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Vladimir Nabokov, *Think, Write, Speak. Uncollected Essays, Reviews, Interviews and Letters to the Editor*, edited by Brian Boyd and Anastasia Tolstoy

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Vladimir Nabokov, *Think, Write, Speak. Uncollected Essays, Reviews, Interviews and Letters to the Editor*, edited by Brian Boyd and Anastasia Tolstoy, Knopf: New York, 2019, 527 p., ISBN-10: 1101874910, \$30

- ¹ For Nabokov scholars, the book *Strong Opinions* has been the central reference for everything Nabokov himself had to say about his life and his work. However, the new publication *Think, Write, Speak*, edited by Brian Boyd and Anastasia Tolstoy, will now be considered an equally relevant reference.
- ² On the very first page of his introduction to the book, Boyd explains that *Strong Opinions* was “a rushed compromise,” as it was gathered hastily to provide one of the eleven books that were required under his contract with his new publisher, McGraw-Hill. It should be noted, however, that *Strong Opinions* predominantly includes his public prose from the latter part of his career (his American career, one might say); Nabokov’s archives actually contain an amazing bulk of documents that reveal a fuller, and maybe truer, image of Nabokov, especially as far as his Russian period is concerned. One could only have access to those documents by visiting the Berg collection (in the New York Public Library), or to the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. Thanks to Boyd and Tolstoy’s book, Nabokov is more widely accessible to the public at large.

- 3 As implied by the *Think, Write, Speak* subtitle, this volume is a collection of 155 different texts, for the most part “Uncollected Essays, Reviews, Interviews and Letters to the Editor.” They are arranged chronologically and the reader is very conveniently guided through the volume by the headers: the header on the right page gives the title of the document (for instance, “On Opera”; “Ivan Bunin, *Selected Poems*”; “Anne Guérin, *L’Express*”), while the left page indicates the type of document and the year (e.g. “Obituary Essay, 1937”; “Lecture Fragment, 1941”; “Interview, 1959” ...). Additionally, some manuscripts and index cards are reproduced in-between the nicely-typed texts, giving the reader examples of Nabokov’s original handwriting and thus sending a Nabokovian tingle down the spine of the reader.

- 4 The greatest pleasure in reading this book is the impression you get that you’re opening your presents underneath the Christmas tree: you never know in advance what you’ll get and one item is an unexpected surprise, the next turns out to be one you were hoping to find all along. This simile may be surprising, especially when it comes to Nabokov, yet this is exactly the feeling one gets: Boyd and Tolstoy put together an amazing variety of tidbits in their volume. If you proceed chronologically, you can have the most precise, thorough essay one can imagine on poetry (“Rupert Brooke,” item 2), followed by a delightful piece in which Nabokov evokes the Russian toys of his childhood (“Laughter and Dreams”); but, as you would with *Pale Fire*, you can choose to be non-linear and flip back and forth, through the sections, and read all the essays, or all the reviews, all the French articles, etc. Personally, I would recommend the chronological order for all the delight that it entails. When reading *Think, Write, Speak*, the reader experiences the same pleasure as in perusing Nabokov’s autobiography, which Nabokov himself described in the following terms in item 63: “What interested me is the thematic lines of my life that resemble fiction. The memoir became the meeting point of an impersonal art form and a very personal life story” (233). Indeed, *Think, Write, Speak* is a lovely blend of literary elements and of personal details pertaining to Nabokov: you experience intellectual marvel when you detect the premises of a famous quote or a literary pattern, and you feel particular pleasure when you get a glimpse of the man hiding behind the famous writer and becoming suddenly relatable.

- 5 It is a tremendous sensation when you find the sources of a celebrated Nabokovian quote, you almost feel like an archaeologist unearthing treasures. For example, when one knows how specific Nabokov was about colors – so much so that he devoted two whole pages, in his commentary to *Eugene Onegin* (Eight: xvii-xviii), to the many shades of red, just so that he could describe Tatyana’s beret – it is quite a thrill to see him expose in an essay dating back from 1928 (item 15) the different nuances that exist in the color purple, such as the French *pourpre*, purple, scarlet, vermillion, lilac, violet, dark blue (77). In the same way, the following quote on “reality” is rather well-known among specialists:

Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information; and as specialization. If we take a lily, for instance, or any other kind of natural object, a lily is more real to a naturalist than it is to an ordinary person. But it is still more real to a botanist. And yet another stage of reality is reached with that botanist who is a specialist in lilies.

- 6 This quote comes from a BBC interview from 1962 (published in *Strong Opinions*), but the construction of the logic at its core seems to date back to an essay written as early as 1928, “Man and Things” (item 13):

Take, for example, a framed painting, the portrait of a woman. One person looks at it and, with the cold admiration of a connoisseur, analyses the colors, the chiaroscuro, the background. Another, a craftsman, filled with certain complex sensation, in which images of his craft mix – the glue, the yardstick, the decorative molding, the firmness of the wood, the gilding – looks at the frame with a professional eye. A third, a friend of the woman depicted, discusses the likeness or, pierced for a moment by one of those faint recollections that are like the street urchins of memory, sees and hears with great clarity (albeit for a moment) that very woman put down her handbag and gloves on the table and say: “Tomorrow is the last sitting, thank God. The eyes have come out well.” And finally, a fourth looks at the painting with the thought that today the dentist will cause him a great deal of pain, so that each time he sees this painting, he will recall the buzzing of the drill and how the dentist’s breath smelled.

- 7 One motif will lead you from a typical Nabokovian position on literature to a very personal portrait of Nabokov. Thus, the many ways in which one may see a painting in the aforementioned essay “Man and Things” (January 1928) finds an echo in the obituary which Nabokov wrote in December of the same year about Yulii Aykhenvald (item 17), a friend and distinguished critic who was hit by a tram while leaving a party at the Nabokovs:

Oh yes, there is an earthly possibility of immortality. The deceased continued to live a detailed and varied life in the souls of all the people who knew him: some knew him closely, others must make do with an outer impression, the hoard of two or three encounters, and then there are those who saw him only once. And every one of them grasped the man in their own way, so that numerous images of the deceased remain on this earth, at times harmoniously complementing one another.

- 8 The several obituaries gathered in the volume give many snapshots of Nabokov the man, some of which are rather humorous, as in the text “In Memory of Amalia Fondaminsky” (item 29, 1937) which describes the “difficult lodger” that Nabokov was when he stayed with the Fondaminskies in Paris in 1932:

Once, for instance, having come back very late when everyone in the house was already asleep, I wanted to switch off the light in the hallway, but there were several switches and I didn’t know which one was the right one. I tried one, then another, and the lamps in the adjoining rooms started waking up. I was alarmed that I was going to light up the whole house this way, and, having left the light on in the hallway, went off to bed. But then my conscience troubled me. I got up, went back to the hallway, and began to test the switches carefully, and it was worrying that one of them seemed to have no visible effect. It later turned out that on my first attempt I had turned on, and then successfully turned off, the light of Amalia Osipovna’s bedroom, and when I returned to the hallway, I lit her bedroom up once more and then left it that way; and she later woke up and turned it off herself, reacting with perfect humor to this nightmarish illumination.

- 9 Other glimpses of a more personal Nabokov are evident in many early pieces, as in “Play” (item 6) where Nabokov’s passion for boxing occupies central stage, or in items 3 and 4, in which Nabokov evokes traditional Russian trinkets such as matryoshkas or lacquered boxes. Personal insights can be found in later pieces too, for example when Nabokov comments on how Paris has changed: Nabokov regrets on several occasions that taxis are no longer yellow or red and that the smell of dead leaves is different (see the French interviews from November 1959). A personal favorite of mine must be one of the editors’ too: in item 116, Boyd and Tolstoy included an index-card which reveals that Nabokov did more than prepare his answers for interviews in advance – he sometimes staged them. Indeed, next to the neatly typed questions and answers,

Nabokov inserted a handwritten note in pencil indicating that he should take his glasses off and stare at the camera, in order to increase the humor of his answer.

- 10 Another reason why Boyd and Tolstoy must be commended for putting together this volume is that *Think, Write, Speak* contains pieces that were originally written in Russian, English and French, with a few articles from German or Italian newspapers. Dozens of items were translated by Boyd and Tolstoy, from the original Russian texts. Boyd, who masters an impressive number of languages (even if he modestly acknowledges that some colleagues occasionally helped for a turn of phrase here and there), then translated all the other pieces. Therefore, this volume makes a great number of archives available to scholars who cannot read the original foreign languages. Most of these documents had never previously been published, let alone translated. French or French-speaking scholars are very familiar with the interview that Nabokov gave to Bernard Pivot in 1975 ("Apostrophes," item 150), especially because the video is easily accessible on the internet, but English speakers are now able to read the translation of the interview transcript. Another French classic, as far as Nabokov studies go, is his essay "Pouchkine, ou le vrai et le vraisemblable," which had already been translated by Nabokov's son, Dmitri; Boyd amended this slightly to change Dmitri's title, "The Real and the Plausible," for the more exact "The True and the Seemingly True." Several other documents had already been published prior to this, but often with truncated extracts. For example, this collection reinstates two missing pages from his essay "The Creative Writer" (item 51).
- 11 If one turns to the Russian texts, we see how the young Nabokov expressed himself quite regularly and assertively on the USSR. For example, many items dwell on Soviet literature, be it fully, as the following titles reveal, "A Few Words on the Wretchedness of Soviet Fiction and an Attempt to Determine Its Cause" (item 8), "Soviet Literature" (item 40), or in passing, as when Evtushenko is mentioned in interviews (items 101 and 106) or in the many references to Pasternak (see, among others, items 95 and 115).
- 12 The Russian Nabokov also came to the fore when he talked about his native language. This was of course the case when interviewers asked him about the three languages he spoke, but what is even more interesting is when he talks about it as a teacher, as in "On Learning Russian" (item 59, 1945) or "The Place of Russian Studies in the Curriculum" (item 61, 1948). Students of the Russian language will undoubtedly recall the difficulties experienced in many early classes, but also the delights of the Russian language.
- 13 One last characteristic that makes the volume *Think, Write, Speak* such a thought-provoking read is that some of Nabokov's views at the time still resonate with the modern reader, even if some of his comments are deeply unsettling. Thus, one is astonished to read that an Italian interviewer in 1966 (item 114) expressed fear about the changing place of women, in terms that are often heard nowadays: "Not man but woman leads the way. We are heading toward a form of matriarchy." Today, many may be shocked and irritated by Nabokov's answer:

The idea of matriarchy seems to me ridiculous. The sociologists must forgive me. Personally, I cannot be convinced that there are no biological differences between men and women. There are, and how. I don't believe the patriarchal structure of society has prevented women from developing in their own way. It is fashionable now to neglect biology and apply socioeconomic measures. But that's not enough. Even if it's a commonplace, the reality is that women are biologically weaker than men.

- 14 But Nabokov also wrote a few wonderful lines on his “irrational belief in the goodness of man,” even in appalling times. This passage from “The Creative Writer” (item 51, 1941) will find an echo in anyone who is astonished by the state of the world or aghast at some of our leaders:

Goodness becomes a central and tangible part of one’s world, which world at first sight seems hard to identify with the modern one of newspaper editors and other bright pessimists, who will tell you that it is, mildly speaking, illogical to applaud the supremacy of good at a time when something called Hitler is trying to turn the globe into five million square miles of blondness and blood. [...] But within the emphatically and unshakably illogical world which I am advertising, as a home for the spirit, Messerschmidts are unreal not because they are conveniently remote in physical space from the reality of a reading lamp and the solidity of a fountain pen but because I cannot imagine (and that is saying a good deal) such circumstances as might impinge upon the lovely and lovable world which quietly persists, whereas I can very well imagine that my fellow dreamers, thousands of whom roam the earth, keep to these same irrational standards during the darkest and most dazzling hours of physical danger, pain, dust, death.

- 15 This volume can already be considered a must-have for Nabokov specialists and enthusiasts, next to his *Strong Opinions* and Boyd’s biography of Nabokov. One can only hope for a French publication and, more generally, for it to be translated into many languages.

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