

# BOOK REVIEW

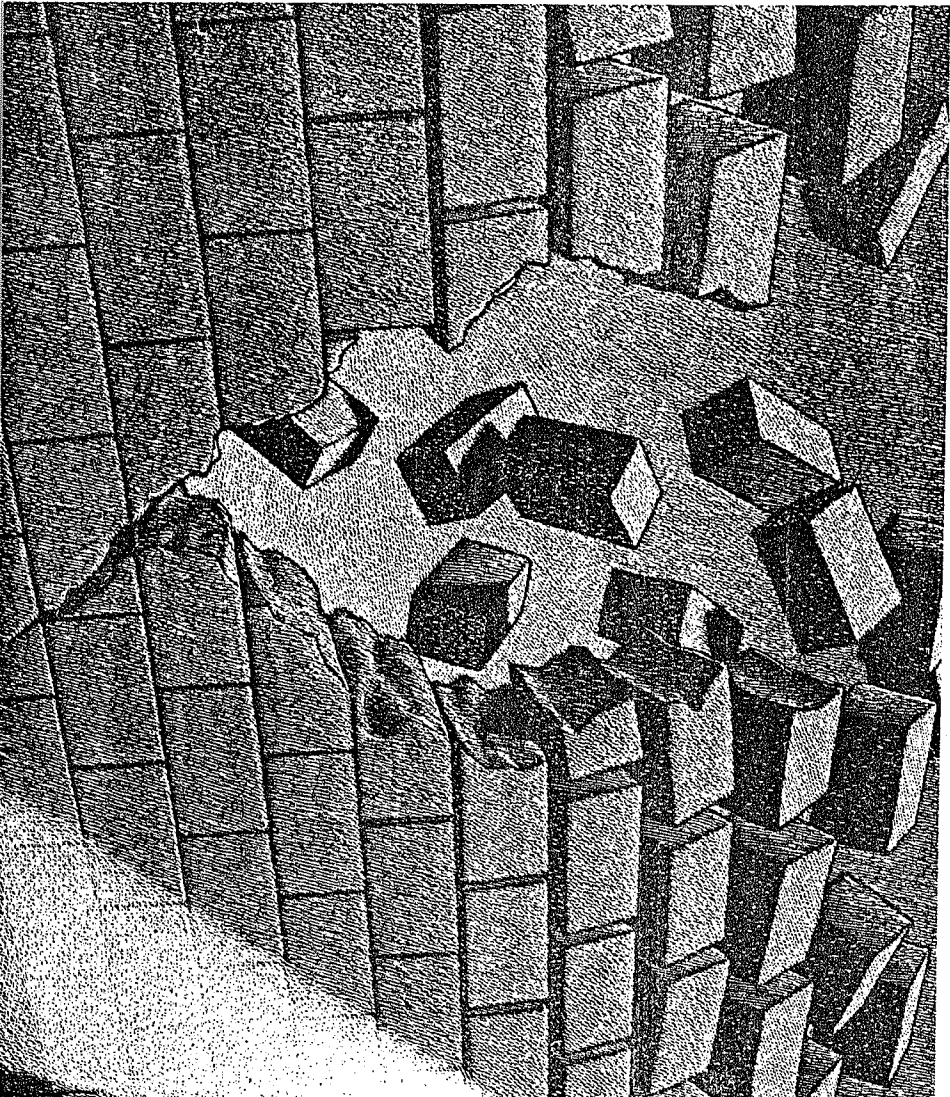
October 14, 1990

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Anthony Burgess on  
Mario Vargas Llosa's  
new erotic novel. Page 11.

## A Savage and Demeaning Ritual



### PLEDGING ALLEGIANCE

*The Last Campaign of the Cold War.*

By Sidney Blumenthal.

386 pp. New York: HarperCollins. \$22.95.

By Alan Brinkley

THE American Presidential election, Theodore H. White wrote in 1961, is "the most awesome transfer of power in the world. . . . Heroes and philosophers, brave men and vile, have since Rome and Athens tried to make this particular manner of transfer of power work effectively; no people has succeeded at it better or over a longer period of time, than the Americans." Thus began "The Making of the President 1960," a book filled with reverence for the majesty of the political process and with a sense of awe before the political giants who dared reach for the great prize.

Sidney Blumenthal's perceptive, absorbing history of the 1988 Presidential election suggests how inconceivable such an account would be today. In form, "Pledging Allegiance" fits securely into the genre White created. In tone, it is worlds apart — a bleak and censorious picture of a corrupted system and empty-headed candidates oblivious to the epochal changes in the world around them. The 1988 campaign, he writes, "was a stunning exercise in the absence of leadership — a failure to come to terms with the new realities of the world as it was and as it was becoming."

Mr. Blumenthal is one of the most respected and accomplished political writers of his generation. He covered the 1988 election for The Washington Post, writes now for The New Republic and is the author of three

# The Passions of Young 'Sirin'

## VLADIMIR NABOKOV

*The Russian Years.*

By Brian Boyd.

Illustrated. 607 pp. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. \$25.

By Sergei Davydov

**I**n the 1950's, the novel "Lolita" created a sensation in this country and its author, Vladimir Nabokov, became an instant celebrity as one of the best writers of English. There are many ironies in that. Nabokov, who was born in Russia, had fled his native country at the age of 20 after the Bolshevik Revolution and the civil war that followed. Twenty years later he fled Europe when the Nazis overran it, and he spent the next two decades in the United States, teaching on several campuses, notably at Cornell University.

Before "Lolita" was published he was known only to a handful of people here who had read his Russian works and to an even more select group as an investigator and discoverer of new species of butterflies. The fortune "Lolita" brought him allowed him to quit teaching and to move to Switzerland where he lived the rest of his life. Famous he may have been, but well known he was not. Despite his own autobiographical writings, most people still know him only for his books in English and have little perception of the man himself. A thoroughly researched biography has been needed for years, and a superb one is at hand.

Nabokov, who wrote two biographies (of Nikolai Chernyshevsky and Nikolai Gogol), produced one Russian and two English versions of his own life and created an array of fictional biographers in his novels, knew the pitfalls of the genre which often "can produce no closer likeness of its subjects than macabre dolls." He warned: "The biographer is apt to become a macabre doll himself if he does not accept, meekly and gratefully, to comply with all the desires and indications of his still robust subject — or those of wise lawyers and hawk-eyed heirs. If the subject is dead and unprotected, a century or so should be allowed to elapse before his diaries can be published and chuckled over."

Brian Boyd's "Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years," the first volume of his biography of the writer, is not an authorized biography, as Mr. Boyd cautiously acknowledges, but it has the blessing of Vera Yevseyevna Nabokov, Nabokov's widow, and their son, Dmitri, who lifted for Mr. Boyd the 50-year seal placed on Nabokov's archives after his death in 1977. The work of Mr. Boyd, who teaches at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, fully justifies this trust. He loves Nabokov, he is faithful to Nabokov's artistic intent and reverent toward his memory. Most important, he follows Nabokov's behest: "plain truth of documents . . . plain facts. . . That, and only that, is what I would ask of my biographer."

It may appear an easy task to write about Nabokov in the wake of three versions of his own autobiography, three lives of Nabokov by Andrew Field, four volumes of correspondence and two bibliographies of Nabokov's works. Nonetheless, to cover Nabokov's early years remains a formidable task. Next to nothing has been preserved from his Russian past; Berlin, where he lived for many years, was bombed into oblivion; the best archives of the Russian emigration after the 1917 Revolution were confiscated by the Red Army in Prague, where Nabokov's sister Olga, fearing the so-called liberators, burned the rest; and Nabokov's papers from his period in Paris, entrusted to a Russian-Jewish friend, perished together with their custodian during the German occupation. There are two more formidable handicaps to reckon with: the task of transposing Nabokov's baroque style and the spiraling pattern of

Sergei Davydov, a professor of Russian at Middlebury College in Vermont, is the author of "The Matrioshka-Texts of Vladimir Nabokov" and is working on a book about Pushkin's fiction and history.



Vladimir Nabokov in 1907, at age 8, with a book on butterflies.

his "Speak, Memory" into linear prose; and Vera Nabokov's sense of privacy — even stronger, we are told, than her husband's.

Mr. Boyd has overcome these obstacles. Like a paleontologist, he has reconstructed a whole extinct species of proud and independent, highly cultured, liberal and socially committed representatives of Russian intelligentsia (such as Nabokov's father, V. D. Nabokov, a lawyer, statesman and the co-founder of the Constitutional Democratic Party) and placed them in the politically turbulent and artistically brilliant last decades of the czarist regime and the exile that followed its fall. From a mountain of documents and conversations or recollections of hundreds of Nabokov's contemporaries, he brings back to life a most remarkable man, who valued literature above all else.

Fate was generous to Nabokov. He was born on April 23, Shakespeare's birthday, in St. Petersburg in the last year of the last century, and his birth coincided with the centennial celebration of Pushkin's birth. For the rest of his life Pushkin's example became the norm

for Nabokov's own esthetics and ethics. Eventually he would translate into English and annotate Pushkin's greatest work, the novel in verse "Eugene Onegin." That book remains the most enduring monument raised to Pushkin on American soil.

The anglophile Nabokov family descended from Russian nobility and had colossal material and cultural wealth. Vladimir Nabokov was brought up by private tutors to speak three languages (English, French and Russian) and later he was enrolled in the liberal Tenishev School which produced another celebrated alumnus, Osip Mandelstam, the greatest Russian poet of the 20th century. As a youth Nabokov was a sportsman and a pugilist. His passion for butterflies began before he was 10 years old, and by the time he was 15 he had read more of the great works in his three languages than most native speakers of them read in a lifetime.

Mr. Boyd amply demonstrates that for a Russian of Nabokov's generation a "terrifying facility for lyrical verse was as much a part of adolescence as acne." In his teens he was oblivious to everything for poetry and love, though his reading list was considerably longer than his list of conquests, which Mr. Boyd also copiously reconstructs. Inevitably his two passions fused and, when his father happened to see some of the extraordinarily frank poems his son wrote about his first amatory experiments, he was forced to give the youngster a lesson on how "a prudent gentleman kept women out of the trouble."

In addition to several million rubles and a 2,000-acre estate which was soon to perish, Nabokov inherited even greater wealth — what he called "the beauty of intangible property, the unreal estate" of memories of a perfect boyhood amid fauna and flora, books and butterflies, loving parents and first love. Nabokov was to draw on this wealth for the rest of his life. He generously distributed it among the heroes of his fictions and endowed his readers with it.

Nabokov's extraordinary love and veneration for his father subverts the proverbial antagonism of fathers and sons, which was the hallmark of the Russian novel from Ivan Turgenev to Andrei Bely. Mr. Boyd is especially good on the counterpoint of two themes: the politically apathetic son and the committed father, a leading member of the first elected parliament in the nation's history, one established after the 1905 Revolution. Nabokov's father was jailed briefly for his opposition.

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## Drilling Mrs. Nabokov

"I read 'Lolita,'" Brian Boyd said, "for the wrong reasons at 13 and found myself disappointed." Then, in 1969, when he was 17, he read Vladimir Nabokov's later novel "Pale Fire" three times. In a telephone interview from his home in Auckland, New Zealand, he said that novel fired a passion that has produced a master's thesis, a doctoral dissertation, a book of criticism and a two-volume biography, of which "Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years" is the first installment.

He never met Nabokov, but before Nabokov's death in 1977, he sent him his master's thesis, and the writer's wife, Vera, wrote him that her husband found "many of its ideas brilliant." That praise sustained the biographer through destitute days of research. During one two-month period in this country, as he explored archives of Yale and Cornell universities and the Library of Congress, he traveled from one to another on overnight buses because he could not afford rooms to sleep in.

Mr. Boyd met Vera Nabokov in 1979 in Montreux, Switzerland, where Nabokov lived for more



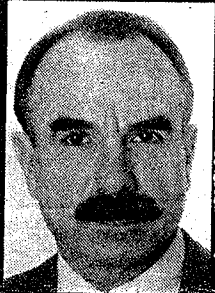
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Brian Boyd.

than two decades. "I interviewed her mercilessly for four days, pumping her with questions, taking no account of her age or physical fragility," he said. But three months later she asked him to spend a summer organizing Nabokov's Montreux archives.

Initially Mr. Boyd had not intended a biography, but a bibliography of Nabokov's work. But among the Montreux papers he became aware of many letters from Nabokov to his mother. Desperate to read them, he found his way blocked by Mrs. Nabokov. "Why do you need these," she asked, "if you are writing a bibliography? Of course, if you were writing a biography, I'd let you see everything." When she said that, Mr. Boyd recalled, "My heart leaped."

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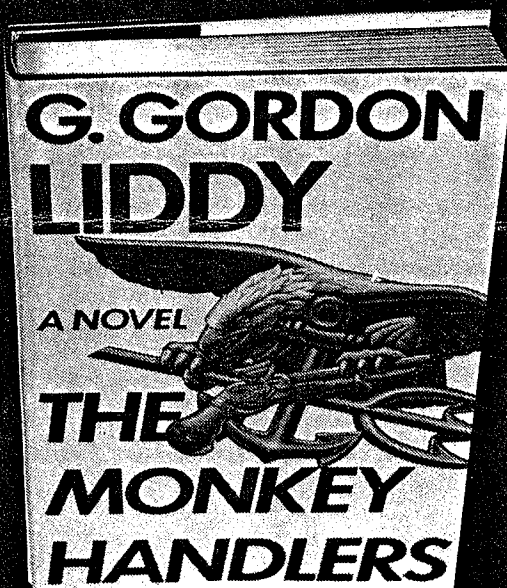


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## The Passions of 'Sirin'

Continued from page 3

tion to the czarist regime that renege on the 1905 reforms. When Nicholas II renounced the throne during the February Revolution of 1917, V. D. Nabokov penned the abdication manifesto for the Czar's brother, the Grand Duke Mikhail. This act marked the end of the Romanov dynasty. The Constitutional Democratic Party attained a majority in the first provisional Government, yet V. D. Nabokov was left without portfolio as a concession to the left. Before the Bolshevik coup in October 1917, he sent his family to the Crimea for safety and was arrested shortly thereafter on Lenin's order. On his release, he joined his family in the Crimea and during the civil war he served as the Minister of Justice of the Crimean Regional Government. In 1919, when the Red Army swept through the Crimean peninsula and was approaching the Sevastopol harbor, to the sound of machine gun fire the Nabokovs sailed into exile aboard a vessel named "Hope."

**A** STRING of his mother's pearls paid for Nabokov's years at Cambridge University (1919-22) where he studied biology and French and Russian literatures, wrote poem after poem, tended the goal for the Trinity College soccer team, extended his list of conquests of young women and earned a degree. Most important, in Cambridge he became "Sirin" — the pseudonym under which he wrote his Russian works for 20 years.

He then joined his family, which had taken up residence in Berlin, published four books within four months, and soon became a notable literary figure in a place where the competition was fierce. Mr. Boyd writes: "Russian Berlin, 1921-1924, was a cultural supernova without equal in the annals of refugee humanity. A few hundred thousand very temporary settlers in a Berlin already well supplied with its own books and periodicals published more in three years than most countries could publish in a decade." The Russian newspaper *Rul*, edited by Nabokov's father in Berlin, was sold not only in Germany, but in 369 cities in 34 countries from Manchuria to Argentina. During his first two decades in exile Nabokov published eight novels, two novellas, some 50 stories, over 100 poems, four plays, several translations and dozens of chess problems and crossword puzzles.

Indeed, Nabokov himself was to say that his life as an émigré resembled "not so much a biography as a bibliography." That that is not entirely true Mr. Boyd makes clear as he takes the reader through the years when Nabokov eked out a living by tutoring people in languages, boxing and tennis, and by ap-

pearing as an extra in German films, since the honorariums for his published works were scant. At the age of 24 he met a woman in a "black mask with a wolf's profile" at a charity ball. It was Vera Slonim, who became his muse and wife, his typist, editor, translator, bibliographer, agent, chauffeur and the mother of their son, Dmitri.

In Berlin Nabokov also lived through the most shattering experience of his life. On March 28, 1922, his father was murdered in a Berlin auditorium by a Russian monarchist. During a lecture given by his colleague, the former Russian foreign minister Pavel Milyukov, V. D. Nabokov was shot to death in front of 1,500 people as he struggled with an assassin trying to kill the minister. The trauma Nabokov suffered from this incident rever-

*Poetry was the  
acne of Russian  
youth in  
Nabokov's time.*

berates through most of his work, and Mr. Boyd allows us to feel its full resonance.

During his 14 German years Nabokov was so preoccupied with preserving his own Russian heritage that he neglected to learn German properly. Also, he felt disdain for a country that was doing its utmost to develop the revolting features Nabokov saw in it long before they became apparent to the rest of the world. They ranged from petty harassments, such as the confiscation of Vera's overcoat by cranky landlords who were anxious about rent payments, to major perversities, such as an episode involving Ivan Bunin, who in 1933 was the first Russian to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. Mr. Boyd tells how Bunin, en route from Stockholm to Paris, stopped in Berlin, where he was detained by the Gestapo, interrogated, stripped and searched for smuggled jewels. "Nobel Prize or not, he had had to swallow a strong dose of castor oil, squat over an empty bucket until the treatment had its effect, then be searched again, naked, by the Gestapo agent who wiped him." In several of Nabokov's works ("Tyrrants Destroyed" and "Bend Sinner," for instance) the two tyrannies Nabokov knew best grotesquely blend into Nazi-Soviet ideological and linguistic hybrid.

In 1937 Nabokov finally fled Hitler's Germany with Vera, who was Jewish, and their son,

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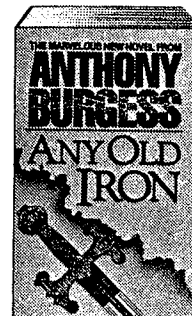
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engrossing...  
fiction of  
Burgess's  
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—*The Philadelphia Inquirer*



"A lively, thoroughly entertaining family saga of war and romance."

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"Resplendent... One of the best that Burgess has written."

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Dmitri, and settled in Paris. He was feted in Russian literary circles but denied a work permit by the French authorities, and the family lived on the verge of poverty. Here Nabokov finished his last and best Russian novel, "The Gift," and "The Real Life of Sebastian Knight," the first novel he wrote in English. In 1940, on the eve of the German occupation of France, a Jewish relief organization in New York, whose leaders remembered his father's courageous defense of Jews in Russia decades before, offered Nabokov and his family a cut-rate cabin on one of their rescue ships. At the end of Mr. Boyd's first volume, Nabokov, Vera and their son — "a parent in each hand" — arrive at the ship that would take them to America: "Their worries were over."

Mr. Boyd has a remarkable gift for drawing life and literature together and he is an astute interpreter of Nabokov's texts. His chapters on them are especially valuable to readers who have no Russian, since many of Nabokov's early works still await their translator. He gives a discerning examination of the "otherworldly" theme which, according to Vera Nabokov, "runs like a watermark throughout everything [Nabokov] wrote." There already exists a small body of criticism exploring this "spectral dimension" and personally I wish Mr. Boyd had taken notice of more of it. But what he does in this impressive biography reveals to us a Nabokov who has been far too little known.

**N**ABOKOV was raised by his parents as an Orthodox Christian and his early tentative musings on the beyond were a mixture of traditional religion and science, or more precisely, the miracle of metamorphosis: "We are the caterpillars of angels," he declared in an early poem. Up to 1925 the images of God, angels and Christ permeate his poetry. Although he later rejected Christianity and dismissed these poems as mere exercises in Byzantine imagery, his powerful sense of an afterlife never left him. It is significant that an early poem, "Easter," from 1922, is his attempt at a poetic resurrection of his father. And in "The Gift," his most autobiographical novel, written 16 years later, the dead father of the protagonist becomes the means of salvation for his son. Mr. Boyd convincingly shows that "The Gift," Nabokov's favorite novel and the most nostalgic one in Russian (considered by many one of the greatest Russian novels of this century), is not only a grand celebration of Russian literature but also a recondite metaphysical meditation. Mr. Boyd's authoritative analysis of "The Gift" and his ingenious readings of its metaphysical hieroglyphs belong to the best in the field of Nabokov criticism.

An additional insight, though, can be gained from Nabokov's

conception of metaphysics as an analogue to poetics. He liked to toy with the idea that human life is only a "preface" to some "main text," or a "commentary to [an] abstruse unfinished poem" written by some unknown master. In 1925 he wrote to his mother: "We are translators of God's creation, his little plagiarists and imitators, we dress up what he wrote, as a charmed commentator sometimes gives an extra grace to a line of genius." In his last three Russian novels ("Despair," "Invitation to a Beheading" and "The Gift"), he created heroes in his own image: all three are writers who, in the process of creating their own

texts within Nabokov's novels, become aware that a superior script surrounds their scribbles and that beyond the book's covers looms the reality of their creator.

Nabokov rewards his heroes according to their art and faith. In "Despair," the hero, discovering that he has a creator, sets about proving that God does not exist and for this is sent to hell by the incensed deity, the novelist. In "Invitation to a Beheading," the gnostic hero renounces the makeshift world in which he has to die and worships the other realm. At the moment of his ex-

ecution, he raises his head and simply walks away, toward his creator, "amidst the dust" of the crumbling novel. And in "The Gift," in return for his fidelity to his creator (both his father and the author), the hero is rewarded with love, with the return of his father from beyond life and with the novel, "The Gift," which becomes the creation of its own main character. The inner and the outer texts have thus merged in Nabokov's last Russian novel — the character becomes the author. Somewhere in this unity of the creature and the creator, of the "preface" and the "main text," I suspect, lies the key to Nabokov's metaphysics. But his

answer to the ultimate question, "Do you believe in God?," remains equivocal and gnostic as ever: "I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more."

Nabokov's life reads like a work by a very imaginative creator. Mr. Boyd gives us that life and ventures many shrewd glimpses beyond it. As a biography his book can hardly be surpassed. It is a definitive life of the man and a superbly documented chronicle of his time. We will not need another biography of Nabokov for the foreseeable future. □

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