

A CRITIC AT LARGE



CONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE

The sharpest review of "Speak, Memory," the author's memoir, was written by Nabokov himself in 1950, but never published.

BY VLADIMIR NABOKOV

THE two books of memoirs before me, one by a Russian-born author, now a citizen of this country, the other by the granddaughter of a great American educationalist, are extremely elaborate affairs. It is seldom that two such accomplishments reach a reviewer's desk practically on the same day.

The small bunch of Mr. Nabokov's admirers will be not unreasonably elated by the publication of his new work. Although to subtitle it "memoirs" seems an obvious step, there are certain features—not necessarily virtues—about "Conclusive Evidence" [the original title of "Speak, Memory"] that set it completely apart from extant autobiographies, true, more or less true, or deliberately fictitious. If its originality is not quite as attractive as the deep human glow that suffuses every page of Miss Braun's "When Lilacs Last," it contains, on the other hand, special sources of pleasure that no intelligent reader should miss.

A unique freak as autobiographies go, Mr. Nabokov's book is easier to define in terms of what it is not than in terms of what it is. It is not, for instance, one of those garrulous, formless, and rambling affairs, heavily relying on a diarist's notes, that experts in other arts or the administrators of our public existence are apt to produce ("Wednesday night, around 11:40, General So-and-So telephoned. I said to him—"). Nor is it a professional writer's kitchen, with bits of unused material floating in a tepid brew of literary and personal stuff. Emphatically, it is not the popular slick kind of reminiscence where the author keys himself up to the lofty level of Grade-C fiction, and with quiet impudence sets down reams and reams of dialogue (Maw and the neighbor, Maw and the children, Bill and Paw, Bill and

Picasso) which no human brain could have preserved in anything approaching that particular form.

It would seem to the reviewer that the permanent importance "Conclusive Evidence" has lies in its being the meeting point of an impersonal art form and a very personal life story. Nabokov's method is to explore the remotest regions of his past life for what may be termed thematic trails or currents. Once found, this or that theme is followed up through the years. In the course of its development it guides the author into new regions of life. The diamond pattern of art and the muscles of sinuous memory are combined in one strong and supple movement and produce a style that seems to slip through grass and flowers toward the warm flat stone upon which it will richly coil.

The reader will surely enjoy finding for himself the convolutions, the stepping stones, the various smiling disguises of this or that thematic line running through the book. There are some main lines and there are numerous subordinate ones, and all of them are combined in a way recalling chess compositions, riddles of various kinds, but all tending to their chess-apotheosis form, in fact, a theme reappearing in almost every chapter: jigsaw puzzles; an armorial checkerboard; certain "rhythmic patterns"; the "contrapuntal" nature of fate; life's "blending of lines of play"; a chess game on board ship while Russia recedes; Sirin's novels; his interest in chess problems; the "emblemata" on pieces of broken pottery; a final picture puzzle completing the spiral of the theme.

Possibly the most moving theme in the book is the line of exile, to which I shall have to refer again. In a way Nabokov went through all the sorrows and



"One cannot help being irritated by certain



peculiarities of Nabokov's manner, by his tendency to dabble in esoteric sensations," Nabokov writes. The author and his sister, Elena, in 1961.

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delights of nostalgia long before the Revolution had removed the scenery of his young years. He is out to prove that his childhood contained, on a much reduced scale, the main components of his creative maturity; thus, through the thin sheath of a ripe chrysalis one can see, in its small wing cases, the dawning of color and pattern, a miniature revelation of the butterfly that will soon emerge and let its flushed and diced wings expand to many times their pupal size.

The unravelling of a riddle is the purest and most basic act of the human mind. All thematic lines mentioned are gradually brought together, are seen to interweave or converge, in a subtle but natural form of contact which is as much a function of art as it is a discoverable process in the evolution of a personal destiny. Thus, toward the end of the book, the theme of mimicry, of the "cryptic disguise" studied by Nabokov in his entomological pursuits, comes to a punctual rendezvous with the riddle theme, with the camouflaged solution of a chess problem, with the piecing together of a design on bits of broken pottery, and with a picture puzzle wherein the eye makes out the contours of a new country. To the same point of convergence other thematic lines arrive in haste, as if consciously yearning for the blissful anastomosis provided jointly by art and fate. The solution of the riddle theme is also the solution of the theme of exile, of the intrinsic loss running through the whole book, and these lines blend, in their turn, with the culmination of the rainbow theme ("a spiral of life in an agate"), and merge, at a most satisfying *rond-point*, with the many garden paths and park walks and forest trails meandering through the book. One cannot but respect the amount of retrospective acumen and creative concentration that the author had to summon in order to plan his book according to the way his life had been planned by unknown players of games, and never to swerve from that plan.

VLADIMIR NABOKOV was born in 1899, in St. Petersburg. His father, also Vladimir, was a highly cultured European, a scholarly statesman, a robust and cheerful rebel, whose

brothers and brothers-in-law were, at the best, easygoing conservatives and, at the worst, active reactionaries, but who belonged himself to the Liberal Group that opposed, in Parliament and in widely read periodicals, the autocratic trends and iniquities of the Tsar's regime. American readers of today, whose information concerning Tsarist Russia is thoroughly permeated by Communist propaganda and pro-Soviet accounts that were spread here in the twenties, will be surprised to learn from various passages in "Conclusive Evidence" how freely opinions could be expressed and how much could be done by civilized people in pre-Revolution Russia.

Life in the wealthy, landowning upper stratum to which the Nabokovs belonged had some affinities with Southern opulence in this country and was very similar to manor life in England and France. The summers, spent by the author as a boy in the country, seem to have been especially responsible for shaping him. The region, with its scattered villages among great forests and marshes, was meagrely populated, but numerous ancient footpaths (the mysterious trails that webbed the whole Empire from immemorial times) kept the berry-gatherer, the tramp, the squire's pretty children from losing themselves in the woods. And, because most of those ways and the wastes they passed by or led to were nameless, landowning families, from generation to generation, designated them by the names that under the influence of French governesses and tutors had naturally come into being during the children's daily promenades and frequent picnics—Chemin du Pendu, Pont des Vaches, Amerique, and so on.

The author of "Conclusive Evidence"—and, by a pleasing coincidence, the author of "When Lilacs Last," too—was the eldest of five children. But, unlike Miss Braun, Nabokov has very little to say about his siblings—two brothers and two sisters, born, respectively, in 1900, 1911, 1903, and 1906. The powerful concentration on one's own personality, the act of an artist's indefatigable and invincible will, has to bear certain consequences, and the above phenomenon is, no doubt, one of them.



With the author's permission, I am enabled to mention here some of my accidental contacts with his family. A first cousin of his, also a citizen of this country, tells me that, in their youth, Nabokov's sisters and youngest brother wrote lyrical verse with an uncanny facility (shared by countless young Russians of that generation). At a literary soirée in Prague, sometime in the early twenties (1923, probably), I remember Franz Kafka's friend, ———, the talented Czech translator of Dostoyevski and Rozanov, pointing out to me Nabokov's mother, a small gray-haired woman in black accompanied by a young girl with limpid eyes and a radiant complexion, Nabokov's sister Elena. In the thirties, when living in Paris, I happened to meet Nabokov's brother Sergei: despite less than a year's difference between the two, they seemed to have led totally separate lives since early adolescence, attending different schools and having different sets of friends. When I knew Sergei he was drifting in a hedonistic haze, among the cosmopolitan Montparnassian crowd that has been so often depicted by a certain type of American writer. His linguistic and musical gifts dissolved in the indolence of his nature. I have reason to think that his childhood had never been as happy as that of his parents' favorite son. Accused of Anglo-Saxon sympathies, Sergei, an outspoken and fearless man, despite his effeminate looks, was arrested by the Germans and died in a concentration camp in 1944.

In the beautiful pages of "When Lilacs Last" which tell of Miss Braun's earliest recollections, she alludes to the security of a world in which the tapping of sugar maples or the birthday cake Mother made were natural and permanent fixtures, as familiar and dear to the New England patrician or Philadelphia princeling of today as they had been to his simple, hardworking forefathers two or three generations before. The world of Nabokov's past, on the other hand, has a singular air of luminous brittleness that is one of the main themes in his book. With great perspicacity, Nabokov stresses the very curious pre-visions of later losses which haunted his childhood—enhancing perhaps its delights. In a conspicuous spot of his St. Petersburg nursery there hung a small colored picture "in the bright

sportive English style, used for hunting scenes and the like, that lends itself so well to the making of jigsaw puzzles"; it represented, with appropriate humor, a French nobleman's family in exile: daisies studded a meadow and there was a cow somewhere and a blue sky, and the fat elderly nobleman, in his brilliantly speckled camisole and puce breeches, sat dejectedly on a milking stool while his wife and daughters busied themselves with some daintily hued washing on a clothesline. Here and there on the Nabokovs' estate in the country, the author's parents, as if come home after years of travel, would point out the fond landmarks of events enfolded in an impalpable but somehow ever-present past. In the cypress alleys of Crimean gardens (where Pushkin had walked a hundred years before) young Nabokov amused and annoyed a girlfriend of his, who had a taste for romantic literature, by commenting upon his own movements or words in the reminiscent, slightly mincing manner his companion might be supposed to develop many years later when writing her memoir (in the style of memoirs connected with Pushkin): "Nabokov liked cherries, especially ripe ones," or "He had a way of slitting his eyes when looking at the low sun," or "I remember one night, as we were reclining on a turfy bank," and so forth—a game that was surely silly but seems less silly now when it is seen to fall into the pattern of predicted loss, of pathetic attempts to retain the doomed, the departing, the lovely dying things of a life that was trying, rather desperately, to think of itself in terms of future retrospection.

When the Revolution broke out, in the spring of 1917, Nabokov, Sr., participated in the provisional government and later, when the Bolshevik dictatorship took over, was a member of another short-lived provisional government in the frail still free south. The group to which these Russian intellectuals belonged, liberals and non-Communist Socialists alike, shared the basic views of Western democrats. However, American intellectuals of today, who got their Russian history from Communist and Communist-sponsored sources, know simply nothing about the period. Bolshevik histories naturally played down pre-Revolution democratic struggle, minimized and violently distorted it,



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A Vacation To Remember

and hurled at it coarse propaganda insults ("reactionaries," "lackeys," "rep-tilies," etc.), not unlike the way Soviet journalists dub today's surprised American officials "Fascists." The surprise is thirty years late.

The readers of Nabokov's book will notice the extraordinary similarity between the present attitude of former Leninists and disgruntled Stalinists in this country toward Soviet Russia and the unpopular opinions Russian intellectuals kept expressing in émigré periodicals during the three decades immediately following the Bolshevik Revolution, while our enthusiastic radicals were prostrating themselves in adoration before Soviet Russia. One has to assume that the émigré political writers were either many years ahead of their time in the understanding of the true spirit and inevitable evolution of the Soviet regime or that they possessed an intuition and a foresight bordering on the miraculous.

WE vividly visualize Miss Braun's college years. Not so with the author of "Conclusive Evidence," for he has nothing whatsoever to say about the classes he surely must have attended. After leaving Russia at the outset of the Soviet era, Nabokov completed his education at Cambridge University. From 1922 to 1940, he dwelt in various parts of Europe, mainly Berlin and Paris. Incidentally, it is curious to compare Na-

bokov's rather gruesome impressions of Berlin between the two wars with Mr. Spender's contemporaneous but far more lyrical recollections (as published in the *Partisan* a couple of years ago), especially the bit about "relentlessly handsome German youths."

In describing his literary activities during the years of voluntary exile in Europe, Mr. Nabokov adopts the somewhat annoying method of referring to himself in the third person as "Sirin"—a literary pseudonym under which he was, and still is, well known in the limited but highly cultured and discriminating world of Russian expatriates. It is true that, having practically stopped being a Russian writer, he is free to discuss Sirin's work as separate from his own. But one is inclined to think that his true purpose here is to project himself, or at least his most treasured self, into the picture he paints. One is reminded of those problems of "objectivity" that the philosophy of science brings up. An observer makes a detailed picture of the whole universe, but when he has finished he realizes that it still lacks something: his own self. So he puts himself in it too. But again a "self" remains outside and so forth, in an endless sequence of projections, like those advertisements that depict a girl holding a picture of herself holding a picture of herself holding a picture that only coarse printing prevents one's eye from making out.

In fact, Nabokov has gone a step further and under the mask of Sirin has projected a tertiary persona called Vasili Shishkov. This action was the outcome of a ten-year-old feud he had been carrying on with the most gifted of the émigré critics, George Adamovich, who had rejected at first, then reluctantly accepted, and finally admired with many an enthusiastic flourish Sirin's prose, but still kept pooh-poohing his verse. With the sporting cooperation of a review's editor, Nabokov-Sirin assumed the name of Shishkov. On an August day in 1939, Adamovich, reviewing in the Russian-language newspaper *Poslednie Novosti* (published in Paris) the sixty-ninth issue of the quarterly *Sovremennye Zapiski* (also published in Paris), lavished inordinate praise on Shishkov's poem "The Poets" and suggested that at this late date the Russian emigration might have at last produced a great poet. In the fall of the same year, in the same newspaper, Sirin described at length an imaginary interview he had had with "Vasili Shishkov." In a groggy but still game reply Adamovich said that he doubted it was a hoax but added that Sirin might be inventive enough to enact inspiration and genius that would greatly surpass his, Sirin's, capacities. Very soon after that, the Second World War put an end to Russian literature in Paris. I am afraid I cannot quite believe the author of "Conclusive Evidence" when, in his recollections of literary life, he stresses the perfect indifference he has always had in regard to criticism, adverse or favorable. Anyway, a ghoulish, vindictive, and sometimes rather foolish streak used to show in his own critical articles.

HOW do we learn the great secret wrapped in words? We see that a foreigner generally fails to acquire a perfect, native sense of their import. He has not lived from infancy in the quiet reception and unconscious study of them, and has not felt how one word is allied to others and how one age—with its writings, its unrecorded traditions, and its common style of conversation—flows into another. In her beautiful, compassionate, intensely feminine quest through the kingdom of things past, Miss Braun has one difficulty less to surmount than Nabokov. True, the Russian author had English governesses when he was a child and spent three



Shanahan

"And, just to be on the safe side, tongue of attorney."

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college years in England. To bring up Conrad's case in reference to Nabokov's novels written in English ("The Real Life of Sebastian Knight" and "Bend Sinister") would mean missing the point of the latter's achievement. Conrad—whose English style, anyway, was a collection of glorified clichés—had not had twenty years of intense participation in Polish literature behind him when he started on his British career. Nabokov, on the other hand, when he switched to English, was the author of several novels and numerous short stories in Russian, and indeed had gained a lasting place in Russian literature, despite the fact that his books were banned in his mother country. The only analogy in this respect is that both men might have chosen French as readily as English. As a matter of fact, Nabokov's first attempt, in the middle thirties, at original prose in a language not his own was a story he wrote in French ("Mademoiselle O"), which Paulhan published in *Mesures*. (An English version of this, with most of the fiction weeded out by its author, appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* and was reprinted in "Nine Stories.") In a new, revised, expanded form, with the last remnants of fiction abolished, the story settled down to its final state as Chapter 5 of this volume.

The present reviewer has an odd recollection of hearing Nabokov lecture in brilliant French at a certain *soirée littéraire*—in 1937, I believe—in a Parisian concert hall. A Hungarian lady writer, today forgotten but then very much à la mode as the author of a French best-seller (something about a fishing cat), who was scheduled to speak that night, had wired a few hours before the lecture that she could not come, and Gabriel Marcel, one of the organizers of that series of talks, had prevailed upon Nabokov to appear as a last-minute substitute with a lecture in French on Pushkin (later published in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*). The lecturer's *acte gratuite* (as Mr. Auden charmingly mis-genders it) was prefaced by a curious movement, a kind of whirlpool in the audience. The whole Hungarian colony had bought tickets; some of them were leaving upon finding out about the change in the program. Other Hungarians stayed on in blissful ignorance. Most of the French contingent had drifted away, too. In the wings, the

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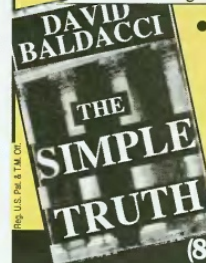


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Hungarian Envoy was violently shaking hands with Nabokov, whom he mistook for the lady's husband. Alerted Russian expatriates had loyally rallied and were doing their best to stitch up the ever-widening holes in the house. Paul and Lucie Léon, faithful friends of Nabokov, had brought James Joyce as a special surprise. A Hungarian soccer team occupied the first row.

Today Mr. Nabokov must find it strange to recall the literary vagaries of his young years. With his wife and son, he now lives in this country, of which he is a citizen; lives happily, I understand, in the simple disguise of an obscure college professor of literature with spacious vacations devoted to butterfly hunting in the West. In lepidopterological circles he is known as a somewhat eccentric taxonomist with analytic rather than synthetic leanings. In American scientific journals, he has published various discoveries of his own relating to new species or forms of butterflies; and—in a scientific tradition that seems to impress so many lay reporters—other entomologists have named butterflies and moths after him. The American Museum of Natural History, in New York, and the Museum of Comparative Zoology, at Harvard, preserve Nabokov's type specimens. On a visit to the latter institution I was shown several tiny moths—belonging to a marvellously multiform genus—which Nabokov discovered in the Wasatch Mountains of Utah in 1943. One of these McDunnough has named *Eupithecia nabokovi*. This is a delightfully satisfying resolution of a certain thematic line of "Conclusive Evidence," in which Nabokov tells how passionately he had dreamed in his boyhood of discovering a new member of that particular group.

TWELVE chapters of "Conclusive Evidence" appeared in *The New Yorker*—and here this reviewer, who happens to be in the know, would like to explain a few things. First of all, in comparing the present text with the *New Yorker* one, it will be noted that in a number of cases (Chapters 3, 6, 10, and 12 offer especially conspicuous examples) chunks of new matter, such as the excursions into Mr. Nabokov's ancestry, his tribulations while collecting butterflies in Europe, an interpolation referring to Polenka, and many new de-

WINTER TALE

THE BUCK STOPS HERE

A MAN in a bar told me about his Uncle Andy who had lived and, several years ago, died on Michigan's Upper Peninsula. On a winter night, with a cord of firewood in the back of his pickup, he was driving home on a lightly travelled rural road (the U.P. has no other kind). As he made a turn, his lights raked a magnificent eight-point buck standing on the center-line. Uncle Andy braked, skidded; the beast perhaps also tried to evade—or didn't, depending on whether there is truth to the cliché about deer in headlights. At any rate, evasive maneuvers proved insufficient, or perhaps mutually defeating, and the encounter ended with impact. The huge animal flew over the hood, crashed through the windshield, and landed squarely against Uncle Andy—not, however, killing him, but its enormous dead weight did pin him to his seat, and the impact stalled out the truck. Uncle Andy sat in the suddenly quiet vehicle as its headlights slowly yellowed and dimmed, with two hundred pounds of dead deer across his chest and his right hand trembling inches from the ignition key, which, turned, would have restored heat to the cab. He froze to death.

When I heard the story, I couldn't help tracing past its punch line. It would have been a long, cold night as Uncle Andy sat with his face flecked by the touch and wet of the odd eddying flake of snow, his field of vision largely occluded by the deer hulk cooling in his lap, his ears tuned for the hiss of oncoming tires but receiving only the delicate forest sounds that emerged from the snowfall quiet. No doubt he speculated about the frequency of traffic as he noted the symptoms of advancing hypothermia and thought, perhaps, about the larger questions.

One picture the tableau that greeted his discoverer the next day: four stiff legs canted up out of the truck's windshield like a naval gun battery, their outline softened by a night's worth of snow; Uncle Andy inside, his right arm stretched over the carcass, bare chapped hand extended toward the steering column, eyes wide, eyebrows and lashes frosted, icicle suspended from the tip of his nose. It is a picture so precisely composed that the person

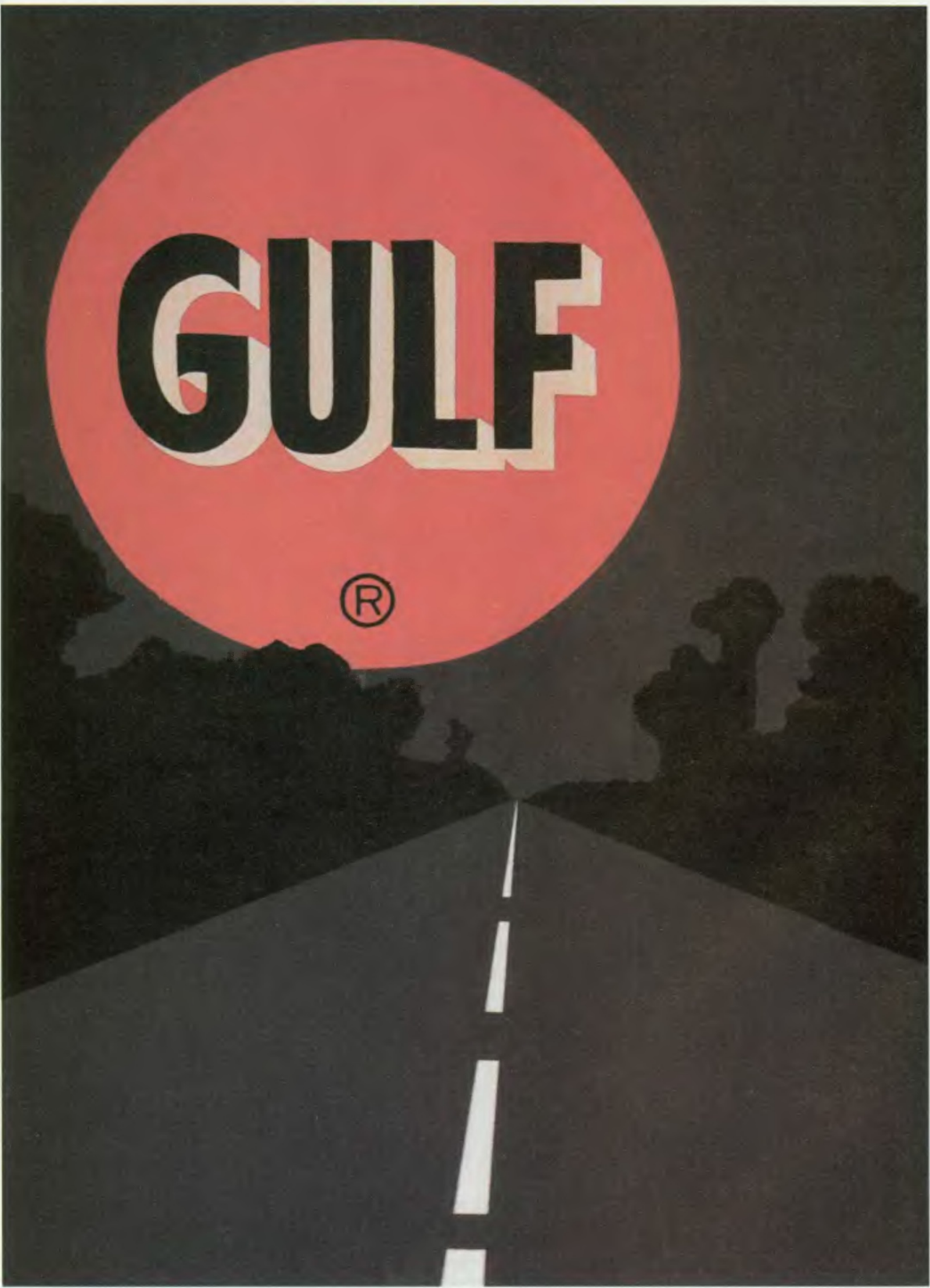
who first stumbled on it might have looked around for a small marker giving the work's title, year, and media: "Seren dipity," 1989 (steel, chrome, white-tailed deer, Uncle Andy). This raises the question of the artist's identity, but of course we all know it, and that he doesn't sign.

The picture contains its own history. Past and present imply each other, giving us the perspective of a being for whom time holds no mysteries. The squeal of brakes and the spatter of glass are simultaneous with the lofty silence that follows. The future is there, too: the bootcrunch and bark of workers hoisting away the deer with the whine of a wrecker's hydraulic lift, and then the snap of Uncle Andy's bones as his body is forced into a configuration that will permit its extraction from the cab. He is carted away, limbs twisted and fingers bent to claws, grinning as he stares at the ceiling of the ambulance, his nose-icicle now riding at the horizontal.

I sat at the bar with these thoughts; the story's narrator, sitting next to me, had lapsed into a Marlow-like reflective silence. Perhaps he was brooding about his own figurative white-tailed buck, out there even now, placidly cropping the sawgrass, bidding the days that separated it and him from their fated convergence. His parka (the bar was in a small town in Wisconsin, and the season was winter) rested high, so that the teeth of its open zipper touched his chin; he was gazing down at the two calloused hands crowded round his shot glass. A loud "Last call!" did not disturb his stare.

I went out into the parking lot, where six or seven vehicles remained, most of them with engines rumbling but empty as ghost ships, their owners indoors waiting for the cars to warm. I set my own car to idling, got the scraper off the dash, worked briefly on the windshield, then went back inside. The man I had been talking to—his name was Coombs—was as I had left him, a hillock of Gore-Tex hunched over a whiskey. The jukebox had been unplugged. The half-dozen remaining customers, all of them men, sat scattered in the quiet, each staring at a point in space. At the bar, Coombs began to weep.—ETHAN COEN

DETAIL FROM "JUNE MOON," 1983, ALAN D'ARCANGELO/WAGA, NYC





"The dog got locked in your car last night, Mr. Ferguson."

tails of his life in St. Petersburg and on the Crimean Riviera, have been added by Nabokov in the process of working on his book after the chapters in question had already appeared in their *New Yorker* form.

In the second place there are those, much less important, discrepancies between the present text and the *New Yorker* one, which are to be explained by the author's reinstating a few scattered words or clusters of words that had been left out—with his reluctant consent—by *The New Yorker*, either for "family magazine" reasons or because *The New Yorker* pessimistically thought that an unusual term might bother some of its less brainy readers. In the latter case, Mr. Nabokov did not always give in, and this resulted in some spirited fights. Some of them, such as the Battle of the Palpebral Night, Nabokov lost. Others he won.

Finally, there was the question of corrected grammar. This kind, or indeed any kind, of editing would have seemed a monstrous insult to Nabokov, had the

Sovremennye Zapiski, in the old days, asked Sirin's permission to alter in any way a sentence in his Russian prose. But as an English-writing author Nabokov has always felt insecure. For all the dash and raciness of his English, he has a way of lapsing into solecisms, some of which are rather astonishing in view of his general sophistication. Therefore, the minor improvements suggested by the *New Yorker* editors—the curing of an inversion, the bracing up of some awkwardly drooping term, the splitting of a long sentence in two, the ritualistic transformation of "which's" into "that's" were meekly and gratefully accepted by Mr. Nabokov. What skirmishes there were took place, usually, around the editors' inadvertently destroying a treasured rhythm, or wrongly interpreting an allusion, or tending to replace by nouns every "he" and "she" and "we" that had strayed into the next paragraph, leaving the reader to scratch his little head. And, more especially, there was the Missing Antecedent case that cropped up again and again, leading to

many tussles in the course of which Mr. Nabokov, an Anti-antecedent of long standing, often knew defeat but also won a few choice victories.

It would seem that at the very beginning of Nabokov's association with *The New Yorker* editorial attempts to clarify seeming ambiguities and trim his prose were much more carefree and frequent than at a later stage. Howls of pain would come from the author, and mutterings about the unworthiness of compliance with a magazine's tastes. Gradually, however, the editing department realized that the labor it expended on the construction of a solid bridge to join any two ideas that seemed to exceed the span of a commuter's mind was a rather unnecessary albeit well-meaning procedure, since the author had taken even more trouble to destroy or lift or camouflage a bridge that spoiled the landscape.

The reader, however, must now be shown the

other side of the matter. Great sympathy, a delicate and loving care, marked all editorial queries. The explanations or amplifications now and then asked for by Mr. Ross ("How many bathrooms did the house have?") were often granted by Mr. Nabokov and resulted in some delightful new paragraphs. Katharine White, who corresponded with the author in regard to all these matters, took endless trouble to check every hyphen and comma and smooth the creases in an author's ruffled temper and do everything to keep Nabokov's prose intact. An excellent proof of the harmonious accord between author and editor is the fact that Nabokov greedily preserved the majority of the corrections in regard to his skittish syntax and also the beautiful "close" system of the *New Yorker* punctuation. Last but not least, *The New Yorker's* wonderful research department several times saved Mr. Nabokov—who seems to combine a good deal of absent-mindedness with his pedantism—from various blunders regarding names, numbers, book titles,

and the like. Now and then he disagreed with the department's findings, and then some amusing exchanges occurred. One of them had to do with the funnel of the Atlantic liner Champlain. Nabokov distinctly remembered it as white. A *New Yorker* checker talked to the French Line: the line said the Champlain had not been camouflaged in 1940 and had at the time its usual red-and-black French Line funnel. Nabokov replied that he could omit the epithet altogether but that nothing could induce him to change a color he so clearly remembered. He wondered if perhaps the military authorities at Saint Nazaire had repainted the thing without notifying the French Line office in New York.

I have discussed Nabokov's connection with *The New Yorker* at some length because I think readers ought to know how things stand and draw their own conclusions. The basic question of a writer's integrity can hardly arise when an editor is able to prove to an author that a pet sentence of his bristles with bad grammar and should be improved if the story is to be bought. A magazine, on the other hand, may underrate its average consumer's ability to assimilate the allusive, the oblique, the veiled—and in such cases I do not believe the author should yield, no matter the financial disappointment involved.

BARBARA BRAUN'S poise and taste, the purity and simplicity of her style as sparkling as a New England brook, are qualities not shared by the author of "Conclusive Evidence." One cannot help being irritated by certain peculiarities of Nabokov's manner; by his casual use of terms that little-known scientists have invented for little-known diseases; by his general tendency to dabble in esoteric sensations; by his methods of transliteration (he uses one system—the correct one—for rendering samples of Russian speech, and another system, pockmarked with compromise, for transliterating names); or by such whims of his as suddenly throwing in a chess problem (without giving the key move, which is bishop to _____).

Another matter that cannot fail to offend a certain type of reader (upper-middle-class in the cultural sense) is Nabokov's attitude toward such writers as Freud, Mann, and Eliot, whom tra-

dition and good manners have taught one to respect together with Lenin and Henry James. At the onciromancy and mythogeny of psychoanalysis Nabokov has been poking rude fun since the twenties. Thomas Mann he places in the Jules Romain Rolland Galsworthy subfamily, somewhere between Upton and Lewis, as he irreverently phrases it (Romain being mathematically equal to Sinclair). He is prone to throw a veritable fit of sarcastic glee when upper-middle-class critics place the plaster of Mann and Eliot beside the marble of Proust and Joyce. Few people will share his contention that Eliot's poetry is essentially platitudinous. I suppose Nabokov is merely trying to be witty when he remarks that the popular success of Eliot's recent play belongs to the same order as "Zootism, Existentialism, and Tito," and, surely, all those whose muse, née Eliotovich, is so huskily vocal in little magazines will fervently agree that calling T.S.E. "the Wally Simpson of American literature" is a sally in very bad taste indeed. Then, too, there is his contempt for Dostoyevski, which makes Russians shudder and is disapproved of in the academic circles of our greatest universities. Perhaps Nabokov's immunity to the sentimental cults American critics have preserved since the twenties and thirties is due to his having gone, during those years, through a Zeitgeistless phase in the world of Russian ascetic exile far removed from "Jazz Age" and "pre-Crash" fashions.

But with all its shortcomings "Conclusive Evidence" still remains a significant contribution. It is "conclusive evidence" in regard to many things, among which the most obvious is that this world is not as bad as it seems. Mr. Nabokov is to be congratulated on having performed a very capable and very necessary job. His memoirs will find a permanent place on the book lover's shelf side by side with Leo Tolstoy's "Childhood," T. S. Elmann's "Amen Corner," and Barbara Braun's "When Lilacs Last." ♦


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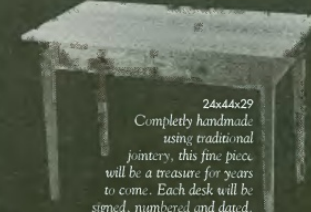
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