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THE NEWSPAPER OF THE LITERARY ARTS

Volume 8, Number 5 September 1998 Ithaca, New York FREE

Nabokov at Cornell

Paul Cody

Before *Lolita*, before the fame, furor, and fortune, much of Vladimir Nabokov's life was about displacement and loss—was a series of comings and goings, exits and entrances. It was about what more than a few great twentieth-century artists called the "enigma of arrival." Is there ever a truly safe and stable place in the world? Where is home? Is it really, as the poet Robert Frost wrote, the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in?

Vladimir Nabokov arrived in Ithaca on July 1, 1948, and moved into what would be the first in a long series of rented houses, at 957 East State Street. "We are enchanted with Cornell," Nabokov wrote, "and very very grateful to the kind fate that has guided us here." He was forty-nine years old that first Ithaca summer, and twice exiled by two of the great political cataclysms of the century—first from his native Russia by the rise of Bolshevism, and then from Paris in 1940, a few weeks ahead of Nazi troops. His father, from one of Russia's oldest and wealthiest aristocratic families, had been a leading liberal democrat and fighter against anti-Semitism in pre-Revolutionary Russia. V.D. Nabokov, revered by his son, had been killed in Berlin in 1922 by a right-wing fanatic when the elder Nabokov tried to shield the target of an assassin at a public rally.

Vladimir's mother, Elena Ivanovna Nabokov, would die May 2, 1939, in a third-class hospital room in Prague. Vladimir had only been able to visit her once during the preceding seven years, in 1937. Because of the political unrest in Europe, he was unable to attend her funeral.

Brian Boyd, in his magisterial two-volume biography, begins *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* by saying, "Nabokov had left Russia in 1919 on a crowded little cargo ship, playing chess with his father on its deck as Bolshevik machine guns strafed the waters of Sebastopol Harbor." Twenty-one years later, just ahead of the Nazis, Nabokov crossed the Atlantic on the *Champlain*, sailing into New York Harbor in late May, 1940. On its following trip to the United States, the *Champlain* would be sunk by a German U-boat. Perhaps life could never be safe, permanent, nor easy.

Before Cornell, Nabokov had lost his native country, his family fortune, and his mother and father. He had lived in genteel penury in England, Germany, and France during those early years of exile, giving lessons in tennis, English, and Russian, writing newspaper chess columns, and translating. Nabokov wrote poetry and collaborated on a few screenplays, did some acting, and wrote his early Russian novels—*Mary*; *King, Queen, Knave*; *The Defense*; *Despair*; and *Invitation to a Beheading*. None of the novels earned more than a few hundred dollars, and all

were written in a language from whose country he had been exiled, for a shrinking audience of émigré readers with a taste for the avant-garde.

And then in his first decade in the United States there would be more impermanence, still more temporary dwellings. Semester by semester, year by year. Appointments to teach at Stanford University and at Wellesley College. Work at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology—for Nabokov was a world-class lepidopterist, an expert on butterflies, who would eventually publish eighteen scientific

papers on entomology. He would cross continents and scale mountains, net in hand, in search of those other elusive and strangely beautiful migrants.

During all the travel, the scramble for money, the year-by-year appointments, he would complete his first English novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and the novel *Bend Sinister*—obliquely about the terror of both right- and left-wing zealots, Nazis and Communists. Nabokov wrote short stories and began what would be a life-long association with the *New Yorker*. Though his work

was being noticed in some circles, by the late 1940s sales of the novels were still pathetic, and Wellesley College had refused him anything more than another one-year appointment.

But one of the people who knew and admired Nabokov's work was Morris Bishop '14, PhD '26, a professor of Romance languages who chaired Cornell's search committee to hire a Russian literature professor. Though Nabokov had graduated from Cambridge Universi-

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Jack Sherman

The Green Bird in the Basement

we don't know how it got there, for even if the basement windows were open, they're wholly screened, so it must have been a one-time fluke when we opened the back door and then the basement door just beyond the small entryway between, but it still looks pretty unlikely for this bird, a fair-sized parakeet, to have gotten down there at all, mewling and moulting, all holed up among the basement ceiling beams where we could do little to help, unfamiliar with such strangeness at the bottom of our own damn house, for fear of being bitten or infected except perhaps to call the ASPCA and ask them to come and rescue it—and us, of course—from this impasse, but they can't come till tomorrow, it being too late, it seems, tonight for them to do anything, despite the fact that our visitor projects all the warning signs of not being able to make it through the night, drooping and whimpering softly, and avoiding us among the beams who are as fearful of chasing him as he is of our good intentions, we are not used to one another like this,

although I've seen them screeching up among the tall trees along the street as I jog past, wondering whether this is natural or whether they're children's pets escaped from thin domestic bounds either way an exotic intrusion among the usual Flushing sparrows,

crows, pigeons, doves, grackles, and robins, although we did have a pair of woodpeckers this spring at our birdfeeder, red tufted heads and speckled bodies, and a scarlet tanager couple, not to leave out those geese and ducks in the pond in the park, and that strange dark whatsit with the long curved neck that swims with its body under water, which only goes to show how content I am when they know their place and where they belong, but how can I relish them dying in my house? how have I become responsible for something that's not mine but somehow I have to take care of and which doesn't even work out in the end?

I had an uneasy sleep that night speckled with bright and restless dreams of strange countries and unfamiliar songs and prophecies we found him cold on the concrete floor the next morning, neglected, fallen from his perch in a swoon, and the place was starting to smell so we had to clean it all up and dispose of him in a black plastic bag like they do lately with fallen soldiers and the victims of fire and flood feeling regret that it had to come to this and guilty that I couldn't help and resentment at being handed this late assignment in the first place and—well—now that you ask, I'll tell you, a missed opportunity a chance to cross the boundary and grow feathers and beak for a change, a chance to let revulsion

drop and touch the damn thing, take some kind of care of it, not knowing if we could have done anything to save him,

or maybe he just came to us looking for a safe place to die away from the sharp-toothed squirrels, and wanting a decent burial with appropriate prayers and songs for the passing of such melodious life from the world, from my life, who penetrated domestic walls somehow to bring us news of what's really going on out there, messages from high high up among the tall trees along these ordinary Flushing streets of this great round heart beating beneath the rectangles of our lives the squares of our days singing us to turn and return in curves to the spirals of our dying and kiss the rod that chastises, for we die, as he died, reminding us of what transpires underneath our houses beneath the cheerful smells of breakfast in the morning, the voice of time and dreams we all ignore and from which no one can escape

—Norman Friedman

Norman Friedman is a retired English professor and a psychotherapist. He is currently seeking a publisher for his third volume of poetry, *Revelation to See My Face*.

Death in Summer

WILLIAM TREVOR



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Subscription rate is \$12.00 per year. THE BOOKPRESS is published eight times annually, February through May and September through December.

Submissions of manuscripts, art, and Letters to the Editor should be sent, SASE, to:

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A Buddhist Beat

Mountains and Rivers Without End.
Gary Snyder.
Counterpoint, 1997.
165 pages, paper, \$13.50.

Stephen Chapman

Some forty years in the making, Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End* was finally published in 1996. It is a significant work—arguably one of the most important long poems written in English in the last quarter century. Like *Leaves of Grass*, it is a collection of lyrical moments linked together to form a nuanced and multi-layered poetical statement. The culmination of a long poetic career, it is in part Snyder's attempt to make sense of his life's work (although it would be a mistake to judge that achievement on the basis of *Mountains and Rivers* alone). Its tight structure conceals in deft and deliberate strokes a succession of poetic insights which, taken together, present a portrait of the poet who could produce such a poem. In its own unique way, but also in line with a long tradition of American rhapsodizing about the wilderness, it can be read as a sacred text for a new ecological America.

Of Beats and Buddhism

In the endnote attached to the poem, Snyder describes the sequence as "a sort of sutra—an extended poetic, philosophic, and mythic narrative of the female Buddha Tara"—a claim which is not merely rhetorical but indicates a clear and concerted effort to present a religious perspective combining the organic and cyclical cosmology of Zen and Tantric Buddhism with modern ecology. He even extends the bounds of traditional Buddhist doctrine by incorporating the latest scientific advances, creating in the process his own idiosyncratic Goddess-oriented Buddhism opening onto a cosmological dimension.

In its explicit embrace of Buddhism, *Mountains and Rivers* returns to and reaffirms Snyder's origins in the Beat Movement, the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance, and the curious religious revival movement of American Buddhism. The Beats, as is well known, rebelled against the conformity of the Eisenhower Era and extolled the life of liberty on the open road amid the vast open spaces of the American West—a dream of footloose freedom forever immortalized in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1955). Their conscious decision to opt out of the "system" by adopting an alternative lifestyle was not just escapism—as has often been charged—but followed from an authentic spiritual quest and searching-out-of-the-truth. Through cultural transmitters such as D. T. Suzuki and Allan Watts, the Beats adapted Buddhism to the American vernacular. Practically all the Beats studied Buddhism as a religious option, but Snyder was the most consistent of the group, and Buddhism informs virtually his entire oeuvre.

Snyder foregrounds his participation in the Beatnik movement and the trans-Pacific flourishing of American Buddhism in many of the early poems of the *Mountains and Rivers* sequence. In a poem called "Night Highway 99," written in 1962 as part of the original *Mountains and Rivers*, Snyder gives an account of his travels up and down the Pacific Coast in the late fifties, tracing the spiritual cartography of the American highway at a time when it was still possible to hitchhike from Seattle to San Francisco with relative ease. "Night Highway" ends up in North Beach and recalls Snyder's participation in the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance and such historical happenings as "The Human Be-In" in Golden Gate Park and the Ginsberg "Howl" event. We are reminded—if there was ever any doubt—that Snyder was a central figure of the West Coast branch of the Beat Movement, at the



Don Karr

very epicenter of an exciting circle of creative activity, even something of a guru, renowned for his wisdom in matters of myth and mountaineering.

Another early poem, "The Circumambulation of Mt. Tamalpais," first published in 1966 in *Coyote's Journal*, records an actual event: Snyder's inauguration, along with Philip Whalen and Allen Ginsberg, of a pilgrim route around Mt. Tamalpais in the Asian "sacred mountain" tradition, complete with various invocations and mantras (Whalen and Ginsberg also recorded the event in their own poems). The poem plots an elaborate Buddhist liturgy, proving that ascending even humble Bay Mountain can become a meaningful spiritual experience, analogous to climbing the Buddhist and Taoist holy mountains in China and Japan. A contemporary poem, "Three Worlds, Three Realms, Six Roads" translates some of the more obscure concepts of Buddhist cosmology into a stylized account of Snyder's own itinerant spiritual wanderings as he travels from Seattle to Portland to San Francisco, and finally on board a ship bound for Kyoto.

In "The Blue Sky," first published in 1968, Snyder pays tribute to the Pure Land sect of Buddhism and to the Tathagata Buddha of Healing, whom he brings into dialogue with the Medicine Man of Native American lore. Similarly, in the "Hump-Backed Flute Player," first published in *Coyote's Journal* in 1971, Snyder draws

parallels between Native American and Buddhist themes, searching for a common Shamanistic origin in the figure of the wandering flute-playing bard, whose petroglyph can be found in the Canyon de Chelly and whose heir is the modern backpacker. Reading *Mountains and Rivers* in the context of Snyder's lifelong dedication to Buddhism and his own evolving idiosyncratic devotions helps to underscore the religious dimensions at the core of the poem, which I believe represents a final and mature effort (after such playful starts as the "Smoky the Bear Sutra") to write a sacred text for a new kind of ecologically-informed American Buddhism.

The Importance of Ecology

At the same time as Snyder was deepening his understanding of Buddhist literature and practice, he was studying ecology and related disciplines such as geology and plate tectonic theory. Although the concordance between Buddhism and ecology has now become something of a commonplace, owing to the writings of E. F. Schumacher, Fritjof Capra, Thich Nhat Hanh and others, Snyder was one of the first to actively promote the idea in his poetry and in his critical writings. Buddhism gave Snyder an alternative philosophical and non-theistic religious framework to the dualisms of the Judeo-Christian and the Western metaphysical traditions. Ecology provided him with the facts and a firm grounding in science

which thankfully restrained him from the excesses of the "disembodied" school of Beat poetry.

A voracious autodidact, Snyder made himself familiar early on with the advances in scientific ecology, from its initial academic successes in the fifties and sixties to later developments such as James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis down to the most recent studies in geomorphology. His grounding in science endows him with a Goethean ability to gaze across the "two cultures" divide between the sciences and the humanities which still splits our knowledge of nature into the "objective" categories of the natural sciences and the "subjective" apprehensions of poetry and the fine arts. For Snyder, as for Goethe, truth is one, and as Snyder's work evolves in both its poetic and its critical dimensions, it strives towards a synthesis of the most up-to-date scientific understanding of nature with Buddhist cosmology, forming a complete worldview which honors both the scientist's quest for objective truth and the poet's search for meaning.

It is possible to identify at least three phases of Snyder's involvement with ecology. The first goes back to the late fifties and sixties, when Eugene Odum's model of organic holism was the dominant paradigm. Snyder, along with many others at the time, came to realize that ecology's perspective of nature as the interplay of

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Off Campus

At The Bookery

This presentation is part of our ongoing series of readings and talks upstairs in the DeWitt Mall.

Sunday, September 13, 4:00 pm

Katy Boynton Payne

Visiting Fellow at Cornell in Bioacoustic Research, Katy Boynton Payne will read from and discuss her new book **Silent Thunder: In the Presence of Elephants**. This account of Payne's pioneering discoveries in elephant communication is part memoir, part spiritual quest, and part natural history



Wednesday, September 16, 7:30 pm



Let Davidson

In **Wisdom at Work**, organizational consultant, leadership coach, and retreat leader Let Davidson shows how to make work a place of spiritual awakening. This inspiring book shows how to combine the inner and outer forces that drive the evolution of our work world in a way that also serves the bottom line.

Sunday, September 27, 4:00 pm

Steven Brouwer

If the U.S. economy is booming, why are so many Americans struggling to get by? Steve Brouwer answers this and many other questions in **Sharing the Pie: A Citizen's Guide to Wealth and Power in America**, an informative and irreverent critique of the rightward shift in America since 1980. Steve Brouwer is the author of **Conquest and Capitalism: 1492-1992** and the coauthor of **Exporting the American Gospel**. He lives with his family in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Thursday, October 1, 7:30 pm

Marjorie Agosin

The Bookery, in cooperation with Ithaca Amnesty International, Durland Alternatives Library, and CUSLAR, is proud to host a reading and discussion by Marjorie Agosin. Marjorie Agosin is recognized in North and South America as one of the most versatile and provocative Latin American writers of her generation. She is the author of 20 books of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and essays, many of which focus on human rights abuses.

Saturday, October 3, 3:00 pm

Gerald Coles

In his new book, **Reading Lessons: The Debate Over Literacy**, Gerald Coles argues that today's preferred methods of instruction not only fail the children who never learn to read and write, but can also damage the thinking and behavior of most who do. Gerald Coles is the author of **The Learning Mystique** and lives in Ithaca.

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Emeritus

For Harvey Fireside

"I am what is called a professor emeritus— from the Latin e, 'out', and meritus, 'so he ought to be'." (Stephen Leacock).

Merit's a bleak word, solemn as a watch-chain or a row of medals across the chest. With an e and an us it's honorable discharge — enforced rest on a bed of laurels that prick pride. Beside 'professor' it spells the end of life as you knew it with all its dull duties, its to and fro of student bodies predictable as V's of geese across the sky; the beginning of a life without constraint, of rest deserved if not desired. There are those emeriti who come in every day to get their mail and chat to colleagues before they take a swim and add a line to papers they have always meant to end. Others spend half their year in Florida, wishing they were back in the slush and scuffle of half-term. You, of course, will do none of this.

II.

The story I liked best at the party when old friends gathered at your house to celebrate your rise to the emeriti was how you told your youngest child not to mention the renegade priest, Daniel Berrigan, was hidden in your house. Later a mother told you that at least half the children knew the secret and shared it with their parents. The FBI thought a fugitive would not court danger hiding among children too young to lie. So Berrigan moved from house to house wherever children were and you, mild and smiling rebel, found ways to rescue a Russian Jew illegal Mexicans, Bosnian refugees. Your Viennese father saw you were schooled in secrecy, chose a safe house for each of you. When so many were fooled he shrewdly planned his family's escape. You learned from him temerity takes practice. Expert now in daring, you're one of the emeriti.

Gail Holst-Warhaft

Gail Holst-Warhaft is a poet, a translator of Modern Greek, and a frequent contributor to The Bookpress.

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Radical Trajectories

Edward T. Chase

An unlikely, even astonishing achievement in creative film making this year, is Joseph Dorman's documentary, *Arguing the World*. In 107 minutes, the film covers the history of four central figures of the "New York intellectuals," from their 1930s student days into the 1980s. By doing so, it is a gloss of key political-ideological developments and ideas that have shaped the 20th century. The protagonists are Daniel Bell, Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, and the late Irving Howe. Essentially a series of verbal portraits depicting the evolution of these four men in their own words, interspersed with historic newsreel shots and some priceless period footage, the film has real narrative momentum, much wit, incisive commentary, emotional vibrancy, and even an effective musical accompaniment.

As William Phillips, the editor of *Partisan Review*, put it, "These men believed that if their radicalism was to be desirable and fulfilling, their thinking, their arguing, must reflect the furthest reaches and the most profound forms of modern consciousness." Morris Dickstein makes a telling remark that characterizes the general evolution in their viewpoint, namely that, in the postwar years, the New York intellectuals became deradicalized. "In a way, the anti-communism of the New York intellectuals was prophetic of the direction that the entire country took after the war."

The film's basic point of departure is the "argument" over Karl Marx's theory of capitalism and the socialist ideal, these students' original inspiration. At City College, the anti-Stalinist Trotskyists were congregated in luncheon alcove #1, the Stalinists in alcove #2, the two camps being hostile and virtually incommunicado then and ever after. As they matured, their radical allegiances changed. Irving Howe stayed devoted to the socialist ideal, a democratic socialist to the end; Irving Kristol became the founding neo-conservative; Bell an anti-communist liberal ("cultural conservative, political liberal, a socialist in economics"); Glazer, never a Trotskyist, a middle-of-the-road liberal, typified by his ambivalent attitude toward affirmative action, for years "con," today "pro." Beside their incisive political commentary, they share wit, often self-deprecatory, always sharp. Relentlessly, the film moves on to the climactic episodes of the infamous 1936 Moscow show trials, the Hitler-Stalin pact, the McCarthy hearings, the Vietnam War and the student riots of the 1960s, and the momentous breakup between Kristol and his neoconservatives, on the one hand, and Bell, Howe, Glazer and the liberals and social-democrats on the other.

Here is the consistently amusing Irving Kristol: "Ever since I can remember, I've

been a neo-something, a neo-Marxist, a neo-Trotskyist, a neo-liberal, a neo-conservative, in religion always a neo-Orthodox, even while I was a neo-Trotskyist and a neo-Marxist. I'm going to end up a neo. Just neo, that's all. Neo dash nothing."

Here is Dan Bell: When he had his bar mitzvah he said to the rabbi, "I've found the truth. I don't believe in God.... I'm joining the Young People's Socialist League. So he looked at me and he said, 'Kid, you know you've found the truth. You don't believe in God.' He says, 'Tell me, you think God cares?' Well, I was so angry at that."

Irving Howe: "A good street corner preacher could go on for three-quarters of an hour. I rarely lasted more than twenty

dipping in, whereas they were reading palookas like Howard Fast."

Lionel Abel: "He [Trotsky] had a literary verve, which was unmistakable. He was a great journalist, and the intellectual power of his criticism of the Stalin regime, most of which has been . . . is accepted nowadays as justified that he was right. But we didn't know he was right, we knew he was interesting. And, in a way, if you lived in the Village, what was interesting was right. Certainly, the uninteresting was wrong. I'm not willing to altogether give that up, even today."

Kristol: "My major memory of a dinner party, I got a plate full of food, and there was a couch, and so I walked over and sat down in the middle of the couch, not knowing who was going to join me, not really

home location in the Lower East Side, Brooklyn, and in the Bronx. Then the scene is their student days at City College—"The basic memory was tussles with the other radical students," Bell recollects. "At City College there was an atmosphere of perfervid, overly heated, overly excited intellectuality," comments Howe.

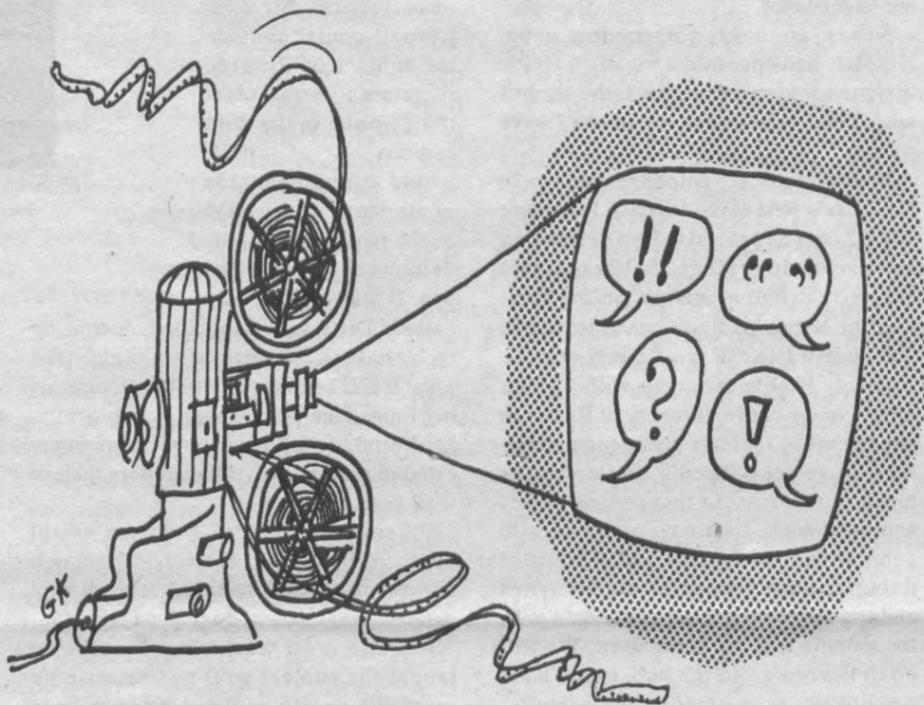
The opening crisis, the debate that established their intellectual framework, was over Russia's socialist "experiment," Trotsky versus Lenin and Stalin. Nathan Glazer, the youngster of the four, was a left-wing Zionist, joining Kristol, Howe and Bell in the anti-Stalinist alcove #1 at City College. The 1936 Moscow trials, featuring ludicrous accusations of foreign espionage, and equally ludicrous confessions, followed by execution, deepened their conviction that Stalin was a murderous dictator, that "tyranny arose out of the movement which was supposed to bring social justice to the world."

As the cast ages, the advent of Senator Joseph McCarthy and his congressional inquisition of communism is a central feature in the film. Bell remarks critically of McCarthy's left-wing victims, "Instead of saying 'We are communists, we have a right to be communists, we defy you, these are our ideas, you're trying to destroy us,' they didn't. They fudged. They took the Fifth Amendment or denied." He goes on to say the Communist Party and McCarthyites "both played each other's game, and the liberals were being caught between them."

About this time, Kristol and Howe, who at the time lived in the same apartment building, split decisively. Kristol expressed indifference to Howe's dissent, while Howe's thinking evolved to the point that "political struggle would become no longer between democratic capitalism and communist totalitarianism, but will now be a struggle between conservatism—Thatcherite conservatism or Reaganite or Kristolite conservatism—on the one hand, and social democracy on the other."

Kristol felt "expelled" by Howe; Howe simply states, "I made a big mistake with Irving Kristol and that was recruiting him to begin. He wasn't the . . . let's say good material, but he wasn't 'expelled' ever." A striking moment occurs in the film when Diana Trilling recalls, quite devastatingly, "Just before we [she and Lionel] went to Europe in 1972, Gertrude Himmelfarb, who was Mrs. Irving Kristol as you know, phoned to ask whether we would give our names to an ad in the New York Times for Nixon. I had much criticism of McGovern, but I wouldn't dream of giving my name to, for Nixon, and neither would Lionel." This was the "Democrats for Nixon" movement, the

continued on page 9



Gary Kass

minutes, even if that long. I had a certain gift. I could lose an audience in about three minutes."

Kristol: "Like most young people with some political consciousness in the 1930s, I assumed the world was coming to an end, and there would be no point in preparing oneself a profession. I knew absolutely nothing about City College. All I knew was that it was free."

Howe: "The Stalinists were middle brow, the Trotskyists were high brow, because they thought in the kind of terms that you had when *Partisan Review* started coming out, the union of two avant gardes, a political avant garde and a cultural avant garde. We prided ourselves on reading Joyce and Thomas Mann and Proust, maybe not completely, but at least

much caring. Well, what happened was that Mary McCarthy sat down on one side of me, Hannah Arendt sat down on the other side of me, and then Diana Trilling pulled up a chair and sat facing me, and I was a prisoner. I couldn't get out. And they then had a long, hour-and-a-half discussion on Freud, in which they disagreed, and I don't remember what the disagreements were. All I know is I sat there, quiet and terror-stricken."

The momentum of *Arguing the World* increases till the very end, with the death of Irving Howe. He and Daniel Bell are the stars of the film for this reviewer. The Jewish-immigrant world of New York is the starting point, with historic turn-of-the-century shots of bustling city slums. Each of the four protagonists tours his original

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 "Years later, Orno Tacher would think of his days in New York as a seduction. A seduction and a near miss, a time when his memory of the world around him—the shining stone stairwells, the taxicabs, the sea of nighttime lights—was glinting and of heroic proportion. Like a dream." So begins this remarkable novel about the lives of two young men and the women they love.
 "Canin keeps readers so thoroughly engaged that the anticipation of resolution is almost dread"
 —Publishers Weekly
 "One of the most satisfying writers on the contemporary scene."
 —The New York Times
 335 pages • \$24.95 cloth • Random

Nabokov at Cornell

continued from page 1

ty with first-class honors, he had no graduate degrees and had done little scholarly work. Bishop—a biographer of Pascal and Petrarch, immensely popular and learned, a man who knew some eight languages and contributed essays and light verse to the *New Yorker*—already considered Nabokov one of the century's most important writers.

"I am concerned with finding a Professor of Russian Literature," Bishop wrote. "What I have in mind is a man who will suck the students into his classes by personality and by a creative attitude toward literature. We have enough footnoters around; if literature is to compete with science, it must be presented as a means to wisdom and an upbuilder of life. The only person I have in mind is Vladimir Nabokov."

Other than Bishop, few people on campus recognized Nabokov's talent, says George Gibian, who came to Cornell in 1961 as Nabokov's replacement. "To many, Nabokov was just one more eccentric Russian," Gibian says, "an émigré writer who had published some things in obscure Russian émigré journals in the obscure Russian émigré world, about which most non-Russians knew nothing."

In the post-World War II years, when millions of former American soldiers were settling into lives back home and veterans were crowding classrooms on the Hill, Cornell offered Vladimir Nabokov something he had yearned for: a permanent job, a place to stay. He would start at \$5,000 a year, teaching Russian literature. The exile would remain in Ithaca more than a decade, perhaps the most stable and productive period of his life. By the end of his time at Cornell, the obscure émigré novelist would appear on the cover of *Time* magazine, and would write a novel, mostly at his rented house at 802 East Seneca Street, that would shock his adopted nation and make him rich. His admirer and best Ithaca friend, Morris Bishop, would not even read it because of its "scabrous subject."

"Lolita," it would begin. "Light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lolee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta."

"She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita." Along with "Call me Ishmael," it would be one of the brilliant, triumphant openings in American literature.

The wandering exile would leave Ithaca and Cornell because of that novel. Only now he was something different. He was the wizard, the author of *Lolita*, the master not only of his adopted language, but of other brilliant novels in Russian and English which contained mazes and mirrors and narrow escapes. He was the author of elaborate chess games about passion and compulsion-like *Invitation to a Beheading*, in which a condemned prisoner marches to his execution and literally watches the scene deconstruct, as though a movie set were being dismantled. He was Vladimir Nabokov, the dazzling genius of American literature, who in the words of long-time admirer John Updike, "writes prose the only way it should be written—ecstatically."

After Cornell he escaped yet again, back to Europe and more rented rooms. But Ithaca would linger in Nabokov's memory and his fiction. Just as he had changed the American literary landscape, Cornell had changed him.

That first Cornell summer of '48, Nabokov settled into his office on the north end of the second floor of Goldwin Smith Hall, GS 278, and played tennis with his son, Dmitri, on the Cascadilla

courts. By September, Nabokov had moved from East State Street to the first two floors of a house at 802 East Seneca Street, where he and his wife, Vera, would stay until 1950.

He encountered a common College-town problem—noisy neighbors. To the occupants of a third-floor apartment Nabokov sent an elegant but bristly note. "I want further to remind you that your living room is situated exactly over our bedrooms and that practically every word and every step is heard. Saturday night you had apparently a party and we were kept awake until 1:30 a.m. I am afraid I must insist that at 11 p.m.—or at 11:30 at the latest—all loud talking, moving of furniture etc. should cease." A few years later, a more forgiving Nabokov would dispatch another note upstairs. "If you want me to write those stories you are kind enough to appreciate, you will not shatter the peace of mind in which they are engendered."

Never an easy nor modest man, Nabokov had once told a friend, "I divide literature into two categories, the books I wish I had written and the books I have written."

There were seventeen students in Nabokov's first class, Russian Literature 151-52, and he proved to be a demanding and eccentric teacher. "Although this course is called a 'survey' in the catalog," he began his first Cornell lecture in 248 Morrill Hall, "it is not a survey at all. Anybody is able to survey with a skimming eye the entire literature of Russia in one laborious night by consuming a text-book or an encyclopedia article. That is much too simple. In this course, ladies and gentlemen, I am not concerned with generalities, with ideas and schools of thought, with groups of mediocrities under a fancy flag. I am concerned with the specific text, the thing itself. We will go to the center, to the hub, to the book and not vague summaries and compilations."

He gave grades to various Russian writers: Tolstoy received an A-plus and Chekhov an A, but Dostoevsky, a titan of the Russian novel, rated only a C-minus. Chekhov had once described literary critics as flies that keep the horse from plowing. "Nabokov didn't mince any words," George Gibian says. "He had little use for literary criticism. He believed it was



Nabokov drew this spectacular butterfly for his wife, Vera, in a copy of his second published work, *Al'manakh: Dva puti* [An Almanac: Two Paths], privately printed in St. Petersburg, 1918. This book, the only known copy in an American library, was recently acquired and donated to the Cornell Library's Rare and Manuscript Collections by Jon A. Lindseth '56.

best for the students to know the texts, know the facts. Russia was full of structuralism and formalism, and he didn't feel that was valuable. He didn't bear fools lightly. I wouldn't say he was arrogant, but there were stories about his

knowing his own value, and about his incredible knowledge of history and Russian literature and literature in general." In one exam, Nabokov's first question was, "List the contents of Anna Karenina's little red bag." It wasn't an exercise in trivia. The contents of Anna's bag are crucial to an understanding of her mind, and thus to Tolstoy's greatest masterpiece. M. H. Abrams, an emeritus professor of English, remembers that Nabokov didn't engage in arguments. "He just bridled and left."

In 1955 Nabokov began to teach Masters of European Fiction, his first Cornell course outside the subject of Russian literature. It was a class that would make him famous at Cornell, would attract hundreds of students, and would be the most popular academic course on campus. It was unofficially called "Dirty Lit"—so called, according to Nabokov, because of an "inherited joke: it had been applied to the lectures of my immediate predecessor, a sad, gentle, hard-drinking fellow who was more interested in the sex life of the authors than in their books."

"'Caress the details,' Nabokov would utter, rolling the R, his voice the rough caress of a cat's tongue, 'the divine details,'" remembers Ross Wetzsteon '54. "He was a great teacher not because he taught the subject well but because he exemplified and stimulated in his students a profound and loving attitude toward it." Another student remembers his opening remarks: "The seats are numbered. I would like you to choose your seat and stick to it. This is because I would like to link up your faces with your names. All satisfied with your seats? Okay. No talking, no smoking, no knitting, no newspaper reading, no sleeping, and for God's sake take notes."

The legendary lectures—on Proust, Austen, Flaubert, Dickens, Stevenson, Kafka, and Joyce's *Ulysses*—were published in 1980 under the title *Vladimir Nabokov: Lectures on Literature*, with an introduction by John Updike. Before an exam, according to Updike, Nabokov would say, "One clear head, one blue book, ink, think, abbreviate obvious names, for example, Madame Bovary. Do not pad ignorance with eloquence. Unless medical evidence is produced nobody will be permitted to retire to the W.C."

But even the most talented students fell prey to Nabokov's mischief, Updike writes. "When a Miss Ruggles, a tender twenty, went up at the end of one class to retrieve her blue book from the mess of graded 'prelims' strewn there, she could not find it, and at last had to approach the professor. Nabokov stood tall and apparently abstracted on the platform above her, fussing with his papers. She begged his pardon and said that her exam didn't seem to be here. He bent low, eyebrows raised. 'And what is your name?' She told him, and with prestidigitational suddenness he produced her blue book from behind his back. It was marked 97. 'I wanted to see,' he informed her, 'what a genius looked like.' And coolly he looked her up and down, while she blushed; that was the extent of their conversation." Updike notes that the student didn't remember the course being called "Dirty Lit," but rather, "Nabokov."

"He would enter the lecture room with



Nabokov at work on his massive translation of Eugene Onegin, 1957, Rare and Manuscripts Collections, Cornell University

great élan," Brian Boyd writes, "Vera behind him. In the winter, overcoated to the ears, he would stomp snow from his galoshes feet and remove his coat, which his wife—"my assistant," as he would refer to her in class—would drape over a chair before taking off her own. Then he would draw his notes out of his briefcase. As one student recalls, 'I don't think Mr. Nabokov realized how much suspense was involved in this; like watching a handicapped magician, we were never sure whether a fist full of silks would appear instead of the expected rabbit, or a custard pie instead of the promised hard-boiled egg. It was always an adventure.'"

Vladimir Nabokov and Vera Slonim had married in 1925. Vera was born into a family of affluent Jewish business leaders who, like Nabokov, were exiled from Russia. Vera Nabokov was brilliant, immensely capable, and considered extraordinarily beautiful even in old age. She sometimes helped teach her husband's courses, translate his fiction, answer his mail, and grade exams. The Nabokov marriage was once profiled in a *New Yorker* article entitled "The Genius and Mrs. Genius."

Years after he left Cornell, Nabokov would recall his time in the classroom. "My method of teaching precluded genuine contact with the students. At best, they regurgitated a few bits of my brain during my examinations. Vainly I tried to replace my appearances at the lectern by taped records to be played over the college radio. On the other hand, I deeply enjoyed the chuckle of appreciation in this or that warm spot of the lecture hall at this or that point of my lecture. My best reward comes from those former students of mine who ten or fifteen years later write to me to say that they now understand what I wanted of them when I taught them to visualize Emma Bovary's mistranslated hairdo or the arrangement of rooms in the Samsa household."

Despite his modest assessment of himself as a teacher—and his wrong-headed and eccentric dismissal of writers such as Mann, Faulkner, Dostoevsky, James, and Freud—Nabokov was nonetheless able to convey his passion and joy in great works of the imagination. He wanted students to experience, as he called it, "the tingle" one might feel "in any department of thought or emotion. We are liable to miss the best of life if we do not know how to tingle, if we do not hoist ourselves just a little higher than we generally are in order to sample

Nabokov at Cornell

saved the manuscript from flames.

They moved to 623 Highland Road, then to 106 Hampton Road. At last, on December 6, 1953, in still another rented house—back at 957 East State Street where they had first lived in Ithaca—Vladimir Nabokov finished *Lolita*, which he had been working on for five years.

Lolita is a love story, a tour de force, a road trip through every one of the contiguous forty-eight United States, a story about a murder. It was also a literary time bomb, which would free Nabokov from teaching and make him famous. The name *Lolita* would soon be a household word in the United States, as well as fodder for such comedians as Steve Allen, Milton Berle, and Dean Martin. But none of that would happen for another four years. The

story of the middle-aged academic, Humbert Humbert, and his passion for his twelve-year-old stepdaughter was, as yet, too hot to handle.

The Nabokovs moved to 101 Irving Place, and Vladimir began work on *Pnin*, a novel that, along with the later *Pale Fire*, is probably the work most closely based on his Cornell years. Both novels concern professors—one of Russian, one of literature—at upstate New York universities. And the long search for a publisher for *Lolita* was under way.

Despite Nabokov's growing reputation, *Lolita* was turned down—often with great editorial reluctance—by Farrar, Straus, Viking; Simon and Schuster; New Directions; and Doubleday. Publishers feared a lawsuit. In 1955, Nabokov sent the manuscript of *Lolita* overseas, where Olympia Press in Paris, publishing books in English, agreed to give *Lolita* a home.

After a stay at Belleaire Apartments, Number 30, at 700 Stewart Avenue, the Nabokovs moved to another sabbatic house at 808 Hanshaw Road. In late 1955, in the London *Sunday Times*, no less a writer than Graham Greene picked *Lolita* as one of the three best books of the year. But John Gordon, an editor of London's *Sunday Express*, declared that *Lolita* was "without doubt the filthiest book I have ever read."

Henry Briet, a book columnist for the *New York Times*, said that *Lolita* "shocks because it is great art, because it tells a terrible story in a wholly original way. It is wildly funny, coarse, subtle and tragic, all at once."

Pnin would be published in America in 1957, before *Lolita*, when the Nabokovs were living at 880 Highland Road, their favorite Ithaca house. Thousands of miles from his native Russia, Nabokov began a translation of Pushkin's epic, *Eugene Onegin*.

Boxes of the Olympia Press edition of *Lolita* were being seized by customs agents in some countries, while other copies were getting through. Sales were brisk in Ithaca bookstores. "*Lolita* was already hotly circulated on the Cornell campus," writes Brian Boyd. "One student came up to Nabokov after a lecture, Olympia edition in hand, and simply bowed to him."

"*Pnin* was nominated for a National Book Award, and students, his own and others, kept bringing copies to be autographed. A Nabokov cult developed among Cornell's ambitious young writers:

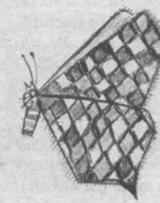
the future novelist Thomas Pynchon '59, science fiction writer Joanna Russ '57, novelist Richard Farina '59, critic Roger Sale, PhD '57, editor Michael Curtis '59. At Cornell's literary club, the Book and Bowl, Marc Szeftel and Richard Farina read from *Lolita*."

On August 18, 1958, *Lolita* was finally published in the United States. Writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, Elizabeth Janeway said, "The first time I read *Lolita* I thought it was one of the funniest books I'd ever come on. The second time I read it I thought it was one of the saddest. . . . I can think of few volumes more likely to quench the flames of lust than this exact and immediate description of its consequences." But Orville Prescott, writing in the daily *Times*, declared *Lolita* "highbrow pornography."

Nabokov's publisher, Walter Minton of Putnam, wired: EVERYBODY TALKING OF LOLITA ON PUBLICATION DAY YESTERDAYS REVIEW MAGNIFICENT AND NYTIMES BLAST THIS MORNING PROVIDED NECESSARY FUEL TO FLAME 300 REORDERS THIS MORNING AND BOOK STORES REPORT EXCELLENT DEMAND CONGRATULATIONS.

Three days later, *Lolita* was in its third printing, and by mid-September the book had sold 100,000 copies in its first three weeks. Fawcett Crest bought paperback rights for \$100,000, a movie deal was in the works, a Texas town debated changing its name from Lolita to Jackson, and students lined up outside Nabokov's Goldwin Smith office to have copies of the book signed in time to

To Vera



This butterfly, hand drawn by Nabokov, appears in a copy of his 1974 book *Look at the Harlequins! He dedicates the book and his drawing to his wife Vera. Recently acquired and donated to the Cornell Library's Rare and Manuscript Collections by Gail ('56) and Steve Rudin.*

bring home for Christmas break.

Nabokov had never been paid particularly well by Cornell. Along with his teaching duties, he had been writing his stories and novels, translating not only *Eugene Onegin* but his own earlier novels into English, and traveling in the West in search of butterflies. On January 19, 1959, Nabokov gave his last Cornell lectures, while a reporter from a Swedish magazine took photographs. The Nabokovs left Ithaca for good on February 24, on icy roads.

By September, Nabokov had formally resigned from Cornell in a letter to President Deane Malott. "With one thing and another," he wrote, "I feel a sovereign urge to devote myself entirely to literary work. I have been very happy at the University and the pang of parting with it is most keen." The Nabokovs sailed for Europe on the *Liberté*.

Vladimir Nabokov's American years, and his Cornell years, were essentially over. He and Vera would live in a series of unglamorous hotel rooms, mostly in Switzerland, and the international literary celebrity would go on to write his novels *Pale Fire* and *Ada*. *Lolita* became a movie in 1962, directed by Stanley Kubrick, and Nabokov was nominated for an Academy Award for best adapted screenplay. The film starred James Mason as Humbert Humbert, Sue Lyon as Lolita, and Peter Sellers as Humbert's nemesis, Quilty. This summer a new movie version of *Lolita*, finished for several years, finally aired on cable TV. The new *Lolita* was not released in theatres; like publishers decades ago, producers were worried about the legal ramifications.

By the 1970s, Vladimir Nabokov was widely acclaimed as one of the century's greatest writers. "You never really got close to Nabokov," says M. H. Abrams. "His natural look was down his nose. Not that he thought he was better than everyone else, but that was his natural posture. He carried himself high. His demeanor was such as to ward off people. He had an air that kept people at a distance."

Perhaps it was the pain and awkwardness of exile, the trauma of his father's death, the experience of a wealthy aristocratic boy who grows into the adulthood of hard times. The eccentric Russian émigré, his brilliant books neglected, having to always hustle for work and for a place to stay. Despite his love for Hawthorne and Melville, Nabokov was never allowed to teach American novels at Cornell because he did not have the credentials. Yet Ithaca offered him the most settled time of his exile.

"It was in an Ithaca backyard that his wife prevented him from burning the difficult beginnings of *Lolita*," Updike writes. "The good-humored stories of *Pnin* were written entirely at Cornell, the heroic researches attending his translation of *Eugene Onegin* were largely carried out in her libraries, and Cornell is reflected fondly in the college milieu of *Pale Fire*. One might imagine that his move two hundred miles inland from the East Coast gave him a franker purchase on his adopted 'lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country' (to quote Humbert Humbert). Nabokov was nearly fifty when he came to Ithaca, and had ample reason for artistic exhaustion."

The exile became the butterfly hunter, the maker of brilliant, lapidary, and, finally, heartbreaking fiction. Through all the moves, the stream of rented rooms, it was only ever about that place in his head—the funnel of a ship, a boy playing chess with his father—where loss could be consoled by art. It was about Humbert and Nabokov longing achingly for something they could never really keep. The fleeting beauty of a butterfly, a word, a work of art—a place where a boy could hold on to his mother's and father's hands, and the pain of loss and grief would be eased.

He died in a Montreaux, Switzerland, hospital on July 2, 1977, with Dmitri and Vera at his bedside. His last home was rented rooms in the Montreaux Palace hotel, where he and Vera had lived happily for years.

(This article was reprinted from the July/September 1997 issue of *Cornell Magazine* with the permission of the author and the editors.)

Paul Cody is a former associate editor of *Cornell Magazine* and a frequent contributor to *The Bookpress*. His most recent novel is *So Far Gone*.

C.A. Carlson contributed research for this article.

Invitation to a Festival

Jason Cons

Gavriel Shapiro is Chair of the Russian Literature Department at Cornell. His most recent book, *Delicate Markers: Subtexts in Vladimir Nabokov's "Invitation to a Beheading"* was released this August from Peter Lang Publishers. Shapiro is the director of the upcoming Cornell Nabokov Centenary Festival. "In this festival," says Shapiro, "we celebrate Nabokov as a Renaissance man." The festival, which takes place on September 10-12, will feature, among other things, an exhibit of Nabokov materials, including books from his personal library and butterflies from his Cornell collection; a scholarly conference on Nabokov's work with presentations by experts from all over the world; a showing of Adrian Lyne's new film adaptation of *Lolita*; and a performance of *Dear Bunny/Dear Valodya*, Terry Quinn's dramatic adaptation of the letters of Edmund Wilson (played by William F. Buckley, Jr.) and Vladimir Nabokov (played by his son Dmitri). *The Bookpress* recently had an opportunity to speak with Shapiro about his book, his interests in Nabokov, and Nabokov's continuing role in American letters.

Gavriel Shapiro: Nabokov's motto, to which I subscribe in my work, was "attention to detail." He would tell his students to fondle details. Nabokov writes [in his *Cornell Lectures on Literature*], "In reading, one should notice and fondle details. There is nothing wrong about the moonshine of generalization when it comes after the sunny trifles of the book have been lovingly collected."

Bookpress: Tell me about your first encounters with Nabokov's work.

GS: I grew up in Moscow and Nabokov was banned in the USSR until the mid-1980s. Completely banned. I first heard about him in 1971. I was 26 at that time. I always wanted to be a literary scholar, but literature was a highly ideological field of study under communism. I felt it wouldn't be good to study in the Soviet Union because they would try to brainwash me and I would only learn within state-imposed censorship. So, I decided to study chemistry, but in my heart I was always a literary scholar. After I graduated from Moscow University in 1968, I became involved in the Jewish movement and wanted to emigrate to Israel. When I announced my intentions, I lost my job.

I was doing odds and ends for work, because if you didn't work for more than six months you were considered a parasite on the State and might be sent to Siberia. Imagine the difficulty of trying to find menial work with a university degree. Potential employers were immediately suspicious of me. But I managed to find some loopholes in the system.

In the spring of 1971, a friend who was a literary scholar gave me one of Nabokov's novels. I didn't know that it was a Nabokov novel at the time; there was no name on it. It was *The Defense*, one of his earlier works. I read it in one night and was astounded. I wanted to know who wrote this and why I, a native speaker of Russian, had never heard of an author who wrote such magnificent prose.

I had to wait until the fall of '72 before I read Nabokov again. I came to Israel and jumped on everything I could get my hands on. I read many authors I was prevented from reading in Soviet Russia.

BP: Now, more than 25 years later, you are organizing a festival that honors Nabokov.

GS: I conceived an idea for the festival ten years ago. I talked to the department chair at the time and told him about it. He asked me to write an outline. I wanted this to be not

just a scholarly conference, but a festival that would celebrate Nabokov—his many talents and interests. About two-and-a-half years ago, I decided to take concrete steps towards putting it together. Now, it's almost here, and I am excited but a bit concerned as well. These are uncharted waters for me. I am not an impresario. This festival has to be a fitting tribute to Nabokov's genius. It celebrates not only the fiftieth anniversary of his arrival at Cornell, but it is also the first in a series of worldwide events marking the centenary of his birth.

BP: It seems to me that Nabokov had a somewhat love-hate relationship with academia. In his novels *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, he addresses some of the absurdities and follies of academic life.

GS: Perhaps in *Pnin* more than anywhere else.

BP: Then how do you think Nabokov might have responded to a festival where such a large portion of time is devoted to scholarly interpretations of his work?

GS: Well, we have to understand that Nabokov did have some mixed feelings about academia. He had a BA from Cambridge University, but there were many snobs who thought he was unqualified to teach in a university. Nabokov dubbed PhDs the "Department of Philistines."

On the other hand, let's not forget that Nabokov was a teacher almost all of his émigré life. For many years he was destitute in exile, since his writing, of course, could not support him. He taught tennis, boxing, prosody, Russian, English, and French. As I've been organizing this conference and talking to people who studied with Nabokov at Cornell, a common phrase has been, "Nabokov taught me how to read, how to see." What more can you ask of a teacher?

Nabokov had many gifts. He was a scholar and his studies were aided by his first-hand creativity. He was an accomplished lepidopterist. But even though the main thing for him was his writing, he needed his teaching jobs to make a living. As soon as he published *Lolita* (which became an overnight success) he retired from the academic world and concentrated on his writing.

Still, Nabokov's time at Cornell was an extremely productive one. *Pale Fire* was written after he left Cornell, but it was, to a great extent, conceived in Ithaca. *Lolita* and *Pnin* were written here, as was his translation and commentary on *Eugene Onegin*.

BP: In what ways did *Invitation to a Beheading* appeal to you as a focus for your newly published book?

GS: Well, it was natural because my first and second papers on Nabokov as a graduate student were on *Invitation to a Beheading*. In a sense, the publication of this book completes a circle. *Invitation to a Beheading* is an unusual novel in Nabokov's canon. It can be defined as dystopian, but it has many dimensions. Especially important is the theme of the individual against the crowd, against totalitarian society. In this case, the individual has the inclinations of an artist who cannot find refuge from the all-seeing totalitarian regime. Of course, this resonated very strongly with me. The book cannot be reduced to this one dimension, but it is one of its strongest themes. Nabokov was annoyed when people tried to reduce it to a socio-political novel, but he did talk about the novel's relation to "communazism" (a word he coined) and its implications against both the Soviet Union and Nazi

Germany. Nabokov lived in Germany from 1922-1937, where he wrote *Invitation to a Beheading* in 1934 (in Russian); it was serialized in 1935-6, and published in book form in 1938.

I'm working on a new book on Nabokov and the pictorial. As a youth, Nabokov wanted to be a landscape painter, but around the age of 15 he realized that writing was his true vocation. Nonetheless, painting figures prominently in Nabokov's artistic universe. Even though he turned from the brush to the pen, his keen sense of vision and color, his great interest in and vast knowledge of the fine arts, are all manifest in his work.

BP: Nabokov is an extremely difficult author, yet he occupies an important place in American popular culture, most notably as the author of *Lolita*. The controversies surrounding this novel have recently been in the news again with the new film production of *Lolita* [Until recently, film director Adrian Lyne was unable to find a distributor in the US because major studios were concerned that the PR cost of promoting such a film would outweigh the profits]. How has Nabokov's role in American culture changed over the past half-century?

GS: I am amazed at how history repeats its follies. What Nabokov experienced in the 1950s, when he had so many difficulties publishing the novel, is now happening in another medium. In the 1990s, people still have not learned that *Lolita* is a very moral novel. To say that it promotes child abuse is as absurd as saying that a novel about war promotes war, or that a detective story promotes crime.

Lolita shows how Humbert ruins his life through his destructive passion and, more importantly, he also ruins the life of Lolita. It is symbolic and telling that she dies in stillbirth. We may recall that after their first intercourse, she complains that Humbert has broken something inside her. She is corrupted by him: he forces her to lie, infringes on her freedoms.

BP: For me, *Lolita* is the perfect representation of American consumer culture and, in a way, she is subverted by Humbert's old-world intrusion. Perhaps it is fitting that popular culture would have such a tenuous relationship with the book.

GS: I suppose, but in Nabokov's lecture on *Madame Bovary* (in *Cornell Lectures on Literature*), he alludes to the fate of his novel: "The book is concerned with adultery" and "indeed, the novel was actually tried in a court of justice for obscenity... as if the work of an artist could ever be obscene." Nabokov believed that true art could not be obscene. He goes on to write, "I am glad to say Flaubert won his case. This was exactly a hundred years ago. In our days, in our times... But let me stick to my subject." Nabokov also knew Joyce's writings

well and understood what happened to *Ulysses*. It is the same situation: philistine societies everywhere cannot distinguish between trash and true art.

BP: Do you do you believe Nabokov's influence in the American literary canon to be a lasting one?

GS: Nabokov has a very important role in American letters. As a cultural liaison, he introduced many people in America—both through his fiction and through his translations and commentaries—to Russian literature and Russian culture, as well as European culture in general. A striking example of this is the story of his translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. One day he came home—so the story goes—and told his wife Véra that he was disappointed with the existing translations of *Eugene Onegin*. To which she responded: "Why don't you translate it yourself?" What he produced is both a translation and a commentary, an astonishing work of superb scholarship.

Nabokov also served as a mentor to a new generation of American writers, such as Thomas Pynchon and Richard Fariña, both of whom were students at Cornell during Nabokov's tenure.

BP: Nabokov has a certain reputation for his strong opinions on literature. One of these, for example, was his outspoken dislike of the works of Dostoevsky.

GS: Here is the problem. So many cannot read Dostoevsky in the original Russian. If you read him in Russian, you realize not only that some situations in his novels are forced, but also that he is not a great craftsman of language. For Nabokov, this was an offense. Nabokov wrote in the tradition of Pushkin, Gogol, Chekhov, and Tolstoy. These were true craftsmen. Tolstoy reworked his writings a great many times, and Gogol used to say that each work should be rewritten at least eight times. But Dostoevsky was a compulsive gambler who needed lots of money to satisfy his addiction. He was writing to meet deadlines and often didn't have time to polish his work. In the end, however, we read and judge what is in front of us, but I think I can understand the reasons for Nabokov's dislike of Dostoevsky. Remember, Nabokov was an accomplished natural scientist who studied the anatomy of butterflies under a microscope. He strove for precision in both science and literature and any errors against the truth vexed him. For Nabokov, any approximation in a work of art was unpardonable.

Jason Cons is a writer and a managing editor at The Bookpress.

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Radical Trajectories

continued from page 5

very start of the neo-conservative movement, she avers, leading to Republican political victories in the White House.

Close lifetime friends and colleagues though they were, Bell split with Kristol also. Bell remarks that Kristol wrote, in *The National Interest*, that, "For me, the Cold War is not over. To me it's a war against liberalism." And I blink. I say, "Well, you know, I can be critical of liberalism, but a war against liberalism? Why?" Well, liberalism is responsible for the moral decay of the country. Well, this I find quite wrong. If there's a sense of decay, it's been in the ethics of so much, not all, but so much of those business corporations, and the way in which they've simply lived lives of total luxury and spoilation, not a word of condemnation of this. So moral decay is always the poor blacks, homosexuals, others, as a form of family values, and nothing on the other side."

Irving Howe's comment brought a laugh from the audience at the showings I attended: "I look upon him [Kristol] as a political opponent and the fact we were together doesn't stir the faintest touch of sentiment in me. I wish him well personally, lead a long life with many political failures."

Michael Walzer, the current editor of *Dissent*, goes to the heart of the neo-conservative position when he remarks, "It seems to me that increasingly the neo-conservatives were in the grip of an ideology, and the ideology was the ideology of the free market, and they seemed to me to be Bolsheviks in the way they adopted and defended and promoted this ideology."

Arguing the World is illuminating also in clarifying the "New York intellectuals'" relations with the student radicals of the 1960s. In 1968, student anger over the Vietnam War erupted on college campuses. Radicals attacked Columbia University, where Bell had been a faculty member for a decade. As Irving Howe put it, "We felt very strongly that by 1968 or so, the New Left people were not engaged in intellectual discussion or debate or political struggle with us; they were out to destroy our bona fides. They were out to deny that we had a right, so to speak, to exist, and this was one of the ways in which the idea of confrontation took place." Bell found negotiation with the takeover-radicals at Columbia impossible. He felt the great universities were the essential institutions for free debate and were complex and fragile. He tells that when police were called in at Columbia, he was with Lionel Trilling, came home at two a.m. and "burst into tears." He felt Columbia was all but destroyed, the faculty torn apart. He left for Harvard.

Both Bell and Howe found radical leader Tom Hayden off-putting, with a "very strong authoritarian, manipulative

streak. We could see the commissar in him, and that put us off." Bell noted Hayden had been called "the Richard Nixon of the Left," and Bell agreed. He remarks here that, "Liberalism has no fixed dogmas. It has no fixed points; you say, 'this is the liberal position.' It changed because it's an attitude. It's a skepticism. It's a pluralism. It's agnostic." Howe says here, "To me, socialism is no longer a dogma or an ideology, but it's a vision, a hope, an expectation, for a world in which there will be greater equality, common ownership of major industries by people who work in industries, a gradual transformation from the ethic of accumulation and me-ism."

In his "defense" of the charge he had become a "champion of the growing political participation of the religious right," Kristol states, "The notion that a purely secular society can cope with all of the terrible pathologies that now affect our society, I think, has turned out to be false, and that is making me culturally conservative. I mean, I really think religion has a role now to play in redeeming the country, and liberalism is not prepared to give religion a role. Conservatism is, but it doesn't know how to do it."

Some useful criticism of *Arguing the World* has emerged. Bell and others have agreed with me that Sidney Hook was neglected. He was a potent voice on the very matters that engaged the New York intellectuals. Ellen Willis felt women were somewhat slighted, but Hannah Arendt, Mary McCarthy, Elizabeth Hardwick and Diana Trilling are quoted and are seen as "writers," not "women." Stewart Kalman was negative in *The Nation*. Bell himself, most omnivorous of readers, regretted the lack of detailed references to Stalin's campaign against the Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe. Senator

McCarthy's hearings at the time diverted attention from these crimes: the execution of Russian Jewish writers David Bergelson, Peretz Markish and several others; the staged murder of Jewish anti-Fascist Solomon Micheols; the purge trial of Slansky; the so-called "doctors plot," where sixteen Jewish doctors were condemned for an alleged poison plot against the Politburo.

Ann Douglas, in *Raritan*, doesn't deal with the film but slights the achievements of its cast. While conceding they were often, like Trilling, "geniuses," she echoes Dwight Macdonald's charge of insufficient "disinterestedness" but she criticizes Macdonald as a "leader in the group's reactionary charge against American mass culture" (italics mine). She feels they simply didn't get it. She excoriates Alfred Kazin and champions C. Wright Mills over all the intellectuals of that time.

Godfrey Cheshire, in the *New York Press* (1/7-13/98), writes perceptively on *Arguing the World*. He poses the question of why the ascent and prominence from the 1930s till the 1980s of "members of one new and very marginal immigrant subgroup became so central to the cultural and political life of a nation to which they were, at first, profoundly and almost belligerently alien?" He points out that another, later group of European Jewish refugees, immigrants or their children went on to become a potent cultural force in Hollywood, "an empire of their own," in the title of Neal Gabler's celebrated book. He credits Bell, Howe, Glazer and Kristol, et al. with likewise building "a principality of remarkable power and cohesiveness within, and having an ever-increasing impact on, America's intellectual realm." Well said.

The film has only been shown for short

runs in a few cities and at selected places like the Film Forum and the Century Club in New York City. But it will be shown on national Public TV in April 1999, and doubtless shown in numerous venues in the coming months as word of its excellence gets around.

Most of the movie critics' comments so far are a good omen for the film's reception as it reaches a national audience.

"This fascinating film, whose lean, information-packed narrative doesn't waste a word, succeeds in compiling sharp, concise portraits of its subjects. The movie offers one of the deepest portraits ever filmed of the fluidity of ideas, as good minds grapple with the cataclysms of history and the human condition and have the temerity to keep searching for answers" (*New York Times*, January 18, 1998).

"It's all very moving and illuminating" (*The New Yorker*, January 12, 1998).

"Arguing the World captures it all with precision, humor, even a touch of emotion. In significant part, this is attributable to each of the four explaining the twists and turns of his own thinking over the past half century in a way that illuminates the usually little understood essential differences among them. In part, too, it is because of the useful running commentary provided by a host of involved contemporaries and later observers (including Morris Dickstein, Diana Trilling, Lionel Abel, Michael Walzer, and William L. O'Neill), plus the deft use of old photographs and newsreel footage" (*The New Leader*, December 29, 1997-January 12, 1998).

Edward T. Chase is the former editor-in-chief of *New York Times Books* and senior editor at Scribner.

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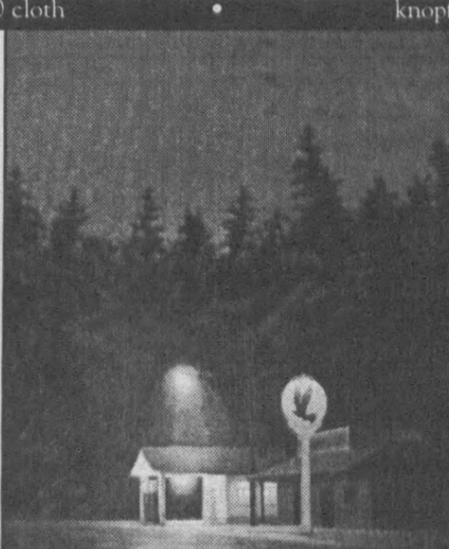
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A Buddhist Beat

continued from page 3

interconnected parts in which "everything is related to everything else" approximates the world-picture presented in Buddhist cosmology. The fruits of this engagement were published in *Earth Household*, a founding text of ecological radicalism, whose very title is a play on the Greek roots of the word ecology (from *oikos* meaning house or home, and *logos* meaning word or order). Its subtitle, "Technical Notes & Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries" gives some idea of its content and suggests how linked Snyder's interest in ecology and in Buddhism were from the beginning. In this early period—consistent with the radical politics fashionable at the time—ecology became for Snyder the "scientific" justification for a revolutionary praxis in which the breakthrough into enlightenment is figured in political terms as a "flip" from current destructive and unsustainable practices to an adherence to the Dharma as it is revealed in nature. Snyder's ecology, like his Buddhism, was from the beginning politically active, pointing down the path from right thinking to right action.

The second stage of Snyder's engagement with ecology occurs after his return from Japan in the late sixties and his reading the work of James Lovelock and others. Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis provided him with a model of the biosphere as a single self-regulating organism, which he then brings into relation with the Goddess archetype in both the Western and Eastern traditions (as in "Short Songs for Gaia" in *Axe Handles*). After settling down on his homestead in the Upper Yuba valley, Snyder became increasingly involved in watershed ecology, in the idea and practice of building sustainable communities, in the bioregional movement, and in multiple personal projects aimed at cultivating a healthier relationship with the land (most of this falls under the rubric of what he calls "reinhabitation," by which he means learning to live on the land as biologically naturalized citizens). In addition, his thinking during this time is influenced by the traditions of Buddhist philosophy and cosmology, and chiefly by Dogen, whose vision of a living universe in which "the blue mountains are constantly walking" provided him with a model for a process cosmology enriched by many points of contact with modern ecological theory. This second period of Snyder's engagement with ecology is represented most explicitly in *Turtle Island* (1974), which presents a vision of a new America premised on the imperative of reinhabitation.

The third stage of Snyder's synthesis of Buddhism and ecology belongs properly to the final period of the *Mountains and Rivers* project, coming in a flurry of inspiration in the mid-nineties and connected with the final push to complete the poem. Whereas the earlier poetry dwelt mainly at the level of immediate sensory experience of nature, the later poetry penetrates deeper into the inner workings of natural processes, concerned not so much with topical impressions as with larger earth-shaking events such as subduction, uplifting, and the clash of continental plates. In these later poems Snyder offers us a vision of the Earth as a single creative process evolving along a space-time continuum. Especially evident in these later poems is a deeper understanding of the cosmic story, of the epistemological implications of evolutionary theory, and a highly technical grasp of the morphological processes which are still shaping the living tissue of the planet. His achievement in these later poems is to fashion a kind of interactive scientific-poetic discourse in the tradition of Lucretius, Erasmus Darwin, and Goethe, which celebrates the creativity of the

Earth with the precision of scientific observation but expressed in the co-creative activity of the poetic imagination.

What the Bristlecone Pines Said

These later poems, in the fourth and final section of the *Mountains and Rivers* sequence, represent a deepening of Snyder's overall poetic vision and a substantially new contribution to American nature poetry. The poem entitled "The Mountain Spirit," a dream-vision loosely modeled on the archaic *No* play *Yamamba* (Old Mountain Woman) may be taken as the visionary epicenter of the entire set and Snyder's most consummate effort to date to arrive at a synthesis of Buddhist cosmology with an up-to-date ecological understanding of natural processes.

The Mountain Spirit is a goddess figure: Mother Nature, Gaia, the *Ewige Weibliche* known by many names. For an ecological poet like Snyder, she is mistress and muse, the voice of nature with whom he can enter into creative dialogue. Snyder uses the conventions of the *No* literary form, steeped in archaic Shinto tradition and infused with an earlier animism, to serve as a vehicle for his vision of a living and evolving universe. The poem opens with an incantatory repetition in the Eastern fashion, almost like a Buddhist chant, affirming the analogy between geological cycles and the cycles of mortality:

*Ceaseless wheel of lives
ceaseless wheel of lives*

*red sandstone;
gleaming dolomite*

ceaseless wheel of lives

red sandstone and white dolomite.

The "wheels of lives" motif refers to the Buddhist doctrine of samsara reincarnation or metempsychosis—a cyclical cosmology of death and rebirth central to most Eastern religious traditions. Sandstone is a clastic sedimentary formation left behind from flood plains, alluvial fans, dunes, beaches, shallow sea bottoms and the like. Dolomite, or dolostone (calcium magnesium carbonate) develops from direct precipitation of carbonates from seawater, and is thus already involved with the interweaving processes which bind the organic and inorganic together in complex flows as carbon and other elements are circulated through the biosphere. Quantum theory and the new life sciences confirm what has always been a central theme of Eastern cosmologies, namely, that everything is connected to everything else in the ceaseless rolling of the wheels of life. Both organic and inorganic life are part of a single unfolding process.

After the opening mantra, the poem moves from the lofty terrain of metaphysical speculation to the rough and real terrain of the Western American landscape, while at the same time transposing the form of the *No* drama into a distinctively American idiom. The poem is structured as an initiation of sorts in which the reader finds himself with Snyder on an overnight vision-quest. The object of the poet's quest is the fabled Bristlecone Pine. These trees, which live on the edges of the Great Basin, grow in twisted and gnarled fashion with new wood constantly coiling around the old, and are among the oldest living beings. Bristlecone appears frequently in Snyder's work as a symbol of nature's longevity, and of a time frame which stretches back beyond recorded human history. In this poem, the Bristlecone Pine serves as a symbolic center around which the poet and the Mountain Spirit, his lover and friend, can enter into a kind of sacred communion. The vision proper begins later that night under a precise astrological coincidence, when Mirfac, "the brilliant star of Perseus," crosses over the ridge at mid-

night. We find the poet in a kind of trance, Manfred-like, staring out over the vast abyss, inspired by the breezes coming up from the flatlands below and by the shooting stars above. There he has a vision of ever-creative nature, of the whole universe literally palpitating with life, and there he begins the recitation of the poem of all poems, the poem of the earth:

*Erosion always wearing down;
shearing, thrusting, deep plates crumpling,*

*Still uplifting—ice-carved cirques
dendritic endless fractal streambed riffs on hillsides*

This is Snyder's High Argument, a theme which extends the principle of identification between mind and nature (the Romantic High Argument) to a deeper level, enriched by a more profound understanding of the cosmic story and by an epistemology grounded in evolutionary theory. Snyder beholds nature as pure creative process, rock diving into earth and mountains lifting up their heads and pouring dust over sea shells from ancient seabeds. Here we have Vulcanism supplemented by Neptunism, a vision of the universe as continual creation and destruction, of past upliftings carved into ever new shapes by the steady wearing away of erosion.

What Snyder presents here is not just dreamy nature poetry, but a poetry of nature informed by a precise, up-to-date scientific understanding of the geophysical processes which are still shaping the earth's crust. The "ice-carved cirques," for instance, refers to the repeated cycles of glaciation as rivers of ice moved up and down the valley during the Pleistocene (a theory, incidentally, first adduced by John Muir to explain the polishing of the steep cirques in Yosemite). Words like "dendritic" and "fractal," lifted from the geologist's lexicon, enter into the service of poetry in an effective concatenation of unlikely sounds and images. The admixture of geological insight with a poetic ear allows Snyder to come up with such felicitous phrases as "calcium-spiraling shells," "magma-swollen uplands," "ranges into rubble" and "lime-rich wave-wash soothing shales and silts." Or he can celebrate a single tectonic event:

*ten million years ago an ocean floor
glides like a snake beneath the continent
crunching up
old seabed till it's high as alps.*

To look at the landscape through the eyes of the geologist-poet is to behold the poem of the earth as it unfolds in successive periods along a story-line extending back many eons. Through a kind of participatory mimesis, Snyder is able to "plug in" to the creative energy of the cosmos,

and then translate that creativity into the effusions of his own co-creative poetry—*physis* metamorphosed in the fires of the imagination into a refined *poiesis*. The poem concludes with a bizarre neo-archaic ritual in which the poet and his paramour "dance the pine tree," a cosmic dance around the twisted roots of the old Bristlecone Pine:

—The Mountain Spirit and me

like ripples of the Cambrian Sea

dance the pine tree

old arms, old limbs, twisting, twining

scatter cones across the ground

stamp the root-foot DOWN

This sing-songy identification of the poet with the Mountain Spirit encompasses a long-view of geological time, extending back to a period when the Great Basin was part of the ancient Cambrian Sea teeming with the first squirming forms of life. There is a distinctly pagan flavor to all of this, bringing to mind the ancient Dionysian orgies in which the principle of individuality is lost within an overpowering identification with the larger whole. I take the Bristlecone Pine here to be a symbol of the evolutionary "tree of life" whose roots and branches help us to visualize the twisted togetherness of coevolutionary history. The dance can then be understood as a celebration of the creativity inherent in those evolutionary processes which, over a period extending back three billion years and more, and through numerous metamorphoses, produced the conditions which allow the poet to stand where he stands and sing of these momentous events. In this way, Snyder expands the limits of poetic consciousness to embrace the entire unfolding process of cosmogenesis extending back to the originating mystery of life and forward to the genesis of his own poem.

The sudden disappearance of the Mountain Spirit—"and then she's gone"—does not, however, leave the poet exactly forlorn. Just when the poem seems to drift off into some sort of hopelessly Romantic *Sehnsucht*, Snyder reaffirms his craft by ironically wrapping up his nocturnal vision with a matter-of-fact and even humorous closure. Posing as if tired of bantering with spirits and wishing for sleep, he bids goodnight to both his dancing partner and his reader and returns to his bivisack spread out under the open sky: "A few more shooting stars/ back to the bedroll, sleep till dawn."

Stephen Chapman is a frequent contributor to *The Bookpress*.

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Puzzling it Out

Drive Dive Dance & Fight
Thomas E. Kennedy.
BkMk Press, 1997.
152 pages, paper, \$14.95.

Suzanne Kamata

For years now, expatriate American writer Thomas E. Kennedy has been publishing short fiction in literary journals across the United States and Europe. *Drive, Dive, Dance, & Fight* is his second short story collection in a body of work that includes stylish speculative fiction, critical studies of Andre Dubus and Robert Coover, and *The American Short Story Today*. He has also edited collections of Danish fiction and new Irish writing while serving as overseas editor for the esteemed *Cimarron Review*. In spite of these accomplishments, Kennedy's work is not as well known as it should be.

An alternative title for this, his most recent book, might be *Men on the Verge of a Mid-life Crisis*. Many of these stories are about men who find themselves in wrecked or fading relationships, wondering about the choices they have made earlier in life.

The title character in "Bonner's Women," the lead-off story, "has just entered what he thinks of as late youth." His early youth is behind him, memorialized in knickknacks in his childhood home. His mother, however, has forgotten everything, including the death of her favorite son, Martin.

The ghost of another Irish expatriate writer haunts this story. The weight of accumulated memories and the Christmas holidays bring to mind "The Dead." At the end of the story, Bonner sits by the window watching the snow fall while his wife sleeps, just as Gabriel does in Joyce's masterpiece.

Kennedy's characters often pay homage to their heroes, literary and otherwise. Or at least they try.

In "Kansas City," Johnny Fry flies into San Francisco from Copenhagen on a mission: "To buy a book of poems by Ferlinghetti. To meet Ferlinghetti. Ask him questions about all those years ago when Fry lived his life by the creed of poets. See if Ferlinghetti's thoughts of a gone time could help him understand what had happened to his own life."

Fry, a product of the idealistic anything-goes sixties, has found himself in middle-age, living in a gray area. His marriage has failed. As an expatriate in Denmark, he is between countries, between relationships. He ultimately succeeds in meeting his idol, but the encounter, as all such encounters inevitably are, proves disappointing.

B, the low level Ministry of Foreign Affairs official in "The Severed Garden," has no chance of meeting his hero, Jim Morrison, because he's already dead. Still, B continues to look to Morrison (J in this story) for spiritual guidance. According to B, Morrison "seized his youth, went down in flame, knew or sensed in advance the consequences of survival." For B, those consequences are alienation from a family that he doesn't understand and disillusionment with so-called civilization and the rules of diplomacy: "The political dreamers of the sixties did not know what they were talking about. Only people like J knew — personal liberation, transcendence of perception, the augmentation of the instant, now. Mao was a fraud." Like Johnny Fry, B has a mission to connect, somehow, with his idol, but a cold stone bust of J does not yield the answers he'd hoped for.

Kennedy presents us with people struggling to make sense of their lives and, sometimes, the lives of others. In "The Burning Room," a counselor attempts to win the trust of a torture victim and to understand his dilemma: In explaining his preoccupation with another man's life, he says, "Humankind is a mystery; even if a man spends his entire life trying to solve that mystery and fails, he will not have wasted his time."

These could be the words of the writer, as he explores the life of a divorced pathologist in "A Clean Knife" or that of a woman suffering from a bizarre fear in "Dust." There are no clear-cut answers, no easy ways out, but there is often beauty and sometimes triumph.

The title story is about Twomey, a man down on his luck, who seeks to overcome his fears. He makes a list of the things he'd always wanted to accomplish drive, dive, dance, and fight, and sets out to achieve his goals. Funny, sad, scary, and deeply moving, this is also a story of hope.

Thomas E. Kennedy knows about a lot of things — martinis, Danish witches, death rot, dust — and it is these details that make his stories so vivid and, at times, delightfully quirky. He is well aware of the absurdities of modern American life, his perspective enhanced, perhaps, by his distance as an expatriate. He is also deeply sensitive to the struggles of ordinary lives.

The final story, "Landing Zone X-ray," concerns a middle-aged man remembering the arrest of his friend who had been A.W.O.L. and hiding out in his apartment during the war in Vietnam. Although the war was a turbulent time in this man's life and in the history of the United States, he feels no regret: "This is my story, the story of my time... All the dead men and all the women will turn their hollow gazes toward us then, and I do not think we will wish that we had done more or less or something else." Here is a man at peace, no longer searching for answers, but accepting of his life. These eight stories resound with hard-earned wisdom and deserve to be widely read. Far away in Denmark, Kennedy has been producing some of the best American fiction of our age.

Suzanne Kamata lives in Japan, where she edits and publishes the English-language literary magazine *Yomimono*. She also recently edited the anthology *The Broken Bridge: Fiction from Expatriates in Literary Japan*.

Crossword by Adam Perl

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Across

- Pop
- Like some books
- Stats for McGuire
- Oklahoma city
- ___ ware
- Drying oven
- Just a bit
- Twangy
- Pinnacle
- Woman in the news in 1998
- Former treaty org.
- PGA's Ernie
- LAX stat
- Corporate ending
- Ab, for one
- Prefix meaning "one's own"
- One of the bright stars
- Bad computer?
- Woman in the news in 1992
- Cheerio ingredient
- Cancel
- Start of N. Carolina's motto
- Fashions
- Popular TV comedy
- Louis XIV, eg
- 1989 dance movie
- Sanction
- Presidential matters
- Sailing
- Sound
- Type of molding
- Delhi order?
- Artists subjects
- "___ Man on Campus"
- Mimic
- Hardy lass
- Paris entry point

Down

- Where things come apart
- Ballet position
- Woman in the news in 1997
- New room
- Sch. for sailors
- Local rock group?
- Supporter of the arts
- Ties
- Sunday fares
- Common ailments
- "___ face red!"
- Joan of Arc, for one
- Clinton or Bush
- Swindle
- Kind of surgeon
- Hip eateries
- Davis of jazz
- Swedish given name
- "Or ___!"
- "___ Rhythm"
- Pricey
- Meddle
- Portion
- Singers syllable
- Not for
- Kind of ink
- Upscale
- Kid's complaint
- One of the big three
- Rainbow follower
- Stage direction
- Sits
- Gung-ho
- Fabulous bargain
- Rundown
- PDQ
- Holiday, for one
- He played Davey
- Cool cucumber connection

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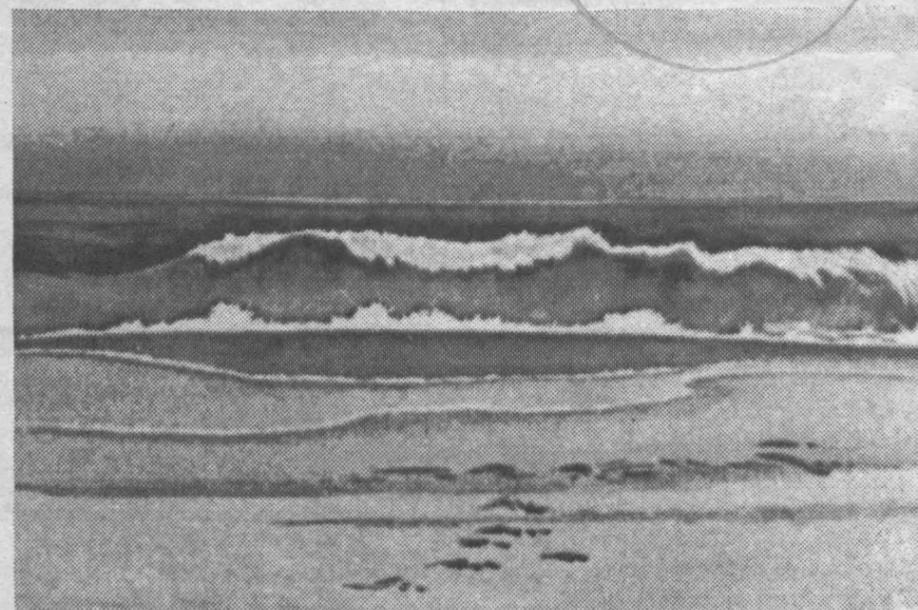
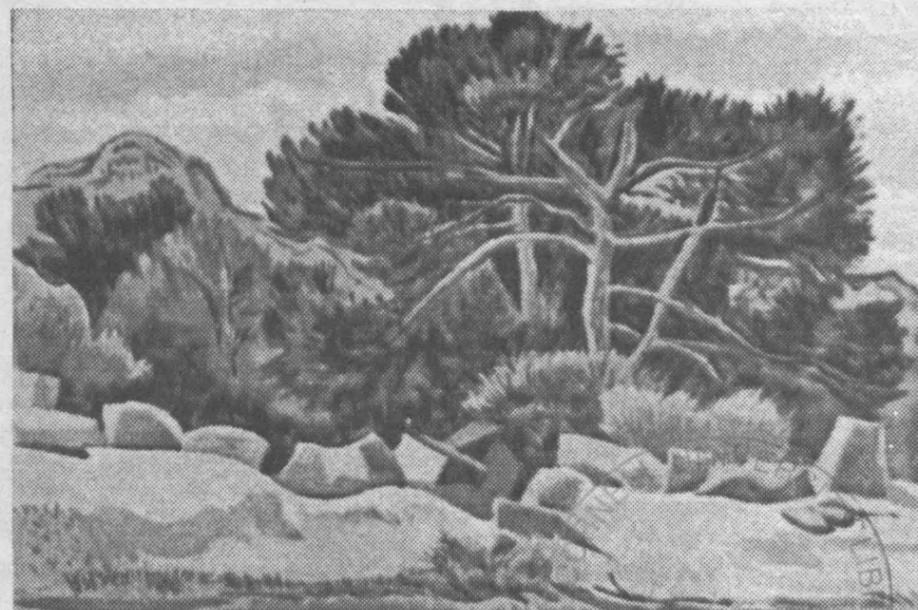
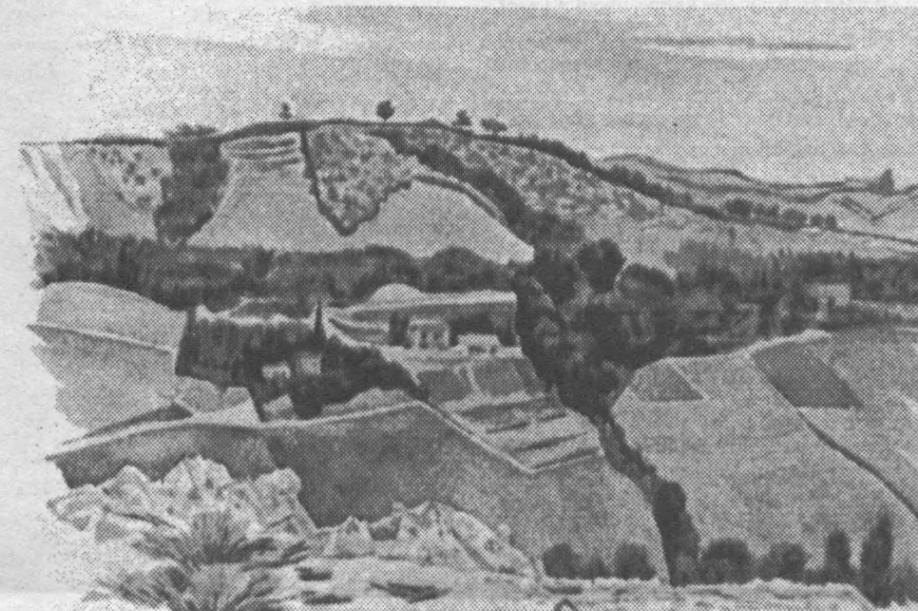
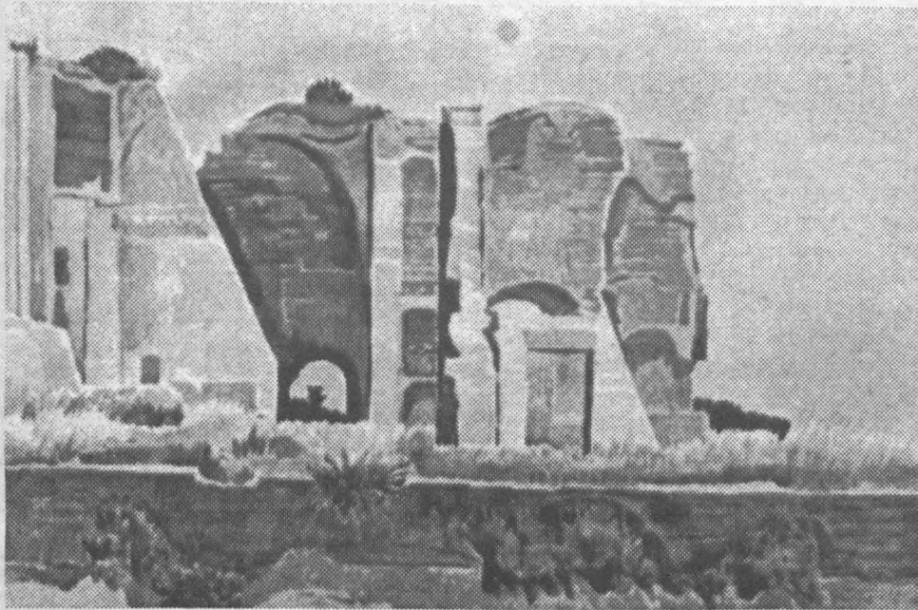
Recently I was invited to talk about my art work to an audience of my contemporaries at a local affluent old folk's home. To prepare for the event I hauled paintings out of the attic that I had produced since I first discovered the magical medium of watercolor at Yaddo forty years ago. It turns out that I have been prodigally prolific, painting hundreds of on-the-spot watercolors in fourteen countries of the Western world, on nine islands and in eight of the United States.

Driven by a compulsive puritanic need to be responsible for every creative move I make, I began to alter these old paintings to conform to my current sense of order and fate, and, as a result, I have become even more aware of the thrilling power of abstract design. The slightest change I made jiggled the rhythms into new alignments that required adjustments, and as one thing led to another I was willing to employ unorthodox means of erasure and addition that I once deplored in order to carry on the process to a resolution, even though it might lead to ruination of the original work. It rarely did so, and now the second floor of our house is awash with relentlessly organized, somber or joyful paintings that are to my over-fond eyes the best American watercolors produced since the work of John Marin.

When I painted my first watercolor in the fifties, Abstract Expressionism was the dominant mode of the day, and as a conventional American artist I wanted to be up-to-date and to avoid the dread sin of being academic. At the same time, I admired the watercolors of Marin and Cezanne and aspired to emulate their method of working directly from nature. In order to accommodate that practice to the rituals of action painting, which required spontaneous improvisation and risk taking, I tried to devise a system that would include the advantages of each. I would venture outdoors from my isolated house-studio at Yaddo, sit down on a portable stool in an adjacent meadow, watercolor equipment on hand, and while being set upon by mosquitos, size up the abstract forces of the scene and, without guidelines of any sort, start the action with one stroke of a color-laden brush. Because watercolor marks penetrate the paper with finality and resist modification, the painter is always teetering on the edge of disaster. One false move and he is done for. In such a state of tension, the prolonged effort requires intense concentration, instant decisions and sustained purpose. Yet sometimes the process engenders a state of transcendental happiness at being there, contemplating the beauty of the world and trying to depict it truthfully, in harmony with the universe.

I believe that a system of working within limits (whether formal, technical, or environmental) stimulates the creative imagination and encourages daring visual inventions that demand control. It follows from this that I identify with the classic art of the Mediterranean countries. In the cultures of Greece, Italy, France, Spain, and Egypt the wild energies of the visual arts, their iconographic meanings, their oppositions and junctures are reconciled without loss of vitality. Consequently, the immanent powers of abstract elements are released and a haptic experience of art is made possible.

Such revelations are beyond the scope of art-historical explication, and when critics base their judgments on the banalities of modern art history, their influence is perniciously restrictive. Powerful tastemakers like the arrogant bully Clement Greenberg, or the equally blind but less offensive smart New York intellectual Adam Gopnik merely reinforce the narrow predilections of an audience that is already disposed to demand the lat-



est models and that is easily titillated by anal-retentive or incontinent extremes of expression.

As one of the many American artists who has never received the sanction of art-world authorities, I know that their indifference or rejection is hard to bear. Even so, I believe that there is more to an artist's work than assessments of style, influences, social milieu and rankings. Therefore, since no one else will do it for me, I would like to proclaim the existence of an approach to the act of painting that combines direct observation of the world of forms with the use of abstract geometry.

This orientation to the creative process is based on the use of a flat, bounded rectangular surface with an intrinsic symmetrical centerpoint that relates to a mysterious sense of a symmetrical center in the human body. In that fixed link, the center is stable and all shifts to asymmetry in the field of vision and on the picture plane (whether left-right or up-down) are dynamic, unsettling, and generate tensions that demand a return to equilibrium and a resolution. The challenge presented by this conflict has stimulated my creative efforts for a lifetime, and my way of dealing with it seems to me special in method and special in result. What emerges in the process is a visual distillation of an experience of the sights, sounds, moods, odors and natural conditions of a particular place and time. In such a composition, the chaotic variety of nature is seen as motifs of color, shape, texture, contours and axial movements that can be organized in patterns of two-dimensional geometry (triangles, rectangles, circles, ovoids and parallelograms, or letters, XST) or musical numbers, duets, trios or quartets. These form a web of mathematical structure across the surface of the painting, and when interior repetitions of the horizontal and vertical boundaries of the initial rectangle exist, a classic base is established that can generate both excitement and serenity. However, the act of putting forms together is still a mystery to me. The irresistible impulse to relate one thing to another becomes an absorbing adventure, and once the exact, essential connection is found, there occurs a miraculous click of satisfaction, like turning a lock with a key.

Watercolor painting is a form of calligraphy, and while writing down one sequence of intervals, I try to keep an eye on the other rhythms to determine how they are reacting to the newcomer. These gestures carry the imprint of individual touch. The resultant hand-made art object is an innate expression of human scale and corporal reality that cannot be duplicated by mechanical means. For me, such a creation becomes a distinctive, potent, and poignant artifact of an artist's life.

I have never known another person who sees what I see in my work or even remotely values it as I do. My old friend, the conceptual artist Norman Daly sometimes sees what I have put there and embellishes my simple creations with his own highly intelligent and original interpretations. Otherwise, I feel professionally isolated and am compelled to admit that my precious nuances and immaculate resolutions are either invisible to others, or, worse yet, noticed and dismissed as obvious and boring. My only stratagem for dealing with these chilling realities is to remind myself that painting watercolors outdoors is one good way to experience the world and to believe that the mountainous pile of elegant but unwanted paintings that occupies my studio is at least a rare, private monument to the joys of creation.

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