

Imagining Nabokov: Russia between Art and Politics. By Nina L. Khrushcheva. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. xvi, 233 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Chronology. Photograph. \$28.00, hard bound.

Nina Khrushcheva ought to know that it is always dangerous to engage in dialogue with a statue. It is also dangerous to take liberties with the public image of Vladimir Nabokov's life

and his family. One need only remember the fate of Andrew Field and his *Nabokov: His Life in Part* (1977). Luckily for Khrushcheva, however, Nabokov's bronze Montreux effigy has not yet deigned to pursue her, despite the provocation of having words, including some that were not Nabokov's, put in its mouth for an imaginary conversation.

By Khrushcheva's own admission, her book is "intensely personal" (2). She declares herself to be the "myself in multiplicate" for whom Nabokov sometimes said he was writing (*Strong Opinions*, 1973, 114). "It is only a matter of time before the right interlocutor turns up. It turned out to be me" (43), Khrushcheva proclaims. It then follows that "Nabokov is me!" (83). "Nabokov is exquisite and insufferable all at once. You can't explain him; you can only create him, each by oneself for oneself" (37). We have been forewarned.

But who is Khrushcheva "in multiplicate"? Who are her intended readers? Apparently, they are primarily a "novel generation of Nabokovian Russians" (25). "The American Nabokov of the second half of the twentieth century is the most important cultural and literary phenomenon for Russia in the first half of the twenty-first. He is our textbook and our road map for today's transitional period from a closed communal terrain to its Western alternative, one open and competitive. How to survive and succeed in this Western world, which Russia always deemed linear, cold, and calculating; this is what the art of Vladimir Nabokov teaches us" (20). Somewhat more generally, she says she is writing "for everyone who—like Nabokov himself—values living in a free society; for everyone who—like my Moscow university students—wants to better learn the intricacies of this life" (38).

Khrushcheva is good on Nabokov's "heroes of kindness": Lolita and Pnin (I would add John Shade), and her comparison of the "heroic exile in the spirit" of Osip Mandel'shtam with that of Nabokov's Cincinnatus C. is touching and relevant, as is her praise of Nabokov for the "heroism of the unheroic life" (152). There are a number of such interesting observations scattered through the book.

Unfortunately, her genuine insights are undercut by numerous sloppy or inaccurate readings, including, but not limited to, her readings of passages by Nabokov himself. I will cite only one of these here. In the last two pages of *Speak, Memory* (1951), Nabokov mentions the shards of a majolica bowl, picked up by his child on a beach, including one shard "whose border of scroll work fitted exactly and continued the pattern of a fragment" found by himself in 1903, by his own mother in 1882, by *her* mother a hundred years ago, and so on, "until this assortment of parts, if all had been preserved, might have been put together to make the complete, the absolutely complete, bowl, broken by some Italian child, God knows where and when, and now mended by *these* rivets of bronze" (*Speak, Memory*, 308–9). Nabokov's "rivets" hold together not only the majolica bowl but also all of *Speak, Memory*. Khrushcheva cites this passage as if Nabokov's bronze statue had spoken it to her in her imaginary conversation with it/him. And then she adds: "I dared to interrupt, 'The bronze bowl was left in the past, and by these shores, in a new coil of the spiral, its fragments formed a bronze statue.' Nabokov nodded in approval" (58). No, he did not. Whatever creative license she may claim, Nabokov is not Khrushcheva; nor is she Nabokov. Any reader of Nabokov should know that bowl not only was not, but could not have been, bronze. Let us leave it at that.