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Review: Brian Boyd, Nabokov, The Russian Years

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artist (her treatment of *Versty I*) is very fine), perceptive readings of individual poems, and commentary on the correspondences between her life and art. At times, however, the basis of Švejc'er's selection of works to be discussed over others is not clear, as in her scant consideration of the *poëmy* of the 1920's. More puzzling is the author's almost complete lack of reference to the considerable critical literature on Cvetaeva's work; there is, for instance, no mention even of Simon Karlinsky's pioneering studies of the poet.

These reservations aside, I find *Byt i bytie* to be a superb and highly readable biography which significantly adds to our knowledge of Cvetaeva's complex life but also broadens and revises our understanding of her. Although other studies have come out since the appearance of *Byt and bytie* which further eliminate gaps in the poet's biography, Viktorija Švejc'er's study stands as a major and vital contribution to our appreciation of this great poet.

Ieva Vitins, Dalhousie University

Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990. 607 pp., \$25.00 (cloth).

"A serious life is not adorned with good stories!" Nabokov reportedly told Andrew Field (*Nabokov: His Life in Part*, New York, 1977), and Brian Boyd has lived up to his subject's requirements. Although he has had access to Nabokov's correspondence and has interviewed Nabokov's widow, Boyd avoids anything that might seem an invasion of the Nabokovs' privacy. The narrative combines scrupulously accumulated fact with careful, balanced readings of Nabokov's works; while gathering for the first time in one book most of the previously available information about Nabokov's life and works, this biography adds little that was not known about the author's life that would be of interest to the general reader.

Some new details will interest those familiar with Nabokov's works and methods. For readers of *Speak, Memory*: Nabokov's great grandfather did not in fact discover the Nabokov River in Novaja Zemlja, it was named for him by his friend Count Lutke (17); Nabokov's English governess Miss Norcott was dismissed because it was discovered that she was a lesbian (52); the real-life names of "Colette" and "Lensky" are Claude Desprès and Filip Zelenskij (79, 80). That Nabokov's relationship with Valentina Shulgina provided the prototype for "Tamara" had already been Fielded, but that five of her actual letters were incorporated into *Mary is new* (146). Apropos *Invitation to a Beheading*, Field's supposition (not mentioned) that Nabokov must have read *We* (AF 148) is confirmed (BB 415), but only in the course of denying Kafka's effect on the novel. Boyd tries to undercut speculation of any relationship between Zamjatin's anti-utopia and Nabokov's novel by referring to a generic utopian novel (*Erewhon*) and to Shakespeare (*The Tempest*). Apparently a contemporary writer should not be considered to have affected Nabokov's work.

Boyd's readings of Nabokov's works are excellent and well-balanced. There are a few curious omissions: the theme of lust in *Laughter in the Dark* is for some reason avoided; Nabokov's pervasive system of literary references goes largely undiscussed, but would seem necessary preparation for the forthcoming second volume. The Berlin stories might better be treated as a group than interspersed with the life chronologically, because the uniting theme—of Berlin as a parody of the other world into which the emigre has "died"—is obscured and the narrative flow interrupted. Boyd reads the works as a progression toward Nabokov's masterpieces, which he considers to be *The Gift*, *Lolita*, *Pale Fire* and *Ada*,

evaluating them in part by how well the shared themes are developed. Boyd makes an excellent point little mentioned in the criticism: that Nabokov will treat a theme in both its positive and negative variations. This is a crucial insight for understanding Nabokov's oeuvre as a totality, something Nabokov seems to have intended—a subject for some future monumental study.

Boyd does a remarkable job of conveying the history and atmosphere of Russia in the decades before the revolution as a background for Nabokov's father's career. He also integrates and correlates vast amounts of documentation of Nabokov's life—letters, interviews about or with Nabokov, reviews of Nabokov's work, Nabokov's poetry, short stories, plays, novels, reviews (the bibliography will only appear in volume two). Frequently cited secondary sources are Andrew Field's *Life in Part* and *VN: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York, 1977). But Boyd castigates Field for "sheer bluster" (539) or for a "preposterous error made possible only through Field's ignorance of . . ." etc. (540). Similar rebukes (familiar from Boyd's book on *Ada*) accompany several of the very few references to other secondary sources; even Pekka Tammi's "comprehensive, sensitive, astute" study is deemed "ponderously scholastic" [566].

This is a symptom of a peculiar identification with his subject that unfortunately undermines Boyd's biography. Nabokov's power as a writer creates passionate partisans and identifiers among his readers. Boyd's devotion to Nabokov manifests itself in exaggerated claims for Nabokov's art: "with a surer skill than almost any artist" (298); "to a degree no one before him had even imagined possible" (299); "His style is psychology at its finest" (302). He even adopts Nabokov's opinions: "the archaic mythmaking and witchcraft of Freud" (91), or what he construes as Nabokov's views: "Nabokov finds his true way, not borrowing from the panoply of old creeds" (251). The entire genre of tragedy pales before Nabokov's art: "[Nabokov] . . . takes care not to build plots in which coincidences are chained to one another with the phonily inexorable logic of tragedy" (299).

Russian literature has always had a propensity to the polemical, and Nabokov, for all his subtlety, participated in that tradition. The same tendency, with less motivation, mars Boyd's narrative, in which the reader ("some readers," "some critics," "most readers" [308]) as created by Boyd becomes a parody of the winged ladies and gentlemen of Humbert's jury: "[Nabokov] did not believe, like the truck driver who tells you that transport makes the world go round, that . . . art . . . was a vocation more important than other human activities" (293); and an array of misreaders is derided for various putative misprisions: "The dismissal of metaphysics is itself a metaphysical issue; its dismissers have themselves been dismissed; . . . [Nabokov] makes [these problems] seem worth facing afresh and injects into them an urgency only the numb would not feel" (295).

Field fell out with the Nabokovs for publishing the details of Nabokov's romantic life. Boyd attempts to minimize the damage. He leaves out several ladies, and describes the affair with Irina Guadanini in Paris in 1937 in such a fragmented way that it is possible not to realize that Nabokov had left his Jewish wife with a two year-old son in Berlin from January to May of 1937 where she was expected to pack up their possessions and meet him in Prague. It is not the biographer's job to pass judgment, of course, but we are told that "Nabokov was never a person who knew how to love lightly" (437) and asked to sympathize with Nabokov's psoriasis brought on by the "nervous tension of the affair" (434).

The biography is extremely valuable in its thoroughness and reliability, and is now the single most complete reference volume on the pre-American period of Nabokov's life. Charles Kinbote's narrative remains more vivid and evocative than John Shade's, and parts of Field's work are informative supplements to Boyd's monumental biography.