as in their antagonistic expectations about their affair. Wells disliked the book's saturated and amorphous nature: typically, Rebecca had scuppered the possibility of its following the course she first intended by overloading it with material about the central characters' earlier life. But, though antipathetic attitudes to writing increasingly divided the pair, what most contributed to their split was Rebecca's clamouring for marriage. As an ardent young radical, she had sarcastically denounced wifehood as often no more than prostitution. But as Wells had noticed, she was always "at once a formalist and a rebel" – or, as a friend later put it, "a combination of the most unconventional and conventional person in the world". Craving position and respectability as well as a reputation for daring talk and bold behaviour, she eventually left Wells. A brief disastrous affair with Beaverbrook followed – which obsessed her for years and generated her unfinished confessional novel *Sunflower*. Then, in 1930, to some surprise among her friends, she married Henry Andrews, a staid-seeming financier nicknamed "Chinese Torture" by Bloomsbury acquaintances – perhaps because he "could – and frequently did – recite the timetables of any railroad on the Continent, including the stations where it was necessary to change trains".

By a freakish twist, this tweedy bespectacled figure – apparently the acme of propriety – turned out to be another undependable male. Going off the rails with other women, he terminated marital relations with Rebecca after five years or so. Basically, though, the union gave her the status and security she desired. In their Portland Square flat, with its butler and mahogany, gilt and brocade, the Andrewses led a life of formality and some grandeur. Virginia Woolf, dining with them, winced at Rebecca's "silky careening society voice" and thought her "a hard painted woman".

Later, with the acquisition of Ibstone House – an eighteenth-century property in seventy acres, with 3,000 bottles in the wine-cellar, paintings several deep on the celadon green walls, flower bulbs ordered by the ton, and terraces adorned with antique sphinxes whose faces resembled Madame de Pompadour and Madame Du Barry – Rebecca continued that metamorphosis from *enfant terrible* to *grande dame* that was to reach its apotheosis in her final widowed years in Kingston House, Kensington. The imperious figure enthroned there in the gilt Regency chair with the claw feet and armrests carved as lions' heads seems a long way from the mocking, mutinous young suffragette. Yet this book lets you see what they shared: an unflagging determination to seize attention by being startlingly combative and self-assertive.

Though Glendinning begins by claiming that the story of Rebecca West is "the story of twentieth-century women", her biography convinces you that it's the opposite of this. passionately personal and self-centred. West's writings – fiction, polemic, reviews, investigative reporting, political commentary, travelogue – look wide-ranging. Her identities – Cissie Fairfield, "Aunty" Panther, Rebecca West, Mrs Henry Andrews – seem protean. But behind it all lies a stubbornly fixed and surprisingly unbudging idiosyncrasy. Far from being representative, she seeks to stamp her peculiar problems and obsessions on everything she surveys. *The Meaning of Treason* – a topic likely to strike a chord in one who felt she'd been so often betrayed – can be glossed by her in unusually subjective ways. *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, hailed by Glendinning as "a great work of romantic art", seems more an artless exercise in self-indulgence. Given Rebecca West's temperament, it was perhaps inevitable that the muddled vehemences of the Balkans should claim her quivering sympathy. But it's still surprising that a book purporting to offer serious historical and political analysis should end up as little more than a technicolour map of its author's personality and predicaments. Though written when she was almost fifty, its pages are hallmarked by her continuingly girlish traits. Mugged-up reelings-out of historical background redolent of the school swot alternate with high-coloured tableaux – lovely doomed empresses, noble monks, handsome peasants, vile tyrants – which remind you that the first author she admired was Alexandre Dumas, and underline the accuracy of Wells's claim, when she was sneering at his *Outline of History*, that she "wanted history full of wonderlands".

Like most of West's ambitious works, the book contrives to be not only overwrought ("It was the body of our death, it was the seed of the sin that is in us, it was the forge where the sword was wrought that shall slay us") and over-long but also over-simplified. The crudely polarized vision of the world she harboured – allies versus enemies, fine art versus coarse vulgarity, radiant virtue versus obscene evil – is weirdly projected on to the murky, problematic arena of the Balkans. A region riven by blood-feud, treachery and slaughter gets praised as the idyllic preserve of natural simplicity. In this "world where men are still men and women still women", homosexuality – another of West's bugbears (she declined to become a Roman Catholic because this would entail "constant and degrading contact with priests who are homosexual") – is happily absent, she feels sure. Beneath this hymning of the Balkans as a haven of healthy, uncomplicated relationships, Rebecca's yearnings for the straightforward partnership she never achieved can be heard. Glendinning's reminder that *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* was written when the Andrewses' marriage was running into problems casts a sadder light on the paraded connubial cosiness – the ceaseless referrings and deferrings to "my husband" – that can seem so risible a feature to the book.

Fiction should have been a more promising field for an imagination that never lost a child-like power of unexpected, vivid response. Jagged mountain peaks perturbed her, Rebecca West said later in life, because they recalled the graphs of rising and falling copper prices her speculating father scrutinized so anxiously when she was a girl. Images of this kind, fresh from childhood memory, regularly vivify her often antique-sounding prose, so heavily encrusted with words like "clamant", "helleboric", "coign" and "volute". Looking back results in moments of pungent sensuous immediacy – as when harshly lit trees at a sickening party remind Rose Aubrey of "the prodigious green of vegetables I had sometimes eaten in my childhood, which had been boiled with pennies by cooks who knew nothing of metallic poisoning".

Modelling itself on the work of her idol, Proust, Rebecca West's "Saga of the Century" tries to emulate it by being long, nostalgic about childhood, full of musical reference and high society scenes. But personal proclivities intrude calamitously. Though Glendinning calls *The Fountain Overflows* "a generous book", it is frequently spiteful and self-regarding. Alongside a flattering picture of Rebecca as a musical prodigy with psychic gifts is set up a grotesque caricature of her loathed sister Lettie – excoriated, in the person of Cordelia Aubrey, as a soulless bossy prig who bawls out orders in her sleep, tortures the family's musical sensibilities by her mawkish and mechanical sawings of the violin, and attracts the embarrassing dotings of a lesbian frump in garish clothes (an earlier fiction, "The Salt of the Earth", had a character resembling Lettie poisoned). For Proust's emotional and psychological subleties, the sequence substitutes West's own naively hierarchized view of life: saints, artists, vulgarians, villains.

Those in the former two categories tend to be impeccably turned out; those in the latter two, hideously dressed. And this sartorial signalling is symptomatic. Near the start of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, West wept over some embroidered frocks that had run in the wash, claiming they had been "important testimony". Minks, "silk evening knickers", and designer outfits, from her Callot sports suit to her Yuki gown, attracted her keenest appreciation, we're told here. "I like dresses and the wide light *salons* where one buys them", she exulted. In *Sunflower* she spoke of "the beauty of tragedy, and the beauty of good clothes, which is one and the same beauty". Rebecca West's career, Victoria Glendinning declares in her introduction, "has turned out to be a sadder story than I expected". One dispiriting feature is the ossifying of the scathing young suffragette – who scoffed that "women who spend their mornings hovering round drapery shops are hardly dignified" – into the dressy attitudinizer who couldn't distinguish between high culture and *haute couture*.

. . . and the eluding

Brian Boyd

ANDREW FIELD
VN: The life and art of Vladimir Nabokov
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0 356 14234 5

Vladimir Nabokov was always alert to the possibilities of biography, and especially to the possibility of disaster. In 1959, a year after the American publication of *Lolita* had brought him fame, a reporter stalked him on one of his butterfly hunts. When the butterflies he sought failed to emerge, Nabokov played up his disappointment before the reporter, in a parody of what the man might write: "'And then I saw that strong man put his head on his forearms and sob like a woman.'" More than forty years earlier he had joked in the same fashion with his girlfriend Lydia Tokmakov:

> In the cypress alleys of Crimean gardens (where Pushkin had walked a hundred years before) young Nabokov amused and annoyed a girl friend of his, who had a taste for romantic literature, by commenting upon his own movements or words in the reminiscent, slightly mincing manner his companion might be supposed to develop many years later when writing her memoirs (in the style of memoirs connected with Pushkin): "Nabokov liked cherries, especially ripe ones", or "He had a way of slitting his eyes when looking at the low sun", or "I remember one night, as we were reclining on a turfy bank – "

To complicate matters, that quotation comes from Nabokov himself, posing as an outside appraiser of his own autobiography in a fake – and mildly querulous – review that was once to have been appended to his autobiography but has never been published.

In his books Nabokov turned biography upside down and inside out. His critical biography of Nikolay Gogol begins with Gogol's death and ends with his birth. His last Russian novel, *The Gift*, contains as an inset the invented young narrator's monograph-length biography of the real writer Nikolay Chernyshevsky, full of genuine scholarly detail but exuberantly defiant of every biographical decorum. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* the narrator's comically frustrated search for the facts of his half-brother's life miraculously becomes not only Sebastian Knight's biography, but also a novel whose very story mimics all Sebastian's own fictional works, and at the same time serves as a handbook for biographers, crammed with precepts and cautionary tales.

Nabokov's interest in the problems of biography is not hard to explain: it fuses two of his most constant themes, the unrevisitable nature of time past, and the impenetrable uniqueness of the individual.

Though the past may be vexingly remote for the palaeontologist who has to reconstruct a whole species from a few fossilized teeth, for a modern literary biographer the problem can often be the reverse: to assemble only a single individual from a ton of papers and ten tons of witnesses. Nabokov offers both problems at once: some of his traces are like footprints in fresh topsoil, while other strata of his past seem down in the Triassic. In 1917, when the Nabokovs fled Petrograd for the Crimea, and again in 1919 when they fled the Crimea for London, they had to leave almost everything behind: a vibrant cosmopolitan city, a cherished country home, a beloved native land, a young man's collection of books, *two* collections of butterflies, and who knows how many other mementoes. The special liberal, cultured Russia the Nabokovs knew has not existed for decades, and despite *glasnost'* the régime they fled has little inclination to tolerate research on émigrés who never regretted their flight.

By the beginning of the 1930s many in the Russian emigration sensed that Nabokov already outshone the star of émigré writing, Ivan Bunin, soon to receive Russia's first Nobel Prize for literature. Throughout the remainder of the decade Nabokov consolidated his position as one of the greatest Russian writers of the century. As German tanks rolled through France in mid-1940, he and his wife fled once again. By the time the war ended, the audience and culture Nabokov had written for no longer existed, and its records were either bombed by the Allies (in Berlin), confiscated by the Soviet occupation (in Prague) or destroyed by the Germans – as were many of the papers and still another butterfly collection that Nabokov left in Paris with his friend Ilya Fondaminsky, who was also destroyed. Can there be a comparable case of a writer reaching the highest levels of achievement in one of the great literary languages only to see the grove in which he earned his laurels bulldozed out of existence?

Nabokov's biographical data divide not so much into two parts – pre-1940 and after – as into four different densities for four distinct phases. For his first twenty years, his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, with its intense focus on childhood, necessarily serves as the primary source. For the next two decades of European emigration a single copy of an émigré newspaper, brittle enough to flake at every touch, may contain the only record of a particular event in Nabokov's life. For his next twenty years spent teaching in American colleges, there are thousands who knew him as a teacher but, with no idea he had fame already behind him or ahead, took no special notice. And in his last twenty years of world-wide celebrity, Nabokov withdrew into the rigorously controlled privacy of his Montreux retreat, where that ton of papers still remains under lock and key.

How does Andrew Field, in his *VN: The life and art of Vladimir Nabokov*, cope with the uneven sedimenta of Nabokov's past? Abysmally, alas. Nabokov creates two devastating portraits of inept biographers in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*'s Mr Goodman, who can remain happily ignorant because so serenely confident of the power of conjecture, and *Pale Fire*'s Kinbote, who intrudes on the privacy of John Shade but misconstrues everything because his own ego gets in the way. Despite all the satiric exaggeration in these two portraits, Field has managed to outdo them both.

In treating Nabokov's first twenty years, Field has sought to avoid *Speak, Memory* or to discredit its recollections. He declares, for instance, that something must be wrong with one of the most poignant scenes in the autobiography. Young Vladimir discovers from a newspaper passed around amid sniggers in his classroom that his father had called someone out to a duel, even though as a jurist he had recently published a celebrated paper brilliantly exposing the feudal folly of duelling. Young Vladimir spends the rest of the day in an agony of tension, picturing his father perhaps already dead from pistol or rapier. Only when he returns home and sees his uncle Nikolay Kolomeytsev, the intended second, descend the stairs laughing as he looks back at his brother-and sister-in-law, does Vladimir realize that for some reason the duel will not take place, his father is safe, and he can burst into tears of relief.

Field announces that the duel V. D. Nabokov alludes to in his paper against duelling has been tracked down. But in the press versions of the encounter he finds no mention of V. D. Nabokov's involvement, and concludes that V.N. seems to have been muddled. The muddle all belongs to Field, who trumpets as a major discovery what is merely a gross blunder. There is no reason for him to suppose even for a moment that this notorious 1909 duel between the leader of the moderate Octobrist party in the Duma and another Duma member could be equated with V.D. Nabokov's calling out a newspaper editor and *not* fighting a duel that *Speak, Memory* tentatively (and correctly) dates 1911. Throughout his discussion of the duel that he identifies as *Speak, Memory*'s non-duel Field seems unaware that (as *Speak, Memory* tells us) Nabokov began school in 1911 or that (as *Speak, Memory* also tells us) V. D. Nabokov's article denouncing duelling preceded his calling someone out. Field does not take issue with the circumstances and dates Nabokov provides, he simply forgets them.

If Field had bothered to consult Nabokov's autobiography again for his new book and had *then* done some work in the newspapers of the time, he might easily have found the real facts behind the near-duel, facts which prove how accurate a memory Nabokov had. On Sunday October 23, 1911, after a week of prominent newspaper coverage of the affair, *Novoe Vremya*'s regular writer of topical doggerel published an account of the challenge calculated to make V. D. Nabokov look ridiculous. If that was, as seems likely, the article Vladimir saw the next day ("a Monday") at school, he has misremembered slightly, transferring to

the rhymed mockery of the challenge his subsequent discoveries of the whole story's outline. Otherwise Nabokov thirty years later had every checkable fact correct: date, cause, the names of the four main participants, the name of the newspaper Field could have traced if he attended to *Speak, Memory*.

Nabokov had been able to save far fewer papers for his years of European exile than in his later years, but he showed Field almost all he had. Nevertheless Field remains ignorant of even the broadest features of this period of Nabokov's life. (When did Nabokov stop living with his family? When did he meet his future wife? When did he write his books?) He has not traced scores of Nabokov letters from this period available in public archives, or visited the richest repositories of the émigré newspapers in which Nabokov was published or discussed. Not that this shakes his confidence. He intones at the end of Chapter Seven that after the killing of V. D. Nabokov in 1922 "certain fundamental things had changed forever". Chapter Eight begins: "It is a simple but striking matter. After the death of Nabokov's father all mention of God vanishes from his poetry." In fact in the first run of poems preserved in Nabokov's verse albums after his father's death – and remember Field has seen these albums – God occurs in four poems out of fifteen, a fifth speaks as if with the voice of a divine creator, two others feature Christ, and still others refer to angels.

For Nabokov's American years, Field naturally dwells on oral evidence. But what kind? He presents the recollections of two Cornell entomologists, although Nabokov was never employed as a lepidopterist there, and ignores those Nabokov worked with at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology. He offers impossible recollections from students, who are for instance treated by Mrs Nabokov to tea from a samovar – brought in a valise from Europe, no doubt, and in spite of the rush to flee Hitler. Without access to the thousands of carbons of Nabokov's letters in Montreux, Field chose not to trace them at the receiving end. Much less excusably, he repeatedly overlooks Nabokov's own accurate published information, so that he can for example depict Nabokov nearly destroying the unfinished manuscript of *Lolita* in 1954, when by that date the completed typescript was already doing the rounds of publishers. As Nabokov himself correctly notes in one of his books, it was in 1950 and again in 1951 that he was on the verge of destroying the novel that would make his fame.

Field disposes of Nabokov's final "eighteen-year Swiss period", both life and works, in a mere twenty-three pages. He flatly declares that these years "should not be given great prominence, even though it is the best documented time of his life". But if so, why does Field not know that Nabokov lived only sixteen years in Switzerland, not eighteen, and from 1961, not 1959? Though even more meagrely informed of Nabokov's final European period than of his first sixty years, Field's confidence persists. At the end of *VN* he maintains: "It seems quite possible, judging by Lord Snowdon's photographs, that Nabokov suffered from some form of cancer in his last years. His neck grew thin within his collar, his cheeks were stretched taut." (In fact these photographs were taken almost five years before Nabokov's death, three before the first signs of any illness.)

When he died, the family withheld information for several days. Nabokov had died of a "mysterious cause" that none of the doctors had been able to identify. It was, in other words, a special, unique, individual death, even though it took place quietly in a hospital and was apparently triggered by a flu acting on his weakened physique.

That last line contains the correct cause of death, which Field encountered in Dmitri Nabokov's memoir "On Revisiting Father's Room". Nevertheless Field supposes himself able to diagnose cancer – on the basis of nothing more than apparent thinness – and insinuates that the family avoided admitting to such a common cause of death because they shared Nabokov's own exaggerated sense of his specialness. Field makes clear that he knows nothing of the series of illnesses and accidents that weakened Nabokov in the last two years of his life, but that does not prevent him from a conjecture and an insinuation insulting to Nabokov's widow and son who in the summer and fall of 1976 and again in the spring and early summer of 1977 wanted nothing more than for Nabokov's doctors to diagnose his illness so that some precise treatment could begin. Field ends his account of Nabokov's life unashamed of his own ignorance, even welcoming it. The less he knows, the freer he can be with malign speculation.

All historical researchers, whether geologists or historians, archaeologists or biographers, must sift and correlate what they have unearthed in order to determine dates and sequences. Field deems himself above such humdrum concerns and makes almost no effort to cross-check or correlate his data.

He declares that after the end of his engagement to Svetlana Zivert, Nabokov in 1924 travelled to Nice, "where he did [*sic*] farm labor with Italian migrant workers" and wrote once to Svetlana. The year was in fact 1923, and unsurprisingly Nabokov did not hoe and irrigate Nice's boulevards but the terrain of a farm a hundred miles away, not far from Toulon. A page later Field suggests that the novella *The Eye* may contain "fiendishly concealed true facets of the real romantic failure of Nabokov in 1922. The Nice letter is emotional and very Russian. It was written in the same year and in the same sort of tone as his article about Cambridge." Svetlana's parents broke off the engagement (hardly a "romantic failure", then) not in 1922 but in 1923. The letter to Svetlana was written later in 1923, whereas Nabokov's article about Cambridge was published in 1921, a date correctly recorded even in Field's error-ridden Nabokov bibliography (fortunately now superseded by Michael Juliar's fine *Vladimir Nabokov: A descriptive bibliography*. 780pp. New York: Garland. $80. 0 8240 8590 6). Two pages later Field states that in the same summer that Nabokov wrote a last letter to Svetlana, he also wrote for the first time to his future wife, Vera Slonim, whom he had just met. When, then, does Nabokov meet Vera? In 1924, the year Field proposes for the letter to Svetlana? In 1922, the year Field dates the "romantic failure"? In 1921, the year of the Cambridge article? I will let out a secret: Vladimir Nabokov and Vera Slonim met on May 8, 1923.

When he prepared *Lolita: A screenplay* for publication in 1973, Nabokov had recently been struggling with the morass of misinformation in the manuscript of Field's *Nabokov: His life in part*, and therefore set out in his foreword in painstaking detail his movements before, during and immediately after the composition of the screenplay, noting even the cabin numbers in his transatlantic liners. But despite these precautions against a hypothetical future biographer, Field now returns to let a whole year of Nabokov's life – spring 1959 to spring 1960 – buckle, crumble and vanish up the flue.

Field has Nabokov leave Cornell in February 1959 to drive by car across the United States and stop at 2088 Mandeville Canyon Road, Los Angeles, to write the *Lolita* screenplay. In fact, as the published screenplay accurately notes, Nabokov and his wife drove not to California but to Arizona, and not to write the screenplay but to collect butterflies and complete the translation of *The Song of Igor's Campaign*. They then sailed from New York on the Liberté on September 29, 1959, for France, Switzerland, England and Italy. While in Menton Nabokov agreed to undertake the screenplay for Stanley Kubrick and returned to the United States in February 1960, on the United States. The Nabokovs crossed to Los Angeles by train and then rented the house in Mandeville Canyon Road, where Nabokov finished the screenplay at the end of August. On November 2, 1960, they returned to Europe on the Queen Elizabeth. Unaware he is at sea himself, Field makes Nabokov finish the screenplay in the spring of 1959 – a year before it was actually begun – and ships him off to Europe on the Liberté on May 28. Where could that horribly wrong but plausibly precise date have come from? By a special recycling process known only to Field: from the date the Nabokovs first arrived in the United States on the Champlain May 28, 1940.

Time has never been quite so unrevisitable as on these Field trips. What of the other inherent difficulty of biography that fascinated Nabokov, the need to see into the opaque sphere of another's personality? Here too

A detail from Yousuf Karsh's portrait of Nabokov, reproduced from Karsh Portraits *(202pp. University of Toronto Press. 0 8020 2242 1).*

Nabokov sets the chronicler special problems. He insisted he was utterly independent of his time, perfectly free from influence of any kind. He had a hypertrophied sense of privacy: "I hate tampering with the precious lives of great writers and I hate Tom-peeping over the fence of those lives – I hate the vulgarity of 'human interest', I hate the rustle of skirts and giggles in the corridors of time – and no biographer will ever catch a glimpse of my private life." He placed a fifty-year restriction on the papers he deposited at the Library of Congress. He hid behind literary masks, and then retreated entirely from the public gaze to tranquil Montreux. Ensconced there, he fired off brusque letters to various editors protesting against factual inaccuracies or infringements of his privacy, and began to agree to interviews only if the questions were submitted in writing well in advance, so that he could prepare his answers too in writing – and then check the whole thing in proof.

Nabokov's attitudes certainly made Field's work as a biographer difficult, but they could have been no surprise: they were well known to the whole literary world before Field offered to write Nabokov's life. When the offer came, Nabokov decided it would be safer to allow a biography while he was still there to minimize errors. Setting aside his reluctance, he let Field see much unpublished material. Aware that this still left much unknown, Field began to suspect that Nabokov wanted him to produce "a falsified life". In an attempt to prove his independence, Field began to avoid *Speak, Memory* and other published Nabokoviana and tried to pursue new lines of research.

One of these was the old family rumour – totally unsupported by any facts – that Nabokov's father was the bastard son of one of the Romanovs, either Alexander II or his brother Grand-Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich. (The mere existence of the two alternatives indicates how purely speculative the rumours were.) When Field raised the matter, Nabokov toyed amusedly with the idea, dancing a jig: "I feel the blood of Peter the Great boiling in my veins." Years later when Field submitted his manuscript Nabokov discovered that his biographer had spent some time grafting the Romanovs on to the Nabokov family tree. Nabokov demanded that they be pruned away again. Field replied that he knew Nabokov thought about and feared the Romanov rumours, so they had to remain whether true or not. Apart from Nabokov's playing with the notion when it was put to him, Field could name only one piece of evidence for Nabokov's thoughts and fears: a diary entry, of which Field had a photostat, about a dream of intercourse with his own grandmother. In fact the diary entry (March 25, 1951) concerns not Nabokov's grandmother but an old woman in Ithaca, where Nabokov was living at the time. I cite it in full:

Dream: am attempting a cold and joyless copulation with a fat old woman (whom I know slightly and for whom I have as much desire as for a gorilla or a garbage can). The day before somebody in my presence was telling somebody that a third party, a man I knew, was – for goodness' sake – marrying a "fat old woman" whom I did not know, but whose name sounded rather like that of the one I dreamt the night after.

The way to overcome the defences Nabokov erects around his privacy is not to read *against* Nabokov and the plain evidence. Nabokov controls the image of himself and his family very carefully in *Speak, Memory*, but instead of ignoring or foolishly attempting to undermine it, we can profitably analyse Nabokov's mode of control, which may tell us at least as much as another's artless frankness.

What is needed is to read Nabokov better, and to set eyes on everything he wrote. No one, however private, can leave behind millions of words of highly individual prose, casual letters and hurried notes without disclosing something of the mind behind them. Unless one has access to these words and reads them for all they can yield, it is fruitless to compile the biography of a writer who knew how to keep to himself. The foremost practical necessity for a Nabokov biographer must therefore be to earn and maintain the trust of the man or his heirs. Field's slipshod transcriptions, misreportings, misfilings, misconstructions, historical ignorance, inept guesswork and fatuous interpretations soon destroyed the trust Nabokov had once given him and ensured not only that he was not gradually given freer access to Nabokov's archives but that he was altogether barred.

Of course the archives, indispensable though they are, do not suffice for a biography. There are other Nabokov letters, rare Russian émigré newspapers, places and people Nabokov knew, to be tracked down in the Soviet Union, Finland, Sweden, Czechoslovakia, East and West Germany, Belgium, England, France, Switzerland, Greece, Portugal, Italy, Spain, Canada and the United States. Andrew Field has not traced even information available in many public collections in the United States, let alone in Europe. He proves himself allergic to accuracy and chronology. He cannot interpret Nabokov except by way of the animosity he has felt since earning the Nabokovs' distrust. He imputes near-hypocrisy to Nabokov, for instance, because V.N. "held biography in contempt and yet used it as one of his major themes in his fiction". Field should have been able to understand that Nabokov found it germane to parody biography to express ideas as central to his thought as the inaccessibility of the past and the uniqueness of individual truth.

As his deep-level explanation of Nabokov, Field offers us only the image of Narcissus. The mask seems to fit much better someone who could write in his first book, "Nabokov, I have mastered your themes. (*Nabokov, have I mastered your themes?*) See how your books lie carefully arranged in the window of my critical eye", or could round off another with this plastic pearl: "Done and done then. A portrait of Vladimir Nabokov, Russian-American writer of our time and of his own reality. *The End. Oh. The End.*" In his last Nabokov biography, Field confesses to "ways . . . in which I am too like Vladimir Nabokov to judge him". Now, he sees him as Narcissus. Recoiling from Nabokov's indignation at the thoughtless outrages of *Nabokov: His life in part*, the always irksomely self-promoting Field appears in his latest book to have looked into the water, seen something unpleasant, and assumed it was Nabokov looking in.

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