

# ‘Everything plays’

Vladimir Nabokov’s ringside vision of art and life

According to the distinguished 1930s novelist Sebastian Knight, “the only real number is one”; and Knight’s creator, Vladimir Nabokov, liked in his later years to tell interviewers that he “had never belonged to any club or group”. But this is not strictly true. As a young writer in the émigré Berlin of the early 1920s, Nabokov was a member of a number of literary clubs, the most significant being the circle formed around the dominant critic of the Berlin Russian emigration, Iulii Aikhenvald — the man who first recognized Nabokov’s talent and seems to have been his early mentor.

Nabokov read out many of his early novels, poems, and plays to the Aikhenvald circle, and gave talks on Pushkin, Gogol, Blok, Soviet literature, Freud, Conrad, “Generalities”, and “Man and Things”. But the topic he chose for his first paper, given in December 1925, was boxing, and specifically the heavy-weight boxing match that had just taken place on December 1 between the German Hans Breitensträter and the Basque Paolino Uzcudun, before an audience of 15,000 at the Sports Palace in Berlin. The talk was pub-

lished as “Breitensträter – Paolino” on December 28 and 29 in the Latvian émigré journal *Slovo*, then forgotten until it was unearthed and reprinted in the early 1990s, in *Daugava* (Riga), then in Nabokov’s Collected Works in Russian.

Nabokov was a devotee of sports and games, ranging from boxing, football and tennis, through chess and cryptic crosswords, to the play of thought, language, desire, art, and the divine universe — those more abstract forms of play that he invokes at the beginning of “Breitensträter — Paolino”, sounding, for all the world, like a pre-Socratic philosopher, only one come to declare not that all is air, water, earth, or fire, but that all is play. Never again would he express so openly and nakedly this vision of life and art as play, which would govern his work for the next fifty years; no wonder that Nabokov, who later said an artist is lost when he seeks to define art, should have let the piece lie hidden in the archives of the emigration.

As a young man Nabokov had taken boxing lessons from a “wonderful rubbery Frenchman, Monsieur Loustatot”, fondly

remembered in his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*; he boxed competitively as an undergraduate at Cambridge; and in Berlin he and his friend George Hessen staged a number of bouts. In 1924, he published a poem called “The Boxer’s Girlfriend”, and in his first major work, *The Tragedy of Mister Morn* (see facing page), the protagonist, Morn, talks about a fist fight with expert attention to specific punches: a hook is a “comma”, a jab a “full stop”.

Of all the sports Nabokov could have chosen to focus on, he took in boxing the one that concentrates as no other the pain and violence he always saw in play. But “Breitensträter – Paolino” is a very literary and verbal account of boxing — the author’s red ink seeping across a skein of metaphor into the blood on the referee’s vest — and is punctuated according to the varying rhythms and geometries of the sport: its quick flurries, its wary circlings, its duelling antitheses. In our translation we have tried to do justice to Nabokov’s dashes, staccato or metaphysical, his commas, apprehensive or explosive, and his inversions, abstract or gutsy, all so important in a piece devoted to testing how far art

can go in formalizing even those parts of life that might seem most resistant — even boxing, even blood and pain. We have also tried to catch those moments, so far from the oracular pronouncements of the opening, in which Nabokov mimics the brusque street-talk of the boxing fan or commentator, mixing his voice with the voices of the crowd — a democratic ventriloquism unique in his work.

But it would be a mistake to take that voice and its cold indifference to pain as “Nabokov’s own”, any more than we should identify Nabokov with Humbert Humbert, or for that matter with the “uptight man” who in “Breitensträter – Paolino” “does not like washing naked in the mornings, and who is inclined to express surprise that a poet who works for two and a half connoisseurs earns less money than a boxer who works for a crowd of many thousands”. In the duel of possible selves that this piece stages, the “uptight man” embodies Nabokov’s fear of his own shadow; while the narrator embodies the cruelty incited by that fear.

THOMAS KARSHAN

## Breitensträter – Paolino by Vladimir Nabokov

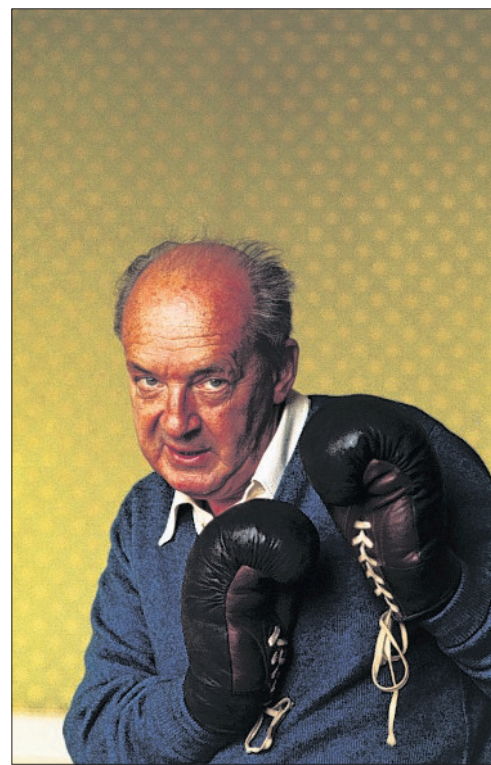
Everything in the world plays: the blood in the veins of a lover, the sun on the water, and the musician on a violin.

Everything good in life — love, nature, the arts, and family jests — is play. And when we actually play — whether we’re knocking down a tin battalion with a pea or drawing together across the net barrier in tennis — what we feel in our very muscles is the essence of that play which possesses the marvellous juggler, who tosses from hand to hand in an unbroken sparkling parabola . . . the planets of the universe.

Man has played as long as he has existed. There are ages — holidays of humanity — when man is especially impassioned by games. So it was in bygone Greece, in bygone Rome, and so it is in our own Europe of today.

A child knows, that in order to play to his heart’s content, he must play with someone else or at least imagine somebody, he must become two. Or to put it another way, there is no play without competition; which is why some kinds of play, such as those gymnastic festivals in which fifty-odd men or women, moving as one, form into patterns across a parade ground, seem insipid, since they lack the very thing which gives play its entrancing, exciting charm. Which is why the Communist system is so ridiculous, since it condemns everyone to doing the same tedious exercises, not allowing that anyone be fitter than his neighbour.

Not for nothing did Nelson say that the Battle of Trafalgar was won on the tennis and



Vladimir Nabokov in the 1960s

football fields of Eton. [Sic.] And the Germans too have lately realized that the goose step can only take you so far, and that boxing, football and hockey are more valuable than military or any other exercises. Boxing is especially valuable, and there are few spectacles as healthy and beautiful as a boxing-match. An uptight gentleman, who does not like washing naked in the mornings, and who is inclined to express surprise that a poet who works for two and a half connoisseurs earns less money than a boxer who works for a crowd of many thousands (a crowd

which, by the way, has nothing in common with the so-called masses and is possessed of a rapture far purer, more sincere, and goodnatured than that of the crowd welcoming home its national heroes), this same uptight gentleman will feel indignation and disgust towards a fist fight, just as in Rome, most likely, there were people who frowned at the sight of two huge gladiators demonstrating the very best in the gladiatorial arts, slugging each other with such iron blows that not even the “pollice verso” was necessary, they’d finish each other off anyway.

What matters, of course, is not really that a heavyweight boxer is a little bloodied after two or three rounds, or that the white vest of the referee looks as though red ink has leaked out of a fountain pen. What matters is, first, the beauty of the art of boxing, the perfect accuracy of the lunges, the side jumps, the dives, the range of blows — hooks, straights, swipes — and, secondly, the wonderful manly excitement which this art arouses. Many writers have depicted the beauty, the romance of boxing. Bernard Shaw has a whole novel about a professional boxer. Jack London, Conan Doyle, and Kuprin have all written on the subject. Byron — the darling of all Europe, except fastidious England — was a great friend of boxers and loved to watch their fights, just as Pushkin and Lermontov would have loved it, had they lived in England. Portraits have survived of the professional boxers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The famous Figg, Corbett, Cribb fought without gloves and fought masterfully, honourably, tenaciously — more often to the point of utter exhaustion, than to a knockout.

Poor Johnson! He rested on his laurels, gained weight, took a beautiful white woman for his wife, began appearing as a living advertisement on the music-hall stage, and then, I think, ended up in jail, and only briefly did his black face and white smile flash out from the illustrated magazines.

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Nor was it commonplace humanity that led to the appearance of boxing gloves in the middle of the last century, but rather a desire to protect the fist, which could otherwise be too easily broken in the course of a two-hour bout. All of them have long since stepped down from the ring — those great, legendary pugilists — having won their supporters quite a few pounds sterling. They lived to a ripe old age, and in the evenings, in taverns, over a pint of beer, they would talk with pride of their former exploits. They were followed by others, the teachers of today’s boxers: the massive Sullivan, Burns, who looked like a London dandy, and Jeffries, the son of a blacksmith — “the white hope”, as they called him, a hint that black boxers were already becoming unbeatable.

Those who had hoped that Jeffries would beat the black giant Johnson lost their money. The two races followed this fight closely. But despite the furious enmity between the white and black camps (the event took place in America twenty-five or more years ago), not a single boxing rule was broken, even though Jeffries, with every one of his blows, kept repeating: “Yellow dog . . . yellow dog”. Finally, after a long, splendid fight, the enormous negro struck his opponent so hard that Jeffries flew backwards from the platform, over the encircling rope and, as they say, “fell asleep”.

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Bombardier Wells, and Goddard, and Wilde, and Beckett, and the miraculous Carpentier who beat Beckett. That fight, which paid the winner five thousand, and the runner-up three thousand pounds, lasted exactly fifty-six seconds, so that someone who had paid twenty pounds for their seat had only enough time to light a cigarette, and when he looked up at the ring, Beckett was already lying on the boards in the touching pose of a sleeping baby.

I hasten to add that in such a blow, which brings on an instantaneous black-out, there is nothing grave. On the contrary. I have experienced it myself, and can attest that such a sleep is rather pleasant. At the very tip of the chin there is a bone, like the one in the elbow which in English is called “the funny-bone”, and in German “the musical-bone”. As everyone knows, if you hit the corner of your elbow hard, you immediately feel a faint ringing in the hand and a momentary deadening of the muscles. The same thing happens if you are hit very hard on the end of the chin.

There is no pain. Only the peal of a faint ringing and then an instantaneous pleasant sleep (the so-called “knock-out”), lasting anywhere between ten seconds and half an hour. A blow to the solar plexus is less pleasant, but a good boxer knows just how to tense his abdomen, so that he won’t flinch even if a horse kicks him in the pit of the stomach.

I saw Carpentier this week, on Tuesday evening. He was there as trainer to the heavyweight Paolino, and it was as though the spectators did not immediately recognize the recent world champion in that modest, fair-haired young man. His glory is now dimmed. They say that after his fearsome fight with Dempsey he sobbed like a woman.

Paolino appeared in the ring first and, as is customary, sat down on a stool in the corner. Huge, with a dark square head, and wearing a splendid robe down to his heels, the Basque resembled an Eastern idol. Only the ring itself was lit, and in the white cone of light falling from above, the platform looked like silver. This silvered cube, which was in the middle of a gigantic dark oval, where the dense rows of countless human faces called to mind kernels of ripe corn strewn across a black background, — this silvered cube seemed lit up not by electricity, but by the concentrated force of all the gazes fixed upon it out of the darkness. And when the Basque’s opponent, the German champion Breitensträter, stepped onto the platform, fair-haired, in a mouse-coloured robe (and for some reason in grey trousers, which he immediately proceeded to pull off), the enormous darkness trembled with a joyful roar. The roar did not die down when the photographers, jumping onto the edge of the platform, pointed their “monkey-boxes” (as my German neighbour called them) at the fighters, at the referee, at the seconds, nor when the champions “pulled on their boxing gloves” (which makes me recall “the young oprichnik and the valiant merchant”). And when both opponents threw off their robes (and not “velvet furs”) from their mighty shoulders and rushed towards each other in the white shimmer of the ring, a light moan passed through the dark abyss, through the rows of corn-kernels and the misty upper

tiers — for everyone saw that the Basque was much bigger and bulkier than their favourite.

Breitensträter was first to attack, and the moan turned into an ecstatic rumble. But Paolino, hunching his head into his shoulders, answered him with short hooks from below, and from almost the first minute the German’s face glistened with blood.

With every blow that Breitensträter took, my neighbour sucked in his breath with a whistle, as if he himself were taking the blows — and all the darkness, all the tiers croaked a kind of enormous supernatural croak. By the third round it became noticeable that the German had weakened, that his punches could not push off the hunched orange mountain that was moving towards him. But he fought with extraordinary courage, trying to make up, with his speed, for the fifteen pounds by which the Basque outweighed him.

Around the luminous cube, across which the boxers danced with the referee twisting between them, the black darkness froze, and in the silence the glove, shiny with sweat, slapped juicily against the live naked body. At the beginning of the seventh round Breitensträter fell, but after five-six seconds, jerking forwards like a horse on black ice, he stood up. The Basque fell upon him immediately, knowing that in such situations you must act swiftly and decisively, and put all your strength into your punches, for sometimes a blow that is stinging but not firm will, instead of finishing off your weakened opponent, enliven him, wake him up. The German bent away, clinging onto the Basque, trying to win time, to make it to the end of the round. And when once more he went down, the gong did in fact save him: on the eighth second, he got up with great difficulty, and lugged himself to his stool. By some kind of miracle he had survived the eighth round, to mounting peals of applause. But at the start of the ninth round Paolino, striking him beneath the jaw, hit him just as he had wanted. Breitensträter collapsed. In frenzy and discord, the darkness roared. Breitensträter lay twisted like a pretzel. The referee counted down the fateful seconds. Still he lay.

And so the match came to an end, and when we had all emptied out onto the street, into the frosty blueness of a snowy night, I was certain, that in the flabbiest family man, in the humblest youth, in the souls and muscles of all the crowd, which tomorrow, early in the morning, would disperse to offices, to shops, to factories, there existed one and the same beautiful feeling, for the sake of which it was worth bringing together two great boxers, — a feeling of dauntless, flaring strength, vitality, manliness, inspired by the play in boxing. And this playful feeling is, perhaps, more valuable and purer than many so-called “elevated pleasures”.

Translated by Anastasia Tolstoy and Thomas Karshan.

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1 The *pollice verso* was the gesture of turning the thumb made by a Roman crowd to pass judgement on a defeated gladiator.

2 This, and the subsequent quotation in the paragraph, are both allusions to Lermontov’s “Song about Tsar Ivan Vasilyevich: A Young Oprichnik and the Valiant Merchant Kalashnikov” (1837). The oprichniks were Ivan the Terrible’s notorious enforcers.

# Enemies of bliss

LESLEY CHAMBERLAIN

When, still on index cards, Vladimir Nabokov’s last novel *The Original of Laura* was published three years ago, worldwide interest outstripped what the barely formed text could offer. The opposite seems to be the case with the first appearance in English of a five-act play he wrote even before he began publishing poems and short stories in Berlin. Recently a rehearsed reading of *The Tragedy of Mister Morn*, before a small audience at London’s Pushkin Club, revealed it to be a gem. The imagery is stunning, metaphor opening out of metaphor. “Burn, weak-willed wax . . . Breathe, mirrors, / With a funereal flame . . . Here’s the crown. / My crown. Droplets of waterfalls on spikes”, the King soliloquizes. He has fought with an opponent: “What a windmill!” and “Fight more cleanly! Here comes a comma and a full stop!”. Now, because of a playing card with “raspberry rhombuses”, he must die.

A wordy play in blank verse, *Mister Morn* was relatively easy to follow in performance, thanks to Holly Maples’s tight direction. Yet on the page the entire text creeps metonymically sideways. Its author weaves language into a tissue of reality hinting at some veiled, mysteriously interconnected, static truth beyond. “The soul is a tooth, God / wrenches out the soul . . .”. Morn, looking at a painting on the wall, seems to step into it, into a world of still greater beauty. “Ah, to go there, to go into that picture, / Into the reverie of its green, airy colours . . .”. A play that creeps sideways doesn’t lend itself to a build-up of dramatic tension, and perhaps that is the reason why Nabokov neither followed a career as a dramatist nor sought to revive this early imitation of Shakespeare. But *Mister Morn* pulses with verbal brilliance. It is visionary and musical. Many in the audience agreed that it would make a ballet or an opera. In theme and texture it gives little sense of being early work. With a text whose lexicon seems to contain so many of the novels to come, from *Bend Sinister to Laughter in the Dark* and *Transparent Things*, it puts us in the head of eternal Nabokov.

When the King is unmasked as plain Mister Morn, tragedy befalls a realm that depended on the King’s enchanting laughter for its happiness. In the final act Morn gets his crown back but the damage cannot be undone. This clear line of action — it might be called political, though it doesn’t have that feel at all — is complicated by a parallel plot in which a Mephistophelian character called (Delirium) Tremens and his daughter Ella are pictured at home. Here is the actual negative political energy of the play. Tremens revels in an enduring will to destruction, even as his own death approaches, while Ella is about to embark uncertainly on marriage to her father’s chief henchman, Klian. The characters who mediate between the worlds of Morn and Tremens are the court poet Dandilio, wise friend to all, and Midia, an omnisciently not liked by Nabokov but a poet in her speech, like all the players. A third strand of action is marked by Ganus, a revolutionary activist and disciple of Tremens, who after four years in prison returns to the King’s

happy realm to find Midia, his wife, in love with Morn. Such are the pressures that force the King to reveal his alter ego. Finally they so burden Ganus, torn between his country’s happiness and his own, that, we guess, he enters a monastery.

Two tragedies marked Nabokov’s life in quick succession: the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, which forced his family to flee the country, and in 1922 the murder of his father in Berlin by right-wing assassins who had been gunning for the exiled politician Pavel Milyukov, sitting beside him in a public debate. Nabokov senior reached out to shield Milyukov and took the bullet himself. Vladimir Nabokov, a recent graduate from Cambridge (England), settled his widowed mother in Prague, where the living was affordable, and wrote this play there in the winter of 1923–4.

Out of those convulsions no doubt came this extraordinary confection of a play about happiness and its enemies. The enemies of a childlike bliss are political power, the madness of passion, trickery and fate. After Ella has innocently dressed up the wronged Ganus as Othello, and Morn’s footman has grown pale at what the deceiving Tremens has contrived, Morn speaks of “the black silhouette of my fate”. Nabokov is unsentimental about love and brutal about sex. Reality, in which all these forces of light and dark swirl about, is the thing. It seems to exist so that the poet can picture it and imagination can fly. Almost every Nabokovian metaphor offers a glimpse of a perfect otherworld where, not least, poets are dandified ancien regime courtiers, their lives given over to ornamentation and wit, not romantic destructiveness.

The day I sat on a discussion panel after the first performance of *Mister Morn* a question was asked from the audience: was Nabokov serious? To which the panel set seriousness against reality, seriousness against frivolity, seriousness against play. Nabokov came out well. His tragedy marked the death of playfulness.

First published in Russian in 2008, with magical characters and recurrent dream-like scenes, the work speaks in many registers, now archaic, now colloquial. While it gives us a fully-formed Nabokov, it comes straight out of Russia’s Silver Age of Symbolist poetry and one might imagine Skryabin’s music sounding in the background and Bergson setting out his theory of emotional time, and Freud his dream logic, for the young poet to interpret. But, rather than align themselves to a historical period, Thomas Karshan and Anastasia Tolstoy determined to produce a play that sounded as if Nabokov had written it in English, and that they certainly achieved. The hope now has to be for a full performance.

The Tragedy of Mister Morn by Vladimir Nabokov, translated by Anastasia Tolstoy and Thomas Karshan with an introduction by Thomas Karshan (176pp. Penguin. £12. 978 0 14119632 9) was published last month.