

genteel mistranslators." As the selection progresses, it is this theme that dominates. And it takes subsidiary forms, from his curt dismissals of virtually all attempts to "translate" the essence of his various books into some appropriate jacket cover design to harsh rejections of any editorial attempts to "translate" his intent into words other than his own. Perhaps, though, nothing less should be expected of one whose entire life involved the carrying-over, the "translation," of ideas, images, assumptions, and imaginings from one culture to another, from one language to another, from one's own consciousness to another's and, perhaps most importantly for the bashful gnostic, to one world from the "other."

Richard C. Borden

Selected Letters 1940-1977 Vladimir Nabokov. Edited by Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, \$29.95 ISBN 0-15-164190-0

The best literary letters allow us to return to an author's work refreshed, clear-eyed and untroubled by unnecessary ambiguities. Vladimir Nabokov's selected correspondence, published in a handsome turquoise volume, its endpapers dappled with butterflies reproduced from originals done by Nabokov himself, serves as a timely reminder of this.

Born in 1899 to a wealthy family in St. Petersburg, Nabokov was twenty when they fled Russia in 1919 at the height of the Civil War; forty-one when he, his young son Dmitri (who has admirably co-edited, annotated and introduced this volume), and his wife Véra, sailed from France for America in 1940; then sixty when, following the impossible double of *Lolita*--a *succés de scandale* equally a *succés d'estime*--he returned in the autumn of 1959 and later established his family at the Palace Hotel in Montreux, Switzerland. The *Selected Letters* come largely from the last two periods of his life with a few earlier ones to set the stage. As the editors point out, the correspondence forms a continuation of the autobiographical *Speak, Memory*. There is to be another volume of letters together with a projected two volume biography due out next year and these will add to the picture. Already, though, we have enough to follow the development of a writer who came to see himself as American but whose major works prior to his arrival, with the notable exception of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, were all written in Russian.

Nabokov shows himself above all as astonishingly adaptable and it is his specializations that make him so--particularly when he is cataloguing his beloved lepidoptera at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology in the nineteen-forties. More letters than I would like are devoted to this passion but they reveal a crucial part of his persona. Lepidoptery for him isn't a gentleman's pastime or an academic pose. It's truly a vocation with far reaching implications for his fiction. I doubt very much that *Lolita* would exist as the great American novel we know were it not for these frequent collecting trips to Wyoming, Colorado, Arizona, and Utah.

His prose, delighting in word play and the shiftings of sense and sensation, was utterly at odds with the pedestrian realism of the American 1950's. "For me, 'style' is matter" he writes to Katherine White at *The New Yorker* after she'd rejected one of his stories in 1951. He then goes on to analyze the story and how it involved multiple readings where "according to this system ... a second (main) story is woven into, or placed behind, the superficial semi-transparent one." This description applies equally well to much of the work that came afterward. The creation of such a tapestry did not come easily. "I have a bad habit (not really bad, just being coy) of choosing the most difficult path in my literary adventures." That was in 1942 when he was working on his penetrating critical study of Nikolai Gogol. Seventeen years later we find him returning the \$2500 advance on *Pale Fire*. "The work has not been advancing and I have come to the conclusion that the very existence of the contractual obligation has been interfering with the free development of the novel."

It's fascinating to see how in his letters of the 1950s, perhaps Nabokov's most creative decade, he was following several separate but interwoven lines of development. At Cornell he lectured on literature and translated Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* (1958), the twelfth-century epic *The Song of Igor's Campaign* (1960), and Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, his epic translation of what he considered Russia's "first and fundamental novel." His literal translation with its exhaustive commentary and notes was eventually

published by Bollingen in 1964 and *Pale Fire* clearly owes the originality of its structure to cross-fertilization from this scholarly work. Then there's the delightful *Prin*, published in 1957 and, intriguingly, written after *Lolita* was mostly finished by 1953. Finally, this "enormous, mysterious, heartbreaking novel" was published in 1958 and the "nymphet" (his marvelous coinage purloined by pornographers much to his annoyance) brought fame, fortune, and freedom. There are too many letters involving the byzantine litigation and legal feints which surrounded publication, equally too many concerning the screenplay Nabokov wrote in 1960 for Stanley Kubrick, and finally too few about his western travels in search of elusive butterflies. Here is Nabokov on location in the part of America he loved best and where we know him least. Telluride, Colorado; Portal, Arizona; Mt. Carmel, Utah; Taos, New Mexico. He hated it. An "ugly and dreary town with *soi-disant* 'picturesque' Indian paupers placed at strategic points by the Chamber of Commerce to lure tourists from Oklahoma and Texas who deem the place 'arty.'"

There's a more rarely seen intimate side to Nabokov in these letters. It's the vulnerable, the concealed. "Socially, I am a cripple. Therefore all my thinking life I have declined to 'belong.'" This from a 1960 letter to Glenway Westcott declining membership in the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Or the same year from Menton on the Riviera where the family had stayed *en pension* in the late 1930s: "Europe is not a hit with me. I feel bored and dejected despite *Lolita's* noisy triumph. Time has tampered with the places I knew...."

As often happens, the journey matters more than the arrival. The letters of his last period, never less than elegant, are least satisfying. Some are dictated to his wife, Véra, others are cursory notes, including an oddly touching one to Hugh Hefner, of all people, thanking him for a prize and saying (in 1967) that it was the first he'd ever received for his writing. There are random and often arbitrary opinions of other writers, including the facsimile of a questionnaire where he lists his favorites among past Russian novelists as "Dear Leo, dear Anton." But the dribs and drabs of fame don't always add up. Focused on his novels, especially *Ada* and its laborious translations, he has little time for letters and puts less of himself into them when he does.

Once in an interview from this period he was asked how he came up with titles for his novels, a routine question he might well have shrugged off. He didn't. He remarked how the title and narrative arose simultaneously in his mind, how each page thus had the title in it like a watermark in fine paper. So also in the life of a great writer do many particulars seem symbolic, representative. After reading these letters I'm not at all sure how much I understand Nabokov for all the added facts and insights now within our grasp, but I feel closer to the man and his splendid enigmas.

Daniel Ardrey

Poems 1963-1988 Bill Knott. University of Pittsburgh Press, \$17.95 ISBN 0-8229-3612-7

If you have fallen asleep on the fainting couch of contemporary poetry, you can wake up now and rub your eyes--here comes Bill Knott's *Poems: 1963-1988*. But be forewarned, you will not find travelogues here or poems concerning fountains, *haute cuisine*, or visits to the family trust. If your chief pleasure in reading poetry is to count the numbers, you can put your fingers away. Bill Knott's poems are born in and emerge from the nexus of imagination and personality, a startling lyricism that mixes humor, original imagery, and wit in the old sense.

It is a poetry in which so much depends upon the willingness of the reader to engage in the work. In "The Juggler To His Audience," the ars poetica that opens the collection, the entire poem is only three lines long:

One in my hand
One in the air
And one in you.

The juggler understands his craft to be one of taking risks by balancing the precarious, and knows that it is the audience that finishes his work. The juggler's art is not passive; the active involvement of the audience, by way of attentive empathy, is necessary to complete the process and make it, if you will, into art. For where is the rest of the poem except in "you."

Like Kafka's tales, Knott's poems often begin with a supposition that, once accepted, the rest of the poem treats in a logical manner. This

seems especially so in "Rigor Vitus," in which the poet walks "on human stilts," a "rigid" man and a "lifeless" woman strapped to his legs. It takes all his strength to take a step. Yet soon we discover "those ole hypocrites" are not even dead: "They perk up when they want to, they please and pleasure themselves" and move independently of the stilt-walker's command. The stilt-walker, who should be the animator of his stilts, is instead animated by them. Nonetheless, there's "one consolation":

When they make love
To someone who's far or close enough away appears
it appears then
Like I'm dancing.

In "Feeding the Sun," the citizens of the Earth notice that the sun is getting pale and must be hungry, so they send their "rockets with wheat, smoke-rings, razor blades." Then, seeing their efforts are not working, they give up "cattle, rivers, windmills, aborigines," and ultimately, having run out of everything else, themselves. Before their instant of death, crashing into the sun, they wonder whether "this final sacrifice, our broughten crumb" will be enough and if a "guttural belch" will "burst out then at last" to be "interpreted as a nova/by other galaxies/those further stars which have always seemed more starving/than ours."

In "Ant Dodger," a "suicide applicant ... hesitates a million stories up," wondering whether or not to step on an ant before jumping. And in "At the Crossroads," one of Knott's best known poems, comedy and tragedy intersect through the speaker's grandiose assumption:

The wind blows a piece of paper to my feet.
I pick it up.
It is not a petition for my death.

To those who have read the many books from which this "selected poems" is compressed, it nearly goes without saying that Bill Knott's poetry has evolved from its surrealist roots (his first book, *Naomi Poems: Corpse and Beans* plays off Robert Desnos's *Corps et Bien*) into a more touching, plain-spoken voice. This is particularly evident in "Sonnet," one of the most beautiful love poems of our time: "The way the world is not/Astonished at you/It doesn't blink a leaf" because "beauty is natural, unremarkable/And not to be spoken of/Except in the course of things..."

"The Closet," which seems to me the major poem in the volume, recounts what occurred, at age six, to the author after his mother's death. I commend the reader to follow the movement of the poem from the child's entrance into his mother's closet "not long after the hospital happened" to his perception of "three blackwire hangers/which quiver, airy, released." The boy holes-up in the absence where once he played hide-and-seek among his mother's shoes and clothes. "The closet has no windows," so the boy shuts his eyes and dreams of his own birth. Eventually, he clears even the "skeletal grace" of the hangers themselves because, "I shall find room enough here/By excluding myself; by excluding myself, I'll grow."

Bill Knott's poetry has grown. The publication of this selection should bring even greater attention to his singular voice and its anarchic yet precise music. Looking back over my stack of ten or so books from which *Poems 1963-1988* was drawn, I grieve over the fact that perhaps he has excluded too many of his other good poems. Yet this makes a kind of sense because Knott's poetic impulse is epigrammatic—"The only response/to a child's grave is/to lie down before it and play dead"—and the several poems entitled "Shorts/Excerpts" bear witness to this by juxtaposing the best lines from disparate poems. I particularly lament, though, the absence of "Penny Wise," in which he renders the complexity of Pound's involvement with Mussolini with one deathless phrase: "At least he made the quatrains run on time."

Bill Knott is an American original. No one else could have imagined what James Wright once referred to as Bill Knott's "indispensable poems."

Stuart Dischell

T.S. Eliot and Prejudice Christopher Ricks. University of California Press, \$25.00 ISBN 0-520-06578-6

I assumed that this book would be on Eliot's anti-semitism. The topic has occasioned crude and self-righteous pronouncements, is "hot," and might naturally attract a critic with strength and courage to swim against the

stream. In *Keats and Embarrassment* Ricks found virtue in passages that traditionally offended genteel critics, and in *Tennyson* he praised a poet whose reputation was down. I supposed that the same corrective sensitivity, intelligence, and honesty would be brought to bear in assessing and explaining Eliot's anti-semitism. They are, but the book strays from this or any purpose.

For Ricks my assumption would be prejudice, and that is the trouble with his book. As instances of prejudice he counts hermeneutic foremeanings, preconceptions, prepossessions, inclinations, stock responses, expectations, taking things for granted, and the like. All thinking and perception is prejudiced insofar as it proceeds on the basis of prior categories and paradigms. Taking our terms from Eliot's Ph. D. thesis on F.H. Bradley, we may say that to be a "finite center," to have a "point of view," is to be prejudiced. Prejudice is universal and inevitable. In this perspective Eliot's anti-semitism deliquesces. Ricks talks about it in one chapter, exhibits and comments on the most offensive texts, and deplores them, but by treating this type of prejudice as though it were not essentially different from the prejudice involved in ordinary thinking, he is unable to throw light upon it.

To my mind prejudice implies ill will. It is a reflex to demean or, in Blake's term, "hinder" a category of persons. Of course, dictionaries define prejudice as an irrational or inadequately grounded preconception. But today when we think about prejudice as a problem, the injury it does to its victims is almost invariably the reason for our concern. A preconception does not cause us to "hinder" other persons. An evil will does, and, in fact, if our will were good, we would question our preconception. Prejudice is more usefully discussed, therefore, in terms of depth psychology, sociology, and ethics than in those of epistemology and the psychology of perception.

Ricks's Eliot is like himself, as is usual with critics. A person of extremely complicated, many-sided awareness, Eliot might see grave risks of error in all positions on any issue. Eliot was "wary of prejudice" and its "dangers," but wary also "of supposing that it simply should or could be eradicated." To an intelligence of this kind, most of the statements that are made in the world, including those in this review, must appear superficial. Other critics have assumed, for example, that "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" slightly denigrates the women who "come and go/Talking of Michelangelo." Thinking more deeply, Ricks finds that the critics' "sense of the lines is incited by prejudice." This does not mean that the lines are not slightly denigrating, but that, after eight pages of analysis, one cannot decide. Eliot "refuses the satisfactions, the complacencies, of the secure or indubitable." His "insinuations" about the women are "profound," but we cannot be sure what is profoundly insinuated. Throughout the book Ricks similarly feels over topics too sensitively and thoughtfully to reach definite results. He takes up problems of tone in Eliot's poetry, of the sound of sense, of foreign words and allusions, and has, toward the end of the book, commentary on passages in "The Hollow Men," *Ash Wednesday*, and *Four Quartets*. He writes with admirable lucidity.

David Perkins

The Day I Was Older: On the Poetry of Donald Hall Edited by Liam Rector. Story Line Press, \$24.95 ISBN 0-934257-20-5

The Day I Was Older is a miscellany centered on the work of Donald Hall. Editor Liam Rector has assembled fifteen poems representing Hall's work and placed them at the center of the book. Next to them he has arranged Hall's recent, important interview in *American Poetry Review*. On the wings of the poetry and interview are interpretive essays written for this book, reviews, photographs, and a bibliography. Over all this hovers the sense that finally there is a book which not only acknowledges Hall's importance but tries to specify the nature of his poetic achievement.

For those who need an introduction to Hall's work, this book is an excellent place to begin. For those already familiar with it Rector provides a good place to sort out the larger patterns of meaning in Hall's life and work. For instance, one of the themes holding this miscellany together is a nearly universal sense of Hall's generosity as a person and poet. The essays by Robert Bly, W.D. Snodgrass, and Louis Simpson, for instance, all provide ample anecdotes about exchanging poems with Hall. Bly speaks of the "forty-eight hour rule" he and Hall observe. Either partner can invoke the rule and expect a response within that time frame to the poems that have been sent.