Vladimir Nabokov, *Tragediia gospodina Morna: P'esy, lektsii o drame*, introduced and edited by Andrei Babikov, Azbuka-klassika, St. Petersburg, 2008; ISBN 978-5-91181-768-8, 638 pp. Introduction. Commentaries. Illustrations. Hardcover. No price available.

Over time, most of the characters populating Nabokov's novels have managed to enter Russia one way or another; at first quietly tucked away in the brittle pages of *samizdat* editions, and later, in the post-perestroika era, announcing their arrival with colourful editions or — in the case of some of the more Kinbotean characters — unashamedly slipping through the net of international copyright in cheaply produced pirated copies. Ironically, the one character of Nabokov's fiction whose sole *raison d'être* is returning to Russia had to wait longer than any of the others. After more than eighty years he has finally arrived. Enter Kuznetsov, the man from the USSR, the secret double agent of Nabokov's second play (written between *Mary and King*, *Queen*, *Knave*). With this new edition of Nabokov's dramatic

work, which for the first time includes the complete original Russian version of *The Man from the USSR*, “the process of returning Nabokov’s heritage to its homeland is now finally completed,” as the publishers proudly announce.

Nabokov’s brilliance as a novelist has long overshadowed his work as a dramatist, and the fragmented publishing history of his plays in Russian and in translation has hardly helped to promote his playwriting. Nabokov wrote a number of small one-act closet dramas and four major plays during his Russian period. His first play, *The Tragedy of Mr Morn* (*Tragediia Gospodina Morna*, written 1923-4), remained unpublished during his lifetime while, of his next drama, *The Man from the USSR* (*Chelovek iz SSSR*, written in 1926), only the first act was printed in the Russian émigré newspaper *Rul’*.¹ Two dramas written in the second half of the 1930s, *The Event* (*Sobytie*) and *The Waltz Invention* (*Izobretenie Val’sa*), were published in émigré journals, but the *Waltz Invention* was the only play published in English translation during the author’s lifetime.² Posthumously, *The Man from the USSR* was published in English translation together with *Event* and *The Waltz Invention*, some one-act closet dramas, and the lectures on theatre which Nabokov gave at Stanford in 1941.³ *The Tragedy of Mr Morn* is still awaiting its English translation. A first Russian edition of the plays included only the material available in Russian publications, hence neither *The Tragedy of Mr Morn* nor the complete text of *The Man from the USSR* were included.⁴ A more recent German edition of Nabokov’s dramas included all four of his plays and the minor dramas, but was directed towards a more general readership than previous iterations.⁵

This new edition of Nabokov’s plays, introduced and edited by Andrei Babikov, combines not only the four major plays (including separate earlier outlines and preparatory sketches for *The Tragedy of Mr Morn*), but also all of Nabokov’s early one-act plays: “The Wanderers” (“Skital’tsy”); “Death” (“Smert”); “The Grand-Dad” (“Dedushka”); “The Pole” (“Polius”); “Ahasuerus” (“Agasfer”); a libretto Nabokov wrote together with Ivan Lukash; and “The Mermaid” (“Rusalka”), Nabokov’s conclusion to Pushkin’s unfinished verse drama. In addition, this volume provides Russian translations of Nabokov’s

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, “Chelovek iz SSSR,” *Rul’*, January 1, 1927, 2-3.

² Vladimir Nabokov, *The Waltz Invention*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov (New York: Phaedra, 1966).

³ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Man from the USSR and Other Plays*, intro. and ed. Dmitri Nabokov (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984).

⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *P’esy*, ed. Ivan Tolstoi (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1990). *The Tragedy of Mr Morn* was subsequently published separately in the Russian journal *Zvezda* 4 (1994): 9-98.

⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, *Gesammelte Werke: Dramen*, vol. XV/1, ed. Dieter Zimmer (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2000).

lectures on theatre, and reprints Dmitri Nabokov's excellent introduction to his father's plays in Russian translation. Additional archival materials are hidden away at the back among the notes to the plays, including excerpts from Nabokov's lectures on Soviet drama, and his speech for his role as the murderer of Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata* at a "literary trial" in 1920s Berlin.

The lucid and informative introduction should be read together with a sort of supplementary preface to the commentaries at the end of the book. Here Babikov draws together published sources and new archival material, outlining a wider and more complex background to Nabokov's playwriting than has been available to date. Babikov's exhaustive search of Nabokov's personal correspondence adds much color to his account. For example, Nabokov's predictable condemnation of fellow émigré Roman Gul's play *Azef*, as a most talentless, extremely trite drama ["bezdarneishaia, poshleishaia p'esa"]; or Nabokov's amusing anecdote of how he came to play the role of Pozdnyshv in the "literary trial."⁶ The wider discussions on the dramatic art which took place among Russian émigrés, and constitute essential contexts for Nabokov's ideas of theatre, are also particularly interesting. Babikov makes a convincing case for Vladimir Veidle and Iulii Aikhenval'd as clear influences on Nabokov's thinking in this regard.

The dramas in this volume have been edited with great care. Major discrepancies between the *Zvezda* edition of *The Tragedy of Mr Morn* and the original manuscripts and typescripts have been removed. For instance, where the *Zvezda* version had mediocrity and meanness ["posredstvennost' i podlost'"], the Azbuka edition has reinstated the correct reading based on the actual manuscript; an early example of Nabokov's penchant for the peculiar Russian concept of vulgarity and pretentiousness ["posredstvennost' i poshlost'"].⁷ A few further examples illustrate Nabokov's dictum that sometimes "the difference between the comic side of things, and their cosmic side, depends upon one sibilant."⁸

‘lucha i tainy’⁹

[rays and secrets]

‘lucha i teni’¹⁰

[rays and shadows]

⁶ Andrei Babikov, ed., *Tragediia gospodina Morna*, 10; 544.

⁷ Ibid., 16; 152, emphasis added.

⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Books, 1981), 57.

⁹ Nabokov, "Tragediia," *Zvezda*, 18, emphasis added.

¹⁰ Babikov, ed., *Tragediia*, 155, emphasis added.

‘[...] stikh i s iazyka sletit / ognem i lepestkom’¹¹
 [and the verse flies from your tongue as fire and petal]
 ‘[...] stikh i s iazyka sletit / ognem i lepetom’¹²
 [and the verse flies from your tongue as fire and prattle]

‘*Tristramovo staran’e* koldovskoe’¹³
 [the magical endeavor of Tristram]
 ‘*Tristanovo stradan’e* koldovskoe’¹⁴
 [the magical suffering of Tristan]

The other dramas in this collection have been edited with the same level of precision. The first act of *The Man from the USSR* is reprinted and then followed by an accurate reproduction of the typescripts in the original Russian. The edition finds a productive compromise for *The Waltz Invention* that abides by the original publication, but includes detailed notes on further revisions which Nabokov made in 1939 and in the later English translation. All other dramas are faithfully reprinted according to the published versions authorized by Nabokov.

The commentaries to the plays are informative and useful in that they suggest lines of enquiry which invite the reader to dig deeper rather than impose specific readings of the dramas. Some interesting literary allusions and references are also uncovered, such as Nabokov’s dialogue with Blok’s 1912 poem “Miry letiat. Goda letiat. Pustaia...” in *The Tragedy of Mr Morn*, or the allusions to Merezhkovskii’s play *Sil’vio* in *The Waltz Invention*. Some comparatist pitfalls, however, are obvious here. For example, stage directions in the first scene of *The Waltz Invention* that describe the view of a mountain through a window, are strangely associated with the beginning of Bernard Shaw’s *Heartbreak House* where the “hilly [not mountainous] country in the middle of the north edge of Sussex [...] is seen through the windows of a room.” Does this mean that there is also a connection to, say, Shaw’s *Arms and Men*, which also has the view of a mountain through a window? To paraphrase Nabokov, sometimes a leaf is just hopelessly green. That said, on the whole, the commentaries are helpful and in some cases essential.

This volume is so strikingly elegant that its aesthetic aspects should not go unmentioned. The cover shows a detail from Somov’s painting “Harlequin

¹¹ Nabokov, “Tragediia,” *Zvezda*, 18, emphasis added.

¹² Babikov, ed., *Tragediia*, 155, emphasis added.

¹³ Nabokov, “Tragediia,” *Zvezda*, 69, emphasis added.

¹⁴ Babikov, ed., *Tragediia*, 244, emphasis added.

and Death,” alluding to Nabokov’s indebtedness to the theatricality of Russia’s Silver Age, while the fly paper is a color reproduction of the Russian artist Iurii Annenkov’s sketches for Nabokov’s play *The Waltz Invention* (the production never materialized). Further reproductions of images interspersed throughout the text provide interesting illustrations of the staging of Nabokov’s plays—beyond the well known photograph of Nabokov amid the cast of the Gruppa troupe in Berlin—such as a photograph of the staging of *The Event* in the popular Russian émigré magazine *Illiustrirovanniaia Rossiia*. A flyer and the program for the production of *The Event* by a Russian theatre troupe in New York serve as a reminder that Nabokov’s plays were actually staged rather than merely read. The illustrations are another indication that Babikov has literally left no (archival) leaf unturned to reveal new sides of Nabokov, the dramatist.

In the best Russian tradition of carefully compiled critical editions, Babikov has restored a part of Nabokov’s work which could have easily gone astray somewhere along the way to his homeland. Through what can only be termed a “labor of love,” Babikov has performed a crucial service to Russian-speaking Nabokov scholars and readers, and not least to Nabokov’s legacy, by opening the way for a thorough analysis and examination of the writer’s dramatic oeuvre. This beautifully produced and intelligently edited volume can rightfully claim to have returned to Russia the last piece of Nabokov’s baggage long lost in transit and translation.

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