marks the Greek rejection of Troy's "civilized ways of warfare." For nine years the Greeks had accepted ransom in exchange for Trojan warriors, an arrangement that led to the long stalemate between the armies that exists at the start of the poem. Now, however, Achilles refuses the ransom by Lycaon, one of Hector's brothers: *"Fool/don't talk to me of ransom. No more speeches./Before Patroclus met his day of destiny, true, it warmed my heart to spare some Trojans . . . /But now not a single Trojan flees his death . . . /Come, friend, you too must die."* Perhaps nowhere else in literature are there more vivid descriptions of hand-to-hand combat than those related here: Armies advance on each other like two lines of reapers in a grain field; a man is caught up on a spear like a fish on a gaff. To Knox, these descriptions balance "the celebration of war's tragic, heroic values and those creative values of civilized life that war destroys."

The only person standing between Achilles and Troy's destruction is Hector, and Fagles's translation of this important scene shows how he differs from Lattimore and Fitzgerald. Lattimore is a traditionalist; his word-for-word approach retains the nobility of Homer's Greek but sacrifices some of the poem's emotion:

[Hector] balanced the spear far shadowed, and threw it,
and struck the middle of Peleïdes' [Achilles's] shield, nor missed it,
but the spear was driven far back from the shield, and Hektor was angered
because his swift weapon had been loosed from his hand in a vain cast.

Fitzgerald, whose translation of Homer's *Odyssey* is considered unsurpassed, strives for a freer verse form:

He twirled his long spear shaft and cast it, hitting his enemy mid-shield, but off
and away the spear rebounded. Furious that he had lost it, made his throw for nothing,
Hektor stood bemused.

Of the three, Fagles tries hardest to match the language with the sense; in this battle scene he favors short, chopped words and excited interjections to achieve the sense of calamity on the field:

Shaft poised, he hurled and his spear's long shadow flew
and it struck Achilles's shield—a dead-center hit—
but off and away it glanced and Hector seethed,
his hurtling spear, his whole arm's power poured
in a wasted shot.

No doubt Fagles's translation will itself receive a few spears from those classicists raised on Lattimore. A modern reader, however, particularly a nonspecialist, will welcome Fagles's explanatory digressions. But deciding which translation is best is a bit like arguing whether "Homer" was a single poet composing alone or a composite of generations of oral bards. Knox reminds us that, since Homer recited the poem from memory, each performance was of necessity an improvisation. Knox's analysis could explain why each generation spawns a new translation: *The Iliad* "is new every time it is performed."

VLADIMIR NABOKOV: The Russian Years. *By Brian Boyd. Princeton. 607 pp. $25*

"I probably had the happiest childhood imaginable," remembered Vladimir Nabokov in 1972. Boyd, an English professor at the University of Auckland, makes us feel the luxurious comfort of winter in the Nabokovs' great house in prerevolutionary Russia and of the sunny, lilac-scented summers on the family's country estate. But at age 18 Nabokov had to flee from

those idyllic scenes: That year, the Russian Revolution forced his family to emigrate to Germany, leaving behind several million rubles, a 2,000-acre estate, and what Nabokov valued even more—"the beauty of intangible property, the unreal estate" of flora and fauna and affection where his memories were set. For Nabokov, literature became a way of preserving what circumstances take away: In a 1925 story titled "A Guide to Berlin," Nabokov said the role of fiction was "to portray ordinary objects as they will be reflected in the kindly mirrors of future times."

On March 28, 1922, Nabokov's beloved father, the liberal politician V. D. Nabokov, was killed in Berlin by a Russian monarchist. Nabokov quickly finished his studies at Cambridge (a string of his mother's pearls had paid for his education there) and made Berlin his home, there publishing four books in as many months. Nabokov soon became the darling of a Russian Berlin, a part of the city which Boyd describes as "a cultural supernova, without equal in the annals of refugee humanity." But being a writer in an émigré supernova is hardly a paying proposition, and Nabokov was forced to eke out a living working as a secretary, tutor, and tennis and boxing coach. Germany's emerging fascism appalled him long before it did most of the world. Nabokov also had special personal reasons for hating the Nazis: His wife Vera was Jewish, and his younger brother Sergei was arrested as a homosexual (and later died in a concentration camp). In 1940—the year this first volume of Boyd's biography closes—Nabokov is seen leaving for America, having already published more than most writers' entire oeuvre: eight novels, two novellas, four volumes of poetry, four plays, and 50 stories. In his suitcase were two unfinished works which, when later transformed into English and published as *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, would make his reputation as a dazzling pyrotechnician in his second language.

Critics have often fastened on Nabokov's rich vocabulary and his mandarin elegance to complain that his novels are "all style and no content." Yet Nabokov had witnessed too much of the evil that politics can do to be an escapist or mere wordsmith. Boyd finds a surprising number of Nabokov's works that deal with politics, such as the novels *Invitation to a Beheading* (1959) and *Bend Sinister* (1947) and the play *The Waltz Invention* (1966), where the Stalinist and Nazi versions of totalitarianism blend in surreal horror.

The charge that Nabokov is merely an aesthete misses the point that all his novels challenge the easy 20th-century opposition between politics and aesthetics. For Nabokov, the artistic is political precisely because it defeats the totalitarian goal (and to a lesser extent, the democratic conformist urge) to reduce consciousness to a set of predictable, familiar responses. Boyd defines Nabokov's formula for happiness: "Detach the mind from accepting a humdrum succession of moments, and everything becomes magical."

Nabokov always relished ironies. A posthumous irony is that Nabokov, who mistrusted biography and feared that it "can produce no closer likeness of its subject than macabre dolls," should have as his Boswell a critic as perceptive—and respectful—as Boyd.

VAN GOGH: His Life and His Art. *By David Sweetman. Crown. 391 pp. $30*
VINCENT VAN GOGH. *By Evert van Uitert, Louis van Tilborgh, Sjraar van Heughten, Johannes van der Wolk, Ronald Pickvance, and E. B. F. Pey. Rizzoli. Volume I: Paintings; Volume II: Drawings. 292 pp.; 336 pp. $90*

On December 23, 1888, Vincent van Gogh quarreled violently with the painter Paul Gauguin. Failing to wound him, Van Gogh rounded on himself and cut off part of his left ear. This violent act has entered the mythology of the modern artist driven to extremes by his sacrifices for art. According to the myth, the artist is ignored and despised by the public. This certainly describes Van Gogh, whose paintings now sell for more than $10 million but which he couldn't sell for 10 francs during his lifetime. Popular works, most famously Irving Stone's novel *Lust*