

cooperation of fantasy." A life is remade by words, self-consciously, in a way that may not accord with events and persons and circumstances in their primary reality. No matter; that reality is lost anyway.

The first two of the six chapters constitute more than half of the book's length but take the author only to age 26. A reader may be tempted to scan the title page to see whether something was missed, whether this is just the first of several intended volumes. But no. Kermode's childhood on the Isle of Man in the shaping presence of his parents, his naval service in the uneasy company of eccentrics comic and tragic, his first years in academic life—these decades receive his sustained and bemused attention. In them, he was made.

For the later life of honors and recognition, to which, as to much else, he worries that he is "not entitled," there is less regard. He admits to being at times a reckless, self-destructive man ("The story of a life must, insofar as it is truthful, be at least in part a story of loss and desertion inflicted and received"), but of his personal adult life he provides few details, and they are likely to appear within the protective confines of parentheses.

One of Kermode's best-known books, on narrative technique, is entitled *The Sense of an Ending*. Over this memoir there looms an ending of a different sort. Kermode recalls Prospero's remark that, once he left his island and returned to Milan, every third thought would be his grave. "I have often written about imagined or fictive endings and said they are all images of the real one. Fall and cease. The third thought is much less alarming than it was: it makes sense of everything, even if one would prefer a different kind of sense." For so civilized a voice, one wishes an ending long deferred.

—James Morris

**THE MAGICIAN'S DOUBTS:
*Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction.***

By Michael Wood. Princeton Univ. Press. 252 pp. \$24.95

"Some day a sagacious professor will write about my absolutely tragic situation," Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977) once quipped to a friend. Wood, who teaches English at Princeton University, may well be that professor. Nabokov's prediction was intended as an ironic comment on his linguistic exile as a Russian-born master of

English. But Wood is wise enough to go beyond the irony to locate the genuinely tragic side of the man he calls the "great, doubting magician."

Probing his conjurer's layered puns, freighted allusions, and sly ambiguities, Wood ranks Nabokov as one of the few writers whose work rewards every variety of close textual scrutiny. Accordingly, he chases linguistic bread crumbs, ferreting out "deep truths in the alphabet," unraveling acrostics, and translating bilingual puns. At the same time, Wood judges some of Nabokov's word play to be "sheer glitter," and he chides the master for expecting readers to catch every trick.

Ultimately, though, Wood sees Nabokov's flashy cerebrations as secondary to his achievement as a "theorist of pain." From his father's assassination to his family's exile from revolutionary Russia, Nabokov was ever the poet of memory and loss—loss gripped in language. "Nabokov came to understand deprivation, marginality, and helplessness as well as he did through his abandonment of Russian as a literary language," writes Wood.

Beyond grief and exile, the specific loss that preoccupies the critic is the loss of innocence. Wood addresses the moral dimension of Nabokov's obsession with immature sexuality, incest, and unnatural death without succumbing either to misguided sentimentalism or to facile cynicism. Instead (in an echo of Lionel Trilling's defense of Nabokov's most famous novel), Wood writes: "It is morally obtuse to think that *Lolita* is an immoral book." Admitting that *Lolita* does not contain a "paraphraseable moral," Wood nevertheless shows how the tormented children who populate Nabokov's fiction are a plumb line into the depths of human cruelty. He concludes: "The suffering of the innocent is what unsettles all comforts for Nabokov."

Compared with biographer Brian Boyd's two-volume behemoth, *The Magician's Doubts* is slim. That is because Wood ignores the "mandarin" Nabokov—that "highly stylized, highly visible" creature whom he finds "dull and narrow"—in favor of the "(real) person I guess at but who keeps himself pretty well hidden." To Wood, this Nabokov is "not only tender and observant but also diffident, even scared, worried about almost everything the mandarin so airily dismisses." This is criticism with heart: a critic not afraid to bring an author back to life.

—Genevieve Abravanel