



Claude Monet, *The Highway Bridge*, 1872.  
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ward march of progress. Site of a major iron-works, the quaint town of Argenteuil had begun to change long before Monet arrived. But, in his early paintings there, such as *The Promenade along the Seine* (1872), he succeeded in harmonizing rivers, fields, and trees with chimney stacks and railroad bridges. Soon, this balance proved too delicate, and he retreated to small corners of untouched nature and finally to the privacy of his own garden. When he did paint larger subjects again, as in *Argenteuil—The Bank in Flower* (1877), the natural and manmade worlds appeared in stark opposition. Though subtly expressed, Monet's art was a judgment on his times.

#### LECTURES ON RUSSIAN LITERATURE

by Vladimir Nabokov  
edited by Fredson Bowers  
Harcourt, 1981  
324 pp. \$19.95

Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977), novelist, *émigré*, professor, lepidopterist, conducts a brilliant tour through the gallery of Russian literary "greats." Judgmental and aphoristic ("Fancy is fertile only when futile"), he reveals as much about his own artistic crotchets as about the works of his compatriots. Leo Tolstoy, master manipulator of time in prose narrative, and Anton Chekhov, writer of "sad books for humorous people," rank high in his pantheon. So does the comic genius, Nikolay Gogol: "His work, as all great literary achievements, is a phenomenon of language and not one of ideas." Faring less well are Fyodor Dostoyevsky (basically a writer of "mystery stories" that stand up poorly on second reading, says Nabokov) and Maksim Gorky, from whose melodramatic fiction there was "but one step to so-called Soviet literature."

#### PROGRESS OF STORIES

by Laura Riding  
Dial, 1982  
380 pp. \$15.95

Lives "as such" are unimportant, muses the author in her preface; the challenge in writing about them is "to let the unimportant remain unimportant." Out of this severe aesthetic, Riding, the versatile American writer (poetry, essays, fiction), has fashioned stories that are icily detached in their observations of human foibles. A woman who cannot out-

grow the burden of her father's ideological obsessions ("Socialist Pleasures"), a man who affects idiosyncracies to appear "interesting" ("Schoolgirls"), a painter who burns out and has "nothing left but ideas" ("The Incurable Vices")—these are some of the characters who people the more "traditional" stories of this collection. In her more experimental pieces, Riding turns the story form inside out, commenting on the nature of the story itself. The narrator of "Reality as Port Huntlady" remarks on the silliness of her narrative and, by implication, all narratives: "Here we are telling ourselves a story about a place where people fancied themselves to be dealing with these few really important things, without knowing ourselves exactly what they are." Riding sometimes pushes her experiments too far—analysis can exhaust—but the austere cadences of her prose (reminiscent of Gertrude Stein at her best) pull one through these dry stretches.

*Science & Technology*

**GENES, RADIATION,  
AND SOCIETY: The Life  
and Work of H. J. Muller**  
by Elof Axel Carlson  
Cornell, 1981  
457 pp. \$29.95

Beginning with his participation in the pioneering of classical genetics while still a graduate student at Columbia University, H. J. Muller (1890–1967) sought not only to establish the gene as the basic unit of life but also to defend Darwinism and eugenics. Toting fruit flies and theories across three continents, throwing himself into professional controversies, Muller helped map the mechanism of the individual gene, postulated genetic recombination and crossover, and voiced the first warnings against the mutagenic risks of radiation—a personal crusade derided both by the U.S. government and by doctors until after World War II. Most of Muller's scientific positions were vindicated by later advances (the Watson-Crick model of DNA, for instance). But as Carlson, a biologist at the State University of New York, points out, Muller's socialist convictions led to troubles and disillusionment. FBI reports of his radical activities drove him from a teaching position at the University of Texas in 1932. But