

The only answer I can come up with is that Fecher loaded the dice against Mencken in his introduction, and they came up snake-eyes. "Let it be said at once," he writes, "clearly and unequivocally: Mencken was an anti-Semite." He even stoops to quoting a diary entry not published in the book in which Mencken used the word "kikes." Mencken never had a chance, especially with younger journalists and their readers who knew little or nothing about Mencken or his times. I suggested earlier that Fecher had done a good job of identifying old names. In every other respect I think his editing was superb. I read the diary typescript in 1982 and found it tedious, repetitive, and depressing. Fecher's version is much more readable, and offers a much clearer portrait, than the unedited mass. He made the right decisions on what to keep in and what to take out. That is especially true regarding Baltimore and Baltimoreans. Fecher is a self-educated Baltimore native and lifelong resident, like Mencken, and is somewhat simpatico. But this introduction—God!

Fecher devotes five of the nineteen pages of his introduction to his indictment of Mencken as anti-black and anti-Semitic, anti-war and anti-FDR, all of which he slyly links. He says Mencken was no Hitler, but the linkage and the disproportion suggest he feels otherwise. Or wants you to. This is particularly bizarre in light of a book Fecher published back in 1978 in which he drew on a folder in the Enoch Pratt Free Library's Mencken Room archive that contains several pages of anti-Semitic material written but never published by Mencken. Mencken left a note saying that the material was planned for books never written—and that he might decide later not to use it. The material criticized Jews as a group for a number of sins—smugness, rudeness, a lack of patriotism, ruthlessness, and so on. It's not pretty stuff. In fact, it's uglier than anything in the diary. So why Fecher, who wrote in the 1978 book that it did not prove to him that Mencken was anti-Semitic, now changes his mind is an absurd mystery. (I have a nasty theory, which I have confided to my secret diary.) I recommend you skip the introduction and judge Mencken for yourself.

The last word: The folder material was written in 1939. That same year Mencken wrote a column in the *Sun* advocating wholesale entry into the United States of German Jewish refugees. He was one of the few journalists to do so. And, of course, a lot of people who would never say "nigger" or "kike" in public or private made damn sure that policy was never adopted. □

**GHOSTS ON THE ROOF:
SELECTED JOURNALISM OF
WHITTAKER CHAMBERS, 1931-1959**
Edited by Terry Teachout/Regnery Gateway/361 pp. \$24.95

James Bowman

The roof of the title piece is that of the Livadia Palace in Yalta where, in 1945, the conference which determined the postwar boundaries of Europe was taking place. The ghosts are those of Nicholas and Alexandra, last Tsar and Tsarina of Russia, who have become Stalin's warmest admirers. In conversation with Clio, muse of history, they pay elaborate tribute to the man who, at the scene of triumph over Roosevelt and Churchill, has realized old Russia's most improbable imperial ambitions. What more natural than that they should also show their appreciation for the marvelous revolutionary creed, a creed that makes Machiavelli look like a Mormon, which has made it possible?

That somber little *jeu d'esprit*, now reprinted in this collection of his journalism, was written for *Time* magazine by Whittaker Chambers at the time of the conference itself—when it was not occurring to many observers in the

James Bowman is American correspondent of the Spectator of London.

West to see its outcome in this way. And the conceit is a happy one. Because its prescience reminds us that if there were anyone from among the legion of the dead whom we should wish to call back for a chat about the unraveling of the fabric knitted at Yalta, it would be the author of *Witness*, the man who did so much to enable Americans of the mid-century to understand what Communism was about.

What he would tell us may be suggested by another in this collection, a brilliant piece he wrote for *Life* magazine called "The End of a Dark Age Ushers in New Dangers." This was written at the time of the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, when Khrushchev denounced Stalin. Here he does not doubt Khrushchev's sincerity, but he does point out that the end remains the same even though the means has changed. Stalinism had been a tactic for another era, and one which had been superseded even before Stalin's death. Now, the Stalinist reliance on brute force was to give way to political finesse:



For Communism the problem was how to convert the amorphous sentiments called "internationalism" or "neutralism" from negative to positive forces, from forces merely dividing the West's will to resist Communism into its marching allies. The answer was to refine the cruder forms of Communist aggression, which had produced the favorable power balance, into subtler forms of aggression which the power balance both required and made possible. This is the chief point and thrust of the tactics set forth at the 20th Congress.

In effect, says Chambers, Khrushchev was re forging the popular front of the 1930s, which Stalin had destroyed at the time of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in 1939. Again, not many people were saying that in 1956, but the subsequent history of the "non-aligned" movement in the Third World and the evolution of the foreign policy of the Social Democratic left in the West show that he was exactly right—about the effect if not the intention of post-Stalinist and pre-Gorbachevian Communism.

Just as Chambers saw the essential continuity between Stalin and Khrushchev, in spite of their tactical differences, so it seems probable that today he would see a similar continuity between Brezhnev and Gorbachev. My own guess is that he would agree with Paul Nitze in pointing to the usefulness of Leninism, independently of most of the Marxist ideology of "Communism," as a tool of conflict management.

If, as Chambers says, victory in the ideological struggle will go to the player "who succeeds in overleaping or bypassing the weapons stalemate, and swinging to his side decisive population masses and their economies now beyond his control" and if, further, Eastern Europe and its Stalinist mechanisms of control had become an embarrassment and an encumbrance to the Soviet side, then it makes sense to see the slimmed down and revamped "Communism" that Gorbachev still vehemently professes as designed to carry on, especially in the Third World, the global struggle whose nature Chambers did so much to make clear to us.

Terry Teachout has organized this book into five sections, which are intended roughly to correspond to phases of Chambers's career. In fact, the reader's sense is overwhelmingly of three epochs: the Communist era of the early thirties, here represented by forty-four pages and really *not* very interesting; the *Time* era, from 1939 to 1948, when he had to make his living by journalism and therefore was led into writing about subjects that he might not have chosen for himself; and the 1950s, after the Hiss case had brought him to national attention,

when his freedom to write of what he chose had both good and ill effects.

To me the second is much the best reading. The lugubriousness and world-weariness of the last phase, though it is illuminated by frequent flashes of wisdom, is hard to take after a while. The middle period, however, is filled with such delights as his "History of Western Culture" series, which makes a fascinating counterpoint to his thoughts on contemporary history, his reviews of the films *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Ninotchka*, his thoughts on Kafka, Rebecca West, Toynbee, Spengler, and Santayana, his appreciation of Marian Anderson and the Negro Spiritual, and his dialogue with the Devil.

As the editor points out, one of the most striking things about Chambers's contributions to *Time* is how much better the magazine used to be than it is now. In every way—quality of writing, intelligence, insight, historical consciousness, seriousness of mind, even factual accuracy—the *Time* of forty years ago, as represented here by Chambers, was infinitely superior to the *Time* of today.

In fact, it might be instructive to look in more detail at one point of comparison which calls immediate attention to itself. In 1948, the 100th anniversary of *The Communist Manifesto*, Chambers nominated Karl Marx as "Man of the Century"—deliberately playing off the *Time* tradition of nominating every December a "Man of the Year." This past December, his successors in the senior editorial offices did something similar: they nominated Mikhail Gorbachev as "Man of the Decade." If their choice is marred by the fact that Gorby didn't come onto the world scene until halfway through the decade, Chambers's is too, by virtue of the fact that Karl Marx didn't live in this century. Let these two quibbles cancel each other out and let us just compare the two treatments of a similar idea. Chambers begins his piece with a geography lesson. "Marxism" is what divides the earth. Very well, let us explain what we mean by a quick run-through of the earth's major rivers:

In the lands drained by the Sava, the Bug, the Moskva, the Dnieper, the Don, the Volga, the Yensei and the Amur, a man who wished to express approval—of a painting, a factory production record or a military operation—is likely to call it "Marxist." In the lands drained by the St. Lawrence, the Mississippi, the Orinoco, the Amazon, the Tagus, the Thames and the Clyde, a man who wishes to express disapproval—of a painting, a production record or a military operation—is likely to call it "Marxist."

Chambers's trick here is a deft handling of rhetorical parallelism and a habit, even when he is writing about the most abstract and philosophical of issues, of

anchoring his material at every possible point in the firm earth of the specific and the factual.

In the same way, he goes on to make his subject immediately topical—"Marxism last week made men fight in the ragged mountains of Greece"—and to give it a human interest:

A Shanghai girl student asked a boy to write in her autograph book. Instead of an affectionate personal statement, he wrote: "What is the reason for the existence of people who reap wealth without laboring?" Marx, who guided the Chinese boy's hand, was also last week the most important man in the world's two great centers of power . . .

The only surprise here is that he doesn't tell us the girl's name (even if he had to make one up) and what it means in Chinese. This is journalism with guts. He gives a geographical location and political compass bearings before he attempts the extremely difficult task of explaining how it is that some long-dead egghead is the reason why people in the remotest corners of the earth are shooting each other.

Compare that with the opening of *Time's* "Man of the Decade" feature, written by Mr. Lance Morrow:

The 1990s came to an end in what seemed like a magic act, performed on a world-historical stage. Trapdoors flew open, and whole regimes vanished. The shell of an old world cracked, its black iron fragments dropping away, and something new, alive, exploded into the air in a flurry of white wings.

Or not, as the case may be. Possibly we were not attending to the same corner of the field as Mr. Morrow. This is exactly the opposite approach to Chambers's: instead of making the mysterious clear by bringing it down to earth, Morrow makes the clear mysterious by mooning off into a mist of fine writing. Only the fine writing is ludicrously bad. The metaphor of a stage transforming itself into an egg—an egg, it would appear, which is made of iron—that contains a mysteriously full-grown bird (dove? swan? albino pigeon?) is hopelessly scrambled and completely distracting. We are invited to take an interest not in the events in Eastern Europe but in the exotic vision of Mr. Lance Morrow:

Revolution took on a sort of electronic lightness of being. A crowd of half a million Czechoslovaks in Wenceslas Square would powder into electrons, stream into space at the speed of light, bounce off a satellite and shoot down to recombine in millions of television images around the planet. The transformation had a giddy, hallucinatory quality, its surprises tumbling out night after night.

My, what a lively crowd! Talk about

your bouncing Czechs! But ought we delicately to suggest that the "hallucinatory quality" of this curious electron basketball (he powders! he streams! he bounces! he shoots!) has more to do with the self-indulgent peculiarity of the observer than with the events which he is ostensibly helping us to observe?

Moreover, the political judgments are even more giddy. Gorbachev is an "international celebrity and impresario of calculated disorder" who "calls what he is doing—and permitting—a revolution"; he "is playing Prospero in a realm ruled by Caliban for the past 72 years." Anyone who thinks that ought to abandon political analysis and take up autograph collecting.

A bit later on in the magazine, Michael Kramer devotes some 1,700 words to the ineffably silly proposition that Gorbachev is saving Communism just as Roosevelt saved capitalism. Then Strobe Talbott maunders on for 6,000 words under the impression that economic weakness and military strength are incompatible and therefore that the Soviet Union never *did* pose any threat to the West.

Each of these men has an Idea. The fact that it is a Wrong Idea scarcely matters next to the fact of their own fascination with it. What we take away from reading them is nothing that we didn't know before—except the Idea, for whatever it may be worth. What we take away from Chambers, however, is

a wealth of information of the classic journalistic kind. We learn not only about Karl Marx's habits of mind but also about his habits of diet and recreation; we are told not only what his friends, critics, and followers thought of him but also something of why they thought it.

What emerges is both a tremendously sympathetic portrait of Marx the man and a dispassionate and deadly accurate account of the poisonous ideology he gave birth to—and its influence on the century. The literacy, imagination, and drama of Chambers's account are all the more striking for being unselfconscious. Somehow, one suspects, it was not just his politics which prevented the new *Time*-stylists from consulting Whittaker Chambers before they undertook to anoint their "Man of the Decade."

One of the last subjects to which Chambers turned his attention in the relatively tranquil later years was that of education. In the midst of the national agonizing which accompanied the launch of the first Russian Sputnik, his was the voice that could be heard to say: "The problem does not turn wholly on the academic processing of what we loosely call 'brains.' It would seem to turn, at least as critically, on the much more difficult problem of what we call loosely 'mind.'" This he defines as including "reflective and creative imagination" but for a more practical demonstration of what he means, read this book. □

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VLADIMIR NABOKOV:
SELECTED LETTERS 1940-1977

Edited by Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/582 pp. \$29.95

Charles Nicol

The first things one notices about this collection of letters are that the selection and editing are very much a family affair and that it starts not in 1940 but in 1923, maintaining that mild eccentricity often associated with items Nabokovian. Dmitri, who has continued to translate his father's early Russian (and French) works into English (and Italian), and Vera, who handled much of her husband's (English, Russian, French) typing and correspondence, have both contributed substantially. Among the many footnotes supplied by the family, a few "of a personal nature" are signed or initialed; in addition to personal glimpses, these sometimes set up defenses against snipers or supply additional—everything Nabokov wrote has wonderful comic moments—humor, such as the following comment about Nabokov's first American literary agent: "De Jannelli gave little Dmitri Nabokov his first camera, a Kodak Baby Brownie. DN" (which has the tone of Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich calling himself "little Vanya"). Rachmaninoff gave Dmitri his first radio; much later his father gave him some good prophylactic advice: "In Italy, for his own good, /A wolf must wear a Riding Hood." The last letter in this collection (9 May 1977) is also to Dmitri.

Many of Nabokov's novels are crafted so that a revelation on the last few pages—sometimes even in the last sentence—throws new light on the whole affair, compelling the reader to start over again, now with the pages illuminated by 500 watts instead of a dim bulb. This collection of letters almost has to be read the same way, and its last few pages help explain the dozen pre-1940 (pre-American) letters that constitute its beginning. Thus young Vladimir's first letter, written during a summer of farm labor in the south of France, starts with a two-word salutation to his mother and an annotation. This endearing letter contains a touch of synesthesia ("I took a walk around the plantation, behind the grove of cork oaks, ate peaches and

Charles Nicol, who teaches English at Indiana State University in Terre Haute, is currently editing a study of Nabokov's short fiction.

apricots, admired the sunset, listened to a nightingale's tweets and whistles, and both its song and the sunset tasted of apricot and peach"), but the Russian facsimile and the English translation are really here to refute one of the wilder claims of Nabokov's first biographer, Andrew Field, that Nabokov addressed his mother Elena Ivanovna by the unlikely diminutive "Lolita." We return to this matter only 500 pages later, in Nabokov's towering reply to Field's "ignoble letter of July 9, 1973" and Dmitri's footnote referring the reader to his own devastating review "Did He Really Call His Mum Lolita?" of Field's biography (*Spectator*-savers may be able to content themselves with mine of January 1987). Later still, Vladimir noted that "I am still at war with Field, who turned out to be a rat."

Four of the early letters are to his wife, and the first footnote to them is one of the few signed with her name: "When my husband was absent from home he wrote me every day. I have suggested four letters from those I received from him in 1937 during our longest 'separation.' Vera Nabokov." Those quotes around *separation* seem to indicate that these vigorous husbandly love-letters are squelching another rumor, this time one originating either in Field's opus or in a gossipy book by Zinaida Shchakovskaya, a Parisian Russian acquaintance not in the index. Still, an unsigned footnote here to "all the Irinas in the world" in-

triguingly identifies them as "various ladies by that name who flirted with or had designs on VN." Another of these letters to Vera contains the darkest mood of the whole collection, concerning Vladimir's—VN's—radiation treatments for psoriasis: "You know—now I can tell you frankly—the indescribable torments I endured in February, before these treatments, drove me to the border of suicide—a border I was not authorized to cross because I had you in my baggage." (Vladimir and John Updike—our most famous current psoriatic—considerably admired each other's works. Was there a kind of dermal sympathy? No wonder VN was especially fond of *The Centaur*.)

In general, this collection seems to contain too many letters to editors and publishers, especially in regard to *Lolita*; VN's increasingly desperate search for a publisher doubtless needs documentation, as does the struggle for rights with its slime-slippery first publisher, but we seem to have more an exhaustion than a selection, and the dozen pages devoted to three lists of proof corrections are surely of interest only to the extremely dedicated Nabokovian. Perhaps stalwart, formidable Dmitri, who tends to overwhelm his father's critics, has been overzealous: Would VN himself have included all this material? After all, nobody doubts his extreme care for his texts, and this is certainly made clear again in his explanations to Katharine A. White of the *New Yorker* of minute details in shorter works: "Low boy file is the right term. See Beckley-Cardy's (Chicago) School Buyer's Guide of Furniture-Supplies-Equipment, Catalog No. 96, School year 1953-1954. Administrator's edition, p. 17, No. D 250, 'all-in-one lowboy file,' illustr." He even gave thorough instructions ("I am sending you some photographs of Pnin-like Russians, with and without hair, for a

visual appreciation of the items I am going to discuss") for Milton Glaser's extraordinary portrait on the dust jacket of *Pnin*. Most of these letters to editors contain items of considerable interest, such as evaluations of his own works, or comedy, such as the handwritten ending of a short note to White: "This is the first letter I have typed out myself in my life. Took me 28 minutes but came out beautifully." Better yet, one tries to imagine the reaction of James Laughlin (editor and proprietor of *New Directions*) upon, after VN's butterfly-collecting visit, receiving a letter asking him to collect two types of plants from areas designated on an enclosed map, plus a few ants: "Kill the ants with alcohol or carbona or any other stuff handy (just drown them, do not squash) and put them into a small box with cotton wool."

Then there are the projects that fell through during his leaner years in America, including a revised, annotated *Anna Karenin* (as VN would have it) and, amazingly enough, a proposed translation of *The Brothers Karamazov*. And it's too bad that the article *Life* proposed on his butterfly-collecting was dropped: "I take it for granted that your photographer is prepared to do some crawling and wriggling and to ignore completely the possible presence of snakes." He even submitted a Burma Shave jingle.

Occasionally his strong opinions give a salutary jolt, as in his 1945 letter to a local Reverend, refusing to let Dmitri participate in a clothing drive for German children: "When I have to choose between giving for a Greek, Czech, French, Belgian, Chinese, Norwegian, Russian, Jewish or German child, I shall not choose the latter one." His absolute rejection of Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes was based on a lifetime of painful experience, but sometimes went to surprising lengths, as when he abruptly cancelled a planned collaboration with fellow émigré and well-known linguist Roman Jakobson, presumably ending their acquaintance as well: "Frankly, I am unable to stomach your little trips to totalitarian countries, even if these trips are prompted merely by scientific considerations." We should also remember his dismissals of quite a few famous writers, as in his accepting an invitation from the *New York Times Book Review* in 1949 to "do an occasional review. I have been waiting for a long time to take a crack at such big fakes as Mr. T. S. Eliot and Mr. Thomas Mann." (He took on Jean-Paul Sartre instead.)

Fame brought its own problems: autograph hounds, interviewers, biographers, scholars. He had to keep refusing honorary degrees. Occasionally his renown could be used to advantage:

