

## Lila Azam Zanganeh and the Contagion of Happiness

Even on first acquaintance it's clear that Lila Azam Zanganeh is someone who believes deeply, unreservedly in the power of literature to make and remake the world—or at the very least, to help us make our way more richly through it. Her first book, *The Enchanter*, is the journey of an imaginative, devoted reader into the language and the mind of Vladimir Nabokov. The book is part biography, part critical appreciation, part invention, part homage, and entirely *sui generis*—a passionate engagement with Nabokov's work and life. Anyone who has read and loved Nabokov's books—and really anyone who has sought and found, in the act of reading a certain author, a life-affirming immersion in remarkable language—will appreciate Azam Zanganeh's creation. The subtitle is "Nabokov and Happiness" and that's one of *The Enchanter's* main assertions—that happiness is a rare and difficult literary terrain to master, and that Nabokov is "the great writer of happiness."

Although she scarcely mentions it in the book, Azam Zanganeh's life has had its share of parallels to the famous Russian expat. She was born in Paris to Iranian parents who, like Nabokov's, were forced to flee a revolution. Like VN, she grew up in the shadow of an unattainable homeland, and like him she was raised with fluency in several languages before acquiring it in others (remarkably, English, the language in which she now primarily writes, was her fourth language of the six she speaks).

Azam Zanganeh has contributed articles, interviews, and essays in English, French, and Italian to *The New York Times*, *The Paris Review*, *Le Monde*, and *La Repubblica*, and edited an anthology of contemporary Iranian writing. She was the recipient of the 2011 Roger Shattuck Prize for Criticism. *The Enchanter* has been translated into nine languages.

-Jesse Lichtenstein

**Jesse Lichtenstein:** Setting aside the similarities in biography, both you and Nabokov chose English, among several languages you knew, as the language in which to work and spend most of your time. That's interesting to me—that journey into English by choice more than by chance (or due to the simple fact of immigration). Is there some affinity that you see between Nabokov's writing and your own journey into English? What about the English language calls to you as a convert?

**Lila Azam Zanganeh:** Much as I was reluctant to draw parallels between Nabokov and myself—for obvious reasons, because it would have been pretentious, arrogant, and also kitsch—I think that, for certain, there are similarities in terms of how we came to the English language. It's true that English was a choice for both of us. He could have written in French—he did write a couple of texts in French. I could have written in French, as well, and I decided to improve on my English and inhabit it fully instead.

**JL:** So, why did you make that choice?

**LAZ:** A number of reasons. English is totally unique in its expansive vocabulary: there are something like three times as many words in English as in any of the Romance languages, for instance. The lexicon is wider in English because English has borrowed from several source languages at multiple points in time. Sometimes you have the same word via Latin, then Anglo-Norman, then Middle French, etc., borrowed repeatedly across various layers of its history. The French were all about keeping the gates shut and exerting a radiating influence from the center. The English were much more tentacular, so to speak, absorbing everything on the periphery. And as a result the lexicon is prodigiously rich in English. That alone is incredibly exciting from a writer's perspective. At the same time, paradoxically, the language is very compact. Apparently, the only language with a shorter version of Hamlet than the original is Russian. So, you have possibilities in English—where you are able to pack and fold things because of the verb-preposition construct—that are wonderfully rich and amusing, that allow you a lot of elasticity and creative freedom. You can say, for instance, "to write oneself into happiness." You can't say that in any of the other languages I am aware of. And, of course, the fact that there are so many English speakers in the world is important—one wishes and hopes to use a language that is widely readable and accessible.

**JL:** Do you feel, then, that you're at the point where writing in English is entirely natural?

**LAZ:** It's somewhat natural. I hope it never will be entirely natural. Every day I write, I come up with things and wonder, "Is this exactly correct? Is this completely idiomatic?" But then, even that gray area, that level of uncertainty, is interesting. When one is a bit in love with language, infatuated, and also a bit bold, and perhaps a little mad—because it's always scary, it's always menacing that there should be a

degree of uncertainty linked to a language you don't know—well, in the end it's liberating. French for me would not have been liberating. French is a very classical language. It's a language of the 17th century with a more restrictive vocabulary—very ridged, syntactical. Had I stayed within the French language, perhaps I never would've known a medium that sometimes seems so liquid and ethereal. It's just thrilling to make one's way into that uncertainty and learn every day. The thrill and delight of learning new words never seems to wane. This morning I was reading "**The Eve of St. Agnes**," by John Keats. It's so lovely. There are a few words that I didn't know and that I was looking up, and every single word I went looking for felt rich with color, density, and taste.

**JL:** You mention in *The Enchanter* the trilingual sense of echoes and resonances that run through Nabokov's writing. When you're reading Keats, it sounds like you hear these same kinds of echoes from other languages that spring up into the text...

**LAZ:** It always happens—it's connected to the incredible texture of English. There are so many words in Keats that come straight from the French and that, in truth, I would not have understood had I not : "In all the house was heard no human sound. / A chain-drooped lamp was flickering by each door; / The arras, rich with horseman, hawk, and hound / Fluttered in the besieging wind's uproar / And the long carpets rose along the gusty floor." The word 'arras'—Arras is a city in northern France known for its tapestry work. So arras now in English means a tapestry. That's a beautiful example.

**JL:** So of those six languages you know well—Nabokov was a famous "synesthete," so this is my synesthesia question—are there any that have flavors for you?

**LAZ:** Definitely. They have flavors, connected with their colors. It's strange, I've never talked about it or really thought to articulate it, but they definitely do. Italian is bright yellow, like citrus. Spanish is blood-orange. French is green for some reason, blue-green. English—English is red, an honest red. And Persian I would say is in the dark red, garnet red. They all have different hues. Though Russian is red, too, somehow. How strange. Russian is definitely a brighter shade of red.

**JL:** Now we know why you always wear red.

**LAZ:** Ha! And they all have particular tastes. They all have moods. I'm attached to them sentimentally in different ways.

**JL:** But you must play favorites...

**LAZ:** I think the language that sounds most beautiful to me is Russian. When it's spoken well and when you read the poetry of Pushkin in his native Russian, it's unbelievable. The economy of language that is at work in the most simple, clearest, crispest little poem of five lines. I would say, musically, that's the language that touches me most.

My grandfather spoke perfect Russian. They say he spoke it with a St. Petersburg accent. He went to Russia often and so maybe there is some Russian line of influence. My mother has studied Russian and speaks it well, too. I also had an uncle who was half- Russian, famously blond and blue-eyed, and one of my grandmothers had Georgian blood, so maybe there's a touch of Russian something-or-other in us. I don't know what it is, but it moves me like nothing else. In terms of the sheer fun of street language, I love Spanish, spoken like *castellano* in Spain—although South Americans find it a little snobby. I've always loved its guttural sounds. Whenever I hear it in airports or if I'm lucky enough to be in Spain, which happens rarely, it makes me giddy. I don't know why, it feels instantly thrilling, even sensual.

**JL:** Let's set aside languages for a moment. When I met you, I was a little surprised to learn—because you seemed so invested in literary culture—that you're a huge enthusiast of science. Conversations with you will randomly turn to astronomy or evolution, and it's not unusual for you to ask out-of-town friends to meet you at the **Museum of Natural History** instead of, say, a bar.

**LAZ:** I always feel very frustrated about the fact that people like me who have had a liberal arts background and supposedly, have been well-educated—a person who's deemed relatively cultured in the literary sense and is blessed to have received a good, substantive education—is in reality incredibly ignorant as to a great part of the culture, which is science.

We act as though science is not a part of culture, yet it very much is. Understanding even the rudiments of string theory or neuroscience or evolutionary biology is absolutely as important and remarkable as knowing *Hamlet* or Dante. I can't understand why the educational system basically decided for me that, because I was more gifted in one thing rather than another, I was going to be completely ignorant about the other.

**JL:** That's the French educational system...

**LAZ:** Maybe, the European at any rate. I feel science is a sibling to poetry. The mystery and beauty that provoke, as Nabokov says, "a tingle in the spine," when I'm learning about—or rather, when I finally understood a couple of years ago, more or less, what gravitation is, and the transition from Newton to Einstein, and space as something that was more like a fabric, if I understand it correctly, and so on. The sort of emotions one gleans from trying to grasp these things—that, to me, is as exciting as reading Shakespeare. It truly is, because it goes down to the same root. To a source question. It's as moving as any great poetry.

Vladimir Nabokov was fascinated, in both art and science, by patterning. The "non-utilitarian delights" of discerning a secret order or concord in the way things are set up, or strung or woven together—the very matrix of nature and art. He loved to talk about "the passion of the scientist and the precision of the artist." I think patterning is one of the keys to Nabokov's cross-passion, so to speak.

**JL:** Well, you brought up Einstein and space-time. One of the main thematic frames of *The Enchanter* is that Nabokov is *the*—or at least *a*—writer of happiness. But he's also a writer who wrestles with time in a really interesting way. Those are some of the passages I really enjoy in the book, where you consider his intense awareness of time, the strangeness of that recognition, when he recalls being "plunged into the pure element of time"—his description of the beginning of consciousness. I can't say I have a similar memory to draw on. What is your first memory? What is your version of being plunged into the pure element of time?

**LAZ:** It's a tricky question, for two reasons. First of all, Nabokov himself has a changing definition of time. The "pure element of time" initially is a sort of sensual awakening—a feeling akin, he said, to bathing in shiny seawater with fellow swimmers. So it's really an awakening to time before he eventually, at a more mature age artistically, negates time as he does quite radically and poetically in *Ada, or Ardor*.

Nabokov hated Freud—"the Viennese quack"—but Freud does say that we have a lot of false memories. And I'm not sure what my first memory is because I feel it has probably been imagined and reconstructed. But some of my first memories are very mundane really. You know, falling asleep in my mother's arms mother's arms

after a long day at the sea—but I believe those are based entirely on stories that I've been told. Father looking at a mosquito bite at dusk, or being woken by something, the wind or a ghost, at night. Very mundane things. But I feel like that's really just part one of Nabokov's idea. It's that sensual awakening, the fact that we're all sharing in this strange medium that appears to set things into motion. But then, as I mentioned, his core idea on time in the end—he says it in *Speak, Memory*, too—is that time does not exist.

**JL:** So he's talking about that moment as the kick-starting of time—and then, through art, the stopping of it...

**LAZ:** Well, art allows, to begin with, for a heightened consciousness of time, realizing that we think of time as moving, stopping and going, he says, like stations. I talk about it in Chapter 7, which has always been one of my favorite chapters in the book. It's largely based on *Ada* and the notion of time that blossoms there. But on a deeper level, Nabokov says that it's a mistake to think of time as flowing because the artist, or the hyperconscious—when I say artist, I like to think of dreaming as a form of art as well—

**JL:** The artist of consciousness—

**LAZ:** Yes, exactly... The acute dreamer is an artist as well. So the artist of consciousness is able to fold and mold and play with time, and therefore negate the very existence of it. What little I know of Einstein seems to point to some convergence between Einstein's idea of time and Nabokov's. And that does seem deeply exciting to me. Because I believe that great poets and artists have genuine, ancient, metaphysical as well as physical insights. I love thinking about this.

I remember interviewing a scientist ages ago whom I thought very charming until he told me that he never read fiction. He found it boring because the real world is so much more interesting, he said. And I thought to myself, you can research your science for another two thousand years and the things that slowly you'll come to realize in your field have been intuited thousands of years ago by poets. Those two things are not diverging. It sounded completely stupid to me to say that fiction is uninteresting because the real world is so much more interesting.

**JL:** The book is called *The Enchanter*, which, of course, has the ring of delight to it—enchantment. But also "enchanter" in the sense of conjurer. And there's also a hint of the seducer, I think, in the word

"enchanter." Some people who are wary of Nabokov—those who are not completely sold on him, and there are more than a few of them—refer to him as a sort of seducer in language, with a negative connotation. The seducer is not to be trusted. Do you ultimately trust Nabokov? The passion you have for his work—is it an enchantment behind which there is a deep trust?

**LAZ:** That is such a funny question, and to me so peculiarly formulated, but I do understand what you mean. Yes, I trust him deeply. I think, to me, the question of trust is a very "American" one, quote-unquote. Because I think—and I don't mean this as a barb against you—I think Americans, culturally, are very hung up on what truth is, or what fact is. I don't much care for fact and neither did Nabokov. I think that, for instance, some prim and proper detectives who've wanted to investigate the lives of the Nabokovs—I'm not talking about **Brian Boyd**, whom I like very much both as a scholar and a person—are always looking to unmask Nabokov and say, "Oh, he said he met his wife there like this and he lied; they said this and they're both making it up." They are all looking for facts through fact-checking lenses and they're annoyed that Nabokov would dare make things up.

But of course, all artists are making things up all day long. And that's their only reality. I deeply trust Nabokov because we both trust in the same thing—because we both know, believe, and live feeling that imagination is what he would call reality to the X degree. Nothing is more intense, more alive, more real than what is imagined. It's the quintessence of the human experience and, of course, if I didn't trust in that, I would be clinically depressed. If life were a bookcase, a desk, a chicken sandwich, and occasionally a trip on an airplane, that would reduce the universe to a little ball. But imagination is what gives us the full measure of who we are. And therefore, I trust fully in those imaginary worlds, in what in *Ada* is called "**Antiterra**." It's the artistic planet. But in its purest, most literal sense, so that it cannot be entrusted only to the man or woman who constructs art or who understands difficult works—it should also be entrusted to the mere dreamer.

There is a film by Pasolini I like very much, *The Decameron*, the first film of a trilogy he called **The Trilogy of Life**. In *The Decameron*, Pasolini himself plays Giotto, one of the greatest painters of all time. Giotto creates a work of art in the film, and the Virgin Mary and all the people inside the church painting in the end are actual human beings, they form a tableau vivant. And then, in the last line of the film, Giotto

mumbles, "But why create a work of art when it's even more beautiful just to dream it?" It's such a beautiful sentence, a genuine profession of faith. He means that anyone is capable of it, of awakening to the infinite possibilities of the imagination. We all do it every night, and each time we raise our nose and begin to daydream.

**JL:** I want to go back to something you said earlier about patterning. I was going to ask you about coincidences, because I noticed this early on when we met: you seem particularly attuned to coincidence. I mean that you notice it and openly celebrate it more than most people I know. Is this also something else you feel you share with Nabokov—a sort of aliveness to coincidences?

**LAZ:** Yes, that's part of the patterning which Nabokov talks about. He has a wonderful sentence in *Ada* that says that there should be a law of probability according to which, past a certain number of coincidences, the coincidence is no longer a coincidence but the living organism of a new truth. In *Lolita*, Humbert talks about the coincidences "that logicians loath and poets love." And it's really just that. It's love. You're inventing all the time. You're inventing meaning. That's what we do.

If you look at a text like *The Odyssey*, when **Telemachus** rises to speak for the first time in front of the assembly of all the men of Ithaca, he overcomes his boyishness and expresses deep anger, as he has been advised by Athena to do. Then, suddenly, two hawks swoop down on the audience to indicate the conjoined fury of the gods. That belief system is very much a part of the Greek world. But if you look at our world today, I feel very many human beings continue to function in a similar belief system, although of course it's articulated differently.

If you look at Jung, for instance, he talks about the fact that we can decide that everything science says is true, and do away with everything else as basically false—we can throw away the mythical as something that is not relevant to our true lives, but then we lose what perhaps is the greater part of the human experience. We can decide that the world of Homer is dead and gone. Or we can decide that Homer and any other of the literary geniuses had a vision, possessed a fragment, a splinter of truth that continues to be true today. We can read it metaphorically or we can decide to be a little bolder, more poetic, more mad, if you will, and read more literally into it.



But I do think that many people believe that coincidences wind up making some sort of sense, and that it's really about observing. Life seems to have a sense of humor which manifests in the shape of a given pattern. Nabokov, in *The Gift*, called it "the reverse side of a magnificent fabric." He believed fiercely that somewhere in the world, above, beneath, around, and about us, there is some form of rhyme and reason. All his short stories, all his novels point to this. In one of his short stories he talks about a pessimist, and says that "like all pessimists, he was a ridiculously unobservant man." It's a strong sentence. It carries such faith in the intimate, hidden, mysterious, and almost mystical fabric of life. And that's something I share with him very much.

**JL:** You were saying to me earlier how, now that you're working on a novel, you are reading *away* from Nabokov. Did that come from a very conscious choice? Did you need to enter a different language, a different vocabulary—an anti-Nabokovian world—in order to write a novel?

**LAZ:** Yes, because this book, *The Enchanter*, was my first book but also, paradoxically, it was a goodbye to academia. I had studied Nabokov for several years at university. I decided not to do a Ph.D. and to write a book instead, so in a sense I'm tying up loose ends. I wanted to pay tribute to someone who awakened me, intellectually and artistically. But then again, when one decides to grow up, it's always a matter of shedding skin, and I know the language in *The Enchanter* is inhabited with echoes of Nabokov. In a moment where I'm paying homage, it's humorous, it's playful, there's a strong element of game. In many ways, it's a love letter to his style. And one is infected—it's a contagion of happiness, as one reviewer put it, and the vocabulary begins to shine and shiver in certain tones rather than others. Now, if I am to start a novel of my own, I can't do that anymore. I can no longer be inhabited by so powerful a figure.

So, yes, it's very important to push him aside a little and start reading people who write the English language in beautiful albeit very different ways—and then finding a rudder and direction in my own English as a novelist.

Besides, Nabokov had a very baroque English, wrote in what some may call a flowery English, and I think he can pull it off because he's a man. I believe that under the pen of a woman, some of the more lyrical passages would seem purple. It's awfully tricky to be as baroque when you're a young woman.

**JL:** Really? Why do you think that is? What makes a baroque style difficult—or is it undesirable?—for a young woman to inhabit?

**LAZ:** It's immediately perceived as twee, overly lyrical, cloying, too feminine, which means sentimental. It's unfortunate, but we can't read or write and just push away 2,000 years of culture and prejudice. I think some of Nabokov's flights of lyricism, under a woman's signature, would make more than a few of this world's greatest Nabokovians cringe. So, as Sartre has said, I suppose we must try to write against ourselves, poetically speaking, in this case.

**JL:** Do you read a lot of poetry? You mention in *The Enchanter* that you're a very slow reader...

**LAZ:** Yes, I try to read poetry every morning. As to prose, well, I wish I could live a thousand years and read thousands of books as slowly as possible, but we are always reading against time. And we are, of course, extremely and increasingly distracted. I can't believe the extent to which even e-mailing keeps me, on a daily basis, from reading as much as I would like to. So one has to discriminate and decide which books are worth spending a sufficient amount of time on.

The ancient Romans thought it was better to know one book absolutely rather than skim through one thousand. And that one book can be, all of a sudden, transformed into a book of life, where all the roots are connected together and lead to other roots. The French philosopher **Deleuze** articulated this concept called *rhizome*, and the *rhizomes* are specific sorts of roots that exist in nature, they are like interconnected threads weaving an infinitely expanding network of new roots. One little root giving life to another—

**JL:** —It's the same in English: rhizome. Like bamboo, or aspen.

**LAZ:** Yes... And I do feel that a perfect work of art like *The Odyssey*, or even a book like *Lolita*—well, they hold the world, in that sense, and they are infinitely expanding. I'd rather have ten of those books in me forever than skim through 200,000 stories without getting any closer to that mysterious event—language unfolding.