

An Interview with Toomas Hendrik Ilves

Grigori Utgof

Toomas Hendrik Ilves (1953) is the President of the Republic of Estonia. He was born into a family of Estonian émigrés who had fled Estonia to Sweden during WWII. He holds BA and MA degrees in psychology from Columbia University (1976) and Pennsylvania University (1978). Prior to 1984, he worked in the US and Canada; from 1984 to 1993 he was employed by RFE/RL. Before becoming the President in 2006, Toomas Hendrik Ilves was a member of the Social Democratic Party (SDE). He served as the Ambassador of the Republic of Estonia to the United States of America, Canada and Mexico (1993-1996), the Minister of Foreign Affairs (1996-1998; 1999-2002), a Member of the Parliament of the Republic of Estonia 2002-2004, IX Riigikogu), and a Member of the European Parliament (2004-2006).

Grigori Utgof: Mr. President, did you discover Nabokov while still in the US?

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: Yes. I discovered him while I was in college. The first thing I read was Pnin.

Grigori Utgof: Was Nabokov on a list of suggested reading?

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: No, I was reading him completely on my own. I read a lot (well, that’s a little, I guess, but anyway – I was reading a lot of fiction). Once I started Pnin, I realized how intriguing what Nabokov was doing internally in the novel actually was – creating entire worlds, such as the Russian émigré world, which I knew a little bit (my grandmother was Russian). Yet, it was his technique and his puns that I cherished the most (back in those days I made bad puns all the time).

Grigori Utgof: So, you never read Nabokov for the plot, but mostly for pattern and word play?

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: No, I don’t read novels for the plot (if I were to read for the plot, I would have chosen Dickens). What is the plot, after all (and that’s the whole thing Pynchon plays with)? I always read for language, and I consider Nabokov to be one of the best in his league.

Grigori Utgof: Did the fact that Nabokov had also been an émigré somehow trigger your interest in his fiction?

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: It probably made certain things more accessible; otherwise – no.

Grigori Utgof: To what extent did Nabokov influence your literary tastes?

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: Let me put it this way: He managed to put into words what I thought about art in general. What comes to mind is John Shade’s criticism of modern art in *Pale Fire*:

“Now I shall speak of evil as none has

Spoken before. I loath such things as jazz;

The white-horse moron torturing a black

Bull, rayed with red; abstractist bric-a-brac...”

That’s precisely how I view all sorts of trashy art. And I also certainly share many of Nabokov’s opinions on trashy writings (I share his veiw of Dostoyevsky, for example).

Grigori Utgof: What is it that makes you so angry with Dostoyevsky?

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: He appeals to raw emotions, and raw emotions are something that can be channeled in a very bad direction. Dostoyevsky’s writings and Leni Riefenstahl’s film Triumph of the Will feel the same: They appeal to emotions, and that leads to bad results.

Grigori Utgof: Have you ever been tempted, as a psychology major, to repeat the famous Nabokov’s experiment on Dostoyevsky’s characters and to analyze some of Nabokov’s characters from a psychologist’s viewpoint?

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: Let me be quick: When I studied psychology, I was majoring in experimental psychology (seeing, hearing). Personality psychology... I know nothing about. I like Nabokov’s aesthetics. I also think that politically Nabokov represents the supressed tradition of Constitutional Democrats – a turn that Russia never took. I don’t list Dostoyevsky as one of my favorites as he swerved from the rational, liberal, and democratic tradition of Russia, the tradition that Nabokov’s family represented, and one that is depicted in Nabokov’s books. Nabokov’s general view of the world, men, and what goverment should or should not be able to do is something very appealing to me. He was a fundamental democrat. His two most political books – Bend Sinister and Invitation to a Beheading – are anti-totalitarian, anti-authoritarian – and that’s the political view that I share. So in that sense it’s not really important whether he was for Richard Nixon or John F. Kennedy. What’s more important is his opposition to the Soviet regime: there were many people who were against the Soviets, but Nabokov managed to describe the aesthetics of totalitarian Communism better than anyone else – as something primitive, oriented for children, simplistic with the touch of ‘poshlost.’

Grigori Utgof: Nabokov believed that one cannot read a book; one can only reread it. Do you share this view?

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: Absolutely. When you read a Nabokov book you have no idea what’s going on until you reread it and start seeing some of the internal connections. You do not see them when you read it once. Really great works of literature should be reread like poems.

Grigori Utgof: What is the one book by Nabokov you reread most often?

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: I have read *Pale Fire* the most. It’s just so intriguing because it’s a seemingly simple work: there’s a 999-line long poem, then a commentary, and yet the novel reads like boxes within boxes within boxes, and you never know whether it is John Shade or Charles Kinbote who was crazy; or who Kinbote is, or if he even exists.

Grigori Utgof: How would you answer the question “Who invented whom?”

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: That’s the question: You never know! In the case of Nabokov they are all his creations – completely self-enclosed worlds.

Grigori Utgof: Do you think it’s possible that Nabokov mocked his own annotated translation of Eugene Onegin in *Pale Fire*?

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: Since Nabokov is so self-reflexive, you never know what to take seriously. I think *Pnin* is his warmest book, his most sentimental one. Perhaps, sentimental is not the right word, but *Pnin* portrays something that has analogies in other émigré cultures: a culture dying at its very height. The Russian refined emigration was highly cultured, well-read, and multilingual, and Timofey Pnin is the symbol... well, Nabokov doesn’t have symbols... the embodiment of all of that.

Grigori Utgof: *Pnin* is also a book that reflects Nabokov’s poignant perception of the Holocaust. It is there that we come accross an account of Mira Belochkin’s death accompanied by the following passage: “Pnin slowly walked under the solemn pines. The sky was dying. He did not believe in the authocratic God. He did believe, vaguely, in the democracy of spirits.”

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: I don't think Nabokov ever believed very much in God. After all, we have John Shade and I. P. H., an Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter. Certainly, what moved him in the Holocaust had to do with his brother, Sergei, who died in a Nazi concentration camp. And of course, Véra was Jewish, so that made that sort of connection... The thing is, Nabokov was passionately anti-anti-Semitic. He was also anti-anything-that-was-prejudicial. That again was a part of his liberal spirit which I very much appreciate. In some parts of the post-Communist world we see a lot of exploitation of ethnic prejudices. That's why I think that Nabokov should be read a lot — for example, in contemporary Russia.

Grigori Utgof: Yet, in *The Gift* there is also a passage or two about ethnic prejudices. I always feel somewhat embarrassed when I come across the following: “He was going to a lesson, was late as usual, and as usual there grew in him a vague, evil, heavy hatred for the sluggishness of this least gifted of all methods of transport, for the hopelessly familiar, hopelessly ugly streets going by the wet window, and most of all for the feet, sides and necks of the native passengers. His reason knew that they could also include genuine, completely human individuals with unselfish passions, pure sorrows, even with memories shining through life, but for some reason he got the impression that all these cold, slippery eyes, looking at him as if he were carrying an illegal treasure (which his gift was, essentially), belonged only to malicious hags and crooked hucksters. The Russian conviction that the German is in small numbers vulgar and in large numbers unbearably vulgar was, he knew, a conviction, unworthy of an artist; but none the less he was seized with a trembling, and only a gloomy conductor with hunted eyes and a plaster on his finger, eternally and painfully seeking equilibrium and room to pass amidst the convulsive jolts of the car and the cattle-like crowding of standing passengers, seemed outwardly, if not a human being, then at least a poor relation to a human being. At the second stop a lean man in a short coat with a fox-fur collar, wearing a green hat and frayed spats, sat down in front of Fyodor. In settling down he bumped him with his knee and with a corner of a fat briefcase with a leather handle, and this trivial thing turned his irritation into a kind of pure fury, so that, staring fixedly at the sitter, reading his features, he instantly concentrated on him all his sinful hatred (for this poor, pitiful, expiring nation) and knew precisely why he hated him: for that low forehead, for those pale eyes; for Vollmilch and Extrastark, implying the lawful existence of the diluted and the artificial; for this Pulchinello-like system of gestures (threatening children not as we do — with an upright finger, a standing reminder of Divine Judgement — but with a horizontal digit imitating a waving stick); for a love of fences, rows, mediocrity; for the cult of the office; for the fact that if you listen to his inner voice (or to any conversation on the street) you will inevitably hear figures, money, for the lavatory humour and crude laughter; for the fatness of the back-sides of both sexes, even if the rest of the subject is not fat; for the lack of fastidiousness; for the visibility of cleanliness — the gleam of saucepan bottoms in the kitchen and the barbaric filth of the bathrooms; for the weakness for dirty little tricks, for taking pains with dirty tricks, for an abominable object stuck carefully on the railings of the public gardens; for someone else's live cat, pierced through with wire as revenge on a neighbour, and the wire cleverly twisted at one end; for cruelty in everything, self-satisfied, taken for granted, for the unexpected, rapturous helpfulness with which five passerby help you to pick up some dropped

farthings; for... Thus he threaded the points of his biased indictment, looking at the man who sat opposite him — until the latter took a copy of Vasil’ev’s newspaper from his pocket and coughed unconcernedly with a Russian intonation.

That’s wonderful, thought Fyodor, almost smiling with delight. How clever, how gracefully sly and how essentially good life is! Now he made out in the newspaper reader’s features such a compatriotic softness — in the corners of the eyes, large nostrils, a Russian-cut moustache — that it became at once both funny and incomprehensible how anyone could have been deceived.”

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: Does not offend me in the least, but I would say that this is a recurring motif in Nabokov – mistaking somebody for another. And look what he does in this passage: he lists all these things the character exhibits, and then it turns out that they have nothing to do with reality! I think that we make those kinds of judgements all the time, and Nabokov makes fun of everyone who makes judgements based on stereotypes.

Grigori Utgof: In other words, we should not confuse Nabokov with Fyodor Konstantinovich Godunov-Cherdyntsev?

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: Yes.

Grigori Utgof: Incidentally, the major Estonian translator of Nabokov, Rein Saluri, went through thick and thin as a child (his father was brutally murdered, and he himself was deported to Siberia), and yet he established himself not only as a distinguished Estonian writer, but also as a brilliant translator from Russian. What is it that helps a person not to become a prisoner of stereotypes?

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: I think that Nabokov is the perfect example of why Russia and the Communist regime are two different things. Nabokov represents what Russia would have become had there not been a Leninist putsch (sometimes when I think about that possible Russia, I also think of Aksenov’s *The Island of Crimea*). If we didn’t have Nabokov (or Stravinsky), we wouldn’t be able to get an idea of what Russia could have become without this awful thing in 1917. That’s why I think Nabokov should be read a lot everywhere. But that’s a really political thing. I don’t read Nabokov for politics. I read literature because it’s literature, and

though I don't have much time for literature these days, literature offers me something from an entirely different world. And I share many of Nabokov's views: he shaped my understanding of the lack of worth of political literature, of the connection between literature and politics, and so on.

Grigori Utgof: Do you also share his high esteem for Flaubert?

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: I don't read French well enough to appreciate Flaubert, and as for translations... you never really get what is there. Traduttore, traditore.

Grigori Utgof: Do you think that somebody with a near-equal proficiency in English and Russian has an advantage over those who can read Nabokov in translation only?

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: Well, it helps to know French, English, and German. When there are Melanie Weiss and Blanche Schwartzmann, two black-and-white psychologists, you should know some French and some German to decipher the roots of the words. So, it helps to have basic knowledge of those languages in order to understand Nabokov's multilingual puns.

Grigori Utgof: What about Swedish? In Pnin, there's a character called Natt och Dag.

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: Well, that “night and day” joke is something one could also get from German.

Grigori Utgof: My final question: Do you share Nabokov's contempt for Freud?

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: Well, basically, I don't think contempt is the right word here: I don't have contempt, I just don't think much of Freud. These days we don't even understand how dominant Freudian thinking was in the culture of the 1950s, and I suppose that some day in the not too distant future people won't be able to understand Communism and totalitarianism either. At least let us hope so.

Grigori Utgof: Tänan teid, härra President!**

* Adieu, adieu, till we meet in Zembla! (Zemblan)

** Thank you, Mr. President! (Estonian)

Original interview on [Nabokov Online Journal homepage](#) .