



PROJECT MUSE®

Nabokov at Cornell (review)

Paul Benedict Grant

Nabokov Studies, Volume 8, 2004, pp. 216-224 (Review)

Published by International Vladimir Nabokov Society and Davidson
College

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nab.2004.0008>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/171926>

Those who publish in series sponsored by learned societies or small academic presses are often at an unfair, though hardly uncommon, disadvantage: their books are not expected to sell many copies, and they are produced in the cheapest way possible, generally from files or copy supplied by the author, with no outside editor vetting the text. It therefore falls to the author, or to the editor of a collection, to give the text the kind of attention that was customary in the glory days of scholarly publishing. The editors of *Torpid Smoke* may have believed that some underpaid drudge would clean up their copy, or it may be that some underpaid drudge *did* clean up their copy and made a very bad job of it. Either way, the result is a hopelessly sloppy product.

Part of the job of the editor of a collection is to impose a uniform bibliographic style across the volume, and one of the first decisions to be made is whether there will be one large bibliography at the end or smaller ones appended to each chapter. In any case, the citation style should be consistent. Not so here; the articles go onstage in whatever bibliographic costume they wore to the audition. Some have bibliographies, some have full citations in the notes or text, and some rely on a system of in-text abbreviations that must be learned from the first note. A collection like *Torpid Smoke* should have a list of abbreviations (of Nabokov's novels, of the most frequently-cited secondary works) at the front of the volume, which saves time for the reader and eliminates repetition. There are good arguments on both sides of the separate-vs.-combined bibliography question, but there is no argument for the mongrel system employed here. The book is further marred by what seems a complete lack of copyediting and proofreading. From the first page, where the title of the Nicol/Barabtarlo collection is given incorrectly, to the last, where part of Brian Walter's biography seems to have tripped over a comma and tumbled into the void, there are far too many errors to list in a short review. The text type is undistinguished, though generously sized, and the cover (which belongs to the SSLP series) looks as though it were run up on a 1980s-era Macintosh. The paper, however, is of commendable quality; it is a shame to have to sully it with a long string of marginal corrections.

Gavriel Shapiro, ed. *Nabokov at Cornell*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003. 132 pp. ISBN 0-8014-3909-4.

Review by Paul Benedict Grant, Lethbridge, Alberta.

In September 1998, a group of international scholars gathered at Ithaca for the Cornell Nabokov Centenary Festival, the first in a worldwide series of celebra-

tions. It was the second Nabokov Festival to be held at Cornell; the first took place in 1983, and resulted in the publication of *The Achievements of Vladimir Nabokov*. The second has occasioned another publication: editor Gavriel Shapiro presents *Nabokov at Cornell*, a collection of twenty-five papers from the proceedings.

Nabokov enjoyed an eleven-year tenure at Cornell, from 1948 to 1959, and in his short preface Shapiro reminds us just how fruitful this period was: while there, he composed *Lolita* and *Pnin*, conceived of *Pale Fire*, produced a number of poems and short stories, wrote the English and Russian versions of his autobiography, prepared annotated translations for *The Song of Igor's Campaign* and Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, and published scientific papers on lepidoptera. Most of these works are covered in the book, but some are not: there are no separate articles on the autobiography, *Pnin*, or *Igor's Campaign*, for example. Given the focus on Nabokov's time at Cornell, it is also odd that the volume should include articles on works produced well outside of this time period. Within the context of the centenary celebrations, this is perhaps to be expected; most such books tend to resemble Festschriften. All this is to say that the parameters are wider and looser than the title implies. This is no real cause for regret; one disappointment, however, is the absence of an index.

The volume is divided into five parts. Vladimir E. Alexandrov opens Part I, "The Russian Years," with "The Fourth Dimension of Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark*," an article that picks up where *Nabokov's Otherworld* left off, with Alexandrov wondering whether Nabokov may have been influenced by the writings of the Russian occultist, Petr Dem'ianovich Uspenskii. Influence is a complex business (witness the recent furor over von Lichberg's "Lolita"), and the paper is accordingly peppered with qualifications. Alexandrov compares a scene from chapter 32 of *Laughter in the Dark* with a passage from Uspenskii's *Tertium Organum*. There are, indeed, "esoteric resonances," but there is no evidence to suggest that Nabokov was influenced by or alluding to this work. In the final analysis, the connection between the two writers, as Alexandrov admits, "remains speculative." D. Barton Johnson's "Sources of Nabokov's *Despair*" is more convincing. Johnson focuses on the manner in which Nabokov "reshaped [the murder of Felix] from contemporary newspaper accounts," specifically, the murders committed by Erich Kurt Tetzner, Alfred Rouse, Fritz Saffran, and Peter Kürten. The factual evidence is persuasive, and the timeline credible: Nabokov began writing *Despair* in July of 1932, a year after most of these murderers had been brought to trial, found guilty, and executed, all in a morbid blaze of publicity. As Johnson writes, "the series of highly publicized trials in March–April 1931 probably planted the seeds for Nabokov's *Despair*."

Marina Kanevskaya's article focuses on the same novel. In "The Semiotic Validity of the Mirror Image in Nabokov's *Despair*," she draws on Umberto Eco's "Mirrors" in order to "prove that the narrator's attempt to deal with the mirror image as if it were a semiotic sign serves as the main clue of his insanity." Nabokov, she writes, "uses Hermann's attempts to submit the mirror image to a reading process as the main devise [*sic*] to expose his 'unreliable narrator.'" With regard to Hermann's unreliability and the contrast between his evaluation of events and the conflicting perceptions of the other characters, Kanevskaya attests that "one realizes this abnormality rather late in the text." Many, I think, would argue otherwise.

In the next article, "*The Enchanter and the Beauties of Sleeping*," Susan Elizabeth Sweeney examines the elements of folklore and fairy tale in Nabokov's novella, which includes allusions to "Sleeping Beauty," "Snow White," and "Little Red Riding Hood." What Sweeney terms "the erotic of sleep" is, she argues, "reflected in the narrative's plot, narration, and imagery," and she is quick to point out the importance of this in relation to the victim of another enchanted hunter in *Lolita*. The study gains added interest when one recalls Nabokov's own aversion to sleep, not to mention a certain individual's interpretation of dreams.

Part II, "The American Years," opens with Zoran Kuzmanovich's "Suffer the Little Children," a spirited reading of *Bend Sinister*, in particular the torture and murder of David Krug. Dissatisfied with previous interpretations of David's death, Kuzmanovich confronts the horror of the event head on. He is disinclined to credit the otherworldly assurances that Nabokov extends to Krug and Olga, and questions why their son is not granted the same kind of redemption. "Why," he asks, "is David denied even a hint of transformation or resurrection?" One such hint may occur while Krug is watching the film of David's last moments alive. As David moves towards the camera, we are told that "his face became larger, dimmer, and vanished as it met mine" (186). The possessive pronoun suggests the same "anthropomorphic deity" that steps in to save Krug, and implies that David has been somehow spared the physical pain he would have received at the hands of the convicts. If this is not the case, nothing can compensate for his torture, and Kuzmanovich moves on to discuss how one is able to adequately depict that pain, and Nabokov's motivations for doing so.

The fictional depiction of pain is also the subject of Joanna Trzeciak's "Signs and Symbols' and Silentology." She "foregrounds the story's silences, favoring its literal level over its symbolism and metafictional possibilities," a reading which "elevates the surface-level narrative to something suggestive of a much

larger picture of unspeakable suffering.” She compares “Signs and Symbols” to “Breaking the News,” which contains many of the same themes, and finds that Nabokov’s depiction of pain in the former “has an unfathomable, unquantifiable aspect.” The open ending is just as enigmatic, “a way of letting the reader know that following the path of signs and symbols leads nowhere.” The rest is, as they say, silence.

Nabokov’s departure from Cornell was prompted by the success of *Lolita*, and this novel is the subject of the next article, by Ellen Pifer. In “Reinventing Nabokov: Lyne and Kubrick Parse *Lolita*,” she compares the two cinematic versions of the book, and finds both wanting. As she notes, one of the main shortcomings of Lyne’s movie is its lack of humor, with the director sustaining a “dominant chord of nostalgic melancholy” to the detriment of Humbert’s wit. By contrast, Kubrick’s “near-obsession with the novel’s high-flown comedy” in the person of Quilty (played by Peter Sellers), relegates Humbert to the role of passive stooge. For all the merits of their movies (and there are many, which Pifer points out), neither director was able to emulate Nabokov’s combination of humor and despair, farce and tragedy, “the ironic shifts and witty reversals of Humbert’s inimitable narrative voice.” For this, as she writes, “we must return to Nabokov’s masterpiece.”

Next up is Brian Boyd’s “*Pale Fire: The Vanessa atalanta*.” Most readers will by now be familiar with Boyd’s revised thesis, which attests that “Shade’s spirit seems to shape the Gradus sections of Kinbote’s commentary,” and that Hazel, after her death, inhabits and “animates” an *atalanta* in order to warn her father of his impending demise: the fruits of Boyd’s research appeared in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, which was published a year after he delivered this paper. Arguments over the provenance of the poem and the commentary will continue to rage, but Boyd’s book adds immeasurably to our understanding of the novel, and is essential reading. No less indispensable is ADAonline, the new electronic version of Boyd’s annotations to *Ada* (also published in *The Nabokovian*), which will serve as an ongoing source of information for one of Nabokov’s most complex novels. *Ada*’s intricacy is ably demonstrated in the next article, “Buzzwords and Dorophonemes,” where Charles Nicol discusses what he believes to be the climax of the novel: the telephone call that Van makes to Ada at Mont Roux. In Nicol’s opinion, this is “the pivotal moment in Nabokov’s ability to see this novel as a whole,” and “explains much about the concept of Antiterra and the time scheme of the novel; indeed, the entire structure of *Ada*,” he argues, “dangles from this single long moment.”

Part III, “The Miraculous Amphora,” opens with two papers on Nabokov’s affinities with Pushkin. In “Metapoetics and Metaphysics,” Sergei Davydov discusses Nabokov’s translations of Pushkin’s “Mozart and Salieri” and “A Feast During the Plague.” Both works, he argues, “offer an obliging prism through which one can look into Nabokov’s own poetics and metaphysics,” and he goes on to discuss themes of artistic envy, ethical and aesthetic crime, otherworldly justice, and daring in the face of death. In “Nabokov the Pushkinian,” Irena Ronen examines the way Nabokov’s attitude towards Pushkin “gradually grew in depth and complexity” during his career, and how, after his arrival in America, “subtle changes and new features began to show in his perception, comprehension, and artistic use of Pushkin’s art.” Nabokov’s changing attitude toward Pushkin is perhaps most apparent in his commentary to *Onegin*, where “the admiration for the artist and man is still there, but the earlier attitude of exalted and exaggerated piety is not.” In the final analysis, however, she finds Nabokov’s “essential” attitude towards Pushkin one of “self-deprecating humility.”

In “Nabokov and Tiutchev,” Christine A. Rydel studies Nabokov’s affinities with another poet “whose spirit,” she claims, “runs through his works.” Rydel devotes most of her study to “Cloud, Castle, Lake,” where “the submerged, camouflaged Tiutchev allusions simultaneously provide an ironic, deeper reading of the story.” The tale has obvious links with *Invitation to a Beheading*, where “words, synonyms, and images from Tiutchev’s poems find their way into Cincinnatus’s dream world.” The latter’s visions of the Tamara Gardens “prefigure Vasili Ivanovich’s own ideal Tiutchev landscape [...] but only Vasili Ivanovich will have the chance to experience his own Tiutchev paradise—if only for a brief time.”

Nabokov’s literary criticism is renowned for revealing as much about his own aesthetic as his subject’s, but his approach may serve to override or even eclipse the subject matter. This is the topic of the next article, by Leona Toker, “Nabokov’s *Nikolai Gogol*: Doing Things in Style.” Toker sees Nabokov’s biography “as belonging to the genre of ‘literary investigation,’ the main feature of which “is a special kind of bifunctionality: One of the functions is informational—to present the results of extensive research; the other is aesthetic,” with the latter often “compensating for the deficiencies of the informational aggregate.” Nabokov had no shortage of material on Gogol, but he chose the aesthetic route, “at times deliberately mimic[ing] and extend[ing] Gogol’s trademark technique of pleonasm that so strikingly contrasts with the economy of textual space.” While this approach underlined his affinities with Gogol, it also served to highlight their differences by dint of

some curious exclusions, most notably the lack of commentary on the scenes of the pogrom in *Taras Bulba*.

Julian W. Connolly opens Part IV, "The Glorious Output," with "The Dædalus–Icarus Theme in Nabokov's Fiction," an interesting examination of the classical myth in relation to Nabokov's work. "At its core, the story tells of a father's attempts to save his son's life and of his profound grief at the child's untimely death. This very subject," notes Connolly, "appears as a central theme of Nabokov's art" in short stories like "Signs and Symbols" and novels like *Bend Sinister* and *Pale Fire*, and suggests that "although Nabokov expressed disdain for heavy-handed reliance on classical mythology in contemporary literature [...] he was not averse to drawing on elements of myth and folklore" in his own fiction.

Sources are also the subject of the next article, by Lisa Zunshine. In "Vladimir Nabokov and the Scriblerians," she convincingly argues that the origins of the short story "Scenes from the Life of a Double Monster" can be traced to the "Double Mistress" episode from *The Memoirs of the Extraordinary Life, Works, and Adventures of Martinus Scriblerus*, an eighteenth-century satire, composed by the Scriblerus Club, that Nabokov may have become aware of through his acquaintance with Wellesley scholar Charles Kerby-Miller, who produced an annotated edition of the work in 1948. "By contrasting Nabokov's treatment of the 'double monster' theme with that of his eighteenth-century predecessors," she argues, "one can gain a crucial insight into the imagery and structure" of Nabokov's story.

Pushkin reappears in the following article, "The Triple Anniversary of World Literature: Goethe, Pushkin, Nabokov," in which Omry Ronen celebrates Nabokov's achievements as a "liberator" of language and the greatest exponent of what Goethe termed "world literature," the success of which depends to a great degree on the translator and the interpreter, individuals who facilitate "spiritual commerce" between nations. Pushkin was, Ronen believes, hampered to some degree in achieving proper prominence by the overshadowing of poetry by nineteenth-century Russian prose, but in translating Pushkin and introducing other nineteenth-century Russian works to a new range of readers in the West, Nabokov "succeeded in correcting the slant," becoming "the first-born of world literature."

Nabokov's skill as a translator is also the focus of the next article, by Nina Demurova, "Vladimir Nabokov, Translator of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*." As she writes, "no other Russian at the time, perhaps, was by accident of birth and education so well suited for the translation of Carroll's immortal

classic and for the evocation of his particular world and spirit” than Nabokov, but the task of translating the work into Russian was not easy, and in order to facilitate appreciation he Russified the text, altering names, circumstances, and “all sorts of historical and social realia.” In Demurova’s opinion, the “most glorious part of Nabokov’s translation is perhaps the parody and verse,” although she accuses him of being “overzealous” at times. She also regrets the absence of the poetic introduction that recounts the genesis of the story. These small qualms aside, *Ania v strane chudes* (1923) is a notable achievement.

Nabokov’s links with French literature are explored in the following article, by John Burt Foster, Jr., “Nabokov on Malraux’s *La Condition humaine*.” Foster details Nabokov’s objections to Malraux’s work in his correspondence with Edmund Wilson, and attempts to account for them by means of what he terms a “Franco-Russian crisscross”: “the border space between two national cultures, rife with potential misunderstanding and conflict, that can open when people who are supremely well versed in certain areas of their native cultures also develop a genuine interest in aspects of a second culture.” He finds that Nabokov’s main objection “centers on cultural, historical, and political issues raised by Malraux’s treatment of things Russian,” but views his letter to Wilson as a “missed opportunity” which “does not do justice to potential agreement between the two writers,” notably, the intensity of their insights into the crises of the 1930s.

No book on Nabokov would be complete without a study of his second great passion, lepidoptera. Part V, “The Thrill of Science and the Pleasure of Art,” opens with an article on the subject by Robert Dirig, “Theme in Blue: Vladimir Nabokov’s Endangered Butterfly.” Dirig is an authority on the Blues, Nabokov’s specialty, and his paper discusses Nabokov’s relationship with the Karner Blue, a butterfly now in danger of disappearing. He provides a recap of Nabokov’s studies in the field of lepidoptera, as well as his first sighting of living Karner Blues in 1950, and includes a number of color plates of the butterfly in its habitat. He then moves on to a discussion of “A Discovery,” and suggests that the butterfly in the poem, which “has long been supposed to refer to the Karner Blue,” more than likely refers to a Cormion Blue.

In “The Evolution of Nabokov’s Evolution,” John M. Kopper explores “the association of evolutionary theory with Nabokov’s art” in novels like *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Ada*, and *Glory*. He begins by discussing Nabokov’s “Darwinist credentials,” which he traces to Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* and the writings of H. G. Wells. He then cites an oft-quoted line from *Pale Fire*, Kinbote’s declaration that “The one who kills is *always* his victims inferior.” This “ethical bon mot,” which appears in various guises in Nabokov’s work, is an overt

criticism of Darwinism, but Kopper challenges the critical consensus, arguing that it “swims upstream against the more conventional Darwinisms to which Nabokov in his fictions readily turns.”

The volume continues with Stephen H. Blackwell’s “Toward a Theory of Negative Pattern in Nabokov,” which examines Nabokov’s early fascination with Andrei Belyi’s metrical designs in “Lyric Poetry and Experiment,” and proceeds to a discussion of the way “these patterns relate to Nabokov’s art and method.” Inspired by Belyi’s theory, “Nabokov set about attempting to create poems that would reveal the most interesting underlying patterns of unfilled stresses,” and Blackwell argues that this “rhythm of absence” might “be considered the ‘shadow’, background, foil or negative of a poem’s positive rhythmic profile.” Belyi’s experiments, he writes, “provoked in Nabokov a sense that art might be perceived in many dimensions simultaneously,” and he transfers this approach to a thought-provoking study of *The Defense*, *Glory*, *The Gift*, and *Pale Fire*.

Interest in the pictorial aspects of Nabokov’s art has grown in the last few years, and the next two articles focus on this subject. In “Nabokov and Netherlandish Art,” Gavriel Shapiro discusses the reasons for Nabokov’s fascination with the latter, using *Pnin* as his “primary example.” He quotes a passage from the novel in which Victor views his reflection in the chrome and glass of a “sun-rimmed headlamp,” finding the effect comparable to the paintings of Jan van Eyck, Petrus Christus, and Hans Memling, in which the artist, by means of a convex mirror, paints himself into his own work. As Shapiro notes, Nabokov often employed a similar technique as a way of manifesting his authorial presence. That said, not all of the examples Shapiro selects are convincing, such as his finding an anagram of “Vlad. Naboko(v) Sirin” in Joan Clements’s question regarding an unidentified writer. Nabokov, the writer in question, frequently smuggled his name into his works, but this particular sentence yields a number of variables.

Nabokov’s interest in pictorial art extended to popular culture, too, of course, and in the next article, “Krazy, Ignatz, and Vladimir: Nabokov and the Comic Strip,” cartoonist Clarence Brown observes “the slight traces of sequential pictorial narrative,” or what he terms *bédesque*, “that crop up in the fabric of his imaginary world” in novels like *Laughter in the Dark*, *Pale Fire*, and *Invitation to a Beheading*. Unfortunately, the paper is rather rambling, and contains material that has been seen before: Brown’s observations on *The Defense* were published in his article on “Humor” in the *Garland Companion*. All told, it casts little light on Nabokov’s work; as Brown himself admits, “these overt references to actual, dimly remembered, or imaginary comic

strips, although interesting as an index of Nabokov's fondness for one small corner of popular culture, in the end are no more useful than all mechanical compilations."

In the Afterword, Stephen Jan Parker discusses the state of Nabokov studies at the turn of the century, and finds it in robust health. At the time of the last Cornell festival in 1983, "only twenty volumes or so related to Nabokov," whereas "today there are more than 130 volumes (counting doctoral dissertations) with others on the way." Parker closes by recognizing those who are most responsible for the development of Nabokov studies, principal among whom is the author's son, Dmitri, who has worked tirelessly to promote his father's work and safeguard his heritage, and who "defended his parents energetically from those who would impugn and malign." This serves as a neat segue into the last contribution in the volume, "On Returning to Ithaca," an abbreviated version of Dmitri's keynote address. It is appropriately anecdotal, based on his memories of the family's life in Ithaca. Among other "apocrypha," he recalls attending some of his father's lectures (against Nabokov's advice), and watching *The Honeymooners* on a TV screen "bisected by a perpetual black stripe." These reminiscences, however, take second place to a diatribe against those individuals who have sought to further mar the picture, as he takes another opportunity to rescue his parents from false allegations, foolish rumors, and the "tripe" cooked up by misled members of the media. Rumors range from the image of Nabokov lecturing in tatty tennis shoes, to accusations levelled at his wife, Véra, who, some believed, took a gun to class in order to curb unruly students. Although it is only natural that Dmitri should protect his parents from personal snipes, it is a somewhat belabored defense, and ultimately unnecessary: fetishists aside, interest in Nabokov does not stem from his footwear, and, as this book shows, few readers need to be forced into appreciating his art at gunpoint.