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Nabokov ou le sourire du chat (review)

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also makes many acute observations on Nabokov's poetical language and on the stylistic changes in the later years of his European period. Finally, she illuminates Nabokov's approach to the theory of poetic translation and cons some of the writer's technical strategies. Not least, the notes to Malikova's introduction constitute a good survey of existing scholarship on Nabokov the poet.

The book's scholarly apparatus is excellent. The editor provides over 80 pages of background, commentary, and bibliographic data on the poems. All of the poems and translations are numbered and alphabetically indexed, making them quite easy to locate in the editorial notes and commentaries. The volume includes 15 photographs, including holographs of Nabokov manuscripts. With this pioneering volume Malikova has laid the much needed groundwork for all future study of Nabokov as Russian poet.

Yona Dureau. *Nabokov ou le sourire du chat*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001. 501 pp. ISBN 2-7475-1061-1.

Review by Jansy Berndt de Souza Mello, Brasília, Brazil

A Brazilian psychoanalyst who attempts to present to an English-speaking audience a book by a French semiologist about a Russian-American author can expect culture shock, and my first reaction to Yona Dureau's *Nabokov ou le sourire du chat* was "How very French this author is."

Dureau's title makes obvious reference to Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat. Having vanished, the cat continues to astonish Alice with his lingering smile. Surprise and wonder also persist for the readers of Carroll's great admirer and translator, Vladimir Nabokov, whose mysterious work still laughs at us long after the author's disappearance. Dureau contends that Nabokov's writing is marked by this special smile and also by his systematic use of empty spaces (*les blancs*). She concludes that Nabokov's deliberate use of lacunae in the text arises not only from his style but also from his conception of reality, writing, and aesthetics. She argues that by employing carefully selected fragments of information organized around these gaps Nabokov sketches the contours of vanished objects and worlds.

"Remember that what you are told is really threefold: shaped by the teller, reshaped by the listener, concealed from both by the dead man of the tale" advises the narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and Dureau quotes this sentence in the conclusion of her book (455) to illustrate how Nabokov

expected his readers to take part in the construction of his novels. Emphasizing how this kind of triangulation (author/work/reader) became a part of his creative process, she also recognizes that Nabokov, as “the dead man of the tale,” remains elusive despite the reader’s persistence. *Sebastian Knight*, a novel concerning the search for an author who has disappeared, sends both Knight’s brother and the reader on a quest for the meaning of Knight’s writing. Nabokov lurks in the background and directs the search.

The reader’s participation in Nabokov’s novels derives from a conscious aesthetic aim on Nabokov’s part. Modern literary analysis has shifted the emphasis away from the relation between an author and his work; the permanence of both is now seen to depend at least in part on the various transformations they will inevitably undergo with every reading. Drawing on Umberto Eco’s concept of “the openness of a work of art,” Dureau argues that the multiplication of possible meanings and ambiguities generated by Nabokov’s particular use of gaps (*blancs*) not only suggest the imperfection and transience of things and their representations but also impede the closure of the text.

Besides giving expression to emptiness and absence, *blancs* can be used to create shifts in the temporal scheme of a novel. For Dureau, the addition of proleptic and analeptic gaps to the structure of the novel is characteristic of Nabokov’s style. Russian authors such as Tolstoy, Chekhov, and even Dostoevsky commonly use the prolepsis, suspending one thread of the story to take it up in another chapter as the narration returns to events that occur a few hours later or after an interval of several years. Analepsis, Dureau shows, is rarer among Russian authors, but it lies at the center of Nabokov’s composition of *Lolita*. In this novel the *blancs* create two fields of time: the time in which the novel itself is taking place and the time of its narration. She illustrates this by an analysis of the novel’s opening chapter, in which Nabokov has Humbert Humbert declare his love for Lolita, who as yet is unknown to the reader (prolepsis). This appositive technique introduces us to the girl as if she were still alive. Only after a second reading will the reader be able to project this sentence into the past, because by then he will have learned that both Lolita and the narrator are dead (analepsis). Here the gaps promote an oscillation between the present (from which the narrator speaks) and the past (in which he refers to himself as a subject).

Nabokov is an uncommon example of a truly bilingual writer, and his mastery of the English language allowed him in his English novels to use as syntagms associations to Russian culture and language. For Dureau this kind of persistent deception would not be easily felt by most of his readers, and yet

it would still engender in them a subliminal effect of strangeness and unreality.

Considering Nabokov's familiarity with the French language, Dureau sees in his description of an old swan's death an oneirical association with Mademoiselle's demise (in *Speak, Memory*) which produces the metamorphosis of swan (*cygne*) into a sign. She also notes the way in which Nabokov parodies Descartes and his *Méditations Métaphysiques* in *Invitation to a Beheading*, dressing Cincinnatus in a robe-de-chambre just like the one worn by this philosopher before he started to doubt everything (beauty, literature, art). These and other examples of Nabokov's French connections serve to enrich Dureau's analysis of his novels.

The first chapter offers a metatextual reflection on Nabokov's European intellectual heritage, while Chapters 2–7 detail the unique traits of his own writing. In those chapters Dureau avoids pinning on Nabokov any single intellectual ancestry even while recognizing his typical twentieth-century preoccupation with "saying the impossibility of saying." Through an analysis of *Bend Sinister*, a novel whose subject is loss, Dureau defines the gap (*le blanc*) as a signifier that marks the absence of a signifier. Taken as a signifier, the gap is used to create a void in the context of a story or even in the syntax of a sentence. It may also be employed as an interval between two assertions or events to establish different levels of meaning.

The gaps that appear when something is left unsaid (*non-dit*) may be employed as a potential presence that destroys, from the inside, the logic of totalitarian discourse, because these missing parts encourage multiple interpretations. Cincinnatus, in *Invitation to a Beheading* (the subject of Chapter 2), remembers his past, and he attributes different meanings to events that should have been taken only at their present significance. His "opacity" may be expressed in the novel by gaps used to protect his memories and subjectivity.

In Chapter 3, Dureau questions the semiotic and comparative dimensions of blanks in *The Gift* and *Speak Memory*. These works are linked to each other by the "gap" of a father's absence, and in each the consequences of this absence are worked through. Gaps are made of all kinds of juxtapositions of information conveyed without explicit causal, temporal, or explanatory links. Nabokov's use of ellipses or omissions (*non-dits*) by appositive phrases initiates a double movement through which an object's strangeness is enhanced to create in the reader a sense of rediscovering what he has known and forgotten. Nevertheless Dureau advises that gaps are not to be taken only as ellipses, nor only as something that has been left unsaid or denied. That which is deliberately left out and unsaid belongs to the category of gap in which the

information is not only absent but also irrecoverable: "One cloudy but luminous day, towards four in the afternoon on April the first, 192—" (*The Gift*).

The discontinuity that forces the pairing of emptiness and fullness, text and silence, the said and the unsaid, reaches modern consciousness only after the realization that every discourse may reveal an unconscious message or an unknown desire. Dureau argues that this procedure encourages the reader, this myriad of Sirin reflections, to search for multiple levels of signification.

Lolita, discussed in Chapter 4, illustrates how gaps are employed by Nabokov to deal with two important taboos: incest and death. The incest taboo is unspeakable, and although linked with desire, it cannot be separated from death, another taboo. Gaps in *Lolita* serve both as hiding-places for the forbidden and as imprints of desire ("Le blanc sert alors autant de cache pour ce qui est interdit que de marque du désir," 21).

Dureau argues that writing is a resource against the physical boundaries of the human condition, of mortality and our ambivalent relation to pleasure and reality. For her, death can be defied through writing when the author creates or changes the represented world. *Pale Fire* and *The Enchanter* are examples that help Dureau demonstrate the poetics of the gap, following Jakobson's poetic function of language (Chapter 5). In Chapter 6, she scrutinizes the epistemological importance of the *blanc* by contrasting it with its explicit and implicit use in twentieth-century science, and she advances her ideas with a thorough examination of *Laughter in the Dark*. The last book she examines is *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, treating it as an allegory of absence and nothingness (Chapter 7).

Nabokov ou le sourire du chat provides a fascinating experience of recovering and uncovering Nabokov which I strongly recommend for those who love what Nabokov provokes and reveals. Dureau's very detailed study of Nabokov's novels is not a pedantic display of erudition; rather it revels in Nabokov's glimmering secrets, now rendered closer to their purest expression. Although her ideas flow smoothly in logical succession and with no apparent blanks, her style conveys a certain impatience with the closed spheres of interpretation and their boundaries.

Just as in *Nove Ensaios Dantescos* Jorge Luís Borges weaves a magical tapestry to describe Dante's literary microcosm, so Dureau demarcates Nabokov's world in all its shimmering details while adding a special measure of emptiness to emphasize its boundlessness. According to her, every choice of a word implies a matrix of choices not made; thus every element in the text also suggests an absence which must be taken as part of the literary process. At the

same time, Dureau rejects investigations of the underlying meanings that insist on establishing a continuity of what the text has made explicit when such a procedure is used to deny an anguishing void. For Dureau only the void allows the irruption of an author's unique voice.

Dureau maintains that "in the critique of Nabokov's works, oppositions concerning diegesis, narrative structures, symbolic or structuralist readings sometimes spring from the same elements that are presented in the text" (12). Furthermore, she claims that Nabokov's writing gives rise to contradictory and intensely emotional attitudes because his readers are indirectly stimulated to speak about themselves after they have projected their own experiences upon the undefined or empty areas of the text. Thus passionate, antithetical, or irreconcilable readings appear as a consequence of Nabokov's not having established explicitly the connections between ideas or events. Gaps are used not only in different contexts, but also according to a multiplicity of structural levels and perspectives, which confer specific values on this variable: stylistic, semiotic, semiological, psychological, metaphysical, epistemological (16). By creating spaces that remain open in the text, Nabokov allows them to become the source for the reader's reflections or projections, which enter the scene to fill in these blank areas. Gaps in one of Nabokov's novels hide something that will become transfigured in another. Although Nabokov uses gaps to convey two different forms of negation (*déni*), he also uses them as signifiers for what is unspeakable or ineffable.

Dureau discusses Nabokov's attempt to communicate his "immediate vision" despite the mediation of language to convey that vision. Language demands both memory and interpretation, but to achieve the brute object of vision it becomes necessary for subjective interpretation to be suspended. Accordingly, the image that is not deciphered and remains meaningless opens the way for an immediate perception that doesn't rely on thought or on a secondary symbolization. "*Si l'écriture tend à ne se faire que regard, elle recherche l'effacement du narrateur, du scripteur, voire de l'écriture elle-même*" (455). Thus, not only must the narrator and the writer vanish, but writing itself if a text is expected to glare like an eye when taken up by a reader.

Dureau does not agree with Alexandrov's idea that Nabokov's universe is crossed by a parallel universe of spirits and mystical beings: she considers that belief in any kind of after-life already attributes meaning where meaning is absent. For her the absence of meaning (*ab-sens*, that is, the epitomic form in which *blancs* operate in designating meaning that lies beyond the traditional categories of thought and expression) is linked to the polysemic multiplication of the poetic when language itself becomes the generator of meaning: "Every-

thing passes as if, in the face of a void of some human experiences, a space of meaning can be generated by language and its poetic dimension” (454).

A drawing that depicts the magic lamp of Aladdin being held by the genie that emanates from its spout may be considered as just a clever cartoon, as a representation of man’s predicament when faced with representations, as an allegory for the power of fiction, as a significant. Dureau’s reasoning suggests that her belief in the supremacy of art over the phenomena of life was a certainty that she shared with Vladímir Nabokov.

“All reality is a mask” wrote Nabokov, and yet, contrary to Dureau, I prefer to take the ontological status of what this mask hides as an open matter—which is something that every reader will have to decide for himself.

Azar Nafisi. *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. New York: Random, 2003. 368 pp. ISBN 0-375-50490-7 (cloth); 0-8129-7106-X (paper).

Review by Suellen Stringer-Hye, Vanderbilt University

Nabokov could not have wished for more attentive students than those who met on Thursday mornings in 1995 at the Tehran apartment of Azar Nafisi to study English literature. Nafisi, who had recently resigned her position as Professor of English Literature at the University of Tehran, expertly guided a group of seven young women in discussions of works such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Daisy Miller*. *Lolita*, however, was the class favorite. To them, the Islamic Republic was like Humbert Humbert and they were like Dolores Haze—controlled by an authority who confiscates their individual identities and replaces them with a cipher of his own imagination. The slightest provocation, a hair out of place, a bared ankle, maddens Humbert just as it does their own tormentors. In the alternative world of Nafisi’s apartment, where not the horrors and humiliations waiting in the street below but the mountains of Tehran were reflected in the antique oval mirror that hung on the far wall of the living room, Nafisi and her group of hand-picked students used literature, as Nabokov had, to transcend the unacceptable realities of a preposterous life and find a place where art, tenderness, and beauty prevailed. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is Nafisi’s account of the years she spent in Iran trying to come to terms with the totalitarian regime that came to power in 1979. By the time the Islamic Republic had so circumscribed the lives of women that attending an all-girl literature class at the home of a professor might require an alibi, “Knowledge nicely browned” was no longer an option.