

JULIAN W. CONNOLLY

Introduction: the many faces of Vladimir Nabokov

Vladimir Nabokov was acutely aware of the image that readers and critics held of him. Deriding the notion that he was a “frivolous firebird,” he predicted that the day would come when someone would declare him to be a “rigid moralist kicking sin” and “assigning power to tenderness, talent, and pride” (*SO*, 193). Not only did Nabokov’s prediction come true, but critics continue to discover new facets of the writer’s legacy to highlight and explore. As a result, it has become clear that the man and his work evince enormous complexity. The facile labels applied to Nabokov early in his career – the “cool aesthete,” “impassive gamester” – have been replaced by other labels (if not “rigid moralist,” then “highly ethical” writer, metaphysician, philosopher). Yet all of these labels are proving to be simply one-dimensional; the full depth of Nabokov’s talent has yet to be plumbed. Indeed, in recent years, new aspects of Nabokov’s formidable intellectual legacy, such as his research as a lepidopterist, have begun to receive serious notice.

The present collection does not attempt to be encyclopedic in scope or coverage. Nabokov and his artistic legacy have too many dimensions to receive comprehensive treatment in a volume such as this. Instead, a group of distinguished Nabokov scholars has been asked to provide the interested reader with some new critical pathways into Nabokov’s rich creative landscape. Readers with some familiarity with Nabokov’s work will encounter thought-provoking treatments of Nabokov’s art and its place in a variety of cultural contexts.

Beginning with the bare facts of Nabokov’s peripatetic life, one gains a quick glimpse into the richness of the man’s life experiences. Born into a wealthy, aristocratic Russian family, only to lose his patrimony after the Russian Revolution, Nabokov moved to England to enter Cambridge University. After his father was killed by an assassin’s bullet in 1922, Nabokov settled in Berlin and began a difficult struggle to earn a living as a writer. Although he ultimately emerged as one of the leading lights of Russian émigré literature, Nabokov found himself in the late 1930s faced

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with the rise of Nazi fascism and the need to start over again, writing in a new language and moving to a new country. A renewed period of economic hardship and arduous work resulted in the unexpected yet immense success of *Lolita*. Financially secure at last, Nabokov returned to Europe, where he spent his last years writing new works in English, translating and revising his earlier Russian-language works, and overseeing the translation of both sets of works into other languages. All of these experiences made for an intense and colorful biography, and Brian Boyd's meticulous reconstruction of this biography encompasses two large volumes.¹

When Nabokov himself contemplated the seismic shifts he experienced over time, he tended not to see them as random, disparate, or disjointed. On the contrary, he preferred to view his life in aesthetic terms. Indeed, one of the most important, recurring images in his fiction is the notion of life as a "text." The widowed narrator of the short story "Ultima Thule" writes: "in moments of happiness, of rapture, when my soul is laid bare, I suddenly feel . . . that everything – life, patria, April . . . is but a muddled preface, and that the main text still lies ahead" (*Stories*, 520–21). In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the narrator V. sums up the subject of his half-brother's last book with a bold declaration: "The man is the book," he writes (175 [ch. 18]), and he then continues: "The answer to all questions of life and death, 'the absolute solution' was written all over the world he had known: it was like a traveler realizing that the wild country he surveys is not an accidental assembly of natural phenomena, but the page in a book where these mountains and forests . . . are disposed in such a way as to form a coherent sentence" (178–79 [ch. 18]). In *Pale Fire*, the poet John Shade includes the following lines in his autobiographical poem: "Man's life as commentary to abstruse / Unfinished poem" (*PF*, 67 [lines 939–40]). When writing a memoir of his own, Nabokov explicitly announces his intention to describe his life the way one might discuss a novel. Speaking of the "match theme" in his life, he declares: "The following of such thematic designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography" (*SM*, 27). In adopting this approach, Nabokov emulates the way his fictional character Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev treats the historical figure N. G. Chernyshevski in *The Gift*. After pointing out a number of themes – the theme of "writing exercises," "nearsightedness," "angelic clarity," "pastry shops," "officers" – Fyodor comments: "the motifs of Chernyshevski's life are now obedient to me – I have tamed its themes" (*Gift*, 236 [ch. 4]).

In the essay that opens the present volume, Zoran Kuzmanovich picks up on the concept of design and patterning in Nabokov's artistic presentation of his own life, and he focuses on several significant images in Nabokov's work that provide clues as to how the writer tried to shape his inquisitive

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readers' understanding of his life experience. Noting that Nabokov's life was marked by devastating losses and heartening gains, Kuzmanovich uses the poem "Restoration" to reveal how the writer created a structured response to these momentous changes in his life. The expansion of consciousness, a resistance to the commonplace, a receptivity to the ever-present possibilities of sudden bliss – these are the enduring elements in Nabokov's appreciation of the world through which he passed.

These elements are also incorporated into the art of Nabokov's storytelling, as Brian Boyd skillfully demonstrates in the second essay of this volume. Boyd, who has long been one of Nabokov's best interpreters, provides a stimulating guide to the strategies and techniques Nabokov deployed to provoke certain responses from his readers. Concentrating on elements such as character, scene staging, plot structure, and shifts in point of view, Boyd reminds us that Nabokov "challenges and questions and refreshes every aspect of narrative," thereby becoming a kind of "personal trainer in mental flexibility." Through a close analysis of the openings of two novels written at the opposite ends of Nabokov's career, *Mary* and *Transparent Things*, Boyd highlights the fundamental freedom embedded in Nabokov's imaginative exercises, his rejection of dull convention, and his desire for the reader to participate in the invigorating joy of discovery.

One of the characteristic features of Nabokov's work that strikes even the first-time reader is the significant role that Nabokov gives to the world of literature in his texts. His fiction is replete with literary allusions, either overt or hidden, and one senses the writer's sensitivity to the artistic efforts of a multitude of other authors, stretching from the distant past to the present day. Alexander Dolinin's essay offers a fresh examination of Nabokov's attitude toward the impressive heritage of Russian literature to which Nabokov himself was now contributing, and which he wished to shape for personal reasons of his own. Dolinin's prior work on the role of literary allusion in Nabokov's fiction puts him in the perfect position to analyze this dimension of Nabokov's art, and the conclusions he draws are deeply illuminating and original. What Dolinin brings out is that Nabokov was keenly aware of his place in the Russian literary tradition and that far from remaining aloof from the literary quarrels that often preoccupied his fellow émigrés, he was a "lively troublemaker" who persistently battled his contemporaries to assert his primacy in a literary tradition he was striving to define. What is more, Dolinin goes on to explain why it was that when Nabokov translated his Russian-language novels into English, he toned down or eliminated many of the allusions to Russian literature that they had originally contained, and replaced them with allusions to such Western writers as Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe. As Dolinin sees it, Nabokov did this not merely because

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he felt that these allusions might be lost on the Anglo-American reader; rather, Nabokov wished to transcend his status as a “Russian” author and to replace that status with a new image as a “cosmopolitan” or “trans-national” author.

It is at this point that Susan Elizabeth Sweeney takes up the tale, focusing on Nabokov’s transformation into an “American” writer. Starting with Nabokov’s efforts to downplay the importance of a writer’s nationality (*SO*, 63), and his own affirmations that “his best work was done in English” (*SL*, 454), Sweeney delves into Nabokov’s complex creative approach to his new home and the numerous guises it assumes in his work. Sweeney makes the argument that Nabokov’s adopted country stood in for his lost homeland, of course with varying distortions, adjustments, and substitutions. As she tracks the changing vision of America, real and invented, that Nabokov inscribed into his English-language novels, Sweeney asserts that Nabokov’s American works compensate for his state of exile “by ‘some sleight of *land*’ – that is, by transposing one country with another.” While recognizing Nabokov’s precise knowledge of the *realia* of American life (which is especially evident in *Lolita*), Sweeney charts the varying degrees to which Nabokov’s novels depict stylized versions of America – “Terra the Fair” – in which human experience, both blissful and agonizing, stand out in haunting relief. Sweeney closes her sweeping study of the American novels by pointing out that not only did Nabokov transform America in his fiction, he transformed American culture too. The words “nymphet” and “Lolita” now have special meaning in the American lexicon, and a host of writers exhibit “Nabokovian” features in their work.

Continuing the exploration of Nabokov’s relation to the literary currents of his day, John Burt Foster, Jr. comments on the writer’s complex views on European modernism (or, to be more precise, modernisms). Foster examines three aspects of this broad topic: Nabokov’s response to English-language “high” modernism, his reaction to what may be called the “modernism of underdevelopment” in his native Russian literature, and the internationalist vision of “modernist fiction” that Nabokov adopted as a result of his experience living and writing in several countries after his departure from Russia in 1919. Outlining Nabokov’s rejection of the mythical method that some of the high modernists espoused, Foster explains how Nabokov favored parody and cultural multiplicity to counter any movement that would reduce the individual to the level of stereotype. Nabokov’s antipathy toward fixed stereotypes also led the writer to downplay the status some Western critics gave to Dostoevsky in their account of the development of Russian modernism. In place of Dostoevsky, Nabokov advanced Pushkin and Tolstoy as key figures in this development. Foster’s essay concludes with an insightful

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summary of Nabokov's interest in (and revision of) the literary practices he observed in the work of Proust, Joyce, and Kafka.

Having delineated several of the literary contexts in which Nabokov's art may best be viewed, the present collection shifts focus to examine several distinct stages in Nabokov's development as a writer. Nabokov entered literature as a poet, and Barry Scherr provides a detailed overview of Nabokov's poetic career, commenting on the structural characteristics of Nabokov's verse output and tracing the evolution of the central themes of this body of work. Of particular interest to those who know Nabokov primarily as a writer of prose fiction may be Scherr's observation that Nabokov's poetry became increasingly profound and original over the course of his career, even as he was writing less of it due to his growing output in prose. While Nabokov's youthful poetry deals with personal themes that are not so evident in the early prose, the late poetry offers unusual transformations or distillations of the central concerns of the prose he was working on in those later years.

As Nabokov evolved from poet to novelist, his creative energies led him into the realm of the short story, and by the time he finished his last short story in 1951, Nabokov had written over sixty short stories and sketches. This body of work manifests the writer's predilection for innovation and experimentation, thus presenting fertile terrain for exploration. In her essay on the short fiction, Priscilla Meyer arranges the stories thematically and thereby encourages the reader to discern how Nabokov's treatment of central themes evolved over time. Meyer also notes Nabokov's use of the short stories as preliminary sketches for the more capacious novels. Into these short works he often introduced ideas that would receive more extensive elaboration in his subsequent novels.

Of the seven novels that Nabokov originally wrote in Russian, I have chosen to focus on the last three – *Despair*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, and *The Gift* – and in the essay I prepared for this volume, I have delineated the development of a seminal theme in these three works. Each of these novels provides a unique treatment of the creative impulse, and, in particular, of the attitude an imaginative protagonist takes toward the surrounding world. In Hermann Karlovich, the narrator and protagonist of *Despair*, Nabokov introduces a narcissistic figure who aggressively projects his solipsistic fantasies onto the world around him. That world, however, resists such a dictatorial approach, and the narrator finds his selfish fantasies rudely overturned by a reality that is more independent and autonomous than he conceives. In *Invitation to a Beheading* Nabokov depicts the inverse of this situation, and he now features a protagonist who must learn to trust the promptings of his creative spirit and to reject the conformist pressures of the world that

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imprisons him. Finally, in *The Gift*, Nabokov's longest and most intricate Russian novel, Nabokov unveils a middle path, and he centers his narrative on a young writer who learns to avoid the temptation of overwhelming the precious individuality of the people around him with personal projection, and who learns at the same time to trust his own creative instincts as well. Through this novel Nabokov reveals his own discoveries about how to cope with loss and how to transform the evanescent experiences of life into the lasting monuments of art. The complex relationship to the Russian literary tradition discussed in Dolinin's essay also emerges as a vital element in this masterful, multilayered novel.

With the completion of *The Gift*, Nabokov had reached a turning point in his life. Facing the political uncertainties of a world on the brink of war, and realizing that the audience for his works was ever shrinking, Nabokov made the difficult decision to abandon his native tongue and to adopt a new language as the primary vehicle for his artistic expression. Neil Cornwell's essay focuses on this pivotal period in Nabokov's career, a moment of something akin to trilingual hesitation, as Nabokov seemed to hover between choosing French or English as the next language in which he would begin to write. After commenting on Nabokov's linguistic aptitude and training, Cornwell examines the principal works that Nabokov wrote in French, the sketch "Mademoiselle O" and the speech composed in preparation for the 1937 centenary of Pushkin's death. Moving to Nabokov's early efforts in English, Cornwell concentrates on *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, which itself addresses issues of linguistic facility and the transition from Russian to English. Cornwell also remarks upon the last substantial works Nabokov wrote in Russian – the novella *The Enchanter*, and two remnants of an unfinished novel – "Solus Rex" and "Ultima Thule." Cornwell sifts through these late works to find the seeds of Nabokov's new identity as an English-language author.

When one considers the fact that in the late 1930s Nabokov was weighing the possibilities of radically reshaping his identity as a writer, one might not be surprised that a clear interest in the genre of biography (and autobiography) surfaced at this time. Galya Diment investigates Nabokov's idiosyncratic approach to biographical writing, using *The Gift* as the focal point of her discussion. What she finds in this investigation is that not only do the biographies of real and imagined others embedded in *The Gift* (Nikolay Chernyshevski and Konstantin Godunov-Cherdyntsev) shed insight into Nabokov's views on the form and practice of biographical writing, they also provide compelling glimpses into important experiences in Nabokov's own life. Diment's analysis underscores the crucial role that "sympathetic imagination" plays in the creative laboratory of the biographical project.

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Imagination also stands at the center of Ellen Pifer's essay on the *Lolita* phenomenon. In her discussion of Nabokov's most famous novel, Pifer meticulously dissects the distortions and misdirections woven into Humbert Humbert's emotional narrative about his obsessive desire for one Dolores Haze, aka Lolita. With acute sensitivity to Humbert's aspirations and anxieties, Pifer skillfully guides the reader through the dense layers of parody, fantasy, and projection from which Humbert constructs his world and his narrative. She reminds us of the real damage Humbert has done to the girl he claims as his immortal love, and she underscores the paramount fact that despite some assertions to the contrary, aesthetics and ethics are inextricably intertwined in Nabokov's artistic world. Pifer also demonstrates how vital and relevant Nabokov's once-sensational novel has proven to be over the five decades since its original publication, citing Azar Nafisi's inspiring discussion of the novel in the memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. The meaning that Nafisi and her students found in *Lolita* as they read and discussed it in secret in the Islamic Republic of Iran represents impressive testimony to the power and strength of Nabokov's artistic legacy.

Turning to the novels Nabokov wrote late in his career, Michael Wood singles out a theme that seems to grow ever more persistent in this period: a sensation that strikes Nabokov's characters that beyond their own world lies another world and, what may be even more unsettling, that some other being – similar, but perhaps more powerful, more competent, and even more authentic – looms behind their backs. Wood's interest here, however, is not so much the otherworldly per se, as the characters' own sense of wonder (or anxiety) over what may exist in this shadow realm. It is in their very belief – that the world around them is not the only possible world – that Wood detects a reasonable definition of what fiction itself “does and is.” By encouraging his readers to wonder what might happen to his characters as the books they inhabit come to an end, Nabokov encourages those very same readers to wonder about their own fates, and about other possible worlds to come.

This *Cambridge Companion* closes with two essays that delve into aspects of Nabokov's work which have received some attention in discussions of specific texts, but which deserve a fresh look. Leona Toker's essay touches upon a number of topics of interest to Nabokov's readers – aesthetics, ethics, metaphysics, and politics – but it is perhaps the elusive subject of Nabokov's metaphysical concerns that has generated the most lively response in recent years. What makes Toker's discussion of this topic so valuable is the diachronic perspective she brings to the debate. Toker argues that Nabokov's speculations on what might exist beyond the horizon of one's death seems to have evolved considerably over time. The close readings of key texts that she conducts here

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will make a major contribution to a little understood but intriguing dimension of Nabokov's art.

In the final essay of the volume, Barbara Wyllie addresses the role that cinema plays in Nabokov's life and art. Although Nabokov was obviously a verbal artist, Wyllie shows how significant the genre of film was to his writing. To clarify this point, Wyllie examines the role of cinema from three angles – the considerable interest in film that Nabokov displayed throughout his life, whether he was panning or praising a given film; his professional activities in the field, including his work on the screenplay for the film version of *Lolita*; and his extensive use of cinematic elements in his works, from tricks of perspective to allusions to well-known (and not so well-known) films. Wyllie detects great ambivalence in Nabokov's treatment of film, but she finds in this very ambivalence a dynamic source of energy, depth, and complexity. Thus we arrive once again at one of the most fundamental characteristics of Nabokov's art – its enormous complexity, richness, and depth. A protean writer, Nabokov created a dazzling legacy that promises to attract and enchant readers for decades to come.

NOTE

1. See Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) and *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

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CONTEXTS

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ZORAN KUZMANOVICH

Strong opinions and nerve points: Nabokov's life and art

I imagined, in bedtime reveries, what it would be like to become an exile who longed for a remote, sad, and (right epithet coming) unquenchable Russia, under the eucalypti of exotic resorts. Lenin and his police nicely arranged the realization of that fantasy . . .

Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 177

[S]ome part of me must have been born in Colorado, for I am constantly recognizing things with a delicious pang.

Vladimir Nabokov to Edmund Wilson, July 24, 1947 (NWL, 218)

More than any other twentieth-century writer whose travel agents inadvertently included Lenin and Hitler, Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov was concerned with discerning thematic designs in his life and encoding across his works “the fantastic recurrence of certain situations” (*Pnin*, 159 [ch. 6]). Once *Lolita* made him a celebrity, he used his public prose to direct his readers toward those prescient designs and to suggest that historical exigency was merely a tool for the materialization of his fantasy. His interviews, prefaces, postscripts, letters to various editors, and responses to his critics always strike me as pre-emptive and corrective, at once recapitulative and predictive. They chide, they nudge, they set the story straight, and they do so not by informing but by evoking. They deepen the mystery of Nabokov’s talent, while, with phrases such as “right epithet coming,” they create a sense of qualification, a momentary reversal in, or rest from the inexorable forward movement while simultaneously speeding readers on their way to the always receding solution of that mystery of presence rendered through absence. Following the American publication of *Lolita*, this was a very successful strategy, simply because it set Nabokov’s readers, usually academics, to work. Nabokov is the lone example of an exiled writer who by staying just slightly ahead of the twentieth century’s political barbarities not only survived multiple linguistic dislocations but also made an artistic virtue out of his transcendental homelessness. That his works should have found a home with the reader is all the more surprising given Nabokov’s contention that an author “clashes with readerdom because he is his own ideal reader and those other readers are so very often mere lip-moving ghosts and