

Contextualising Nabokov

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To reflect an epoch is not poetry's task, but only that poet is alive who breathes the air of his century, hears the music of his time. That music may not accord with the poet's ideas about harmony, it may even be repugnant to him, but his ear must be filled with that music, as one's lungs are filled with air. Such is the law of poetic biology.

(Khodasevich, *Derzhavin*)

I composed the Russian original exactly a quarter of a century ago in Berlin, some fifteen years after escaping from the Bolshevik régime, and just before the Nazi régime reached its full volume of welcome. The question whether or not my seeing both in terms of one dull beastly farce had any effect on this book should concern the good reader as little as it does me (*IB*, vii).

I had been living in Berlin since 1922, thus synchronously with the young man of the book; but neither this fact, nor my sharing some of his interests, such as literature and lepidoptera, should make one say 'aha' and identify the designer with the design. I am not, and never was, Fyodor Godunov-Chernyntsev; my father is not the explorer of Central Asia that I may become some day; I never wooed Zina Mertz, and never worried about the poet Koncheyev or any other writer (*Gift*, 8).

I do not believe that 'history' exists apart from the historian. If I try to select a keeper of record, I think it safer (for my comfort, at least) to choose my own self (*SO*, 138).

Readers can take their pick of quotations from Nabokov's forewords, framing statements and other obiter dicta, but the result converges on the same: 'history' is nothing more than a 'dull beastly farce', even when one's and one's family's fate is at stake; the author '[is] not, and never was' his most autobiographical hero, and the 'keeper of record' who identifies the connecting strands between what happens in the world outside and the text inside is none other than 'my own self', Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov. The goal of the present volume, which we feel is an appropriate

one for maturing Nabokov studies, is to challenge such comments, but not necessarily with the typical ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’. It is not our purpose as scholar-critics to assume we see things and uncover conveniently repressed moments (shades of the ‘Viennese delegation’ [*Defense*, ix]) that the author has swept under his psychological rug. In the present intellectual climate, we as readers are no longer – as Nabokov archly called his characters – simply ‘galley slaves’, nor are we ‘mini-me’ little Nabokovs participating in his textual games, as entertaining as the latter are. We – the historical Nabokov, his texts, and his readers – are moving to someplace else. So, let it be said from the outset: Nabokov was a genius; it is the ‘solitary’ part that we would like to interrogate. His play, while unique and mesmerisingly so, is not a ‘violin in a void’ (*IB*, ix).

At the same time, ‘context’ is a term and a concept suffering from overuse, at least from the perspective of some English faculties (if not Slavic faculties, which historically have been more conservative and slower to adapt). ‘Context’ is also the staple of ‘historicist’ studies, which by now are no longer ‘new’. As Rita Felski expresses her critical motivation in ‘Context Stinks’,

Against the grain of such critical historicism, I want to articulate and defend two related propositions: 1) that history is not a box – that conventional models of historicizing and contextualizing are notably deficient in accounting for the transtemporal movement and affective resonance of texts – and 2) that in doing better justice to this transtemporal impact, we might usefully think of texts as ‘non-human actors’ – a claim that, as we’ll see, requires us to revise prevailing views about the heroic, self-propelling, or oppositional nature of agency and to ponder the links between agency and attachment.¹

Our starting point is the acknowledgement that there are not enough contexts to cover the phenomenon of ‘Vladimir Nabokov’ sufficiently and that in our selection of connecting strands (‘Nabokov and ____’) some not insignificant topics have been left out. There are no separate chapters, for example, on chess or crossword puzzles, the author as poet or the author as dramatist. And while there are also no individual chapters on such defining themes as ‘memory’, ‘translation’, ‘modernism’ and ‘language’, which shaped Nabokov’s art throughout his life, they are covered from multiple perspectives under different headings. We agree with Felski that ‘contextualizing’ Nabokov can short-change the ‘transtemporal movement and affective resonance’ of his texts, which is to say there are qualities in his writing, quiddities of his personal aura, that cannot be captured in

¹ Rita Felski, ‘Context Stinks’, *New Literary History*, 42 (2011), 574.

the ‘Nabokov and ____’ format. By the same token, however, as we as a democratising (and in worst case scenarios, ‘levelling’) literary culture move beyond notions of the romantic poet, it would behove us to develop strategies that account for texts as ‘non-human actors’² and that require us ‘to revise prevailing views about the heroic, self-propelling, or oppositional nature of agency and to ponder the links between agency and attachment’. The proverbial elephant in the room in any analysis of Vladimir Nabokov the writer is the sense of overwhelming agency, of Argus-eyed intentionality. Not for nothing did Nabokov prepare his answers to interview questions beforehand and would not be caught dead going to any real-life version of the Cremona Women’s Club with the wrong lecture in tow. Our task is to interrogate the edges of this consciousness in a manner that, while still recognising the astonishing achievement, sees the traces that live on after the man’s passing as part of a bigger picture.

Thus, our aim in the present volume is to mount a good-faith, but admittedly less-than-perfect, effort to anchor Nabokov more firmly in the social, historical, ideological and cultural contexts of his time. Our section headings – Identity, Places, Literatures and Arts, Ideas and Cultures – are best understood as ideational ‘vectors’, forces pressing in from the world in which Nabokov lived and thought that elicited the remarkable work he produced. But once again, it should be stressed that this relationship is not ‘causal’ in any direct sense. Explaining, say, Nabokov as a product of class – i.e. he was fortunate to be born into the privileged circumstances he was and *therefore* in some sense he was able to produce what he did – is a non-starter:

There is also keen pleasure (and, after all, what else should the pursuit of science produce?) in meeting the riddle of the initial blossoming of man’s mind by postulating a voluptuous pause in the growth of the rest of nature, a lolling and loafing which allowed first of all the formation of *Homo poeticus* – without which *sapiens* could not have been evolved. ‘Struggle for life’ indeed! The curse of battle and toil leads man back to the boar, to the grunting beast’s crazy obsession with the search for food. You and I have frequently remarked upon the maniacal glint in the housewife’s scheming eye as it roves over food in a grocery or about the morgue of a butcher’s shop. Toilers of the world, disband! Old books are wrong. The world was made on a Sunday. (*SM*, 617)

² ‘Nonhuman actors, then, help to modify states of affairs; they are participants in chains of events; they help shape outcomes and influence actions. To acknowledge the input of such actors is to circumvent, as far as possible, polarities of subject and object, nature and culture, word and world, to place people, animals, texts and things on the same ontological footing and to acknowledge their interdependence’ (ibid., 583).

For Nabokov, work *is* life. However, this work is also play, lolling about in order to create, making a day of rest a day of intense and joyful celebration. By the same token, this worker bee-cum-queen bee existed *in the world*, which means his professed ‘lolling’ was never completely free of its ‘situatedness’; it had to cost something, which is also our subject.

In order to grasp this larger force field of ‘Vladimir Nabokov’, then, we need to understand that the relationship between life and work, or to put it crudely, the world of contexts and the world of texts, was constantly being mediated by a myriad of factors. Moreover, if the texts that Nabokov produced are indeed load-bearing and life-bearing into the future (in Felski’s formulation, their ‘transtemporal’ qualities), then we also should consider them as ‘non-human actors’ in their own right. To invoke two of the thinkers who have made such a difference in late twentieth and early twenty-first century Russian studies, Mikhail Bakhtin and Yuri Lotman, the relationship between Nabokov and his surroundings is on the one hand deeply *dialogic*, which is to say, it is constantly moving in both directions, with the subject reacting to and creating from what comes his way, just as it is *semiospheric* on the other – Nabokov receives but he also shapes and defines the signs that surround him like the ambient air. The tension between text and context, agency and ‘big picture’, will always be there.

Each section of our volume seeks to cover the times, places and themes or issues that constitute a significant portion of the ‘contextualised Nabokov’. Thus, our first section, ‘Identity’, focuses on aspects of biography and self-invention (‘Authorial Persona’) that provide a useful starting point for any understanding of this complicated man and his works. Brian Boyd initiates our path into ‘identity’ with a tightly woven recap of the author’s ‘Russian’ and ‘American’ incarnations. Barbara Wyllie follows by demonstrating the astonishing ‘paying-it-forward’ patrimony of the childhood years, the ‘hoarded memories’ that became the mature writer’s hallmark and that were preserved like butterflies under glass, while Lara Delage-Toriel brings to light Nabokov’s interaction with and dependence on women, especially his wife, Véra, and the way his art remained ‘masculine’ even as it became increasingly absorbed with ‘feminine’ subjectivity and with the notion of creativity as ‘androgynous’. Nabokov’s capacity for friendship as well as his boxer’s love of a good scrap, including his famous falling-out with Edmund ‘Bunny’ Wilson, is the subject of Julian Connolly’s chapter. ‘Professor Nabokov’ and his engagement with American academia on a professional and creative level (the new subgenre of the ‘campus novel’) are then analysed in Susan Elizabeth Sweeney’s chapter on ‘Academia’. The ‘Identity’ section is rounded off with Maria Malikova’s revisionist exploration of Nabokov’s

‘phantom authorial persona’ of the late 1930s (as the author was considering an expansion of *The Gift* before he decided to emigrate to a different language and country) and his complex relationship with his first biographer, Andrew Field.

‘Places’ offers a temporal and spatial framework for Nabokov’s career arc. Gennady Barabtarlo explains to the modern reader how Nabokov fits into the cultural history of his hometown; while clearly his studied elegance and reserve belong to the city’s long-standing tradition, it was the suburban environs, particularly the rich opportunities for summertime butterfly-hunting on the family estate of Vyra, that tugged more at his imaginative heart-strings. Beci Carver, Stanislav Shvabrin and John Burt Foster, Jr. bring to life the three European cities that most defined, and stimulated, the writer Nabokov became between the wars. In Carver’s chapter, we get a fine-grained glimpse of Nabokov, now the ‘Trinity man’, now the ‘lab rat’, now the budding poet, at Cambridge. Berlin, the ‘the city of misfortunes and mishaps’, is then treated by Shvabrin as the stereoscopic locale that allowed Nabokov to transit between different planes of being, to embrace his Russophone roots against the background noise of the Third Reich’s march to power and to turn exile and displacement into some of his greatest art. And, as Foster writes, Paris was important for Nabokov as the émigré home of admired senior figures of the Russian diaspora (Khodasevich, Fondaminsky) and as the ‘literary marketplace’ he experimented with, now as a potential Francophone writer, before deciding to cast his lot with the English language and the New World. In ‘East to West Coast’, Monica Manolescu records the America Nabokov endeavours to invent in his writings, *Lolita* above all, and the America he loved to traverse and study with Véra at the wheel. And the ‘dialogue between nature and culture’ that drew Vladimir and Véra to the shores of Lake Geneva and their last home at the Montreux Palace Hotel is the subject of Annick Morard’s ‘Switzerland’, the concluding chapter of ‘Places’.

The ‘Literatures and Arts’ section interrogates the different terminologies – canon, publishing, genre, censorship, media/mode – by which Nabokov has been traditionally approached. Alexander Dolinin and Michael Wood initiate this section with an exploration of the meaning of ‘canonical’ when applied to the author’s understanding of which figures and *what sort of writing* deserve to shape a tradition. Dolinin contextualises the ‘un-Russianness’ of Nabokov as misperceived by émigré critics (what they didn’t like in Nabokov, his eschewal of moralising, was exactly what earlier critics had disapproved of in Pushkin and Chekhov – not bad company!) and his ability as time went on to ‘shape his own pedigree’ by ‘selecting relatives and guarding against intruders’. Wood

takes a different tack when analysing Nabokov's idiosyncratic use of the canonical as applied to the Western tradition: it wasn't the writer per se who defined what was 'in' or 'out', though Shakespeare, Pushkin, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Proust and Joyce would certainly be 'in', nor was it the writer's fully realised example of a genre, say *Anna Karenina* or *Madame Bovary*; rather it was the intense moment, the segment of the writing, that stood out and came alive against its background, perhaps like the specimen of the butterfly that was so colourfully arresting when viewed in its environment, so that 'canonical' becomes that aspect of the author's style, his specific personhood, that remains alive after he departs the scene. The next two pieces in this section address the publishing culture that prevailed first during Nabokov's émigré years in Berlin and Paris and then during his rise to fame as the author of *Lolita* in the United States: in the first, Siggy Frank reconstructs the publishing climate – the newspapers, journals, editorial practices, ideological and aesthetic alliances and material conditions – that defined everyday reality for someone of Nabokov's growing fame; in the second, Duncan White explains the shift in the American book publishing market in the direction of the 'blockbuster' that Nabokov encountered in the years following the Second World War and how the prestige of the properly promoted 'high brow' classic and book club monthly allowed the author of *Lolita* to maximise the work's cultural capital, eventually turning it into the financial capital that freed him from his teaching responsibilities. The last four chapters in 'Literatures and Arts' examine different compositional 'seams' that highlight Nabokov's mercurial positioning vis-à-vis his reading publics. Michal Oklot and Matthew Walker read Nabokov's sharply negative statements about detective fiction not as a rejection of the genre, which the author certainly turned to often in his own work (e.g. *Despair*), but of the poorly executed 'mystery' of style. Ironically, as Ann Komaromi details, it was the physical copies of his works (those published abroad and smuggled in – *tamizdat* – and those created illegally within the Soviet Union – *samizdat*) that travelled to the homeland that had expelled him and that led to his rediscovery by his most literate and appreciative readership. In 'Nabokov's Visual Imagination', Marijeta Bozovic probes the idea that the author thought 'in images', played constantly at 'painted borders' in his poems and novels, and as time went on learned how to 'mimic rival media', especially of the visual sort. And Nassim Balestrini engages the broad topic of Nabokov and popular culture: not only is *Lolita* the work most drenched in the everyday America of the 1950s, it also, after Nabokov, has taken on a life of its own in pop songs, urban parlance, video and screenplays.

Our final section, 'Ideas and Cultures', places Nabokov into the intellectual crosscurrents of his, and our, times. Several of the topics, including 'Psychoanalysis' and 'Totalitarianism', were personal *bêtes noires*, a fact which makes our readings as interesting as they are, contextually speaking, necessary. In 'Science', Stephen Blackwell tells us how art and science are deeply related in the writer's mind and how certain core concepts, such as mimicry, systematics and relativity theory, were understood – and contested – by Nabokov in his own highly idiosyncratic and aestheticised way. Following in Blackwell's footsteps David Bethea looks at Nabokov's 'Darwinism' by resituating it as a post-Symbolist reaction to the excesses of nineteenth-century positivism, empiricism and materialism. In their second chapter for the volume, 'Psychoanalysis', Oklot and Walker do a double turn worthy of their subject: rather than have Freud frame Nabokov's artistry as a function of neuroses, or have Nabokov frame Freud's myth-making as a function of perverse or 'creepy' psychology, wouldn't it be more productive to remove them both from the 'intention wars' and examine their writing instead as 'a symptom of something else: literature'? Sergei Davydov, who was one of the first to study the meta-physical and metafictional implications of 'otherworldliness' (*potustoronnost*) in Nabokov, presents the case for what 'faith' could mean to the writer. Despite being married to a Russian-Jewish woman while living in Nazi Berlin and having a number of good friends of Russian-Jewish extraction, Nabokov had a difficult time creating authentic Jewish characters in his own fiction, which is the subject of Leonid Livak's chapter.

The next four chapters in 'Ideas and Cultures' provide historical frameworks for approaching a more robust, dimensionalised Nabokov. Dana Dragunoiu fills in the back-history of V. D. Nabokov's neo-idealist, liberal, law-centred values at the turn of the century that powerfully influenced his son's sense of decency, fair play and defence of the underdog and the bullied (think of little Luzhin or slight, child-like Cincinnatus). Olga Voronina negotiates the thin line in Nabokov's writing between denying any connection to politics and ideology and building into his artistic works ingenious stylistic loop-holes – loop-holes the author himself would protest are neither 'satiric' nor 'didactic' – that function to subvert totalitarian thinking. With a deft handling of historical context Will Norman traces Nabokov's record as 'Cold Warrior', demonstrating how he went through different phases and how those phases became interwoven in his novels and their reception. In an intriguing turn of events, Nabokov's long-held disdain for Stalinist Russia placed him at odds with the American literary scene (left-leaning to begin with) in the 1940s, while Stalin was an ally in

the war against Hitler, but then this same position actually worked in his favour in the post-war, anti-communist climate of the 1950s, when his long-held opposition to the Soviet Union fell on receptive ears just as *Lolita* was creating a *succès de scandale*. In 'The Long 1950s', Andrea Carosso extends Norman's discussion of politics into the highly charged area of sexual perversion, with *Lolita* again as the focus. Our last section of contextualising frames is itself framed by Rachel Trousdale's chapter 'Transnationalism': when Nabokov fuses Russian and American topographic details into a *frisson* of time-place or Russian and American words in multilingual puns, he is after something – not so much the 'commonality between unfamiliar cultures' as 'the potential for new discoveries in the conjunction of old and new worlds'.

Context does not, cannot, ever solve completely the mystery of 'Vladimir Nabokov'. But it can, when laid out carefully, help us get closer to the 'transtemporal movement and affective resonance' of his texts – those 'nonhuman actors' that continue to speak to us as though they are alive.