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## **TRANSITIONS IN NABOKOV STUDIES**

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**Author's Post-Print Version**

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### **Abstract**

This article maps recent transitions in Nabokov Studies and places them in the context of the history of the field as it has developed since the 1960s. While many critics have allowed Nabokov's own injunctions and "strong opinions" to establish the parameters of their research, various scholars over the last decade have shown a willingness to transgress the rules of Nabokovian reading. From historicist approaches to *Lolita* as a holocaust novel, to controversial questions concerning ethics and ideology, I survey the best work on the author and suggest ways in which Nabokov Studies might develop in the future. In the past many of the most radical readings of Nabokov have focused on *Lolita*, but the posthumous publication of *The Original of Laura* now invites renewed focus on the late fiction, while there remains the necessity of exploring Nabokov's place within the contexts of modernism and of world literature.

### **Being a "Good Reader"**

Scattered throughout his writings, Nabokov left us with a clear sense of how he wanted his fiction to be read. This is, in large part, because of the publication of several courses of lectures which he gave at Cornell University in the 1950s. Among these, in an introductory talk entitled "Good Readers and Good Writers," Nabokov describes a quiz he gave in a "remote provincial college through which I happened to be jogging on a protracted lecture tour" (*Lectures on Literature* 2). The quiz comprises of a list of ten possible conditions for being a good reader, of which six are red herrings. The four correct answers (imagination, memory, a dictionary, and some artistic sense) are less interesting than some of the others, which, as Nabokov relates, were leaned on heavily by the students. We learn, for example, that belonging to a book club will not help you, and neither will

aspiring to be an author yourself. Concentrating on the “social-economic or historical angle” is similarly delusional (3). “The truth is that great novels are great fairy tales,” we are told, works which constitute their own unique worlds, which we must approach “as something brand new, having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know” (2, 1). This injunction on historicism is supplemented elsewhere by Nabokov’s well-known antipathy towards Freud and psychoanalytic readings of fiction. “My novels should be stamped ‘Freudians keep out,’ he writes in his foreword to *Bend Sinister* (xii). No Marx then, and no Freud. In addition to this we must consider Nabokov’s polemical attack on the notion of “commonsense” and those interested in “the interrelation between the writer and the national or universal community” (*Lectures on Literature* 371). Finally, one interviewer asked Nabokov about his influences. He replied: “I do not believe that any writer has had a definite influence on me” (*Strong Opinions* 47).

So far we have been working through a process of elimination. What *does* constitute a Nabokovian reading? The answer, as given in “Good Readers and Good Writers,” is the attempt “to grasp the individual magic of [the writer’s] genius and to study the style, the imagery, the pattern of his novels or poems” (*Lectures on Literature* 5-6). This sounds very much like what we would now call “close reading” and here we are reminded that Nabokov was teaching in an American university in the heyday of the New Criticism (one of its leading proponents, Allan Tate, helped him to get his first American novel, *Bend Sinister*, published in 1947). Nabokov’s novels, the implication is, are autonomous objects and should be studied as such. We should, in ways the New Critics would surely have approved of, admire their intricate structure, their dazzling style, their deceptive layerings of reality; we should, as Nabokov told his class, “caress the details” (*Lectures on Literature* xxiii) and search for patterns of word and image which resolve apparent contradictions and problems presented at the level of plot. The implication, it seems, is that we should aspire to ascend to the heights of the ivory tower, to escape the messy stuff of history, politics and society, or what Flaubert, one of Nabokov’s favourite writers, described as “the tide of shit beating at its walls” (572).

Any attempt to take stock of the history of Nabokov scholarship must necessarily resume the writer's own "strong opinions" for the simple reason that his academic readers have mostly consented to the model of criticism he proposed. "Good readers and Good Writers" contains an image which neatly sums up the paradigm: "up a trackless slope climbs the master artist, and at the top, on a windy ridge, whom do you think he meets? The panting and happy reader, and there they spontaneously embrace and are linked forever . . ." (*Lectures on Literature* 2). This is a romantic variation on the ivory tower, of course, and Nabokov's readers have generally been happy to make the arduous climb, though few would claim to have caught up with the author.

### **The Beginnings of Nabokov Studies**

The beginnings of an Anglophone critical project devoted to Nabokov can be discerned in the 1960s, when the writer was still available to approve or dismiss readings of his work. Appropriately enough, one of the leading figures was an ex-student of his, Alfred Appel Jr., whose article "*Lolita*: The Springboard of Parody" formed an important part of the Spring 1967 edition of *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* devoted to Nabokov, and was eventually expanded into the introduction to his enormously influential annotated edition of *Lolita* in 1971. Appel's pioneering work was devoted to exploring the "crooked reflectors" he found everywhere in the fiction: "Doubles, parodies and self-parodies (literature trapped in prison of amusement park mirrors), works within works, mirror-games of chess, translations . . . and language games" (108). Such hermetic concerns are echoed elsewhere in the early criticism, for example in Mary McCarthy's well-known review of *Pale Fire* from 1962 (still used to preface the Penguin edition of the novel), in which the dominant metaphor for the novel is that of a "do-it-yourself kit" which should be "assembled, according to the manufacturer's directions" (v). McCarthy's essay is primarily devoted to an annotative approach to reading Nabokov, shared not only by Appel's *Annotated Lolita* but also

by Carl Proffer's *Keys to Lolita* (1968), which found in the novel's intertextual play a key to unlock hidden levels and meanings. Also of note from these early years is Andrew Field's critical biography, *Nabokov: His Life in Art* (1967), prepared in collaboration with Nabokov himself, which provided the first comprehensive overview of the oeuvre to date, with appended bibliography and insightful commentaries on the fiction.<sup>1</sup>

Formalist readings of Nabokov's intertextual patterns, imagery, and word-play remained the dominant paradigm for criticism of his fiction into the 1970s and beyond the author's death in 1977. The extraordinarily dense networks of allusion, chronologies, and self-reflexivity exhibited in the late works, especially *Ada* (1969) and *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974), provided both primary material and validation for this approach, as did Nabokov's own collaboration with, and occasional praise for, particular readers. Studies such as Page Stegner's *Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (1966) and Julia Bader's *Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov's English Novels* (1972) emphasised, and indeed valorised, Nabokov's formal mastery, while suspending judgement of the ethical and political implications of the content.<sup>2</sup>

The 1980s saw the first significant departures from the pure formalism adopted by Nabokov's early acolytes. The decade is bookended by two powerful readings of Nabokov's ethics, by Ellen Pifer and the pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, both of which sought to push beyond Nabokov's famous assertion that *Lolita* has "no moral in tow" to attempt a rehabilitation of the cold, aloof image of the author built over the previous two decades. Pifer and Rorty, in their different ways, suggest not so much that Nabokov's autocriticism and fictional writings contradict each other (they both use his critical writings to support their readings), but that surface contradictions between a uncompromisingly autonomous stance on literary production and an ethically informed art can be resolved through the practice of diligent close reading. These two interventions into criticism of Nabokov's most famous novel do not then break any of his injunctions. Rather they try to find a way of preserving them while answering the increasingly urgent accusations that an autonomous formalism necessarily brings with it certain ethical costs. The readings of Pifer and

Rorty are recalled in Leland de la Durantaye's more recent book, *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (2007), which also sets itself the task of absolving Nabokov from charges of privileging aesthetics over ethics. Two related patterns are observable here which recur throughout Nabokov Studies up to the present: the act of criticism as defence of the author, and the critical goal as the resolving of contradictions between Nabokov's autocriticism and his fictional practice.

### **Reading Nabokov in the 1990s**

The 1990s saw the establishment of Nabokov Studies proper, with the launch by Donald Barton Johnson of the scholarly journal bearing that name in 1994, and the indispensable *Garland Companion to Nabokov*, edited by Vladimir Alexandrov in 1995. Both publications carried valuable work by academics trained in Russian literature who were able to elucidate for an Anglophone readership the Russian literary contexts from which Nabokov's aesthetics emerged in the early twentieth-century. They therefore mark an important moment of development in the ongoing critical exchange between those Nabokov scholars trained in Anglophone literature and theory and those whose backgrounds are in Slavic and Russian literary studies. The end of the decade also saw the landmark publication of a complete works in Russian, supported by extensive commentary and annotations by Alexander Dolinin and others. These developments have led to a renewed emphasis on Nabokov's own location within a transnational literary history, albeit one in which he necessarily formed the final telos or pinnacle of achievement.

The 1990s also saw the publication of what are almost certainly the two most influential works of Nabokov criticism: Brian Boyd's two-volume critical biography (1990-1) and Michael Wood's *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (1994). Boyd's thoroughly researched and comprehensive account of Nabokov's career established authoritatively the agenda for Nabokov Studies in several ways: firstly by further consolidating the view that Nabokov should be

read in the way he intended, through painstaking close attention to textual detail, with the conscious exclusion of theoretical considerations, and secondly by developing a convincing case for understanding Nabokov as a pioneering poet of consciousness, committed to challenging the limits of human cognition, its notions of time and space. This view, traceable to his *Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness* (1985) and developed further in his *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (1999), is predicated on a model of reading in which the reader progressively ascends to higher and higher levels of complexity through solving a series of intertextual and narratological problems of increasing refinement and difficulty. This model, as Boyd explains, is partly indebted to Nabokov's own interest in the form of the chess problem, with its own hermetically pre-determined solution.

Michael Wood's book, by contrast, is less invested in the solution-orientated scholarship proposed by Boyd and espoused by many who have followed in his footsteps. In *The Magician's Doubts* we find something like a sceptical reading of Nabokov, sensitive to the disjunction between the self-assurance of Nabokov's public face and the disquieting experience of reading the fiction. Wood's Nabokov is a less triumphant writer, one whose fiction and autobiography constantly probe and retrace doubts and anxieties about its own status through a poetics of loss, absence and aporia. The faultlines in Nabokov's biography – the premature deaths of family members and the experience of exile – are here understood to be essential formative elements in the development of Nabokov's aesthetics. Significantly, Wood does not avoid some theoretically-informed reflections on authorial presence, drawing for example on the work of Roland Barthes. In the context of the restricted parameters of Nabokov scholarship, Wood's book about Nabokov's risk-taking fiction took risks of its own, ones which have too rarely been repeated from within the community of Nabokov specialists.

This brief sketch of Nabokov Studies' development from the 1960s into the 1990s is intended to indicate the backdrop against which claims for a "transition" in the field may be evaluated. To sum up, the conceptual model for reading Nabokov remained largely unchallenged in its observation of the author's own injunctions. Within those limited parameters the broadest

tendency was to ever-more detailed internal mapping of his works – their allusive networks, wordplay and patterning, or what Nabokov would call “the mystery of literary structures” (*Lectures on Literature* 89). The tendency of this approach assumes a progressive interpretive movement through the text which leads, at each ‘solution’ to a new hermeneutic level. The question remains as to what the ultimate horizon of such a process might be, and two related answers have been presented. One would find the numerous hermeneutic paradoxes and patterns assimilated into the old Romantic notion of an ultimately transcendent or “timeless” art (this, at times, is what Nabokov himself seems to have suggested). The other would translate this metaphysics of literary form into a more crudely mystical but no less absolute form of “the beyond,” in which the text somehow situates itself at the intersection of life and death, and in which seemingly irresolvable impasses and aporia are subsumed by what Alexandrov, in the most fully realized pursuit of this methodology, called “the otherworld,” an ideal realm from which the dead may contact the living.<sup>3</sup>

### **Challenges to the Consensus**

Given the widespread consensus achieved by such critical practices, and reflected in the cluster of essay collections which emerged from the Nabokov centenary in 1999, it should not surprise us that some of the most innovative work to be published on Nabokov has come from scholars who, rather than engaging in a single-author perspective, have decentred him by finding a place for his most famous novel within broader conceptual or theoretical frameworks to which the community of Nabokov scholars has traditionally been resistant. Thus, for example, sophisticated chapters on *Lolita* in Elisabeth Bronfen’s *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992) and Rachel Bowlby’s *Shopping with Freud* (1993) transgressed on critical taboos with lucid and challenging readings informed by theories of consumer culture, feminism and psychoanalysis. Paul Giles’ *Virtual Americas*, meanwhile, located *Lolita* historically within the period of the



emergence of American Studies in the academy and assesses the challenges it poses to myth creation based on national ideals. In doing so Giles indicates the ways in which Nabokov's polemic against examination of "the interrelation between the writer and the national or international community" conceals a complex and deeply ambivalent negotiation of American ideologies in the postwar.

*Lolita*, then, has become a crucial point of contact which has ensured that Nabokov Studies has not detached itself from the dominant methodologies of Anglo-American literary studies in the academy. The result of this, however, is that the diversity of critical writing on the novel far outweighs that devoted to any of his other works, and especially to his Russian-language fiction of the 1920s and early 30s. This is why one must look to French scholarship for a substantial monograph which is willing to explore the sustained application of modern literary theory to his fiction. Maurice Couturier's *Nabokov, ou la cruauté du désir* (2004) has not received the attention it deserves outside France.<sup>4</sup> Although Couturier uses a rich critical vocabulary touching on structuralism, narratology and modern European philosophy, the book's principle framework adopts Lacanian psychoanalytic theory as a means of understanding the interplay of desire across a range of Nabokov's Russian and English language works. Lacan's privileged position in French theory, a mediating interface between Freudian psychoanalysis and poststructuralism, facilitates some original analyses which are able to bring attention to plot and character together with questions of voice and style. It is instructive to compare the considerable impact of French postwar theory on Joyce Studies (particularly in the 1980s and 90s, before the resurgence of historicism) to the stonewalling it has received from the majority of Nabokov scholars. It is a fallacy to suppose that Nabokov's fiction is in any sense unamenable to such theorizing either, given his sustained (though largely unexamined) engagement with distinctively French poetics from Stéphane Mallarmé through to Alain Robbe-Grillet. A set of concerns with the metaphysics of presence, textual metonymies, the materiality of the book and the aesthetics of temporality which Nabokov shares with these figures

also provide the background for much of Barthes' and Derrida's own critical work. Nevertheless, the sporadic efforts to bring such concerns to bear on Nabokov's fiction have met with mixed success.<sup>5</sup>

### **Mapping Nabokov's Locations**

By contrast, an area which has received more sustained and productive critical attention since the centenary is the mapping of Nabokov's location in literary and intellectual history. Annotational research, as we have seen, has always been an important element of Nabokov Studies. The transition in this case is to be found in the move towards understanding Nabokov and his work to be participating in networks of intellectual and critical currents which are not directly or intentionally signalled through encoded allusion. In other words, by expanding critical attention beyond the fictional worlds over which Nabokov asserted his control, we then might be able to return to the fiction with a renewed sense of its place.

Stephen Blackwell's monograph, *The Quill and the Scalpel: Nabokov and the Worlds of Science* (2009), is arguably the most substantial and well-researched book on Nabokov for some time. Here we are able to see how Nabokov's aesthetic practices related to his interest in scientific research. His own work within Lepidoptery and his failed attempts to provide a rigorous scientific basis for the attacks made in interviews and novels on the power of Darwinian explanations of the natural world receive generous attention, as does his consistent engagement with developments in psychology and physics. The narrative which emerges here is one of the writer's unflagging efforts to undermine all determinist scientific models within his fiction. Nabokov's fictional worlds, in which, for example, Humbert Humbert defies all attempts at finding a causal psychological explanation for his sexual predilections, or Van Veen denounces Einsteinian physics in a rather grandiloquent but intellectually dubious lecture, seem ultimately to define themselves by opposition to mainstream scientific thought in a defensive dialectic intended to protect them from threats to their autonomy.<sup>6</sup>

We can also see the beginnings of a critical interest in Nabokov's relationship to philosophy. For some time Leona Toker's reflections on Nabokov in relation to Bergson and Schopenhauer stood out as an exception in the field, but Thomas Karshan's two articles on Nabokov and ideas of play have shown that there is interesting territory to be excavated here.<sup>7</sup> Karshan finds in the aesthetic philosophy of Kant and Schiller a compelling context for examining Nabokov's development as an artist from the structured game playing of the early Russian fiction through to the free play of the later novels. As well as offering a fresh perspective on Nabokov's engagement with philosophy, this approach also has the benefit of proposing a logic behind Nabokov's development as an artist from the 1920s through to *Lolita* and *Ada* (of particular value is his coverage of some of the the earliest Russian fiction). Thinking in philosophical terms about writing as play also provides an alternative route into questions about ethics and Nabokov's fiction, since Karshan's work indicates an increasing tendency towards ethical ambivalence and aesthetic disinterestedness on the part of the author.

The third area in which Nabokov's location remains contested is that of literary modernism. In his critical writing during his American years Nabokov cleaved the newly developing modernist canon in two, declaring writers such as Joyce, Proust and Kafka to be masters, while denouncing others, such as Mann, Faulkner and Eliot, as charlatans and frauds. The logic, if there is one, behind this rather Manichean view of the literary world has never been fully elucidated. Neither do we have much of a sense of whether we can think of Nabokov himself as fitting into any of the categories which have emerged through literary studies under the banner of "modernism." The closest we have to a negotiated route through these problems is John Burt Foster Jr.'s *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism* (1993), which presents a very useful survey of Nabokov's many allusions to modernist writers and proposes an aesthetics of memory developed through intertextuality. Here, though, modernism is assumed as a retrospective category equivalent to the aesthetic practices held in common by the writers collected in the modernist canon – what we do not get is a diachronic account of how Nabokov's art responded to the evolving, heterogeneous and volatile rhetoric of the formally experimental and avant-garde writers which Nabokov variously read, admired and

denounced from his adolescence in Silver-Age Russia through to his maturity in the age of American New Criticism. Foster tells us much about the “art of memory” which Nabokov shared with a number of canonical modernists, but we must also consider modernism’s complex relationship to its own historical moment, its anxious meditations on historical change and public time, its susceptibility to seduction by mass politics, and its responses to the two World Wars. We know that such questions troubled Nabokov, and played a part in the development of his art. These lines of enquiry have been recently pursued in my ’s two articles, “*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and the Modernist Impasse” (2007) and “*Lolita’s* ‘Time Leaks’ and Transatlantic Decadence” (2009), which read these novels as self-consciously positioning themselves within particular modernist trajectories, in response to changing historical and critical landscapes.

### **Nabokov, World Literature and the Question of Relevance**

Nabokov’s oeuvre has also lent itself to critical consideration in the context of growing academic interest in transnationalism and the idea of world literature. The author’s own exilic status, his multilingualism and autotranslation, and his exploration of hybrid geographies all contribute to a tension in his writing between the historical effects of international politics on his biography on one hand, and on the other a form of virtualism which invites us to understand the construction of borders to be as provisional as the construction of fiction. Nabokov’s true home, goes the critical cliché, was in the world of the imagination, which respects no borders. Still, he found time, during his creative reimagining of political geography in the writing of *Ada*, to congratulate Lyndon Johnson on his “admirable work” in pursuing the Vietnam War in 1965 (*Selected Letters* 378).

So what kind of resistance to, or compensation for, international containment and domestic repression are offered by Nabokov’s works as they are taken up by the community of world

literature consumers? For the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk, who writes an interesting essay on Nabokov in his 2007 collection, *Other Colours*, it was precisely the detached refusal to engage with the social which attracted a young novelist trying to shake off the literary expectations of a restrictive regime: "Seen from Turkey, the characters from *Ada* and other Nabokov novels from the 1970s looked like fantasies of a nonexistent world, 'cut off from the present.'" Fearing he might be "smothered by the cruel and ugly demands of the social milieu" Pamuk felt a "moral imperative" to embrace Nabokov's increasingly hermetic late works. The cost of this decision, as Pamuk admits in his essay, is the necessity of guilt: "This was the price I paid for the beauty of the novels and also for the pleasure I took from them" (155).<sup>8</sup>

An alternative to Pamuk's reception of Nabokov is offered by Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2004), which gives an account of a clandestine women's reading group in Iran in the 1990s, who read contraband works of fiction smuggled across the border. We know that Nabokov listed book clubs as one of the factors which will *not* make you a good reader, but Nafisi nevertheless attempts to find in *Lolita* and *Invitation to a Beheading* allegories for the kinds of cruelty suffered by women in Iran, an unambiguous compulsion to find in Nabokov's works something more than just the "aesthetic bliss" he claimed for it. Eric Naiman, in a critique of Nafisi's book, mischievously compares her efforts to find a political relevance for fiction to those of Nikolai Chernyshevskii, the Russian utilitarian critic which Nabokov satirically portrays in *Dar (The Gift)*. His argument ultimately leads to a defence of Nabokov's professed apoliticism, and the assertion that "the price of literature's relevance may be a diminution of its literary value" (38). This is a calculatedly provocative statement, and while Naiman effectively exposes the contradictions in Nafisi's position, which pays lip service to the principles of Nabokovian reading while ignoring them in practice, he does not acknowledge the extent to which the structure of this problematic is replicated at the level of the master's own practice. Nabokov cited his two dystopian novels, *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister* as his "absolutely final indictments of Russian and German totalitarianism" (*Strong Opinions* 156). This is not because of their ostensible content, but because of their aesthetics and

style – their *form*. In the sense that this was developed consciously in response to historical and biographical realities, it demands to be understood as having a politics, a relevance, of its own. The kind of relevance suggested by Nafisi, based on allegory and identification, is not robust enough to withstand critical interrogation. The demand, however, must be for a more sophisticated understanding of relevance, and not an anxious defence of “literary value.” The most interesting recent attempt to theorise what such relevance might entail is that of Agnès Edel-Roy, who, looking to Nabokov’s reference to a “magic democracy” in his lecture on Dickens’ *Bleak House* (*Lectures on Literature* 124), finds in Nabokov’s fiction the space for dissent from his tyrannical narrators, an art which “frees the reader from the enslaved representations decreed by complete imposters, these false creators who are made of the same stuff as real tyrants” (33). There is much room for argument around what kind of politics might emerge from Nabokov’s aesthetics, whether these be found in the act of criticism itself, or (more problematically I think) inherent in the writer’s own practice.

Nabokov’s escape from oppression (like Nafisi’s) was through transatlantic travel rather than fiction. Rachel Trousdale (2009) takes Nabokov’s own account of this journey across the Atlantic in 1940 as the starting point for her reading of Nabokov as the “model transnational.”<sup>9</sup> In her analysis, which examines his reception by American writer Michael Chabon, the puzzle-solving beloved of so many of Nabokov’s readers is contextualized as part of a strategy which metaphorically transforms geographical displacement into a means of community-building among diasporic and exilic individuals. The attraction to Nabokov for writers such as Salman Rushdie and Zadie Smith is his ability to “create alternatives to national identity” (100). The difficulty, as Trousdale acknowledges, is the necessity of finding a “balance between the imminent political threat and the transcendent escape” (112). This assertion that the relationship is not one in which the former is simply swallowed by the achievement of the latter is extremely welcome. There is a suggestion of a dialectic here, a far more productive one than the caricature of the “Hegelian triadic series” which Nabokov refers to in *Speak, Memory* and models as the way to solve a chess problem (211). The risk is to introduce

contingency as that which constantly defines Nabokov's transcendent impulses – to bring the intricately ordered worlds of the novels into dialogue with their own limits. Such limits haunt the fiction in two guises. One is in the form of the social and historical, the experience of which provides the very foundations from which Nabokov's aesthetic system develops. The other, becoming increasingly prominent in the later work from *Pale Fire* onwards, is the biological necessity of aging and death, the grossly material betrayal offered to the mind by the decrepit body.

### **Nabokov's Limits: History and the Body**

Scholarly discussion of how Nabokov's experience of the historical impacts upon his fiction is now developing some momentum. The earliest efforts to interrogate Nabokov's ahistoricism concentrated naturally on the two dystopian novels, *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*.<sup>10</sup> However, the most effective challenge to the monolithic ahistoricism of Nabokov scholarship came from Susan Mizruchi's 2003 article "*Lolita* in History," which openly took issue with Nabokov by asserting the critical obligation to read the novel within a historical framework. Mizruchi's insistence that we understand *Lolita* as a novel painfully enmeshed in the aftermath of the holocaust, compulsively rehearsing the imagery of the death camps, provides a powerful counterargument to those who would prefer to read it as a formalist triumph in which historical contingency is transcended. Since then, work by Steven Beletto (2006) and Adam Piette (2009) has sought to ask what it means to think of Nabokov as a Cold War writer with his own ideological investments in the conflict, rendered visible through espionage, surveillance and the metaphor of nuclear fusion. My own work on reading Nabokov alongside Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno has examined how Nabokov's writing adapted its modernist premises in the face of the rise of Nazism and the Second World War in Europe and the United States ("Nabokov and Benjamin"; "Nabokov's Dystopia"; "Unpacking Nabokov's Library"). Meanwhile, Barbara Straumann's 2008 comparative study of

Nabokov and Alfred Hitchcock proposes “to read their texts against the background of exile as a momentous experience of the twentieth century’s history and culture” (8). Straumann’s reading builds explicitly on Michael Wood’s earlier exploration of grief and loss in the fiction and autobiography, but, in her analysis of *Speak*, *Memory* and *Lolita* she also deploys Freudian notions of the family romance as well as modern trauma theory. The overarching thesis here, inspired by Fredric Jameson’s theoretical work, is that of history as “absent cause.” Jameson’s own comments on Nabokov, particularly in *A Singular Modernity: Essays on the Ontology of the Present* (2002), disclose a distinct impatience with his writing, but nevertheless his theoretical reflections on the relationship between modernist form and historical conditions provide a fruitful critical route into Nabokov’s own formal experimentalism.

When the success of *Lolita* gave Nabokov enduring financial security for the rest of his life, he gave up his teaching post at Cornell and moved to Switzerland, where he spent the rest of his life living in a hotel in Montreux. It is no coincidence that the fiction he produced after this move in 1960 shows a marked retreat from the historical exigencies felt in his mid-career works, saturated as they are by the concerns of political violence, anti-Semitism, incarceration and tyranny (*Pale Fire*, composed mostly after the move to Switzerland, nevertheless anchors itself off a political assassination). At this point in Nabokov’s career, the experienced limits of the historical and the social are sublimated into the mortal limits of aging flesh, first glimpsed in John Shade’s “wobbly heart” and “slight limp” (*Pale Fire* 20), then more fully manifested in Van’s inexorable deterioration in *Ada*, overweight, with creaking vertebrae, heartburn and intercostal neuralgia. This theme continues through the unfortunate protagonists in *Transparent Things* (1972) and *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974) to find its apotheosis in Nabokov’s unfinished, now posthumously published, novel, *The Original of Laura* (2009). Here, as we now know, Nabokov’s own anxieties about approaching mortality are transfigured into a vision of the body itself as Other, located especially in Philip Wild’s gross obesity (“I loathe my belly, that trunkful of bowels, which I have to carry around, and everything connected with it.” [149]). Wild’s attempts at using the power of the mind to make



his own disgustingly material body disappear finds its historical counterpart as early as Nabokov's 1938 Russian short story, "Istreblenie tiranov" ("Tyrants Destroyed"), in which a dictator is overcome not through assassination or revolution but through the imaginative recreation of his biography by the writer. Doubts about the ultimate success of both these 'triumphs' of the power of consciousness necessarily remain. The victory of Nabokov's aesthetics over such historical or biological limits, even if we entertain them intellectually, are at best pyrrhic. A critical appraisal of Nabokov's late works, capable of creating a coherent framework around *The Original of Laura*, together with his other involuted and increasingly self-referential fictions of the 1970s, will doubtless emerge in the coming few years. My expectation would be that such work requires serious philosophical and theoretical consideration of the relationship which came to obsess Nabokov, between writing and death, or, to put this another way, of the sense in which textuality might mediate between idealism and materialism. We will have returned by then to the territory of Nabokov's "otherworld," but this time with a renewed conceptual apparatus capable of doing more justice to the demands made by the fiction.

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<sup>1</sup> Field published two further, increasingly eccentric, biographical studies of Nabokov (*Nabokov: His Life in Part* [1977] and *VN: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov* [1986]), which suffer from numerous errors and were largely superseded by Boyd's work in *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* [1990] and *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* [1991]).

<sup>2</sup> Extracts from Appel, Stegner and Bader, together with a useful commentary on their positions, are offered in an excellent guide to criticism on *Lolita* edited by Christine Clegg for Icon Critical Guides (2000). It also provides coverage of various other critics discussed in this article.

<sup>3</sup> Following Barton Johnson's *Worlds in Regression* (1985), which can be said to have initiated the interest in otherworldly readings, Alexandrov's *Nabokov's Otherworld* (1991) attempted a rereading of the oeuvre in the context of the Russian Silver-Age mysticism, which, he argues, remained a major influence on Nabokov.

<sup>4</sup> Although it has yet to be published in English, Couturier's own translation of his introduction is currently available online at: <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/coutnab1.htm>

<sup>5</sup> For two readings of *Pale Fire* which engage poststructuralist theory, see articles by Hennard and Le-Roy Frazier. Martin Häggglund's exchange with Brian Boyd over questions of time in *Ada* dramatises the strength of resistance to theoretical perspectives on the fiction.

<sup>6</sup> Two other monographs, outside the scope of this article, seek to find common ground between Nabokov and intellectual currents in twentieth-century culture: Michael Glynn's *Vladimir Nabokov: Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences on His Novels* (2007) and Marina Grishakova's *The Models of Space and Time in V. Nabokov's Fiction* (2006).

<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Senderovich and Shvarts (2007/8) have reinitiated consideration of Schopenhauer as a philosophical context for Nabokov's work

<sup>8</sup> Neil Cornwell (2009) has recently built a convincing case for Pamuk's extensive debts to Nabokov's aesthetic practice in terms of metafictional strategies as well as the operation of memory and nostalgia.

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<sup>9</sup> Trousdale's essay has now been supplemented by her book, *Nabokov, Rushdie and the Transnational Imagination: Novels of Exile and Alternate Worlds* (2010).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example Baxter (1977), Rampton (1984), and Walter (2002).

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