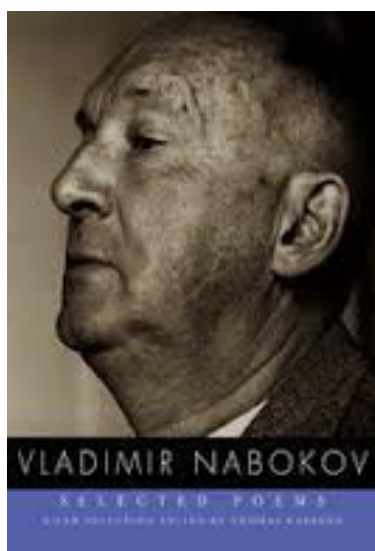


*Collected Poems*, by Vladimir Nabokov, ed. and introduced by Thomas Karshan; London: Penguin Classics, 2012; ISBN 9780141197173. Notes. Index of Titles. Index of First Lines. First-time Publication Details. li+278 pp.; *Plays (Lolita: A Screenplay, The Tragedy of Mr Morn)*, by Vladimir Nabokov, London: Penguin Classics, 2012; ISBN 9780141197210, 522 pp.



Two recent instalments in the 22-volume edition of Vladimir Nabokov's works published in the Penguin Classics Series present him not as an acclaimed novelist but as a dramatist and a poet. Volume 19, entitled *Plays*, contains Nabokov's own version of *Lolita's* screenplay for Kubrick's film adaptation of the novel, as well as a recent translation of his early play *The Tragedy of Mister Morn*. *Collected Poems* (volume 20) contains a plethora of verses covering several decades, including several previously unpublished translations by the author's son Dmitri.

On the one hand, *Plays* seem to underpin the conventional views of Nabokov as a literary figure. Thus, Nabokov's 1973 introduction to *Lolita's Screenplay* contains several references to Kubrick's "modifications, the garbling of my best little finds, the omission of entire scenes, the additions of new ones, and all sorts of other changes" (12). As a result, in Nabokov's opinion, the final version is a "picture as unfaithful to the original script as an American poet's translation from Rimbaud or Pasternak" (13). Being a ruthless adherent to the source text in his own translation practice, Nabokov could not have approved of such changes, which explains his decision to publish his initial script – after a further revision – in

1974. Carried out “not in pettish refutation of a munificent film but purely as a vivacious variant of an old novel” (14), the revised screenplay contains several significant variations on the film version. Most notable of these is Nabokov’s interpretation of the role of Quilty and the author’s own cameo appearance as a butterfly hunter discussing entomological terminology and ‘rare species’ with Humbert (178-9). However, the screenplay’s size and its oversaturation with detail may serve as a proof for the necessity of the above-mentioned omissions, confirming the existing tradition of acknowledging Nabokov as a famed novelist rather than a playwright.

On the other hand, *Plays* reveal a lesser-known Nabokov. *Tragediia gospodina Morna*, written between late 1923 and early 1924, received a very reserved response among Russian émigré circles in Berlin and was left unfinished. It was not published until 1997 when, edited by Serena Vitale and Ellendea Proffer and introduced by Vadim Stark, it first appeared in Russian in the literary journal *Zvezda*. A revised edition was carried out by Andrei Babikov and was published in St Petersburg by Azbooka Press in 2008. It contains a commentary and an appendix with the play’s description and its rough plan by Nabokov; its text is based on the original manuscript kept in Nabokov’s archives at the Library of Congress.

The current English translation is based on the latter edition and has been made by Anastasia Tolstoy and Thomas Karshan. Karshan, a lecturer at the University of East Anglia and the author of a recent monograph *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play* (OUP, 2011), precedes the translation with an introduction. In it, he highlights the play’s “elusiveness of happiness; the creative and destructive playfulness of the imagination, [...] the sovereignty of desire and illicit passion” (291), tracing these themes in Nabokov’s further work. Karshan notices numerous Shakespearean influences within the play’s structure, from its themes (such as an illusory kingship) to versification (which, according to him, underwent a further cultural filter – that of Pushkin’s ‘little tragedies’). In this well written comparative overview Karshan skilfully juxtaposes both Russian and English influences on young Nabokov, citing and listing numerous sources, including Nabokov’s later works. Various references to the play, available both in English and in Russian, are provided in the *Further Reading* section after the introduction. The quotations from Nabokov’s description of the play are helpful in contextualising it, and Karshan succeeds in providing a nuanced picture for the reader. He

even corrects Nabokov's factual error in his description of the play as borrowing "something from the 17th century Venice of Casanova", by returning Casanova to the 18th century. It is a pity there is no note accompanying this correction though, as it looks rather like a misquote. Perhaps textological intricacies of this kind could have been pre-empted with a commentary similar to the one accompanying the Russian edition. This could be helpful for a reader of an unfinished literary work, even though Penguin's cannot be considered a full scholarly edition. Such a commentary would also be useful for an explanation and translation of the play's numerous 'speaking' names (Edmin, a homophone of Admin; Tremens, from Lat. 'fever'; Ganus alluding to Janus; Dandilio, to dandelion, etc.). A translation of Nabokov's earlier version of the play, or the play's description in prose, both of which accompany the Russian source text, would also be welcome.

The translation itself, however, is an excellent rendition of the original where several complicated passages are given an insightful interpretation. While translating "Segodnia otkryvayu / moi nebyvalyi prazdnik" – literally, "Today, I will open [or, inaugurate] / my unprecedented [or, fantastic] festival [or, holiday]" (310) as "Today I shall unleash my monstrous carnival" (393) can hardly be praised as an equivalent by a linguist, in the context of Act II where revolutionary Tremens declares his vision of terror – but it can serve as a prime example of what Eugene Nida defined as "dynamic equivalence". Nabokov would probably have declared this reading of the source text 'unfaithful'; moreover, as a translation formalist he would have had even more to say about the translators' decision "against trying to reproduce Nabokov's own fairly strict iambic pentameter" (312). Yet by choosing a "loose five-stress line" and steering clear from "awkward enjambments" (*ibid.*), Tolstoy and Karshan produced a version both enjoyable in English and incredibly close to the original. Its minor inconsistencies cannot diminish the excellent overall quality: "pyan'chuga-zolotar'" is translated as a "drunken goldsmith" (339) while a more correct rendition would be an "alcoholic cesspit cleaner". The phrase "Velikolepnye blazhenny" used by the king twice as a general greeting alludes to the Beatitudes, a reference hardly evident from the English "Splendid, blissful people!" (356). Finally, it is perhaps only the Shakespearean connection which can redeem "Dandilio, you gay dandelion" (356), as it is no longer a common equivalent for "veselyi oduvanchik" [happy dandelion]. Yet in spite of a few inconsistencies, or what Nabokov might have regarded "a rhyme lost in transmission to our discordant

language” (438-9), once or twice, *The Tragedy of Mister Morn* is a brilliant translation which makes a welcome addition to Nabokov’s body of work in English.

Nabokov’s *Collected Poems* is another exciting addition to English Nabokoviana, particularly welcome since several decades passed after the publication of his *Poems* (1959) and *Poems and Problems* (1970). Numerous poems published in *Rul’*, *Nabokovian*, *New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly* and several other periodicals over a few decades are gathered within this compilation. The volume also contains five previously unpublished translations by Dmitri Nabokov, whose name is given prominence in the edition on a par with his father. In fact, the collection starts with a section entitled ‘Poems Translated by Dmitri Nabokov’, and goes on to list Russian poems, then English poems from *Poems and Problems*, and finishing with English poems which were not included in the 1970 collection.

Of the new translations, *The University Poem* stands out not only because of its considerable length, but also because of the contrast between the *Onegin* stanza (used by Pushkin as the main vehicle for action in his *magnum opus*) and its contents (a reflexive description of a half-hearted Cambridge romance in Nabokov). While Thomas Karshan may be right that this contrast is precisely what “the reader without Russian is missing” (xxxii), the translation aims to emulate the form as closely as it can. A detailed translator’s note contained within the Notes (231-233) also provides some helpful guidance for the reader. Karshan supplements it with three further comments of his own, but – alas – that does not help to explain the reference to “some works by Pushkin, and / some Dahl” which the protagonist found “upon a magic counter” of an antiquarian bookseller in Cambridge, referring to Vladimir Dahl (or Dal’), a famed Russian lexicographer.

The notes, the index of titles, index of first lines and first-time publication details make this volume a helpful guide and catalogue of the varied poetic legacy of one of the 20th century’s best-known authors. Besides his son’s careful renderings, Nabokov’s own translations of his Russian verses give the “reader without Russian” a chance to experience yet another unexpected side of Nabokov: the one of an ardent literary translator who believed his greatest task to be “a poet’s patience / And scholiastic [sic] passion blent” (*On Translating ‘Eugene Onegin’*, 197). A poetic diary of a kind, the volume reveals a more vulnerable and pensive Nabokov than one might expect judging solely from his prose.

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