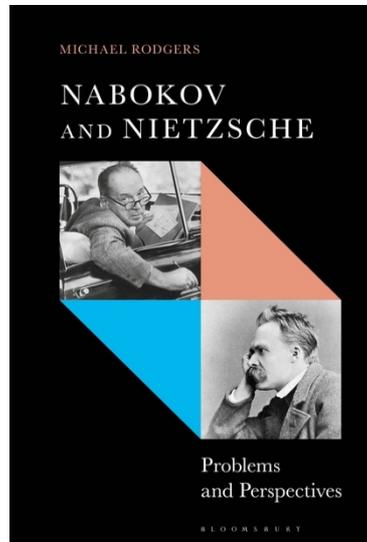


***Nabokov and Nietzsche: Problems and Perspectives*, by Michael Rodgers.** New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. ISBN 978-1-5013-3957-8. Bibliography. Index. xii + 170 pp.



In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche declared that his time had ‘not yet come’ and that ‘some are born posthumously’, predicting that ‘one day institutions will be needed in which men will live and teach as I understand living and teaching; maybe also by that time chairs will be founded for the interpretation of *Zarathustra*’. Although such chairs have not yet been founded (and probably never will be), the German Expressionist Gottfried Benn got it right when in 1950 he confessed that ‘everything my generation discussed, dissected [...] one can say suffered through [...] had already found its definitive formulation in Nietzsche; thereafter everything was exegesis’. But it was not just Benn’s generation; from very early on after his death, one can say that Nietzsche had gone global.

As Michael Rodgers reminds us in the introduction to his study, Nietzsche exercised huge influence on late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Russian writers, despite his work being completely banned from Russia from 1872 to 1898. (After censorship rules were relaxed when Nikolai II succeeded Aleksandr III in 1894, a translation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* soon appeared, followed by translations of almost all of Nietzsche’s works.) The influence of Nietzsche on such Russian Silver Age writers as Vyacheslav Ivanov, Andrei Bely and Aleksandr Blok, not to mention Ivan Bunin and Vladimir Mayakovsky, can be attributed to Nietzsche’s belief in the Dionysian principle; his individualist aesthetics; and the mystical, or even

religious, dimension of his work (7). And, as a collection of papers edited in 1994 by Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal demonstrated, Nietzsche persisted in transmuted form as a presence even in Soviet culture (7).

Rodgers's focus, however, is on the work of Vladimir Nabokov, despite the fact that Nabokov 'had very little to say directly on Nietzsche' (14). While noting that it is always 'dangerous' to interpret silence, Rodgers rightly senses that the German philosopher's impact on Nabokov is more significant than the latter's allusions to Nietzsche and his thought would suggest. For a start, that impact should be seen in the context of Nabokov's 'curious' relationship with Germany and its culture in general (14), and in his study Rodgers argues that Nabokov's silence on Nietzsche 'can be seen as respectful, rather than contemptuous or indifferent' (15). Of course, it would be wrong to assume a unified reaction to the work of any writer, let alone Nietzsche, as the sheer variety of Russian responses to Nietzsche — ranging from Blok's aesthetic via Nikolai Berdyaev's religious to P. D. Ouspensky's metaphysical interpretations — indicates (16). Consequently, Rodgers identifies 'specific aspects' of Nietzsche's thought as they feature in Nabokov's work, 'distilling' Nietzsche's project to such philosophical tenets as eternal recurrence, perspectivism, transvaluation, master-slave morality, the will-to-power and the *Übermensch*, and 'applying' them to particular areas in Nabokov's work. The following six chapters are thus divided into three sections entitled 'Nietzschean Engagements', 'Nietzschean Readings' and 'Beyond Nietzsche'.

In *The Strange Life of Ivan Osokin* (1915), Ouspensky made explicit reference to Nietzsche's complex (and much contested) notion of eternal recurrence (33, n. 11), a concept that Martin Heidegger would later describe in his famous lecture course of 1937 as 'the fundamental doctrine in Nietzsche's philosophy' (27). Rodgers uses the notion of eternal recurrence to examine Nabokov's conception of memory in *Pnin*, *Mary* and *The Defense*, demonstrating 'how certain features of the texts demonstrate deep preoccupation with eternal recurrence but also raise the issue of conflict' (17). Turning to the Nietzschean concepts of 'master-slave morality' and 'the will-to-power' and their relation to Nabokov's writing, Rodgers draws out a rhetorical similarity between the essay 'Good Readers and Good Writers' in *Lectures on Literature* and Nietzsche's definitions of his terms. Two short stories, 'Recruiting'

and ‘The Vane Sisters’, are used to illustrate what Rodgers calls Nabokov’s ‘will to disempower’ (57).

The next chapter further illustrates ‘reader (dis)empowerment’ by providing a Nietzschean reading of *Lolita* as an exercise in ‘Nietzschean morality’ (67) and, more specifically, in ‘moral disorientation’ (82). Rather than proposing Humbert Humbert as a traditional Nietzschean *Übermensch*, Rodgers argues that he serves as ‘a vehicle for questioning the rules and codes of society’ (89); in effect, Nabokov is asking the same question as Nietzsche did in *Twilight of the Idols*, ‘whether we have really grown more moral’. And in chapter 4, Rodgers considers whether the concept of ‘internal authorship’ and Nietzsche’s concept of perspectivism can be used to read *Pale Fire* (Nabokov’s ‘most interpretively resistant novel’) as ‘a number of different, but *equally valid*, novels’ (18). This approach, Rodgers suggests, enables us to see Nabokov as trying to ‘replicate Nietzsche’s privileging of interpreting human experience only in life-affirming ways’ (112).

It is entirely consistent with how Nietzsche wished us to read his philosophy that some of Rodgers’s most interesting insights are to be found in the concluding section, ‘Beyond Nietzsche’. Whereas chapter 3 had discussed the problem of moral disorientation, chapter 5 examines how Nabokov’s works suggest a similarity between their protagonists and his own literary persona, on the one hand, and the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, on the other – while problematizing that very similarity. The representation of pity in *Bend Sinister* is a case in point: while Nietzsche identifies pity in *The Gay Science* as our ‘great danger’ and describes it as an obstacle to ‘becoming one’s self’ (130), pity is central to Nabokov’s works. And in the final chapter, Rodgers undertakes a synthesis of Nietzsche’s materialist vision — according to Zarathustra, ‘that “other world”, that inhuman, dehumanized world which is a heavenly Nothing, is well hidden from men’ — with the transcendent outlook of Nabokov’s concept of *potustoronnost* (141-142). The key text here is Nabokov’s least well-known novel, *The Gift*, in which Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev’s outlook combines Nietzschean materialism and Nabokovian ‘otherworldliness’ by ‘pointing to the “beyond” in the everyday’ — to ‘an “other world” within the material that fuses the spiritual and earthly ‘through perception’s transformative capabilities’ (18). Such a reading supports a view of Nietzsche as propounding a form of *non-metaphysical transcendence*, underpinned by what could be termed a *vitalist materialism*.

It would also confirm the priority given by Nietzsche to the aesthetic, and his statement in *The Gay Science* that ‘we cannot look around our own corner: it is a hopeless curiosity that wants to know what other kinds of intellects and perspectives there *might* be’ should remind us that ‘curiosity’ is one of the four terms used by Nabokov in his afterword to *Lolita* to describe art (the three others being tenderness, kindness, and ecstasy) (147 and 165). Thus Rodgers’s study not only demonstrates how Nabokov’s writings offer us ‘unique opportunities to experience the unsettling but exhilarating visions of Nietzschean philosophy’ (159) but also helps us understand what it would mean to adopt a Nietzschean attitude toward life.

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