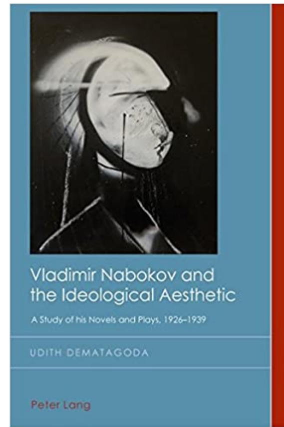
***Vladimir Nabokov and the Ideological Aesthetics: A Study of His Novels and Plays, 1926-1939*, by Udith Dematagoda.** Oxford et al: Peter Lang, 2017; ISBN 978-1-78707-291-6. XIV, 208 pp.



Nabokov Studies is a popular topic of research, persistently replenished by a considerable number of new instalments. In this context, Udith Dematagoda's monograph is undoubtedly an eye-catching and valuable addition to the field. The book offers an original reading of Nabokov's texts through the prism of the writer's ideological and political concerns, which are often eclipsed by the scholars' traditional focus on the aesthetic dimension of his oeuvre.

The study comprises the Russian period of Nabokov's writing: from 1926 to 1939. According to the author, these years contained significant political and biographical events germane to the writer's 'ideological aesthetic' (p. 20), and thus had a formative impact on the views elaborated and projected in his works. Given the limited scope of a single monograph, it would be certainly futile to embark on the enormous task of examining the entire corpus of Nabokov's Russian novels; however, a somewhat more detailed elucidation concerning the selection of the texts would be welcome by the reader, for it is difficult to refrain from asking why such major novels as *King, Queen, Knave* (1928), *The Defence* (1930) – whose publication effectively brought Nabokov to fame – and *Laughter in the Dark* (1936) remained outside the discussion.

The book consists of five chapters. The first one is dedicated to two early pieces of Nabokov's theatre – a very welcome examination of the writer's limited dramatic output, which has always enjoyed less critical attention than his fiction. The chapter focuses on *The Man from the USSR*, written and staged in 1927, and *The*

Waltz Invention of 1938. Laying the grounds for the analysis of the ideological opposition between the individual and the collective – a cornerstone of Nabokov's ideological platform – it traces the first signs of the burgeoning tension, or a 'cognitive dissonance', to use the book's wording (p. 181), between the writer's political adherence to liberal democracy and his aesthetic convictions, invariably fostering the primacy, not to say the 'tyranny' (p. 53), of the artistic will of the creator.

The subsequent chapters follow the chronological order, focusing respectively on Nabokov's works responding to the political and ideological conflicts of the early 1930s. The relatively short novella *The Eye* (1930) and the full-length novel *Despair* (1932) are discussed with the aim of exploring the writer's views on Russian Modernism by reference to his affinities with Symbolism and Formalism, and his outlook on the contemporary Soviet fiction. The chapter briefly brings in David Glynn's study on the Bergsonian influence on Nabokov's writings (p. 69). Considering that the notion of artistic autonomy lies at the very centre of Bergson's epistemology and forms the foundation of his views on one's cognitive apprehension of the real, a more elaborate comparison with Glynn's study would have been an asset for the discussion, offering some additional insights, for instance, into Nabokov's thoughts on authentic artistry, as opposed to the 'cheap artifice' of the mundane. This juxtaposition constitutes a foundational pillar of Dematagoda's analysis of Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* (1934), conducted in chapter 3. It is mapped onto Schopenhauer's ideas (art as the only possible relief from the unremitting process of willing, p.117-18), on the one hand, and onto the proliferating Socialist Realist canon, on the other – with some effective argumentation proving the latter to be nothing but a crooked-mirror image of the philosopher's views.

Reinforced by a subtle examination of *The Gift* (1938) in chapter 4, both chapters demonstrate Nabokov's 'resistance to materialist epistemology' (p. 21) traced back to the Russian tradition of socialist utilitarianism of the 1860s, promoted in the works of Belinsky and Chernyshevsky. The final chapter, dedicated to the first of Nabokov's English novels, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), aims at elucidating the nuances of his now fully-shaped intention to champion 'an ideological position which had at its centre an uncompromising commitment to individualism and aesthetic autonomy' (p. 22), thus rounding up the discussion started in chapter 1.

The book offers a detailed in-depth analysis of Nabokov's oeuvre (not limiting itself to his creative output but embracing the writer's correspondence, interviews and literary criticism), paying meticulous attention to textual details and expanding on the subtleties of his literary allusions. The overall line of inquiry comes across with somewhat less clarity and precision, which lies, predominantly, in the difficulty of providing a clear definition of the term 'ideology'. Although the introductory chapter offers a considerable volume of debate on the subject, this wide-ranging series of propositions (such as 'false consciousness', p. 17; 'a web of discursive effects in the real world of the reader's lived experience', p. 3; or a representation of 'the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence', p. 11) remains largely in the hermetic field of self-mapping. What is perhaps worth outlining in somewhat greater detail is the distinction between the domains of ideology and metaphysics. Such a distinction would be of some considerable importance, given that quite a few sections of the monograph (especially those concerning the relationship between epistemology and art) are focused on examining Nabokov's exposure to the views of Schopenhauer, the Russian Symbolists, Freud and Lacan – all of which have an established philosophical, rather than ideological, affiliation. In the same vein, in order to indicate the difference between the two, a more extensive comparison and contrast with V. E. Aleksandrov's study *Nabokov's Otherworld* (1991), which examines the metaphysical roots of Nabokovian aesthetics (using largely the same textual material), would have, arguably, offered some extra clarity in terms of specifying the premise of the debate.

To sum up, when approaching the legacy of such a complex and multifaceted author as Nabokov, one inevitably chances upon a three-fold area of concern related to: 1) the purely biographical and contextual (historical and political) aspect of the writer's creative process; 2) the myth which he conjures up and presents to the audience through the corpus of his works (discussed in the concluding section of the monograph); 3) the question of reception, i.e. how one makes sense of this from the perspective of the contemporary reader. By revealing the fundamental and irreconcilable tension, which, as proven, existed between what Nabokov wished to convey through his writings 'and what he was ideologically compelled to express instead' (p. 18), Dematagoda's monograph links up all three of the aforementioned

points, leading to a clearer and more nuanced understanding of Nabokov's universe and his oeuvre.

Olga Sobolev,
London School of Economics