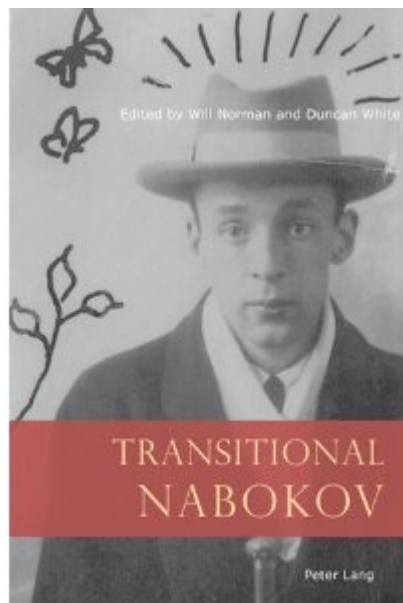


***Transitional Nabokov*, ed. by Will Norman and Duncan White. Oxford et al: Peter Lang, 2009; ISBN 978-3-03911-525-9, 311 pp. Index.**



The theme of transition is the primary focus of this new collection, which brings together established and new scholars alike, to explore new paradigms for approaching Nabokov's oeuvre. The collection offers a great many new insights, and original perspectives on various topics including the relationship between Nabokov's scientific and artistic work, translation, ethics, his influence on contemporary literature and an analysis of theatricality in a selection of his works from the thirties and forties. The idea for this work developed from a conference of the same title, held at the University of Oxford in 2007. Approaching Nabokov's works within the transitional framework, which incorporates new theoretical approaches, may, as this collection purports, provide impetus for the evolution of Nabokov studies as an academic discipline. It is a very engaging and interesting work; all of the essays within the collection are thoroughly readable, and provide fertile ground for further discussion and enquiry.

The relationship between Nabokov's artistic and scientific work is focus of the first thematic section, 'Nabokov & Science', which features essays by Stephen Blackwell, Leland De La Durantaye, Elizabeth Sweeny and the noted scholar Brian Boyd. In 'Nabokov's Fugitive Sense' (15) Blackwell analyses how the author's distinctive theories about the classification of Lepidoptera inform his conception of literary selfhood. Reluctant to fully

accept the taxonomical existence of ‘species’, he conceded that ‘if they do exist they do so taxonomically as abstract conceptions, mummified ideas severed from and uninfluenced by the continuous evolution of data-perception, some historical stage which may have endowed them at one time with a fugitive sense’ (*Nabokov’s Butterflies*, 302). The notion of ‘fugitive sense’, Blackwell maintains, is central to understanding how Nabokov’s scientific methodology ‘provides a crucial perspective on his artistic outlook’ (19). Brian Boyd’s contribution to this collection, is concerned with how the patterned form of Nabokov’s novels relates to evolution and the operations of human cognition. This essay, while using *Lolita* as its material, reaches beyond Nabokov studies, and suggests new avenues of enquiry into how it may be possible to approach literature in terms of its scientific evolution.

The transitional & transnational period of Nabokov’s life is the focal point of the second section, which includes essays by leading French Nabokov scholar Maurice Couturier, Chrstine Raguet, Rachel Trousdale and Neil Cornwell. Within his essay, Couturier examines the possibility of a French Nabokov, of how the author may developed as an artist had he chosen French as his primary language of literary composition. Couturier concludes that although fluent to a very high degree in French, and influenced by the many intricacies and literary traits which were present in the works of his beloved Flaubert and Proust, there was never any question as to what language he would chose to write his most famous works of the post-war period. Nabokov had an ‘ambiguous’ attitude towards France. ‘He liked the French language and many French writers, greatly enjoyed living on the French Riviera, but found Paris Grey, inhospitable and culturally arrogant’ (135). ‘America’, Couturier maintains, ‘was a great deal more congenial to his literary taste and his way of living, thinking and writing’ (135). Following on from the concept of the transnational Nabokov, Neil Cornwell offers a comparative essay on the works of Nabokov and the Nobel Prize winning Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk, examining the latter’s indebtedness to the former through an analysis of their comparable uses of memory, identity and the encryption of self within the text.

The final two parts of this collection are concerned with Nabokov’s work in other mediums; drama, a dalliance with opera – in addition to new perspectives on play and ethical responsibility. There are fascinating essays by Lara Delage-Toriel, Siggy Frank, Emily Collins, Yuri Leving, Michael Wood and Thomas Karshan. In arguably one of the most interesting essays within this collection, Emily Collins utilises the work of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud to examine the role of ‘objects’ in Nabokov’s work. With some notable

exceptions, questions of ideology, and the political, do not tend to feature prominently in Nabokov studies. Perhaps this is due to a certain adherence by scholars to Nabokov's insistence that his work 'has no social comment to make, no message to bring in its teeth... [It] does not uplift the spiritual organ of man, nor does it show humanity the right exit¹.' Of course, Nabokov's hostility towards Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxist criticism is well known – from his future biographers he demanded 'plain facts, no symbol-searching, no jumping at attractive but preposterous conclusions, no Marxist bunkum, and no Freudian rot' (*Strong Opinions*). However, Collins offers a very useful analysis of how magical objects 'frequently function as fetishes or as portals' (186), and how they relate to Marx's seminal definition of commodity fetishism in *Das Kapital*, and add to Theodore Adorno's & Max Horkheimer's expanded analysis of the functioning of the Culture Industry. As Collins maintains, Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of the denigration of the cultural value of art, in favour of its relative market value, is strikingly similar to Nabokov's feelings towards the philistine profession of advertising which was rife in his adopted homeland.

As we have seen, Vladimir Nabokov was 'ever in transit' (1), scientifically, linguistically, geographically, aesthetically and even philosophically. When one examines the details of Nabokov's eventful, often tragic, biography, one wonders why the idea for such a collection has never previously occurred. Perhaps because during those last two decades of his life, which he spent at the Montreux Palace Hotel, the great man allowed only staged glimpses into his private life and meticulously prepared interviews, through which he attempted to achieve the impossible task of dictating his own legacy. Will Norman & Duncan White, the editors of this collection, maintain that Nabokov is 'often the victim of the literary stereotyping he rallied against' (2), and there is no doubt that the caricature ('The Nabokov of critical cliché') which they present of the arrogant 'literary patrician' with a 'disdain for what he deemed the second-rate and the mediocre', 'the austere aesthete', 'the ahistorical autocritic' (2) reflects the general perception of the author outside of this small, but enthusiastic, scholarly community who are so intimately acquainted with his oeuvre and the most minute details of his life. It was the unforeseen, but nonetheless inevitable, outcome of those last two decades. That is why a collection such as this is so refreshing. Genius can no longer be justified by its mere existence, detached from any external factors and imbued with a mystical quality which discourages any explanation of its origins, its effects and the nature

¹ Nabokov's foreword to *Despair* (1965).

of its evolution. Nabokov was not a singular genius; his genius existed in many different transitional spaces.

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