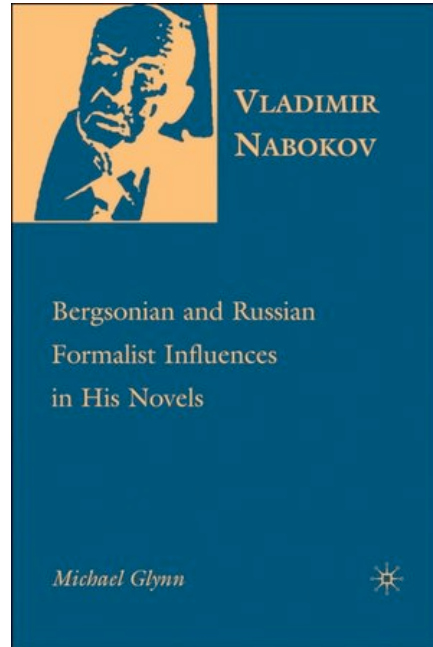


Vladimir Nabokov: Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences in His Novels, by Michael Glynn. Palgrave Macmillan, New York and Houndmills, 2007; ISBN 978-1-4039-7985-8, xi+202pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index



Readers who are interested in the Nabokovian field will appreciate Michael Glynn’s insightful study, which furthers our understanding of the advances and retreats in Vladimir Nabokov’s development as a novelist. Although this subject has enjoyed much attention both in academia and in the cultural community at large (especially after the recent release of *The Original of Laura* – an unfinished novel first published posthumously in 2009), this contribution, thoroughly versed as it is in Nabokov’s writings and in twentieth-century literary theory, is particularly welcome.

“I am almost exclusively a writer, and my style is all I have”, wrote a 66-year old Nabokov in one of his letters.¹ Following the author’s guidelines, Glynn embarks on an intellectual pursuit in an attempt to grasp the aesthetic wholeness of Nabokov’s works and to find the underlying influences that shaped his mode of expression. The book is elegantly written and well structured. It is divided into two parts, the first of which traces Nabokov’s affinities with the major literary and philosophical trends of the time: his anti-Symbolist epistemology as well as his allegiance to Russian

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Selected Letters, 1940-1977*, ed. D. Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/Bruccoli Clark Layman, 1989, pp. 381-382.

Formalism and Bergsonian thought; the second explores these influences across a representative selection of Nabokov's prose texts.

In the opening chapter the reader is presented with a meticulous and well sourced analysis of the critical scholarship on Nabokov's relations with the Symbolist school, within which Glynn's own argument is convincingly and effectively positioned. Although Glynn does not deny Nabokov's general intention to *épater les bourgeois*, as well as his hieratic attitude to the social role of artists and the "sense of a cosmic riddle" characteristic of his novels, attention is nevertheless drawn to the writer's essentially anti-Symbolist mode of cognition. Emphasis is placed on Nabokov's attitude to language, which has manifested itself in his profound interest in the precision of expression, as well as his hostility to the Symbolists' predilection for the suggestive power of words. The analysis is rendered even more effective through reference to Nabokov's encounters with poetry – the preferred mode of symbolist expression. Finally, the author dwells on Nabokov's generally hostile attitude to symbolism as a vehicle of social and political cohesion, which strongly contributes to the main argument and gives it a broader cultural dimension.

The following chapters examine respectively Nabokov's affiliation with the Formalist and Bergsonian intellectual systems. The discussion of Russian Formalism is more ingenious than persuasive. The fact that relatively few works are dedicated to this subject is hardly coincidental. Neither in his private correspondence nor in his creative output had Nabokov ever expressed any direct interest in Formalist thinking, and the claim that it is "unlikely that Nabokov would have been unfamiliar with the activities of the clamorous and polemical Formalist school" (31) in terms of influence is scarcely convincing (in fact, as the author himself puts it, "what Nabokov's precise stance toward Shklovsky would have been is uncertain", 35). Glynn draws a number of compelling parallels between Russian Formalists' (narrowed down to Shklovskian in particular) and Nabokovian aesthetics. He sees similarities in their refusal to treat verbal expression as an unmediated and transparent reflection of reality (31), in their emphasis on metonymic rather than metaphoric tradition (33), and, most importantly, in their conviction that the power of literature lies in its defamiliarising function – its ability to refresh the reader's perspective of the world. In this respect, Glynn's attempts to engage Nabokov with the elements of the Formalists outlook are not without grounding. This approach, however, has already been subjected to critical

examination by Russian scholars (Grishakova and Dolinin²), whose works, unfortunately, remained outside the present study. They argued that the Formalist reduction of literature to language, as well as their opposition of “the visual” and “the verbal” (particularly in the views of Tynianov and Eikhenbaum), were of lesser importance in Nabokov’s epistemology, which was based primarily on the dichotomy of images and ideas, and focused on the former as the essential material for literary texts.³

Nabokov’s affiliation with Bergsonian philosophy is a well established point of scholarly discussion. The book, however, gives an effective spin to the argument by relating Bergsonian anti-automatism to the Nabokovian paradigm of delusion – one of the major themes in the writer’s creative world. The notion of the deluded mind, treated as a consequence of the automated and conventional perception of reality, is extensively discussed in the second half of the book, where Nabokov’s epistemology is masterfully illuminated through a detailed analysis of his texts.

The second part of the book, “Deluded Minds, Deluded Worlds”, focuses on the novels, where the writer is actively engaged with a paradigm of delusion. For the purposes of the study, the novels are arranged into two groups: the first shows reality through the prism of a deluded artist (*Lolita*, *Pale Fire* and *Despair*); while the second is set in the deluded realm of automata (*Bend Sinister*, *Invitation to a Beheading* and *King, Queen, Knave*). These chapters offer a thoughtful examination of Nabokov’s novels, unparalleled in its comprehensiveness, clarity and inclusion of detail – a critical study that, at the same time, comes across as a meditation on the nature of literary art. Close attention is paid to the narrative devices and poetics of the text with nuanced references to philosophy and literary theory. The analysis culminates in a new conceptual conclusion that brings together ethical and aesthetic aspects of Nabokov’s works. By stressing the fact that delusion often results in cruel insensitivity, the author casts light on an intrinsic moral dimension of his writings, which leads to an even wider conceptual inference on the role of art in its ethical function to redress reality. Glynn masterfully shows how Nabokov never fails to

² M. Grishakova, “Visual’naia poetika V. Nabokova”, *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 2002, 54, p. 207; A. Dolinin, *Istinnnaia zhizn’ pisatel’ia Sirina*, St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2004, pp. 247-250.

³ The findings of the Russian scholars are summarised in a very comprehensive study by Arkadii Bliumbaum (“Antiistorizm kak esteticheskaia pozitsiia”, *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 2007, p. 86), who also draws attention to the fact that Shklovskian inability of “thinking in images” was parodied by Nabokov in *The Gift* (Dolinin 2004, p. 247).

challenge his own postulations and patterns, thereby creating a demanding and dynamic fabric of literary text. In finding its way through these enriching challenges, this book offers readers a welcoming entrée into Nabokov's cognitive aesthetics and their place in the complex world of the twentieth-century literature.

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