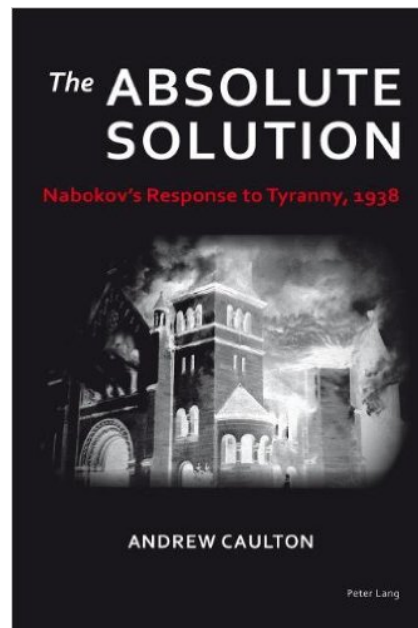


*The Absolute Solution: Nabokov's Response to Tyranny, 1938*, by Andrew Caulton. Oxford et al: Peter Lang, 2013; ISBN 978-3-0343-0956. Bibliography. Index. 232 pp.



Andrew Caulton's study of Nabokov focuses on the year 1938; a year which is generally considered to be one of the most formative in the life of the author but also, as Caulton notes, remains one of the most obscure in terms of available biographical material. With the ascension of Sergei Taboritsky, one of the fascist thugs responsible for the murder of his father, to a prominent position within the Nazi government in 1936, Nabokov sensed that it was dangerous to remain in Berlin with his Jewish wife and child, and took trips abroad in order to look for a situation in either France or England. It was also in 1938 that Nabokov wrote his first novel in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and conducted an affair with a Parisian Russian émigré named Irina Guadagnini, which came close to ending his marriage.

It is Caulton's contention that 1938 is a year which is of 'vital interest in a consideration of the man and his work' (xi) and on this point we must agree unequivocally. The tumultuous historical and ideological processes occurring around Nabokov during this particular period inevitably affected the character of the work of this avowedly, though self-proclaimed, apolitical writer – and there is much lively analysis within Caulton's study. However, the work itself has a somewhat odd structure, beginning with a 'chronological

survey of 1938', which details the personal and political context within which the work resides – and offers passing analyses of the minor works of this period. Following this very brief and somewhat fragmented first section, comes an extended analysis of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, which constitutes the main body of the study. Admittedly, the efficacy of this structure is at best underwhelming; at worst, confused and piecemeal. It is difficult to gauge the intended audience of this study, as it purports to be a work of scholarship yet is written in a manner comprehensible to the general reader. We are informed that this work derives from Caulton's doctorate, completed in 2005, and it is evident that he has found some difficulty in revising his thesis for publication and has to some extent given in to the temptation of including far too much material than is necessary for a succinct argument. Thus, the first part of the work gives the overall impression of being in many ways surplus to requirements.

Within the analysis of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Caulton has transgressed Nabokov's dictum to avoid 'attractive' but ultimately preposterous conclusions. Amongst the many fragmentary insights, which are often proposed without being developed further nor having really contributed much to the coherency of an overall argument, is the particularly absurd notion that Sebastian Knight is an agent of the British Secret Service. There is nothing – i.e. nothing supported by solid evidence – that comes close to a 'revelation' in Caulton's work. It relies heavily upon a tired strain of Nabokov studies which is, in the second decade of this century, incredibly predictable and dated. The ultimate desire seems to be to give Nabokov's work some sort of theistic or transcendental meaning, through the uncovering of what Caulton describes as the work's 'covert level'. Unsurprisingly, the 'Absolute Solution' to all questions of life and death, the quote which forms both the title and largely the basis of this study, turns out to be nothing more mysterious than a unfathomable belief in a higher power. No doubt, Caulton, as many other scholars before him, took at face value Nabokov's oft quoted platitude that he knows 'more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more'. Yet Caulton perhaps should have paid equal attention to Nabokov's remark that he could 'only explain God's popularity by an atheist's panic' (*Strong Opinions*, 125).

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