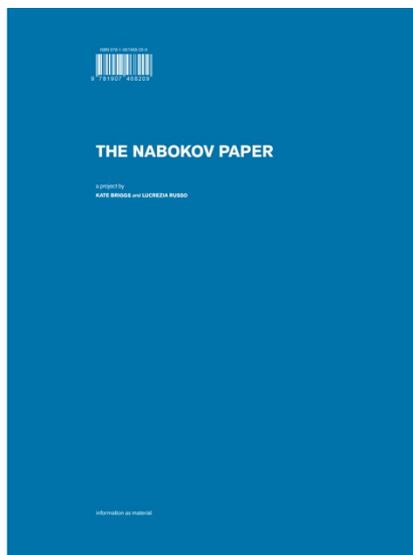


***The Nabokov Paper*, ed. by Kate Briggs and Lucrezia Russo. Acklam, UK: information as material [publishing house], 2013. ISBN 978-1907468209. 104 pp.**



Nabokov's posthumously published *Lectures on Literature* have been assessed chiefly in terms of Nabokov's literary opinions. Kate Briggs and Lucrezia Russo's edited collection, *The Nabokov Paper*, aims to turn attention instead to Nabokov's pedagogy by offering creative interpretations of his teaching methods through answering questions from the mock examination paper included at the end of the *Lectures*. The examination features questions pertaining to two of the seven novels covered in the lectures — *Bleak House* and *Madame Bovary* — leaving *Mansfield Park*, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Swann's Way*, *The Metamorphosis*, and *Ulysses* bereft of sample questions. Briggs and Russo “read back through the lectures and reformulate[d] Nabokov's exercises and observations into further questions” (6). The result is an appropriation of Nabokov's esoteric teaching techniques as a methodological jump-start for creative interpretation. While Nabokov would doubtlessly disprove of the contributors' appropriation of his strong opinions in *Lectures* — these responses certainly do not reiterate what he says in the lectures — Briggs and Russo achieve their goal of demonstrating the fertile results of taking Nabokov at his word that he encourages creative re-readers. The book forms an open invitation to consider the methods posed

by the examination, even taking the form of lined paper akin to an examination script for the book's blank pages.

The Nabokov Paper contributes to the growing output of artistic and creative responses to Nabokov's works. The affiliation with Information as Material immediately marks the project as an artists' book rather than a collection of scholarly essays. More accurately, *The Nabokov Paper* is an exhibition book, documenting the objects on display in a showcase at Shandy Hall during Autumn 2013, approximating any physical elements that could not be transferred directly to print. Due to this setup, it is unsurprising that book artists are well represented in contributors' lists, among academics, cartographers, conceptual poets, architects and other artists. This creates a diverse range of responses to Nabokov's questions that frequently diverge from the scholarly essay towards visual and multimodal expressions.

The experiment resulted in 35 responses from almost 40 contributors. While not all the questions received answers, some provoked multiple replies. The final project forms a cacophony of interpretations offering a variety of innovative approaches to seven highly canonical works of literature with a Nabokovian spin. Some of the more creative and information responses in the book include Lucrezia Russo's transformation of Nabokov's synaesthesia as a form of visual alliteration to answer a question about alliteration in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (36-37) that reveals the vibrancy of colour Nabokov saw when he looked at text. Other highlights include Kate Briggs's tracing of Mr Guppy in *Bleak House* through use of transparent slides in order to focus on where he appears on the page rather than in the narrative (30-31), and Simon Morris's subversion of a question about the vast vocabulary of *Ulysses* through creating an animation of flicking through Simon Popper's alphabetized edition of Joyce's novel (99). The range of approaches to the question ensures that the exhibition does not become repetitive, but offers a new challenge with each response. While these do not necessarily reveal hidden truths about the seven familiar novels, they allow the reader to reconsider their relationship with the novels.

The Nabokov Paper's most important contribution to Nabokov studies is demonstrating the use of his teaching as a springboard to reassess his work in creative ways. The text offers a blueprint for future digital humanities projects connected to Nabokov through the use of mapping character relationships (58-59), the representation of the author's synaesthesia in the process of reading and Céline Guyot's mapping of the real and imaginary geography of *Mansfield Park* to

“[reintegrate] the fantastical elements into a representation of the real” (52). Such strategies are easily applicable to Nabokov’s own literary output. Imagine what primary colour comes from analysis of Nabokov’s understanding of *Ada* or map the complex imaginary and real geography of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. This requires a move towards more playful interaction with Nabokov’s work, which Briggs and Russo’s book achieves in both form and content. *The Nabokov Paper* must be actively explored, as the bound volume is supplemented by folded double-page spreads and a hidden pamphlet offering an extensive procedural erasure of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. The theme of play reaches an apex with Zenon Fajfer and Katarzyna Bazarnik’s boardgame version of *Ulysses* that presents a teaching device for students struggling to break down Joyce’s novel (92-98).

Due to the physical conditions of some contributors’ projects on display at Shandy Hall, it is clear *The Nabokov Paper* can only supplement the exhibition rather than represent multimedia work fully. While many of the responses happily stand alone as purely textual objects, other multimedia projects have not transitioned well to the printed page. Most egregiously, some of the projects only contain documentation of the contributors’ unfinished notes and screenshots from a film shown at the exhibition (32-33). This is a limitation of the book’s genre, but this is exacerbated by the occasional unfinished project or undecipherable entry. By the organisers’ own admission, the time constraint of six months to respond to the question caused the projects to be unfinished, but compared to some of the more polished work on display, it is slightly disheartening.

While the contributions are of varying quality, the methodologies on display in *The Nabokov Paper* provide fertile ground for new exploration of Nabokov’s teaching methods and their implications for reading the master’s works. His idiosyncrasies are perfect invitations towards rethinking methods and the book offers a masterful proof-of-concept. Overall, *The Nabokov Paper* offers a glimpse into an artistic understanding of Nabokov’s multi-faceted genius and hopefully will be a catalyst for further exploration of the master’s convergence with textual and visual art.

Simon Rowberry
University of Winchester

