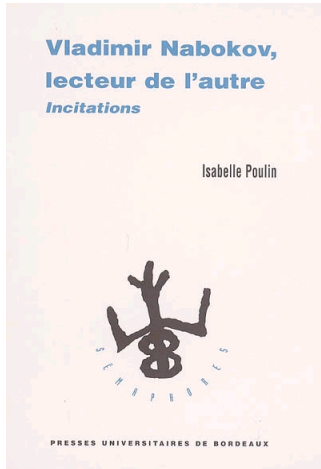


***Vladimir Nabokov, lecteur de l'autre: Incitations*, by Isabelle Poulin. Pessac: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2005, 248pp. Bibliography.**



These ‘incitations’¹ explore what it is to be a ‘good reader’ in relation to the work of Vladimir Nabokov. Poulin concentrates on the exchange of influence between French authors and Nabokov in examining the role of the reader in fulfilling the author's need to communicate. From creative conception to the readings capable of ‘killing’ a text, this is a wide ranging discussion around the closely linked themes of reading and writing, self and other.

Poulin begins by discussing the significance of ‘the artistic moment’ – the way in which for Nabokov the experience of intense moments of visual intimacy with the thing, and with the world (a moment which she likens to Proust's Bergson on noticing the small stretch of yellow wall in Vermeer's *View of Delft*) had the power to produce a revelatory moment of insight and inspiration, which, he felt, allowed him, if communicated, to escape the ‘prisons’ of time and of the ego. However, the successful expression of these moments is reliant on the appreciation of ‘good readers,’ and Poulin stresses Nabokov's desire to ‘éduquer le regard’ (35) of his readers, so that through active readings,

¹ The term is borrowed from Marcel Proust's *Sur la lecture*: ‘C'est là, en effet, un des grands et merveilleux caractères des beaux livres... que pour l'auteur ils pourraient s'appeler ‘Conclusions’ et pour le lecteur ‘Incitations’ (There it is, in effect, one of the great and marvellous characteristics of beautiful books... that for the author they could be called ‘Conclusions’, and for the reader, ‘Incitements’).

'grounded in the relationship between details' (34), his essential aim of a reader and writer 'united' in these moments might be achieved. The rest of the book is largely dedicated to investigating the complexities of achieving this – especially for a bilingual, émigré writer such as himself.

Nabokov stated, 'To write on Pushkin and on me... you need to know French literature.' The first of two main sections 'en lisant, en écrivant d'après Nabokov' brings together a series of essays on the influence of French artists and writers on the development of Nabokov's attitudes to reading and writing. Poulin, 'reading over Nabokov's shoulder' (11), shows some of the ways in which Nabokov incorporated his readings of French writers into his own work – both in the choice and development of his prose style, and in his extensive use of literary references. The first chapter concentrates on the influence of Rimbaud's synaesthetic poetry on what Poulin terms Nabokov's 'prose poetique', referring in particular to the use of the imagery of jewellery in works such as *Bend Sinister* and *Ada* as an 'open sesame to the world of the imagination' (63). Chateaubriand, 'omnipresent' in Nabokov's American work, is the next writer he admired to be discussed. Poulin highlights Chateaubriand's influence on Nabokov's approach to landscape, emphasising in particular Nabokov's preferred definition of Romantic, 'as applied to a style abounding in vivid, specific details', and explores possible links between political and poetic experience. In the fourth chapter, Poulin explains the regular appearance of a 'Flaubertian hypotexte' in Nabokov's work as an homage to a writer whom he revered for his masterful use of ironic distance and narrative fragmentation.

The question of 'authenticity' in literature is raised: Sartre (cited, perhaps a little controversially, as a counter-influence, or anti-model for Nabokov), reproached in particular what he saw as the 'exhibitionism' of Nabokov writing, 'seeing himself write' (83). However, Poulin explores the possibility that, forced as an emigre to reconstruct his identity in the 'mirror' of a foreign culture, his intertextual approach might in fact have been essential in allowing him to be able to 'see himself' at all. She also investigates how Nabokov works with the duplicitous nature of language in such a way as to express (to those readers willing to investigate 'the spaces hollowed between what an artist has

written and what he wanted to say' (112)) 'the purest truth of fiction' (129), the 'truth beyond language' (147) – which is the awareness of 'the moment of detail'. The final essay in the first section focuses on Nabokov's controversial approach – his use of arcane terminology and extended footnotes – to the translation of *Eugene Onegin* in his attempt to convey the precision of the imagery and the 'allusive power' of Pushkin for English-speaking readers, discussing how far it is possible to go in 'the language of another person'.

Questions of the limitations of written language as a form of communication, the paradoxes of identity and the nature of 'authenticity' in literature are carried through into the second main section, 'en lisant, en écrivant après Nabokov'. Here, Poulin investigates why 'pratiques de seconde main' (151) – pastiche, parody, translation and rewriting – are so highly valued, and pursued to such lengths, in the post-modern era. She presents Lahogue's *La Ressemblance* – a rewriting of Nabokov's French translation of *Despair*, a work which pastiches the style and parodies the subject of Dostoevsky's *The Double*, which itself contains parody and the rewriting of a 'worn-out subject' (152) – in order to discuss further how these techniques function in allowing a writer to find liberation from the strictures of the self. The second chapter likewise uses Dostoevsky, Nabokov and a modern French author, des Forets, in an essay on the portrayal of the writer as an isolated, solitary figure for whom writing constitutes both 'une voix et une écoute' (167), and she looks at the significance of the resulting hierarchy of conflicting perceptions that the reader is frequently presented with: 'le désir désespéré de distinction mis en scene par le personnage gagne le narrateur qui dénonce l'auteur qui met au défi le lecteur' (176).²

In the final chapter of the second main section, Poulin raises the issue of conflict between reader and writer. Writing on Natalie Sarraute and Nabokov, she refers to the relationship between author and reader in terms of a 'contract' which the reader has an obligation to honour in order for the work to 'live' – and she argues that much critical analysis fails to do this. She refers to Sarraute's *Les Fruits d'Or* and Nabokov's *Pale Fire*

² The desperate desire for distinction, enacted by the character, influences the narrator, who denounces the author, who lays down a challenge to the reader.

in order to demonstrate the authors' awareness of the ways – through unnecessarily confrontational, overly-detailed or overly-interpretive analysis – that, in Sarraute's words, 'the commentary *kills* the text' (187). Poulin asserts that, for Nabokov and Sarraute, the 'ideal reader' must maintain the correct 'focal distance', 'must remain relatively close to the text, but not too close' (197) in order to really see what it is they intend to communicate.

This book could be seen as Poulin's attempt at honouring this contract, at maintaining the correct 'focal distance', at being a 'good reader'. These 'incitations' are a success on her own terms: they form a well-argued academic study born out of the inherently subjective personal experience of her reading a writer whom she admires very much and who has had a great influence on her reading of her native French literature. She makes no attempt to dissect or to have the final say on any subject, although she pays impressive attention to detail and a feeling of completeness is achieved in the skilful way that the essays and authors cited are combined. Her consistent aim is to help to strengthen 'the strange link... which unites a poet and his reader' (199) and to underline the importance that a work of art is brought alive by each individual's imagination. The end result is a convincing testament to Poulin's vision of the spirit in which books should be read, and almost certainly a challenge to all those who might previously have considered themselves to be good readers.

Sam Vaughan-Birch,

University of Glasgow

