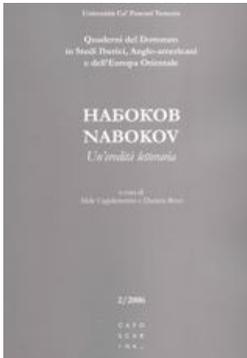


***Nabokov: Un'eredità letteraria*, a cura di Alide Cagidemetro e Daniela Rizzi (Quaderni del Dottorato in Studi Iberici, Anglo-americani e dell'Europa Orientale, 2/2006, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia); ISBN 978-88-7543-172-3, 172pp.**



This is a collection of ten papers given at an international colloquium in Venice in 2005. Three years seem like a long time in academia (the length of a non-language undergraduate degree in England), but of course there are scholarly publications which appeared 30 years ago which are as relevant today as at their inception. The question is if this one will be.

The literary legacy of which the title speaks is the one Nabokov has left, the one he absorbed from his predecessors (through so-called Nabokovian intertextuality). Also, within the same intertextuality, a crosspollination occurred with his own contemporaries, as, according to Daniela Rizzi's paper 'Nabokov e Mandel'stam', was the case with the Russian Acmeist poet.

Rizzi's paper importantly places Nabokov within a Russian literary tradition, as does Claudia Criveller's article 'Nabokov e Bal'mont: dileggio dell'estetica decadente'. Rizzi is surprised by the dearth of exploration of the relationship between the novelist and the Acmeist poet (111), but perhaps it would be fair to say that even analyses of Nabokov within a Russian literary context are thin on the ground. The book proves pertinent in this respect by including Rizzi's and Criveller's articles which do exactly that.

Rizzi equates Nabokov to Mandel'stam on another level: with their intertextuality, both authors present a challenge to the reader which involves tracing the references within their texts to their sources (121). Like a diamond thief in some films, Nabokov is having fun trying to get caught, and in challenging the reader to become a

better one. This analogy of traces and sleuthing is further taken up by Nora Buhks' article 'Nabokov et la psychiatrie: le cas de Loujine', which to me is the most fascinating piece in the whole compendium. Buhks states that Nabokov, while wholeheartedly against psychoanalysis, was very interested in psychopathology, the knowledge of which formed the basis of many of his novels (67-68). As a case study, Buhks takes *The Luzhin Defence*, proposing that Nabokov's characterisation of Luzhin junior was based on research on autism which had been published by the time Nabokov was writing the novel [1929].

The plausibility of Buhks' argument lies in her own overview of the study of autism at the beginning of the 20th century, within which she correlates Freud to Eugen Bleuler, the latter being the father of the study of autistic psychopathology (69-70). As Buhks rightly argues, Nabokov's ardent attack on Freud would have been made only from a standpoint of knowledge of his work, and as he knew about Freud, he would have known of other scholars working in the field of psychopathology. Freud and Bleuler had jointly edited the journal *Jahrbuch für Psychoanalytische und Psychopathologische Forschung* between 1909 and 1913, and, amongst learned circles in the 1920s Europe, Bleuler would have been as well known as Freud (75). To Buhks (and to the reader) it also makes sense that Nabokov should have taken on the issue of autism at a time when it was becoming an important focus in medical research (ibid.).

Luzhin, for example, lives in his own reality, where he engages only with things he enjoys, and takes language at its literal meaning, not realising the subtexts which may be carried with it – these are all characteristics of the autistic mind. According to Buhks, Nabokov has placed Luzhin in his own reality, one that is even out of the control of the author himself, exactly so that the character can rebel against this control (82). And indeed it is striking how Luzhin's autism calls to mind some of the characteristics so lauded by Nabokov: individualism and independent-mindedness (especially as a child), with his childlike innocence (comparable to that of Pnin) marking him out from the people surrounding him. However, Buhks' conclusion is that Luzhin loses this particular battle with the author, since by being trapped in his own world he is inevitably trapped in the novel (86).

Individuality is also the characteristic Mark Lipovetsky attributes to *Lolita* in his very convincing article 'A war of discourses: *Lolita* and the failure of a transcendental project'. Lipovetsky argues that in *Lolita* Nabokov reaches a postmodernist view of culture, whereby there is no distinction between high and low culture (61). The war of discourses of the paper's title is the one between high culture (initially represented by Humbert, his Romantic imagery and his search for transcendence through *Lolita*) and popular mass culture (coagulated in the character of Quilty and his low brow oeuvre) which takes place over the disputed ground that is *Lolita*.

As the novel progresses, Lipovetsky points out, the distinction between the two camps becomes less clear, since, for example, Humbert starts acting more and more like *Lolita*'s late mother, Charlotte (very much a consumer of popular culture, 59), and, in his pursuit of Quilty and *Lolita*, goaded by the breadcrumb trail Quilty leaves him at various motels, Humbert recognises an intellectual equal, of sorts, in his rival (60).

However, neither side comes out victorious, since *Lolita*'s individuality prevents her from succumbing to either man (62). Rather, Lipovetsky skilfully highlights, the failure of both projects points to culture, be it high or low, as dressing to the vacuous Christmas tree of life (64-65).

The fact that much attention is given in this collection to *Lolita* is probably proof of the novel's grandiosity, the fact that it can be reinterpreted over and over, looked at from different angles, without the interpretations seeming tenuous.

Elide Pittarello's article 'Rewriting Nabokov: a shortened *Lolita* by Javier Marías' is an exploration of Nabokov's influence on the Spanish writer Javier Marías, who, in 'rewriting' the novel as a short story, reminds the reader of one of the strands of *Lolita*, one which seems often overshadowed: that *Lolita* is a love story, and especially one of loyalty ("Esta es la historia de una fidelidade").

Although Pittarello makes connections between the two authors subtly enough, I felt that the intertextuality or the legacy which justifies this collection could have been explored more deeply.

While in general this is a set of mostly interesting and some very valid papers, there are a couple, like the one just mentioned, which could have gone deeper or been more critical. Two articles each explore the reception of Nabokov's work in Spain and

Italy, the latter between 1948 and 1962. These turn out to be mainly descriptive, rather than analytical, something which leaves the reader dissatisfied, especially one used to Nabokovian rigour and intellectual goading. In 'Nabokov in Italy: 1948-1962' Francesca Scalinci admits that, while *Lolita* has had success in Italy, Nabokov's oeuvre as a whole should be better recognised and analysed. It seems a missed opportunity, then, that this Italian publication (although not all in Italian language) has failed to trailblaze a path in the study of Nabokov in Italy.

The last entry in this collection 'Vladimir Nabokov e l'Adelphi: storia di una riscoperta' is a disappointment and acts very much as a back cover advertisement for the Italian publishing house, written by one of its editors. While critics lash out at the corporatisation of higher education in Europe, this last entry proves the critics right. Surely, credit is due to Adelphi for taking the risk with publishing Nabokov's works in Italian, but this book perhaps is not where such a credit should be given.

While this thin volume obviously adds to Nabokovian scholarship, one can only hope that, overall, more is done to raise Nabokov's profile in Italy.

*Eva Montenegro Oddo,
London*

