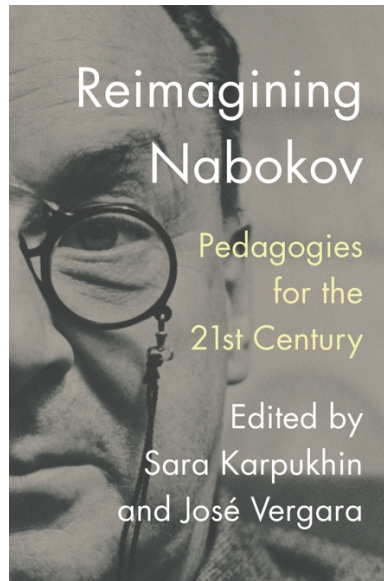


Reimagining Nabokov: Pedagogies for the 21st Century, edited by Sara Karpukhin and José Vergara. Amherst, MA: Amherst College Press, 2022. ISBN(s) 978-1-943208-50-0 (paper); 978-1-943208-51-7 (open access), <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12734225>, 230 pp.



Both the Foreword by Galya Diment (xiii-xx) and Introduction by Sara Karpukhin (1-11) frame this collection of essays by evaluating the role of New Criticism and Formalism in 21st century Nabokov scholarship. Diment negates Nabokov’s claim that “A work of art has no importance whatever to society” (xiv), by highlighting how a more diverse, aware, and sensitive student environment can identify sexism, racism, and homophobia in his works. Instead of suggesting that a new generation unnecessarily politicises literature, Diment draws attention to the uneasy chasm between Nabokov’s ‘personal’ rejection of racism and antisemitism, and evidences of bias and stereotype in his writing. Karpukhin continues this with a call to arms: “It is our hope that the essays gathered here will be invitations to take up this important and pressing work, particularly in relation to Nabokov and race” (4). Perhaps there is a sense of guilt—how can we, as educators, justify teaching these works—and of shame—indicative of a parasocial relationship with an author who we would all prefer to be less “problematic.” Diment identifies how “Nabokov, regretfully, also on occasion used directly racist language and images to describe Black characters” (xvii), and Karpukhin later reflects on how “It was particularly disappointing that Shade ... uses his literary vocation to justify divesting himself of ethical answerability” (117). Enriching these challenges are questions surrounding the role of the author (to what extent can we identify Nabokov’s views in those of his protagonists?), and, for want of a better phrase, the necessity of “lived experience.” Through Nabokov’s own characterisation of the impossibility of accessing reality, we may ask how fully he is able to portray the identities and experiences of others, or whether he falls short when it comes to his female, queer, Jewish, disabled, and black characters. This collection, divided into “Digital Collaborations,” “Mixing Cultures,” “Disability Studies and Queerings,” and “Paratexts and Archives,” confronts questions of power and

authority, reality and authenticity, but also advocates for the role of joy, playfulness and pleasure in teaching Nabokov in the 21st century.

Yuri Leving, in “Teaching Nabokov in 3D,” focuses on the pedagogical benefits of embracing digital methods, demonstrating how the collaborative creation of an app for *The Gift* and *Lolita* seems a natural extension of Nabokov’s own teaching methods. His examples highlight the possibilities of enhancing Nabokov’s interest in the “material world,” his attention to minute detail and “the idea of documents” (25). In addition to making a case for the authenticity and rigour of technological approaches, Leving argues for the importance of the “humorous” and “playful quality” of digital humanities. It would have been intriguing to consider how these 3D methods can be adjusted to even more contemporary advancements, for example, what kind of images an AI generator could produce when prompted to depict Humbert Humbert and Dolores. Whilst José Vergara also makes a case for the Nabokovian nature of digital methods, “Good Readers, Good Writers: Collaborative Student Annotations for *Invitation to a Beheading*” is strong in its wider application for “shifting power dynamics in the room and on the page” (40). Through use of the collaborative annotative publishing tool Scalar, Vergara notices how his students found themselves in a more communal, interpretative and empowered learning environment. The ability to “incorporate materials not necessarily available in other commentaries (images, videos, and so on)” (43) suggests that such digital methods actually augment Nabokov’s teaching philosophy. This, in itself, is a radical rejection of authorial control and narrative instruction, giving a new generation of students and readers the agency and freedom with which to approach his works. Vergara, as with Leving, argues how digital humanities can transform close reading into a “fruitful, dynamic interplay of individual research and communal exchange” (49).

The essays in “Mixing Cultures” are, despite their variations in theme, primarily concerned with the application of Nabokov and his works to students today. In “Teaching *Poshlost*: Texts and Contexts,” Matthew Walker provides a comprehensive study of Nabokov’s various definitions of the seemingly “untranslatable” term. It is the third that yields most insight, with Walker considering how the grammatical origin, “the past tense form of the verb ‘to go,’” *poshlo* ... literally that which “has gone” or “what went” (64), highlights the fear that all culture is at risk of being imitative, and if so, asks how the translation of *Eugene Onegin* is different than *Pale Fire*? This leads to a discussion of whether *poshlost* is “intrinsically conservative” (69): Nabokov’s indifference to class or race “sounds at best like privilege speaking today,” and his distaste for books about homosexuality is “incomprehensibly callous” (70). In “Teaching Nabokov in a Virtual Time of Trouble,” Tim Harte considers the prognosis of Nabokov’s “playful prose” (77) in a post-George Floyd, post-strike college environment. “Good art, in Nabokov’s not-so-humble estimation, offers an antidote to the human impulse to discriminate” (79), Harte claims. He defends a “Nabokovian brand of social justice” (81), however, other contributions in this collection that demonstrate instances of racism in his writing call this position into question.

“Nabokov’s Haunted Screen: The Exilic Uncanny in Weimar Film” explores how such forms, symbolised in *Mary* and other early texts, exhibit the rich themes of exile and grief. Luke Parker characterises how, for a new generation of students, “silent film is the cinematic undead,” repurposed into GIFs and clips, but that the particular strangeness and roughness of this genre allows a way into an earlier, simpler and timelier Nabokov than his polished American works.

“Disability Studies and Queerings” strikes me as the most impactful part of this collection, with three essays that intertwine on questions of “Othering,” authorial intent, and the challenges of paranoid and reparative methods. Roman Utkin’s “Reading Disability in ‘A Guide to Berlin’” is a masterful study in new reading. On the question “Why does an author cripple a character?” (99), Utkin considers differing existing interpretations: as a way of announcing authorial presence, as punishment for hubris, as defamiliarization, as “narrative prosthesis” (103). He ultimately lands on a reparative reading, arguing that such crippling adds depth to the story. Utkin understands the final line “How can I demonstrate to him that I have glimpsed somebody’s future recollection?” as a suggestion that the protagonist’s disability extends into an inability to communicate verbally and thus the story is about the search for language. But, perhaps, to go even further, is there something prophetic and transcendent in this signifier? In a note to her essay, Karpukhin notes the similarity between her and Meghan Vicks’ application of paranoid and reparative readings, as “emphasizing the timely relevance of Sedgwick’s work for Nabokov studies” (124). “Nabokov, Creative Discussion and Reparative Knowledge” focuses on terms which “demanded translation, intergenerational, rather than interlingual, for my students” (110). Karpukhin delicately interweaves and layers her definitions of *vulgarity*, *texture*, *pity* and *colored*, signifying a wider semantic field which informs Nabokov’s literary aesthetics and ethics, “the crux where compassion, autonomy and consciousness come together” (116). Grounded in this close reading, she argues that reading Nabokov reparatively allows students to transcend the limitations and challenges found in the “hermeneutics of suspicion” (120), to be looser, more creative, more nourished, and to find joy. Joy is what Meghan Vicks searches for too, in “Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading and Queering *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.” Building on Sedgwick’s theories, Vicks argues that reparative reading allows students to access “an experience of joy and wholeness in relation to the text, unencumbered by fear of ‘missing something’ or ‘getting it wrong’” (128). She identifies this anxiety in the world of Nabokov studies, highlighting the need to challenge this scholarly environment. The essay explores the paranoid methods undertaken by V. in order to “find” Sebastian and suggests alternative readings which “queer the concept of identity,” uncovering his potential homosexuality (140). Vicks considers this in relation to Nabokov’s treatment of his brother, recognising his inability to “access [Sergey’s] real life” (138). We can draw on this, and Nabokov’s own statements on the impossibility of accessing reality, “So that we live surrounded by more or less ghostly objects” (142), to suggest at his wider incapability to understand and portray the realities of others.

Finally, “Paratexts and Archives” explores the act of writing and re-writing of the text and the self. Robyn Jensen, in “Patterns and Paratexts: Teaching Nabokov’s Autobiography,” reflects on how students, who constantly curate and re-create their social media identities, may find affinity in Nabokov’s decades long autobiographical project. Her pedagogical approach includes a study of maps, diagrams, indexes, and book covers, determining the need for familiarity of these paratexts in highlighting the levels of artifice and control: “By understanding the rules of the game, readers can choose to play it differently” (159). This issue of authorial authority is central to Olga Voronina, too, in her essay “Vulnerability, Discipline, Perseverance, Mercy: On Teaching Nabokov’s Short Stories.” Her close readings of “The Potato Elf,” “Breaking the Silence” and “Sounds and Symbols,” highlight themes of compassion and human misery, suggesting that narrative silence “demonstrates the generosity and trust with which he treats his audience” (172). Through her “attempt to re-actualize this historical context” (171), Voronina exemplifies how the act of re-reading and noticing details empowers students, in turn, to be literary critics of their own and confront the author. Lisa Ryoko Wakamiya, in “*The Original of Laura* and the Archival Nabokov” reframes this contentious text through Gennady Barabtarlo’s characterisation of it as “fragments of not-writing or near-writing or pre-writing” (185). She suggests that *Laura* be compared alongside other fragments of not-writing (such as *Lectures on Literature* or his dream diaries), to teach students to understand how Nabokov wrote for himself, raising questions about intention, interpretation and expectation.

This collection, despite drawing almost exclusively from examples of American college courses, is a valuable study for any reader, teacher, scholar, or student of Nabokov. Amongst specific and urgent insights on the potential for digital methods, the relevance of Nabokov for students today, and how to reconcile issues of identity with an author who disavowed history and politics, are much wider and timeless questions of authorial control and the ability to access reality.

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