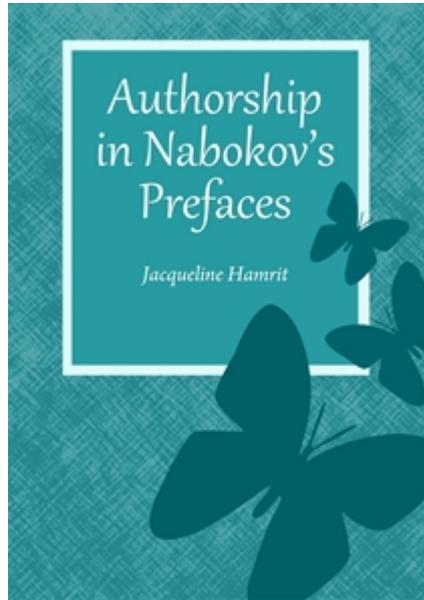


Authorship in Nabokov's Prefaces, by Jacqueline Hamrit. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014; ISBN 9781443866828. Bibliography. Index rerum. Index nominum. 146 pp.



Jacqueline Hamrit's book is the first full-length examination of Nabokov's prefaces, which have previously received paltry critical attention.¹ The scope of her concise study is tightly focused as she examines the problematic figure of the author with regard to three specific prefaces from the plethora of examples in the author's oeuvre: 'On a Book Entitled *Lolita*', which was written in 1956 and has appeared alongside the text of *Lolita* since the novel's publication in the USA in 1958; the introduction to *Bend Sinister*, which was written in 1963, almost two decades after the novel itself; and the introduction to the third version of Nabokov's autobiography, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, which was published alongside the revised and re-translated text in 1966. Using Genette's typology of prefaces from *Thresholds*, Hamrit defines a preface, for the purpose of her study, as any liminary text, which is written by the author about the text it is attached to. Additionally, she refers to 'Outwork', in which Derrida considers the problem the preface poses for the text itself, and which results in both the text and

¹ Three articles have previously focused on Nabokov's prefaces. Firstly, Charles Nicol's "Necessary Instruction or Fatal Fatuity: Nabokov's Introductions and *Bend Sinister*" (in *Nabokov Studies*, 1994/1) identifies the main characteristics of Nabokov's prefaces, while Corinne Scheiner's "In Place of a Preface: Reading Chapter One of Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark* as a foreword to the English Translation" (in *Proceedings of the International Vladimir Nabokov Symposium 2002*) considers the role of the preface in conjunction with Nabokov's self-translations. Finally, Marilyn Edelstein's "Before the Beginning: Nabokov and the Rhetoric of the Preface" (in *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practices*, ed. Brian Richardson, 2009) discusses *Lolita*'s paratexts.

the preface becoming conjoined to form the ‘unceasing preface’.² Moreover, both conceptions are concerned with the question of the author and the role that this figure plays within the text, the preface and the resulting textual form in which both components are subsumed. Hamrit uses this question to argue that Nabokov uses his prefaces to create a fluid role for the author, whose presence is, as a result, constantly in flux.

Hamrit examines the three focus prefaces through the lens of Blanchot’s and Derrida’s conceptions of the self-effacing and receding author, and the resultant struggle between this figure and his readers, and argues that, as an author, Nabokov is constantly appearing and disappearing within his texts. This idea of the author is one which, Hamrit notes, has immediate parallels with Siggy Frank, who argues in *Nabokov’s Theatrical Imagination* that ‘Nabokov [...] recedes into the background and dissolves into his art’.³ Hamrit here argues for a figure of the author who is neither omnipresent nor absent, and positions herself in opposition to Maurice Couturier’s idea of the tyrannical authorial figure of Nabokov. While Couturier makes a compelling argument for his case that Nabokov, as an author, is anything but dead, Hamrit offers a more subtle consideration of Nabokov as an author. She argues that, in the role of the receding author, Nabokov ex-appropriates the text by intruding upon it in his prefaces (or appropriating the text) before removing himself again (or expropriating the text). This process allows the author to simultaneously affirm and deny his own mastery by appearing and receding from his work. This is an interesting and pertinent proposition as, despite Nabokov’s many assertions of authorial control, as an author commenting on his own work, he is, in essence, nothing if not facetious. Moreover, his desire to control his work is often met with an unusual level of facilitation from critics who are guided in their own desire to meet ‘the Master’s expectations’.⁴

Focusing on these specific prefaces, Hamrit convincingly argues that Nabokov engages in an elaborate game of hide and seek with his readers. She posits that the author utilises three distinct relationships with his readers, his texts and, eventually, himself as the subject of his own autobiography, in order to appear within the text before receding. In all of these exchanges, Nabokov as the receding author encounters an otherness, which he incorporates, so that in all of its variants it may speak to his readers both within his own self and the text (92). Hamrit’s proposition that the reader plays an essential role in this conception of authorship neatly reflects Blanchot’s conception of the ‘singular reciprocity’ of author and reader, who create each other, the former by writing and the latter by reading the text (25). This does not, however, facilitate

² See Jacques Derrida, “Outwork, prefacing,” in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981), 43.

³ Siggy Frank, *Nabokov’s Theatrical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 194.

⁴ Eric Naiman, “Hermophobia (On Sexual Orientation and Reading Nabokov),” *Representations*, 101/1 (2008), 120.

the fully harmonious and co-operative relationship that it may suggest, and that Nabokov himself wrote of in 'Good Readers and Good Writers'. When Nabokov engages with his first readers of *Lolita*, whom Hamrit characterises as the 'interpretive community' of publishers who would not publish the novel due to its subject matter, he does so to right their misunderstanding, or rather misreading, of the book.⁵ This leads directly to the writing of the epilogue to *Lolita*, 'On a Book Entitled *Lolita*'. In it, Nabokov defends his work against charges of pornography, indecency and immorality, a function he had assumed John Ray Jr.'s fictional foreword would originally serve. Hamrit argues that, by latterly bookending his work with fictional and factual prefaces, Nabokov opposes both John Ray Jr., as the fictional author, and himself, as the author of *Lolita*, and creates a situation in which *Lolita* cannot be read without its prefaces. In this way, the author who wrote *Lolita* reappears within the newly expanded text, and promptly retreats after imparting an elegant defence of his work. This results in the boundaries between fiction and reality losing their distinction, and the author receding into the text of *Lolita*.

This authorial function is evident again in Nabokov's relationship with his text. Using *Bend Sinister* as her example, Hamrit argues that Nabokov uses the introduction to position himself as an authorial presence in opposition to the text itself. By re-reading his text in order to write its introduction, Nabokov identifies and then foregrounds central images, themes and points. In this introduction, Nabokov highlights the importance of the puddle motif to the central theme of *Bend Sinister*, that of 'the beating of Krug's loving heart'.⁶ This lends a 'surrealist dimension' to the text, which becomes infused with 'the reverie Nabokov indulges in when he rereads his text' (56). His repeated references to the variants of the motif generate an authorial memory of the text, which 'resembles a pictorial inlay' (55). While with 'On a Book Entitled *Lolita*' Nabokov bookends his text with prefaces, here his introduction faces the text head-on, commenting on it and directing subsequent readings, at which point the author recedes again. The receding authorial figure is, therefore, a continual process in Nabokov's oeuvre, and it is one which continues when the author encounters himself as the subject of his autobiography. Nabokov uses the introduction to *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* to address any lapses or errors of memory that resulted in changes being made in this third iteration of his autobiography. While this is a functional element of Nabokov's authorial role, this process also allows him to develop self-awareness and face himself in his autobiography's introduction (55). Nabokov, therefore, as autobiographer, posits himself in the text before retreating from it

⁵ Stanley Fish, "Introduction, or How I Stopped Worrying," in *Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 14.

⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, "Introduction," *Bend Sinister* (London: Penguin, 1964), 7.

entirely, and continues the ‘endless apparition-retreat movement’ which pervades his oeuvre (83).

Hamrit presents a convincing argument for a less tyrannical and more playful authorial role for Nabokov in *Authorship in Nabokov’s Prefaces*. The theoretical framework is, while at times dense, effectively applied to Nabokov’s liminary texts in order to show his ex-appropriations of his texts. Particularly interesting is the consideration of the role of Nabokov’s readers in this process. While the relationship between Nabokov and his readers is specifically considered only in relation to ‘On a Book Entitled *Lolita*’, it seems that the reader may have a more central and interpretive role in the formation of the receding author. There is, of course, still much work to be done in relation to Nabokov’s prefaces. Hamrit’s book is a coherent insight into the multiple questions of authorship that these liminary texts continue to raise.

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