

VLADIMIR NABOKOV: HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

Introduction

Yannicke Chupin, Agnès Edel-Roy and Monica Manolescu

This issue of the *Nabokov Online Journal* brings together nine articles that explore history and geography in Nabokov's work, in connection to the changes of place and language, as well as the historical evolutions that marked Nabokov's life and career. The articles were presented at an international conference organized by the French Nabokov Society in 2019, at the Sorbonne and CY Cergy Paris Université, in collaboration with the National Museum of the History of Immigration in Paris. Isabelle Poulin and Will Norman were the two guest speakers at the conference.

The historical and geographical dimensions of Nabokov's work remain relatively understudied for reasons having to do with a certain tradition of critical interpretation and reception. By examining the connections between Nabokov's texts and history and geography, the various articles read Nabokov against the grain by questioning certain approaches that insist on the autotelic character of his work and its supposed resistance to historical and geographical discourses. History and geography represent two major concerns in Nabokov's writings, which work in close interaction and the study of which has recently brought to the fore a new understanding of Nabokov.

The articles gathered here address questions having to do with Nabokov's treatment of history and geography, and how his literary project relates to both; referentiality and the ways in which history and geography are transmuted into fiction; the various spaces and times in Nabokov's texts; the rereading and rewriting of historical events, political regimes, ideologies and philosophies of history; the friction between imaginary worlds and political contexts; Nabokov's treatment of geographical exploration.

Characters of explorers and naturalists (real and imaginary) feature repeatedly in his works, sometimes but not always in relation to entomology (“Polyus,” “Pilgram,” “Terra Incognita,” *Dar*). In the *Foreword* to the English translation of *Dar*, Nabokov projects himself as a future explorer while at the same time warning his readers against biographical identification with the characters in the novel: “My father is not the explorer of Central Asia that I may still become some day” (*The Gift*, i). In *Speak, Memory* he mentions his great-grandfather who (supposedly) explored Nova Zembla (although Brian Boyd has shown that this was not actually the case, 17): “my great-grandfather has nothing to show except that very blue, almost indigo blue, even indignantly blue, little river winding between wet rocks” (*Speak, Memory*, 52). Humbert Humbert presents himself to the *Ramsdale Journal* as “Mr. Edgar H. Humbert <...> writer and explorer” (*Lolita*, 75). In *Ada*, Van reinvents himself as Mascodagama (an artist walking on his hands and seeing the world anew), suggesting a connection with Vasco da Gama’s explorations and discoveries. Naming and mapping are major procedures in Nabokov’s work. The motif of the map keeps resurfacing (in *Speak, Memory* or *Lolita*), growing into a larger framework in the reconstruction of geography and history put forth in *Ada*. Explorer narratives, travel writings and travel guides are important sources for *Dar* and *Lolita*. Nabokov’s knowledge of and research into geographical and historical contexts, combined with his commitment to precision about fauna and flora, constitute an important foundation to his fiction. At the same time, referentiality is always unsettled by the inclusion of invented place names (in *Lolita*) and the creation of alternative historical and geographical narratives (in *Ada* or *Pale Fire*, in different ways).

Nabokov uses the terms “recreation” and “phantasm” to refer to the construction of some of his fictional universes (*Foreword* to the English translation of *Dar*). In “Good Readers and Good Writers,” he develops the striking metaphor of writing as simultaneous act of creating and mapping a world (*Lectures on Literature*, 2). His emphasis on great novels as “great fairy tales” (*Lectures on Literature*) seems to encourage an autotelic perspective on literature. However, such pronouncements should be nuanced and contextualized. They are part of an authorial strategy of warning against reductive referential readings of his work and of fiction in general. Such edicts should in no way prevent readers from situating his work within specific social, ideological and cultural contexts (Bethea and Frank 2018). They should not deter readers from paying attention to specific choices of representing and reconfiguring geographical and historical elements in Nabokov’s fiction. Beyond these specific choices, Nabokov’s interest in articulating geography and history as larger frameworks for his most

complex and experimental novels (*Dar, Lolita, Pale Fire, Ada*) deserves further scrutiny because it is crucial to his literary vision. The multiple operations at work in his unsettling combinations of referential, imagined and intertextual dimensions are key to understanding his geographical imagination (Manolescu 2010) and his historical imagination as well.

It can be claimed that Nabokov's works, considered in their entirety, feature a scale of mimesis with varying degrees, each work presenting a different engagement with what Nabokov called "reality" between quotation marks. There seems to be a difference between Nabokov's approach to certain European exilic spaces (especially Berlin) in his Russian fiction and his treatment of the United States as geographical, social and cultural space in novels such as *Lolita*, much more keen on absorbing contemporary strains of popular culture and reshaping American natural landscapes or built environments (motels, highways, suburban architecture). This difference should by no means lead us to consider the two as schematic opposites (inconsistence of Berlin vs consistence of America), which would be reductive and unsatisfactory, but rather as distinctly positioned and highly nuanced representations whose features and workings derive from certain contextualized strategies of writing, publishing, inhabiting and belonging. Nabokov's ambitious reconstructions of history and geography in *Pale Fire* and especially *Ada* are proof not only of the complexity, refinement and originality of Nabokov's historical and geographical narratives, but also of the privileged place history and geography occupy in his literary endeavor. By defamiliarizing the world at such a scale, Nabokov invites readers to think about the political and poetic imperatives that lead to such literary remapping, and about the dialogues that these reshuffled cartographies have with the actual remapping of territories and states in the course of history, due to various upheavals in which the individual is often crushed and silenced (revolutions, wars, phenomena of communal and individual uprooting).

Nabokov's personal experience of geography and history was primarily shaped by displacement, loss and tragedy in the wake of the Russian Revolution and World War II. His family's repeated spatial displacements across Europe, following the vagaries of the Russian emigration, and across the Atlantic, are woven together with the challenges posed by writing in Russian for the limited audience of the emigration and attempting to find new audiences in other languages (French and English). The ambivalent experience of exile is translated into his texts, which are marked by displacements and fusions of many kinds (of literary and cultural traditions, languages, geographical and historical coordinates). Geographical displacement cannot be dissociated from a certain oppressive vision of history and a sustained

reflection on totalitarianisms. Nabokov's approach to geography and history is determined (at least in part) by his ideas about individual freedom and rights, community, authority and authoritarianism. As Dana Dragunoiu has argued, the tradition of Russian liberalism had an influence on shaping Nabokov's political stance (Dragunoiu 2011). His novels represent oppression and totalitarianism with stark lucidity (*Priglasenie na kazn'* and *Bend Sinister*, but *Lolita* also offers insight into these themes). The Holocaust is poignantly present in *Pnin* (among other works), through the memories of Mira Beloshkin haunting the protagonist. Nabokov's novels and short stories can be read alongside various political contexts and debates having to do with tyranny, coercion and abusive acts. Nabokov's approach to geography and history, couched in the discourses of literature, is fundamentally animated by an ethical impulse that becomes manifest in the denunciation of suffering, exclusion, imprisonment and victimization (Edel-Roy 2018).

The nine articles in this issue address highly relevant themes and perspectives that allow us to foreground history and geography: exploration in *Glory* (Adam Lieberman), mobility in *The Gift* (Sophie Bernard-Léger), the response to Leninism in *Ada* (Agnès Edel-Roy), *Lolita* and (the absence of) historical influence in the case of an unexpected intersection with Proust (Dana Dragunoiu), Nabokov's understanding of history (Will Norman), his reflection on animal suffering as symptomatic of his denunciation of violence of every kind (Isabelle Poulin), the articulation of precision and invention as far as imaginary worlds are concerned (Léopold Reigner), the redefinition of geography in sonic terms (Sabine Metzger) and the representation of Berlin in dialogue with Simmel (Alexia Gassin).

In "Nabokov's Wrong Turns," Will Norman continues his groundbreaking research on Nabokov and time that began with the publication of *Nabokov, History and the Texture of Time* (Routledge, 2012). His article examines the concept of history starting from Nabokov's *Bend Sinister* (1947) and highlights the figure of the "wrong turn" to show how Nabokov participates in debates about historiography after World War Two. The article traces several types of historical traditions that Nabokov engages with (ancient Greek, Hegelian and Marxist) and places Nabokov's understanding of history in dialogue with that of other intellectuals such as Hannah Arendt and Karl Popper.

Questioning the postmodern vision of Nabokov's work as being outside of History, Isabelle Poulin's article, "The map on the belly, or the animal side of History in Nabokov's work," opens a new direction in thinking about the writer's relationship with history, geography and the barbarism of his time, by adopting the point of view of animals, since he

“was concerned with every form of violence brought to bear on living things.” Studying examples from the Nabokovian bestiary (from early Russian short stories to American novels) and the recurrent motif of the lady with the little dog, Isabelle Poulin analyzes the suffering of animals as signifying Nabokov’s denunciation of political bestiality. In his confrontation with the violence of History, the writer, also a naturalist, develops an ecological conscience in his work, supported by an original sensitivity for the poetry of the far away and taking into account the places devastated by the indifference of political authorities towards the planet.

In “History, geography and ‘reality’ in Nabokov’s invented worlds: the process of specialization,” Léopold Reigner scrutinizes Nabokov’s complex and evolving definition of “reality” in order to disentangle a paradoxical knot: how does the author reconcile his commitment to scientific accuracy with his invention of “impossible” realities, such as imaginary countries and alternative histories? Relying on a close study of literary notions such as realism, exactitude, verisimilitude, implausibility, and Nabokov’s meticulous reading of Flaubert’s realism, Reigner provides illuminating comments on the nature of Nabokov’s artistic license in connection to reality and literary invention.

Dana Dragunoiu’s “Making History from the Future: *Lolita* and Proust’s Cahier 36” starts from a tantalizing coincidence: Proust’s exercise book 36 contains a character called Humberger or Humberg who never made it into the final version of *À la recherche du temps perdu* and who bears a striking resemblance to Nabokov’s Humbert. Dragunoiu approaches this coincidence from a future temporality, adopting an analogue medievalist perspective. The article investigates the ways in which meaning is produced outside of an identifiable historical influence.

In “Nabokov, A Writer of Simmelian Modernity,” Alexia Gassin concentrates on the representation of big cities in Nabokov’s novels, and more specifically on Berlin and its inhabitants in *King Queen Knave*. Through the prism of German philosopher and sociologist George Simmel’s theories of modernity in the early 20th century, Gassin’s nuanced study of characterization of city-dwellers in Nabokov’s novel reveals the writer’s yet unexplored affinities with Simmel’s urban sociology of the German metropolis.

Berlin is also central in the next article. In “A Poetics of Mobility in *The Gift*,” Sophie Bernard-Léger regards mobility in the German city as the prevailing paradigm for Fyodor’s creative re-composition of his lost past. Comparing Fyodor’s peregrination with the exploratory and experimental construction of his narrative, S. Bernard-Léger sees in the dynamism of the narrator’s prose a relentless urge to avert any form of petrification, whether

of bodies, of memories or of thought itself. Physical and mental mobility invigorate every page of a novel that seems in constant search for the formula that would solve the writer's dilemma: "how to catch ideas in midair without fossilizing them into the artifice of language."

Adam Lieberman's "Mapping the Hero's Dreams: Imagination and Travel in Nabokov's *Glory*" analyzes the theme of travelling in this early Russian novel and the way it revisits the genre of travel writing. Nabokov weaves elements of a given historical context (that of exile) and autobiographical details into the narrative. The novel develops unactualized opportunities in Nabokov's own life, creating a tension between the actual and the imaginary.

In "Eutopia in *Ada*, or the Aesthetic Reconfiguration of Twentieth-Century Political History: Vladimir Nabokov's *souci d'eau* against Vladimir Lenin's Electricity," Agnès Edel-Roy links the Nabokovian artistic quest for *eutopia*, the "good place," which in *Ada* resembles the writer's native land, and his constant opposition to ideologies that promoted happiness for all mankind as a new religion, but appeared to be coercive, if not tyrannical. Among them, as the author argues, Nabokov's main target is Leninism and its political consequences for the Soviet Union, whose development had been based on electricity. She interprets the banning of electricity on Antiterra and its replacement by water, an omnipresent theme in *Ada*, as an aesthetic proposal that deconstructs the political history of the twentieth century and becomes an anti-deterministic reverie on the possibility of humanity becoming free to set out on another "entirely different <...> adventure" (Genet).

Sabine Metzger's "Nabokov's Sonic Geographies" is an innovative study examining Nabokov's construction of sonic geographies as hybrid *soundscape*s (Emily Thompson) – making Nabokov significantly different from other 20th century writers. The author explores four sonic environments in Nabokov's works: the urban one, in particular that of Berlin; rural sonic environments as mediated by memories of Russia in *Mary*; that of the wilderness in *The Gift*, and soundscapes of repression in *Bend Sinister* and *Tyrants Destroyed*. The article examines the reasons why Nabokov's soundscapes are idiosyncratic, that is "highly dependent on his characters' individual ways of perceiving them."

WORKS CITED

- Bethea, David M. and Siggy Frank (eds.). 2018. *Nabokov in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boyd, Brian. 1990. *Vladimir Nabokov. The Russian Years*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dragunoiu, Dana. 2011. *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Edel-Roy, Agnès. 2018. *Une 'démocratie magique'. Politique et littérature dans les romans de Vladimir Nabokov*. PhD. Université Paris-Est Créteil.
- Manolescu, Monica. 2010. *Jeux de mondes. L'ailleurs chez Vladimir Nabokov*. Bordeaux : Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. 1984. *The Man from the USSR and Other Plays (1923-1938)*. Tr. Dmitri Nabokov. New York: Harcourt.
- _____.1989. *Invitation to a Beheading (1938)*. Tr. Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author. New York: Vintage International.
- _____.1963. *The Gift (1937-1938)*. Tr. Michael Scammell in collaboration with the author. New York: Vintage International.
- _____.1990. *Bend Sinister (1947)*. New York: Vintage International.
- _____.1991. *The Annotated Lolita (1955)*. Ed. Alfred Appel Jr. New York: Vintage International.
- _____.1989. *Pnin (1957)*. New York: Vintage International.
- _____.1989. *Pale Fire (1962)*. New York: Vintage International.
- _____.1990. *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle (1969)*. New York: Vintage International.
- _____.1989. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited (1966)*. New York: Vintage International.
- _____.1980. *Lectures on Literature*. New York: Harcourt.
- Norman, Will. 2012. *Nabokov, History and the Texture of Time*. London: Routledge.

