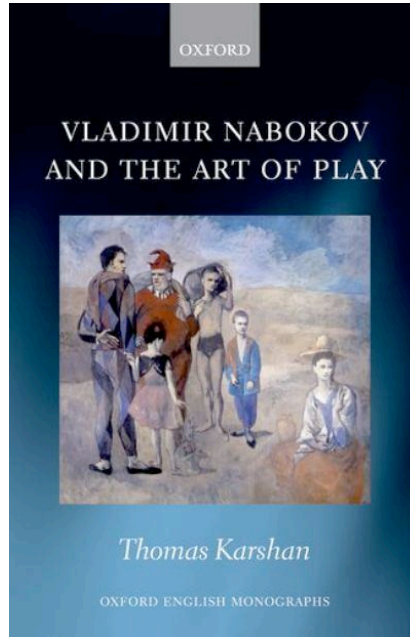


***Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play*, by Thomas Karshan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011; xi + 269 pp. Bibliography. Index.**



Nabokov’s works often give individual readers a sense of discovery. Almost each Nabokov scholar has felt, at one time or another, that he or she has perceived in the master’s texts what no one else has seen. To a large extent this impression may be justified. But what importance do we attach, in terms of Nabokov’s corpus itself, to what has attracted our attention and interest?

Thomas Karshan situates the subject of his book vis-à-vis Vladislav Khodasevich’s sense of what is “the key to all of Sirin,” namely “the life of the artist and the life of the device in the consciousness of the artist” (4), as well as against Vladimir Alexandrov’s 1991 argument that the mystical “otherworld” is Nabokov’s “central theme” (5), or at least one of the major themes. Karshan offers a third unifying principle, which complements the metaliterary and the mystical readings of Nabokov (and other readings that he does not single out). Play, “rather than art or transcendence” is, he believes, “Nabokov’s signature idea” (5). Karshan’s introductory gambit, the discussion of the 1925 article that Nabokov wrote about the boxing match and published under the title “Igra” (“Play” or “Game”), is followed by a catalogue of games played by the

characters of Nabokov's novels. The book then surveys the most important philosophical and sociological approaches to the issue of play, from the more figurative language with which Kant links play to aesthetics, through Schiller's seminal thoughts in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, to Nietzsche, Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois, occasionally punctuating this discussion with minor insights into Nabokov's work, e.g., into the shades of Schiller passing through his corpus and culminating in the heroine's married name in *Lolita* (7). Nabokov's interest in games and their relationship to aesthetics is also traced to his readings of Russian modernist literature, in particular Andrey Belyi's *St. Petersburg*, and to the influence of the émigré critic Yulii Aikhenwald.

One of the main subjects dealt with by the study is about the tension between play as a free expression of creative energies and play, or rather games (the distinction is language-bound), as a structured and rule-governed activity, albeit entered of one's own free will. Thomas Karshan's survey of Nabokov's early writings oscillates between concerns with these two facets of play. Another important tension traced in the book is between the view of art as play in the sense of luxury-type activity or para-Romantic valorized idleness (especially when it does not cater to a specific need of society and does not serve the artist to make a living) and art as an ethically important activity, serious play. The complex of ideas that cluster around this distinction provide, for instance, an illuminating explanation of the ironic title of Nabokov's "A Guide to Berlin": writing guidebooks is a recognized pragmatic activity; aesthetic experience, by contrast, is, or should be, divorced, at least temporarily, from all practical "use." At the same time, Nabokov believed in professionalism in art, as in other spheres, and hence — less directly — in the professional work ethics in the practice of art. Thomas Karshan remarks, suggestively, that "Nabokov embodied the ambiguity of his own position as an artist by giving his characters [of the 1920s and the 1930s] jobs in which the distinction between work and play is somehow blurred" (112). Indeed, Nabokov's works of that period, as well as his later work, can well support the belief that "to divide life up into work and play is to submit to the assumptions of a utilitarianism which degrades life as well as art; and that art is the one thing in modern life which, because it cannot be classified either as work or as play, undoes that false distinction" (112–13). Yet one should remember a

caveat: play may be homologous to art, among other things because it provides a space of freedom from the grim determinacy of social life. Each may also partake of the other, but one should not slip into identifying the two.

The book is based on a large scope of studies. It takes into account not only Nabokov's well-known published texts but also texts that are more difficult to access — unpublished archive materials and uncollected articles, such as the March 1941 essay "One Hundred Years of England" or the seldom quoted 1959 essay "The Servile Path." The preliminary research includes much archival work. It does not deal, however, with Nabokov's works written after *Ada*.

While explaining the contexts of Nabokov's treatment of play, and sometimes the contexts of the contexts, the book occasionally neglects relevant details of Nabokov's own corpus. In discussing Nabokov's "A Guide to Berlin" the author never seems to notice, for instance, that on the last page of the 1976 version of the story a phrase is added to the translation of the 1925 text — a reference to the narrator's "empty right sleeve and scarred face": the text is thus turned into a record of a wounded veteran's appreciation of his survival — an overtone that Nabokov's Russian émigré audience of the 1920s may have perceived even without the help of this insertion.

Focus on play seems also to exempt the author from the need to place his remarks into the perspective of other interpretations. As a result, although the book makes some innovative remarks on *Despair*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Bend Sinister* and even the much discussed *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, one is left with the sense that these works remain short-shrifted. This is also the reason why the book would not be useful as a pilot into Nabokov studies. Its proper audience is experienced Nabokov scholars, and such an audience may at times be vexed.

It seems, indeed, that another round of editing could have helped to eliminate hasty statements, repetitions, occasional errors in Russian transliteration, and other imprecisions. Some of the statements are dispensable. For instance, the author feels obliged to comment on *Mary* even though he notes that the content of this novel does not involve games (the playfulness of its structure largely escapes his attention). The discussion of *King*, *Queen*, *Knave* is not illuminating, yet the chapter on *The Defense*, Nabokov's chess novel, brings contexts to bear on this work in very interesting ways.

Karshan discusses the chess masters in whom Nabokov was interested, and pays special attention to Richar Réty's 1923 book *Modern Ideas in Chess*. With the help of that study Karshan places Nabokov's Turati in the context of the "chess hypermodernism" (97–98), with the advent of which Luzhin's and his possible prototypes' circumspect strategies become obsolete. Another context, even closer to home, is Nabokov's "chess sonnets": as the book shows, there may, for example, be a parallel between the novel's 14-chapter structure and that of a classical sonnet.

Thomas Karshan's own preference, however, seems to be for free play rather than structured game. The book keeps oscillating between texts and contexts, in a manner reminiscent of the free play of association. The transitions can be somewhat forced (e. g., the hyperbolic suggestion (219) that Alexander Pope can provide an anamorphoscope for the "nonnons" of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*). The reader is left with the memory of more than one such moment of irritation, and yet also with many felicitous observations on Nabokov's texts, as well as with useful pointers towards formerly neglected intertextual links.

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