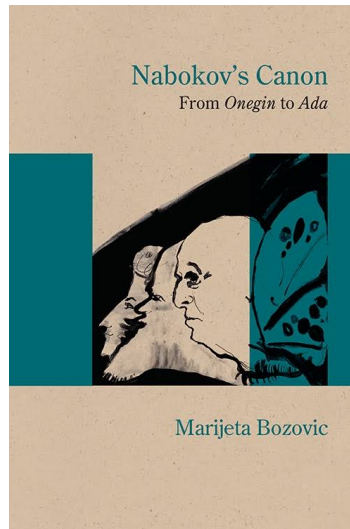


Nabokov's Canon: From "Onegin" to "Ada", by Marijeta Bozovic. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2016; ISBN 9780810133167. 230 pp.



Vladimir Nabokov's *Ada* is the author's most divisive, if not controversial work (that accolade still belongs to *Lolita*). Published in 1969, a full seven years after the critically lauded *Pale Fire*, it was discordantly received by critics, who called it both 'a ragbag of effects ... one of the most self-indulgent and self-caressing books ever written', as well as 'an erotic masterpiece'¹. Prior to *Ada*, Nabokov had published his literal translation of Pushkin's novel in verse, *Eugene Onegin* (with an extensive accompanying commentary), which, in addition to being poorly received, ended the author's friendship with Edmund Wilson. Marijeta Bozovic's *Nabokov's Canon* focuses on these two curious texts, characterizing them as 'Nabokov's most solipsistic and disturbingly aristocratic works' (4). She posits that the cool, critical responses they elicited point to the most 'fraught and ambitious' (4) moments of Nabokov's career, in which the author challenges the canon, positioning himself and his works within it. She argues that in the 1960s, following the critical and commercial successes of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, Nabokov 'launched a campaign to promote a counter-canon to that of T. S. Eliot and the New Critics, encountered in the classrooms of the American universities as in the pages of fashionable literary periodicals' (4). Taking on the role of Eliot before him, Nabokov assessed and reassessed the literary playing field, proposing a 'canon, which is pointedly transnational and translinguistic, continental but also specifically Russo-Franco-American centric' which served to 'legitimise his own literary practice' (4) in all three languages.

¹ Morris Dickstein, 'Nabokov's Folly', *New Republic*, June 28th, 1968, and Alfred Appel Jr., 'Ada: An Erotic Masterpiece That Explores the Nature of Time', *New York Times*, May 4th, 1969.

In order to explore Nabokov's approach to canon formation, Bozovic reads *Ada* and *Onegin* 'as case studies for transnational canon formation in the second half of the twentieth century' (12). Her study is split into five chapters, the first of which presents a twenty-first century examination of 'the allegory of centres and peripheries of cultural capital' (12) in *Onegin*. Bozovic here presents a stimulating contemporary reading of this essential Russian work, which contextualizes the proceeding chapters on Nabokov's direct and indirect use of *Onegin*. She takes the theme of the pursuit, which Nabokov identified, and traces it both as an element of the text itself, as the characters pursue one another to Onegin's climax, as well as in terms of literary fashions, tastes and appropriations (34). Bozovic argues that Pushkin was 'brilliantly suited to appropriation' (42), as his *Onegin*, the departure point for a Russian literary tradition, as well as his oeuvre more generally, are flexible and open to interpretations, which point to and reflect current issues and situations. In the second chapter, Bozovic reads *Onegin* again, this time focusing on Nabokov's 'awkwardly literal' (45) translation and treating it as an autonomous text. Describing it as a unique blend of devoted scholarship and 'creative ambition' (44), Bozovic notes that Nabokov's *Onegin* was 'an attack on American Slavists and Soviet scholars – but also on reigning Anglo-American literary elites' (46) – one which privileges the Russian language and preserves its qualities and characteristics in English. This approach allows her to show that Nabokov effectively underlined Pushkin's literary references to Chateaubriand and Byron, which leads convincingly to her argument that Nabokov 'redraws the Western canon to include the Russian strain in a central position' (47). In this way, Nabokov revitalizes and repositions Pushkin and his novel in verse as Russian literature's point of entry into 'a transnational canon to which Nabokov could be both a critical gatekeeper and a creative heir' (12).

This sophisticated self-contextualization and self-positioning leads to the third chapter, which focuses on *Ada* as a contemporary allegory on 'literary canons and their geographical distribution' (12). Bozovic argues here that *Onegin* and *Ada* are 'sites of formation and the battlegrounds of Nabokov's alternative literary canon' (73) which rivaled the dominant texts in the reading lists he had, by this point, left behind in North America. In doing so, Nabokov is, in a sense, mitigating Russian literature's 'late' arrival to the European stage and the subsequent waylaying of its growth by the 'tragedies of the twentieth century' (12). In order to create a literary world, which uses the literatures of Nabokov's three languages as ripe sources, *Ada* cherry-picks from *Onegin* as well as Byron and Chateaubriand. This triad is replicated twice; firstly with Dickens, Flaubert and Tolstoy, and finally with Joyce, Proust and Nabokov himself, as the author attempts to contextualize himself and his works. The tension this pursuit creates is explored further in Chapter

4, which examines Nabokov's debt to Proust and Joyce in more depth. *Ada*, Bozovic posits, takes further the network of literary allusions and appraisals of *Pale Fire*, and 'throughout, Nabokov seeks to internationalise Russian literature by annexing it to a transnational canon' (99). His connections to Joyce and Proust allow him not only to position Russian literature in the canon, but also to situate himself in the company of the already canonized writers. This leads to an ever more experimental approach to form, which reveals 'an eminent desire to push the boundaries of the novel form, to detonate its borders and limitations' (130).

This conclusion leads Bozovic neatly to the final part of her argument, which considers the treatment of time in *Ada* in relation to its working title, *The Texture of Time*. Veen's philosophy of time is distinctly Bergsonian and, indeed, Bergson is an important figure and motif throughout the novel. Van's arrows, in conjunction with the structure of the novel, point inevitably towards the conclusion of life, i.e. death (132), thus reflecting Bergson's successive approach to time. However, the narrative form of *Ada*, in which Van dictates the story of his life to Violet, partially edits it with *Ada* and dies before completing it, leaves behind the multiple layers of his own artistic fallibility. These traces simply reassert the masterpiece as Nabokov's own and the artistic dominance as Nabokov's and not Veen's. Moreover, Van tries to make sense out of life via memory, while Nabokov gathers and presents literary links and references (157). Taken together, these elements of *Ada* demand that the reader not only re-reads, but returns to the text time after time in order to decode its litany of ciphers (157). As such, it provides a challenge not only to the reader, but to the narrative form itself. Bergsonian notions of time, refracted through Van Veen's parodic homages to the Nobel laureate, allow Nabokov to move fluidly across transnational literatures to borrow from 'cultural and linguistic borders' (158). In this way, Bozovic argues that Nabokov creates a text that is not Modernist, but about Modernism, deconstructing his own canon as it is formed, thus highlighting the 'struggles and stakes of canon formation' (158).

Bozovic concludes *Nabokov's Canon* by noting Nabokov's agency in canon formation, writing that the author 'had no interest in fitting into someone else's anthology of Russian writers, but provided his own transnational genealogy in the *Onegin* project and then again in the family tree of *Ada*' (160). Indeed, Nabokov's fashioning of a public persona was aggressive and sustained, as was 'his positioning of himself and his oeuvre outside the bounds of the marginalized émigré and Russian abroad' (161). This is perhaps the most significant contribution of her excellent study, as it grounds and contextualizes the latter part of Nabokov's career. While Nabokov could be seen to be rescuing 'his line of Russian literature by translating and annexing it to a hybrid, if English-dominant, canon' (5), there is a self-serving component to this, as *Ada*, to a greater extent than any

other work by Nabokov, seeks ‘the final word on Nabokov’s precursors, rival canons and even on the novel’s agonistic competition with rival media’ (160). Ultimately, Nabokov’s *Ada* (as well as Pushkin’s and, indeed, Nabokov’s *Onegin*) assimilates and expels its source materials, becoming a hybrid form of ‘filmic prose’ (161), which presents elements of all three of the author’s languages, drawing on their literary heritages and traditions to create a somehow visual work, greater than the sum of its parts. Thus, *Nabokov’s Canon* presents a vigorously original approach, which is convincingly argued and thoroughly supported, to Nabokov’s works, his authorial identity and his position within the canon, as well as a provocative assessment of the nature of canon formation itself.

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