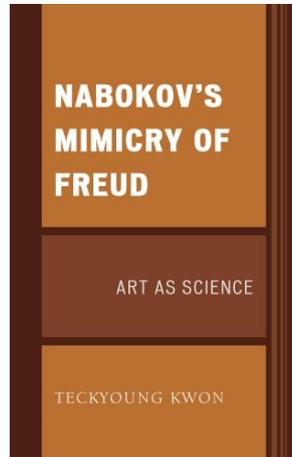


Nabokov's Mimicry of Freud: Art as Science, by Teckyoung Kwon. Lanham, ML: Lexington Books, 2017. ISBN 978-1-4985-5760-3. Bibliography. Index. xii + 188 pp.



K*allima inachus*, or the dead leaf butterfly, is a species found in tropical Asia which, when it closes its wings, resembles (as its name suggests) a dry leaf (cf. 18, 27, 35). Swallowtail butterflies, of which there are over 500 species, practise a different sort of mimicry, resembling distasteful species to deter predators (cf. 30-31). These and other examples would have been well known to Nabokov who, in his autobiography records that, by the time he was nine, he had gained ‘absolute control over the European lepidoptera as known to Hofman’ (cf. 14) — that is to say, those listed in *Die Gross-Schmetterlinge Europas* by the German entomologist Ernst Hofmann (1837-1892). This passion remained with him throughout his life; in an interview given on 5 June 1962, Nabokov declared that ‘my pleasures are the most intense known to man: writing and butterfly hunting’ (108, cf. 116). And in an interview given in 1991, his son, Dmitri, noted the significance for his father of not just of Poe, Shakespeare, and Pushkin (as well as Blok, Bergson Joyce, and Proust), but also texts dealing with entomology (19).

This background has more than mere anecdotal significance for Teckyoung Kwon, who undertakes in her study of *Nabokov's Mimicry of Freud* to ‘explore the manner in which Nabokov sought to integrate his knowledge of biological phenomena with his formidable skills as an artist to demonstrate the ways in which memory and mimicry converge in a single work of art’ (22). More specifically, however, the ‘overall purpose’ of her book is to ‘show how Nabokov mimics Freud in the medium

of dialogue, thereby integrating resemblance and difference' (22). Now the notion of mimicry or *mimesis* is central to both aesthetics and science. According to Aristotle, art does not so much imitate natural things as rather mirror nature's design (29); while Henry W. Bates and other biologists (including Alfred Russel Wallace [35]) sought to explain the function of mimicry in evolutionary terms (30-31). Subsequently, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan adopted mimicry as a basic component of the human psyche when, in his *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, he wrote that 'mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an *itself* that is behind', adding that 'the effect of mimicry is camouflage, in the strictly technical sense' (32, cf. 33).

Likewise, Nabokov regarded mimicry as a fundamental element of both art and nature, but he consistently rejected all reductive interpretations of its function. Instead, in mimicry Nabokov 'sensed the existence of an *other world*, one situated beyond the grasp of our consciousness' (36), a world that also manifested itself in the concept of *contingency*, something common for Nabokov to science and art alike (37). In relation to this idea, Nabokov drew on the Russian esoteric philosopher P. D. Ouspensky's notion of *theatricality* (38) as well as the notion of *transfiguring* found in the thought of Nikolai Evreinov (aka Evreinoff), the Russian Symbolist and theatrical dramatist (40). As well as the theatricality of Ouspensky and Evreinoff (27 and 94), Kwon highlights the significance for Nabokov of the American pragmatist philosopher, William James (21).

As far as the question of the relation between time and memory is concerned, two monumental works in particular – James's *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) and Freud's 'Project for a Scientific Psychology' (1895) – are said to have heralded a new age in the study of the mind (45-46). For James in his *Principles*, the essence of the psyche is *transgression*, as the inner mind accrues experience of reacting to the external environment; the basic structure of the brain is geared towards *habit*; and even if our conscious memory of learning fades away, the *traces* of this process are never entirely lost (46-47). By contrast, in his 'Project,' Freud set out his view (as he put it in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess of 6 December 1896) that perceptions (i.e., *Wahrnehmungen*) are 'neurons in which perceptions originate, to which consciousness attaches, but which in themselves retain no trace of what has happened', for '*consciousness and memory are mutually exclusive*' (cf. 53). And in

his famous paper of 1925, “A Note upon the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad’,” Freud provided a model for how “an unlimited receptive capacity and a retention of permanent traces appear to be mutually exclusive properties in the apparatus which we use as substitutes for our memory” (54). In the conclusion to this paper he recorded his suspicion that “this discontinuous method of functioning of the system [perception]-[consciousness] lies at the bottom of the origin of the concept of time” (cf. 54).

Kwon detects shades of James and Bergson in this later approach of Freud, yet throughout his life Nabokov was highly critical of the founder of psychoanalysis, condemning him (along with Marx) as another one of those ‘fake thinkers and puffed-up poets’ (89, cf. 100). Nabokov’s initial encounter with psychoanalysis must have taken place at Cambridge, where he would have been able witness what Kwon calls the English intelligentsia’s ‘overheated enthusiasm’ for Freudian thought (16, cf. 72, 93). On her account, Nabokov’s disappointment with Freud lay in the way psychoanalysis produced a ‘universal imperative’ that traced every symptom of the mind to the working of the unconscious; or, as Freud himself wrote in “A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis” (1917), ‘the ego is not master in its own house’ (55-56). By contrast, the Jamesian concept of ‘an intimate memory enriched by the magic of fantasy’ offered an ‘appealing alternative’ to Freud’s proposal that ‘childhood is the primary source of trauma’ (56).

All these rich theoretical and historic-intellectual considerations provide the framework for Kwon’s thought-provoking discussion of five works by Nabokov, beginning with *The Luzhin Defence* (1930), Nabokov’s third novel which he wrote during his emigration to Berlin. The concluding scene of the novel reminds Kwon of a Freudian case study (and, in particular, of *From the History of Infantile Neurosis* (1918), known as the case of ‘Wolf Man’). The ‘vague, mysterious sentences’ of his novel enable Nabokov to present ‘an essentially phenomenological view of memory’ (68), but for all that they shared in common *theoretically*, Freud and Nabokov are said to have had opposing views of the function of art. Next *Despair*, Nabokov’s seventh novel originally published in Russian in 1934, is described by Kwon as Nabokov’s ‘most explicitly political novel’ (83). While *Doppelgänger* and mimicry are integral to the novel’s plot, Kwon argues that Nabokov also employed Freudian psychology ‘as an artistic framework’, engaging himself in mimicry of psychotherapy in order to distract from his ‘dual attack’ on Russian Communism and German National

Socialism — ‘a risky enterprise at that particular time in history’ (96). On this account, Nabokov was ‘constantly looking at Freud, with more than a touch of humour, while he simultaneously imagined Freud looking at him’ (97), and the essential *theatricality* of this narrative device can be found elsewhere.

For instance, Nabokov’s controversial novel of 1955, *Lolita*, can be read as a ‘mimic of psychoanalysis’ (100), and not simply on the obvious thematic level as a work of fiction that uses the Freudian talking-cure as a springboard to demonstrate how ‘a nymphet’s spell’, the pure past, can ‘be neither grasped nor generalized’ (109). As Theodor Reik observed in *Listening with the Third Ear* (1948), Freud’s early paper ‘Screen Memories’ (1899) lays the groundwork for his later preoccupations with remembering, the so-called ‘primal scene’, displacement, repression, memory-traces and consciousness, and the colour yellow — the same colour as the stripes on the swallow-tail butterfly, which features in the case of the Wolf Man as a symbol for female genitals (104, cf. 112-113). By the same token, *Pale Fire* (1962), presented in the form of a poem and literary commentary, replicates Nabokov’s embrace of James’s concept of the perception of time to engage with various elements of memory and cognition (117). Finally, *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969), the story of Van Veen and his lifelong love affair with his sister Ada, playfully problematizes the structural significance that the incest taboo held for Freud, while engaging with the Freudian theme of memory.

Although Nabokov dismissed Darwin’s theory of natural selection as a utilitarian view of nature and rejected him, along with Marx and Freud, as systematizing and universalizing thinkers, Kwon argues that while Freud, as a scientist (although surely a scientist of a very peculiar kind?) was ‘compelled to generalize a theory’, Nabokov as a poet was ‘ultimately unable to avoid generalizing about the deceptive magic of the human psyche in its protean manifestations’ (115). While some critics have suggested that Freud is best appreciated as a literary writer and argued that his case studies should be read as carefully crafted stories or novellas, Kwon’s fine study sets Nabokov firmly apart from Freud, precisely because the former mimics (and thereby subverts) the latter (22-23). Moreover, in contrast to the ‘vulgar’ Freud’s schematic sexual symbolism and his Oedipal fixation on the ‘primal scene’ (71), what Nabokov learned as a child from his mother (as he tells us in *Speak, Memory*) was to pay attention to such natural details as ‘a lark ascending the curds-

and-whey sky of a dull spring day, heat lightning taking pictures of a distant line of trees in the night, the palette of maple leaves on brown sand, a small bird's cuneate footprints on new snow [...] Thus, in a way, I inherited an exquisite simulacrum – the beauty of intangible property, unreal estate – and this proved a splendid training for the endurance of later losses' (13). Unlike Freud, Nabokov has an attachment to the natural world that underpins his writing; or, as Nabokov once proudly proclaimed in a 1962 interview, "There's a butterfly in every one of my novels" (cf. 33).

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