NABOKOV
AT THE LIMITS
REDRAWING
CRITICAL BOUNDARIES

EDITED BY
LISA ZUNSHINE

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Contents

Series Editor’s Foreword
   Daniel Albright
   vii

Acknowledgments
   xv

Abbreviations
   xvii

Introduction
   Lisa Zunshine
   xix

Chapter 1: Ada’s “Malbrough s’en va-t-en guerre”
   D. Barton Johnson
   3

Chapter 2: Music in the Theater of the Mind: Opera and
   Vladimir Nabokov
   Charles Nicol
   21

Chapter 3: Resonances of Popular Music in Lolita, Pale Fire, and Ada
   Barbara Wyllie
   43

Chapter 4: The Quest for a Natural Melody in the Fiction of
   Vladimir Nabokov
   Julian W. Connolly
   69

Chapter 5: Vladimir Nabokov’s Invitation to a Beheading and
   Igor Stravinsky’s Petrushka
   Nassim W. Balestrini
   87

Chapter 6: “Ballet Attitudes”: Nabokov’s Lolita and Petipa’s
   The Sleeping Beauty
   Susan Elizabeth Sweeney
   111

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Chapter 7: Pninian Performatives
Masha Raskolnikov

Chapter 8: Alexander Pope’s The Rape of the Lock and
Vladimir Nabokov’s Pale Fire
Lisa Zanshine

Chapter 9: European Art: A Framing Device?
Christine Raguett-Bouvet

Chapter 10: Nabokov and Comic Art
Gavriel Shapiro

Chapter 11: Nabokov’s Painted Parchments
Ralph A. Ciancio

Bibliography

Contributors
Introduction

Lisa Zunshine

This volume represents an attempt to negotiate the boundaries of contemporary Nabokov scholarship by addressing several themes hitherto unexplored and even considered off-limits by students of his fiction. Nabokov's strongly expressed aesthetic preferences seem to have effectively forestalled certain venues of scholarly investigation—witness the current critical reticence to explore musical subtexts of his prose or his engagement with Augustan aesthetics, based on the fact that Nabokov had on several occasions proclaimed his indifference to music and characterized the English Age of Reason as pedestrian and devoid of imagination. This collection seeks to demonstrate that it is possible to open up formerly proscribed venues of inquiry without violating the personal and aesthetic integrity of the writer. We are reminded that the dynamism of any system—in our case, the system of aesthetic values articulated by Nabokov in his self-reflexive critical writings and subsequently developed by the scholars—lies in its unavoidable inconsistencies.¹

The above considerations have determined the choice of topics and the structure of this volume: once we gain the critical ground in the areas traditionally excluded from Nabokov scholarship (his engagement with music and ballet) or located on its periphery (the poststructuralist inquiry into the ways the writer's Russian characters "perform" their ethnicity; Nabokov's interest in eighteenth-century British literature), we turn to Nabokov's involvement with the visual arts—another until recently unexplored subject, now a focus of several book-length studies. By bringing these topics together and re-evaluating their significance for Nabokov studies, we not only discover the unfamiliar
Introduction

V.N. but also gain a better perspective on the merits and limitations of the scholarly consensus-forming process.

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One of the problems with the current scholarly attitude concerning Nabokov’s involvement with music is the absence of a clear understanding of what such an involvement would entail. In this case, the following differentiation (obvious as it seems) can be useful:

Nabokov was said to have no ear for music. He might “deplore [such a] shortcoming bitterly” (SO 35), but there was nothing he could do about it. His actual relationship with music, however, was clearly more complicated than such conventional definition would allow. The presumably “amusical” Nabokov described “the crickets emitting their metallic trill pitched at two octaves above middle C” (S 562); admired Proust for his peculiar drifting “from the idea of pale light to that of remote music—the sense of vision [grading] into the sense of hearing” (LL 213); and used the same strategy as one of his famously “musical” predecessors, E.T.A. Hoffmann: Nabokov’s “Bachman” much like Hoffmann’s “Ritter Gluck” evokes a widely known cultural icon to expand the story’s connotative field and to comment with a subtle irony on the character’s predilections. In other words, Nabokov did not have to be a practicing musician or a professed melomane to take advantage of a rich array of cultural references—historical, biographical, emotional—that musical tradition has to offer, no more than should the literary scholars imagine the fantastic world where music does not exist and sounds are tuned down to accommodate the peculiar handicap of the peevish writer.

Thus, several contributors to this collection focus on numerous musical “passwords” present in Nabokov’s fiction, that is, the allusions to specific composers, songs, musical styles and forms. As D. Barton Johnson points out in his analysis of musical subtexts of Ada, each of these allusions, besides having a more or less direct referent, constitutes a “breeding point for secondary and tertiary lines of allusion that resonate with ever wider aspects of [a given] novel.” Such is the case with “Malbrough s’en va-t-en guerre”—the song which in Ada is associated with the character named Percy de Prey and the theme of Ada’s infidelity. D. Barton Johnson demonstrates that a multicultural history of the “Malbrough” motif (the history which spans four centuries and six countries) is mirrored in the “extraterrestrial” (the term used by George Steiner to designate international multicultural

character of modernist writing) universe of Ada, “with its interweaving of the languages and literatures of three cultures.”

There is a certain contrast between Ada, where the melody implicitly functions as a lingua franca, shifting effortlessly between languages and cultures, and some of Nabokov’s earlier, Russian stories, where musical references have a pointedly local character. Their very locality attests to Nabokov’s recognition of their unique role in his fiction: musical references allow the exiled writer to claim his audience, because, as Barbara Wylie (in this volume) points out, “the success of [such references] relies upon the reader’s familiarity with the music, and there is an element of risk involved, since the author cannot be wholly confident that the reader will recognize the reference or more crucially, share the author’s response to it.” In the preface to the 1995 collection, The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov, Dmitri Nabokov notes that “music, for which [his father] never professed a special love, often figures prominently in his writing (S xiv). D. Nabokov refers to such stories as “Sounds,” “Bachman,” and “Music”; I would add to this list “That in Aleppo Once” (featuring the musical crickets—see above) and “The Admiralty Spire,” the narrator of which remembers that back in 1917, he “cherished the echoes of modish tsiganshchina [gypsy singing] that inclined [his beloved] to singing, and [him] to composing verse” (S 347). The story contains a tribute to the “authentic Gypsy art” that had earlier “enchanted Pushkin” and had practically withered by the 1920s. There is also a curious description of a song performed in a “menacing voice [mimicking] the Kaiser: ‘Give me a nib and a holder, to write ultimatum it’s time’ . . . to the tune of ‘Under a Cloud the Moon’s Hidden’” (S 349). The references to the specific tunes and lyrics may seem obscure to us today, but at the time when those stories were written, these references served as familiar signposts for Nabokov’s uprooted Russian audience. Culled from real songs or conceived as stylized imitations of such songs, they conjured the emotional atmosphere peculiar to each cultural milieu more effectively than any lengthy description could. Herein lay their attraction for Nabokov the writer and the roots of his willingness to risk such irreveribly topical allusions.

Nabokov’s 1943 “The Assistant Producer” stands apart from other short stories in its use of musical references. The “limited but always welcome repertoire” of Russian émigré singer Slaviska includes a song that opens with the plaintive: “Du bist im Schnee begraben, mein Russland.” The unexpected German lines are introduced as “printed
beneath the Russian text” (S 548; italics mine) in some phantom songbook. Fittingly, these German lyrics are all we learn about this presumably quintessential Russian song soaring over the topsy-turvy world where the husband of the patriotic singer, the second-in-command of the Russian White Warriors Union, is a triple agent collaborating both with Germans and with Soviets. Interestingly, the allusive terrain of the German line does not end here and transcends the spatio-temporal limits of the story proper. Nabokov writes “The Assistant Producer” in January 1943; American papers are full of news about the Hitler’s Third Army’s spectacular defeat near Stalingrad—the lament about the “Russland begraben im Schnee” assumes an eerie topicality.

“Du bist im Schnee begraben...” is an aural antithesis of madeleine: it brings back no memories of the lost Russian past (as the abovementioned “Give me a nib and a holder, to write ultimatum it’s time” could, to those in the know). Instead, it gestures noncommittally toward a present historical moment and, in the final account, contributes to the dawn of disorientation that the whole story seems to cultivate (i.e., by the parodic use of cinematic techniques). Nabokov clinches his account of Slavskia’s repertoire with a sarcastic nod toward the people “for whom music and sentiment are one, or who like songs to be mediums for the spirits of circumstances under which they had been first apprehended in an individual past [and] who found the tremendous sonorities of her voice both a nostalgic solace and a patriotic kick” (S 548). Indeed, the possibility of a nostalgic solace or a patriotic kick is irrevocably compromised here through a contextual interbreeding (to modify D. Barton Johnson’s earlier term) of German and Russian, of past and present, of singing and political unscrupulousness. “The Assistant Producer” thus represents somewhat of a rupture with Nabokov’s earlier technique of instant evocation of a particular cultural setting through song and even takes to task such a technique for its presumed naïveté. This development is not surprising because “The Assistant Producer” was the first story that Nabokov wrote in English with a predominantly non-Russian audience in mind. The subject matter of the piece is still Russian, but the connotative fields are readjusted in a crucial step toward what would be perceived as uniquely Nabokovian use of intertextuality.

Charles Nicol’s “Music in the Theatre of the Mind: Opera and Vladimir Nabokov” provides an extensive analysis of Nabokov’s Russian musical background, his early exposure to songs and operas, and the subsequent reflection of this exposure in his oeuvre. Nicol successfully challenges the accepted view about Nabokov’s inability to appreciate music and his pointed ignorance of songs and composers. He uncovers a remarkable instance of an intertextual dialogue between Nabokov’s novel The Gift and Musorgsky’s opera Boris Godunov: when the Gift’s protagonist, Fyodor Godunov-Chernyntsev “imagines a sort of geographical fantasy where he joins his father in his travels across southwest Asia,” we are reminded of the scene from the Musorgsky’s opera when Tsar Boris’s son, Fyodor, is studying geography. Another surprising operatic echo (this time, of Bizet’s Carmen) awaits us in one of the “most celebrated and debated passages” in Invitation to a Beheading.

Barbara Wyllie’s analysis of resonances of popular music in Lolita, Pale Fire, and Ada serves as a thematic counterpart to Nicol’s investigation of Nabokov’s Russian musical heritage. Wyllie demonstrates Nabokov’s awareness of American popular music of the early 1950s and draws our attention to his somewhat puzzling choice of musical references in Lolita. It is established early on in the novel that “contemporary popular music is Lolita’s domain, a domain anathema to Humbert Humbert’s culture of high European art and architecture.” This convenient demarcation is compromised as the narrative progresses and “Humbert begins to display a heightened sensitivity to the presence of music in the atmosphere” and finally, upon losing Lolita, is forced to accept the music as “one of the few remaining tangible elements of Lolita’s presence in his soul.”

Concluding the “music” selection of the volume is Julian Connolly’s review of the evolution of the theme of music throughout Nabokov’s career as a writer. In his early fiction (“Bachman,” The Defense), Nabokov seemed to be influenced by the Russian Romantic tradition associating creative genius with madness. As Romantics considered music a quintessential art form, “passion and the confusion of the soul,” two of Nabokov’s brilliant and deranged characters are respectively a musician and a chess player; the latter is introduced into the “mysteries of chess [by] the spectral influence of his maternal grandfather, himself a musician and composer.” Gradually, first in the short story “Music,” and then in Lolita, Nabokov develops an increasingly ironic perspective of his early association of music with mental instability.

Nabokov’s novella The Eye (written in 1930) is not mentioned in Connolly’s article, yet it seems to fit well with his persuasive paradigm
Enchanted Hunters” evokes the scenery and the imagery of Petipa’s ballet and so does the theme of the “sleeping princess”—Dolores Haze. On the other hand, the projected drowning of Charlotte and the “real” killing of Quilty unfold in a series of magically slowed-down ballet movements; arts merge into an ironic aestheticization of the macabre, an instance, perhaps, of what Daniel Albright sees as the modernist investigation of “tranvesticism” among the verbal, visual, and melodic—“what happens when art stimulates itself by temporarily pretending to be another species of art altogether” (“Series Editor’s Foreword”). Quilty’s “performance” of dying (“he rose from his chair higher and higher, like old, gray, mad Nijinsky” [Lo 302]) renders obsolete whatever scenarios of murder Humbert has been nurturing, the scenarios based on the readily available cultural representations which codify death as a solemn proceeding (or grisly, in case of homicide)—not a series of fanciful ballet pas.

Nabokov’s ironic destabilization of cultural codes, hinted at in Sweeney’s article, becomes the focal point of Masha Raskolnikov’s inquiry into the ways of performing (and misperforming) one’s ethnic background. Raskolnikov uses the framework developed by Louis Althusser to provide an unexpected and exciting reading of Nabokov’s Pnin. In his 1971 Lenin and Philosophy, Althusser theorizes the process by which the individual gets interpellated by cultural institutions and, by the virtue of such interpellation (often subtle and almost imperceptible), is given the status of a subject, an ambiguous benediction, as it turns out, as the parameters of subjection are defined on the terms of the interpellating culture/ideology. Raskolnikov complicates the Althusserian model as she considers Timofey Pnin whose satisfactory interpellation by American culture is compromised a priori because of the language barrier (Pnin may simply misunderstand the terms of interpellation!) and because of the neverlandish status of the culture within which he underwent his first, “defining,” interpellation, the abolished Russia of his youth. 3 Pnin’s unique position in relation to both interpellating cultures seems to create possibilities for resistance to interpellation, the resistance that hinges upon the ways in which Pnin agrees/is brought to “perform” his Russian background (at times, in contrast to other “performers” or “mimics” of the ethnic: Sirin, Komarov, Cockerell).

Raskolnikov’s suggestive use of the poststructuralist and postcolonial instrumentarium opens a larger discussion about the processes that define the limits of scholarly inquiry and shape the field
of Nabokov studies. In a different way, I continue this discussion as I explore the multiple allusions to Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* contained in *Pale Fire*. Most of these allusions are obvious, and the fact that they have not been discovered until now points to a particular lacunae in Nabokov scholarship: so far critics have been taking at its face value Nabokov's dismissive attitude (expressed primarily in his *Commentary* on Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*) toward eighteenth-century aesthetics and have not investigated the full extent of his engagement with Augustans. On the rare occasions when Pope and Swift do figure in Nabokov criticism, the stress is made on their function as translators, critics, and mock-critics—the imaginative power of their poetry and prose being off-limits. I suggest that to understand Nabokov's contradictory attitude toward eighteenth-century British literature, we ought to reconstruct the specific take on eighteenth-century aesthetics prevalent in the American academy back in the 1940s—the time when Nabokov started his teaching career in the United States.

Another prominent gap in Nabokov studies is about to be bridged. Several scholars—Ralph Ciancio, Christine Raguet-Bouvart, and Gavriel Shapiro—are working on book-length projects taking up several distinct aspects of Nabokov's involvement with the visual arts. By a stroke of editorial good luck, they have agreed to present parts of their ongoing work in this volume.

Christine Raguet-Bouvart perceives the use of painting in literature as a stylistic device; the rich contextual tension between the "linguistic and perceptual complements the narrative discourse without placing signs before words, or vice-versa, thus playing on the ambiguity between what is visible and what is readable." So, for example, the numerous fake paintings cropping up in Nabokov's fiction serve as a touchstone for characters' ability to "correlate the visible and the sensible" ("La Veneziana," *Laughter in the Dark*). Noting that painting and artists figure prominently in *Lolita*, Raguet-Bouvart points out that the "artistically represented world of the story is emblematic of Humbert's discourse: artistic images in the story conflate with the figures of his speech to recall Humbert's solipsistic nature." Humbert brings up Claude Lorrain and El Greco (no favorites of Nabokov) to describe American landscapes; "to see his new country not through his own eyes but through the eyes of exiled artists is for Humbert a stylistic device that would enable him to resolve the risk of losing his identity."

Gavriel Shapiro starts his essay on Nabokov's interest in comic art with a remarkable biographical excursus: a review of Nabokov's childhood exposure to caricatures. These caricatures were often "more or less vulgar cartoons" (*SM* 188) appearing in Russian reactionary newspapers and ridiculing his father, a prominent statesman, famous for his stance against anti-Semitism. Later, living in Germany, Nabokov became fascinated by the cartoons of *Simplicissimus* and incorporated some of their themes and details into his fiction; when in America, he was similarly engaged with the pictorial world of his favorite magazine, *The New Yorker*. Shapiro suggests that through his depiction of comical artists, budding caricaturists, and impersonators (*Laughter in the Dark*, *Pnin*), Nabokov was able to enunciate his aversion to cruelty and show that comic art "with all its humor and satire, should always be compassionate and ennobling, but never insensitive, let alone cruel, toward a fellow man."

Ralph Ciancio focuses on the centrality of visual perception to both fiction and our interpretation of it. Less concerned with attributing the influence that specific artists might have had upon Nabokov, he explores the "heuristic value of certain approaches to painting as analogues to Nabokov's descriptive and narrative methods." He demonstrates the ways in which "epistemological precepts of Impressionism would seem singularly congenial to Nabokov's vision," investigates the affinities between the aesthetics of Leonardo da Vinci and Nabokov, and provides a spectacular analysis of the use of "curious perspectives" in Nabokov's fiction.

One of Ciancio's points can serve as a leitmotif for the present collection. Ciancio notes that Nabokov's "interviews are indispensable for the light they shed on the general predisposition of his taste in art, but for insights into the whole 'picture,' there is no substitute for grappling with the optic niceties of his tropes, uncovering buried allusions, and following the associative logic (or illogic) of [his] enchanted universe.... Nabokov assumed that the ideal reader is prepared to first of all hazard inferences on the basis of contextualized, internal evidence." This volume is a testament to the value of the readerly risk-taking that Nabokov encouraged.

**NOTES**

1. Alexander Dolinin provides an analysis of one such inconsistency as he discusses Nabokov's theory of literary translation. He notes that "just a glance
at Nabokov’s half a century-long record as a translator of poetry ... shows beyond any doubt that his practice, with the sole exception of Eugene Onegin, has contradicted his proclaimed (or feigned?) principles” (119).

2. I mention E.T.A. Hoffmann on purpose as I imagine that a hypothetical collection, entitled Musical Subtexts in the Texts of E.T.A. Hoffmann, would raise no eyebrows because Hoffmann was an accomplished composer. (Of course, as any student of German Romanticism would attest, there is nothing “hypothetical” about books dealing with Hoffmann and music. See for example Klaus-Dieter Dobat’s 1994 Musik als romantische Illusion: Eine Untersuchung zur Bedeutung der Musikvorstellung E. T. A. Hoffmanns für sein literarisches Werk, or Helmut Gobel’s 1992 “E. T. A. Hoffmann’s Language About Music,” in Music and German Literature: Their Relationship Since the Middle Ages.) By contrast, when the idea of a volume on Nabokov and music was first brought up among Nabokovians, it was met with skepticism prompted no doubt by Nabokov’s frequent avowals of his indifference to music.

3. Interestingly, Nabokov uses a concept very similar to the Althusserian notion of interpellation when he talks about the “circumstances under which [people get] first apprehended in an individual past” (548).