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Nabokov Conference in Kyoto, April 24-27, 2010 Organized by the Nabokov Society, Japan (Akiko Nakata, Tadashi Wakashima, Shoko Miura)

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“Revising Nabokov Revising”

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- 1 Nabokov revised his works as he translated them and, on another plane, canon revisionism has been having its backlash and provoked other refracting waves. The purpose of the conference was to advance Nabokov studies through the discussion of how our view of Nabokov’s standing and his works today should be revised, especially after the publication of *The Original of Laura*. However the conference was not confined to just this theme, since “revising” is a word rich with implications. To borrow some words of advice from Ellen Pifer, the word made it possible to focus on a wide range of issues, from close examinations of specific textual revisions to broad cultural issues dealing with the way that Nabokov’s work is currently read and received around the world.
- 2 After a delightful opening reception on March 24, the conference opened with three papers dedicated to the *Lolita* screenplay, or rather the *Lolita* screenplays, since the drama piece exists under different versions. The first paper was entitled “Nabokov’s Revisions of *Lolita* in the Screenplay” by Andrei Babikov (The Culture Center of Ukraine in Moscow). Andrei Babikov, who translated the published screenplay into Russian, tackled the notion of revising through a singular example of Nabokov’s revision of his own work. Andrei focused upon motives and networks of allusions that Nabokov added or strengthened in the screenplay, and recalled that the screenplay should not be considered a lesser or simplified version of novel, but as a work in its own right—an “implied film” as Michael Wood put it. In her questions, Beth Sweeney wondered whether the screenplay had been designed for a film meant to be viewed more than once, or for people who had read *Lolita*. Andrei’s opinion is that the *Lolita* screenplay is a text for readers.
- 3 Jacqueline Hamrit (University of Lille III, France), in “Generic Glidings and Endless Writing from *The Enchanter* to *Lolita*: A Screenplay through *Lolita*” underscored the cross-generic writing at stake in the nymphet story. She demonstrated that these texts illustrate not only the difference between showing and telling in literary terms, but also between literary narrative and cinematic showing. She thus analyzed the shift from the

third to first-person narration and to the absence of such a filter in the screenplay, as opposed to the conservation of the mother-child-husband scheme. She also underlined the awareness Nabokov had of the camera’s presence and function.

- 4 In his paper entitled “Nabokov Revising Nabokov: The *Lolita* Screenplays,” Julian Connolly (University of Virginia) not only focused on the changes in the form of the work (from verbal narrative to screenplay), but also on literary allusions and characterization. He rehearsed some of the major differences between the two versions of the screenplay (such as the opening), and insisted on the toning down of all erotic contents, even though Nabokov kept some indications of Humbert’s pedophilia, deleted by Kubrick. Julian Connolly then interrogated the intertextual aspect of the screenplay, noting that only the references to Poe were kept, and almost all other references dropped. Finally, he analyzed the absence of some of the novel’s characters (Monique, Gaston Godin) and the expansion of both the role and personality of others (Quilty, and notably Lolita).
- 5 The following set of papers focused upon Nabokov’s languages in creation and his writing strategies. In “Nabokov’s ‘Natural Idiom’: From ‘First-rate’ Russian to ‘Second-rate’ English,” Shun’Ishiro Akikusa (University of Tokyo) carried out a stylistic comparison of Nabokov’s Russian and his self-translation into English. He demonstrated that the most unique feature of Nabokov’s Russian style is the fact that he deliberately utilizes the grammar, usage and idiom, which native speakers internalize unconsciously. His way of writing is to bring out all the possibilities of Russian, and is different from his English, which often evidently violates the rules of idiomatic usage. Moreover, Shun’Ishiro Akikusa noted that in his self-translations into Russian, some features of his English were transferred into his Russian.
- 6 Marie Bouchet (University of Toulouse, France) developed an analysis focusing on the notion of displacement in Nabokov’s fiction in terms of structure, characterization and style. She especially analyzed the syntactical and phonological displacements at play in the characterization of Pnin, and the recurrence of a rather infrequent device in *Lolita*, the hypallage, one of Humbert’s favorite. Hypallages perform the syntactic displacement of an adjective or adverb, which qualifies an item other than the one it logically should. This device of transgression of the syntactical borders renders the limits between words porous, and invites the reader to replace the adjective or adverb, and thus play the displacement game offered by the text.
- 7 Ljuba Tarvi (Helsinki University) presented her work in progress, focusing on what she calls “descriptive structural metaphor” (DSM), in Vladimir Nabokov’s nine Russian novels as regards his female protagonists (FP). Her aim is to unravel how Nabokov stylistically creates the ‘sub-feeling’ of a concealed disregard for these protagonists. Her hypothesis is that Nabokov’s Russian FPs produce an ‘unpleasant’ impression because the DSMs used to describe them are predominantly negative. She presented to us her classifications of such DSMs.
- 8 The first plenary speaker of the conference was Maurice Couturier (Nice University) who presented his findings as he annotated his translation of *Lolita* for the second volume of the prestigious Pléiade edition of Nabokov’s works, due to appear in 2010 in France, and for which he is also the chief editor. Maurice Couturier focused on two types of annotations: first he analyzed the contents of Nabokov’s cards deposited at the Library of Congress, going over the ample material gathered by Nabokov from newspapers, magazines, and books on such topics as the development of a girl’s body at puberty, sex, teenage slang, legal jargon, and literary references. Then, Maurice concentrated on

intertexts which had not been unearthed yet, like Vigneau’s *Lolita*, or *Nocturnal Revels* where Nabokov obviously dug out the name of Charlotte Haze, and many echoes to French literary works he passed on to his French-speaking narrator. According to him, these two sets of annotations tend to show that desire and sex are much more important in this novel than Alfred Appel, Jr. suggested in his annotated edition.

- 9 Tadashi Wakashima (Kyoto University) presented a paper entitled “Another Road to *Lolita* : A Transatlantic View,” in which he considered the possible reasons why Graham Greene notoriously praised *Lolita*. He especially explored the so-called “mushroom jungle”—a horde of lurid paperbacks which proliferated and gained a large popularity in postwar Britain—and see how *Lolita* could be mistakenly considered as a typical product belonging to that genre.
- 10 In her paper “Revising Nabokov Revising the Detective Novel: Vladimir, Agatha, and the Terms of Engagement” Catharine T. Nepomnyashchy (Columbia University) examined the way in which Nabokov revised the detective novel by incorporating it into his own novels, via possible references to Agatha Christie. She particularly analyzed *Lolita*, *Despair* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and showed how Nabokov appropriates popular fiction’s power to seduce the reader and pose the problem of the function of literature in an age when it was challenged by politics and competing forms of culture.
- 11 Maya Medlock (Yamaguchi University) focused on “the theme of tears” in *Lolita* in her paper, relating it to the wider theme of water. She explained that although we pay attention to Lolita’s tears and sobs, we have not given much thought to Humbert’s tears. It might be fair to say that Humbert has at least the sense to tell us about Lolita’s tears and sobs. What is wicked about him, however, is that he keeps on mentioning his own tears and sobs, which almost overwhelm those of Lolita.
- 12 Akiko Nakata (Nanzan Junior College) presented a paper entitled “Some Spiritual Subtexts Hidden in *Transparent Things*” in which she analyzed the subtexts alluding to spirituality, which she called, following Boyd, “stories behind the story behind the story.” These spiritual layers under the surface of the work not only have to do with something spiritual, but also reveal the way the novel is devised. The difficulty to notice these indirect quotations indicates that these subtexts are incorporated in the text both to be found and to remain concealed, as Nabokov often does with the theme of death.
- 13 In “*Bend Sinister*’s Mad Dash or How to Impersonate an Anthropomorphic Deity,” Leland de la Durantaye (Harvard University) analyzed the ending of *Bend Sinister* and discussed the image of creator and creation to be found at the end of this work, relating it to larger aesthetic and ethical questions in Nabokov’s writing. Examining the text itself and Nabokov’s statements about it, Leland discussed the ambiguous status of the last lines, which can be interpreted as Krug addressing his tormentors in the diegetic world, or his creator who has been inflicting so much pain on him. Leland demonstrated that the question of suffering goes beyond any political intent, and related it to some basic features of Nabokovian art.
- 14 Kazunao Sugimoto (Aichi Shukutoku University) analyzed the common features of what he called “Nabokov’s Orpheus Stories,” namely the narratives in which male protagonists lose their beloved woman, mostly by death, and struggle in vain to find a way to get her back. Studying “The Return of Chorb,” *Mary*, “Ultima Thule” or *Lolita*, Kazunao Sugimoto showed that the last attempt to get back the lost beloved appears to be the act of becoming the ‘author’ of a story.

- 15 In his paper entitled “Saving Jewish-Russian Emigrés,” Maxim D. Shroyer (Boston College) furthered his analyses of Nabokov’s Jewish concerns and explorations, analyzing works from Nabokov’s Russian short fiction. Maxim D. Shroyer underscored the pattern of characters rescuing or attempting to rescue Jewish children, and interpreted the Berlin fiction as a warning Nabokov addressed to the émigré community, who should have left Germany as early as possible, and salvage the Russian-Jewish children, as he saved his own son.
- 16 The three following papers dealt with Nabokov’s autobiography. Maria Alhambra (University of East Anglia) focused on the paratext of *Speak, Memory* (map, index, photographs), and the unpublished chapter 16, included by Brian Boyd in the Library of America edition, which provides a comment on the patterns structuring the book. Maria Alhambra discussed the function of the paratextual elements, and showed how they participate to the subjectification of the temporal and spatial referents given as objective.
- 17 Then, Siggy Frank (University of Nottingham) focused more specifically on the photographs reproduced in the book, and analyzed the relation between the text and the images, and more precisely the photograph and the caption chosen by Nabokov. The photographs provide an echo to Nabokov’s intense experience of remembering which is mainly visual, as if his mental pictures were juxtaposed with the actual photographs.
- 18 Ellen Pifer (University of Delaware), in her paper entitled “Folding His Magic Carpet: Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory* and *Lolita*,” attempted to trace the creative process of the nymphet by focusing on Polenka, the young daughter of the Nabokovs’ head coachman, with whom young Vladimir exchanged glances of desire. She demonstrated how in the memoir as in the novel, the triumph of memory over time’s arrow is often tinged with remorse.
- 19 The second plenary speaker of the Kyoto conference was Brian Boyd (University of Auckland), who had also provided the conference theme. In his talk entitled “Nabokov as Psychologist: Routes for Exploration,” Brian Boyd explained it was probably time to revise or refresh or expand our sense of Nabokov by considering him as a serious—and of course a playful—psychologist. Brian recalled how Nabokov applied his scientific curiosity, his gift for precise observation and his artistic inventiveness to psychology. Indeed, much of his famous antipathy to Freud derived from his passion for psychology. Following Nabokov’s claim that “all novelists of any worth are psychological novelists,” Brian demonstrated how Nabokov, not only a brilliant observer of the world of nature and the world of human nature, had subtly understood the workings of man’s mind by analyzing in detail a short excerpt from *Ada*, which magisterially illustrates how Nabokov uses various mental processes now well known of specialists of the cognitive systems in the human brain.
- 20 Nobuaki Kakinuma (Kobe Shoin Women's University) gave a talk in Russian, entitled “From the Notes to *Eugene Onegin* to *Pale Fire*: Comparing the Annotations of Nabokov and Lotman.” In it, he established Nabokov’s notes were intertwined with subjective assumptions fueled by his creative imagination—elements countered by Lotman’s notes, which can be read as a criticism of Nabokov’s. He explained and illustrated how Nabokov’s notes on *Eugene Onegin* are far from being strictly scientific and philological. The ambiguities of Pushkin’s original compositional directions provide extreme stimulation to the unbridled imagination of Nabokov as a writer.

- 21 In his paper, Mitsuyoshi Numano (University of Tokyo) focused on the “stylistic exuberance” of *The Gift*, which became all the more blatant as he was translating the novel into Japanese so as to make Nabokov’s masterpiece in Russian available to Japanese readers. Mitsuyoshi Numano explained how the syntactical constraints of the Japanese language rendered the task of translating Nabokov’s long and convoluted sentences, frequently resorting to relative pronouns and participles, excruciatingly difficult. Translating the abundant alliterations and assonances of Nabokov’s text also proved complicated, especially as in Japanese such stylistic ornaments do not sound as poetic and elegant as they do in Russian.
- 22 A French psychiatrist and Nabokov amateur, Jean-Pierre Luauté, gave a talk entitled “Was Nabokov a Psychologist?: About *Despair* and Nabokov’s Inflexible Criticism of Freud’s Doctrine.” As a specialist of the various clinical conditions in which the phenomenon of the double appears (currently designated as the Delusional Misidentification Syndromes), he described the “syndrome of the subjective double” with Professor Christodolou of Athens University in 1993, and suggested that the first discoverer of this condition was Nabokov who, in *Despair*, gave an exact description of it. Jean-Pierre Luauté and his colleague would have liked to call this syndrome the Nabokov syndrome, but unfortunately the writer’s name had already been ascribed to another condition, namely the mental-spatial impairment Vadim displays in *Look at the Harlequins!*, which the describer misinterpreted to be Nabokov’s as well.
- 23 In her paper entitled “‘Almost Completed But Only Partly Corrected’: Enacting Revision in Nabokov’s Novels,” Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (College of the Holy Cross) examined the revising practice at work in Nabokov’s process of creation. She considered the various versions, revisions, additions, self-translations with modifications that not only mark Nabokov’s works in their making, but are also thematically reflected in his fictional worlds, as most of his novels, in fact, present themselves as manuscripts still being composed by a first-person narrator.
- 24 In her paper presented in Russian and entitled “A Phantom Russian Poet: Vladimir Nabokov’s Poetics and Position in the Late 1930s – Early 1950s” Maria Malikova (Pushkinskii Dom) focused on Nabokov’s “Shishkov cycle,” a series of poems written under the pseudonym of Vasilij Shishkov— and a practical joke triumphantly played by Nabokov on the most famous and influential Russian émigré literary critic Georgij Adamovich who, out of sheer partiality, had consistently dismissed Sirin’s poems and enthusiastically welcomed Nabokov’s poetry when he put on the mask of Shishkov. However, Maria showed that Adamovich’s reading of those poems should not be only regarded through the narrow lens of the joke: she underscored Adamovich’s acute insights into the essence of Nabokov’s later Russian poetics.
- 25 Masataka Konishi (Tokyo Gakugei University) presented a paper in Russian, entitled “Nabokov's Paradox,” in which he analyzed the recurrence of mathematical motives in his novels from the end of the 1930s to the mid-1940s. According to him, the presence of such mathematical paradoxes and conundrums is to be paralleled not only to self-reference, as part of the metafictional aspect of Nabokov’s novels, but also to his interest in the otherworld.
- 26 Stephen Blackwell (University of Tennessee) offered a revision of the relationship Nabokov had with the work of Dostoevsky, showing how in his work Nabokov developed important Dostoevskian devices, such as the loophole, and pushed them to new limits.

Following Bakhtin's analysis of Dostoevsky, Stephen Blackwell showed that if Dostoevsky first brought the world a heightened sensitivity to the finalizing power of language, through characters that continually seek to transcend their own and others' narratives about them, Nabokov extended that project by crafting narratives that extrude and dramatize their own entrapping potential.

- 27 In his paper entitled "Nabokov and Hemingway: The Fish That Got Away" Yuri Leving (Dalhousie University) recalled the various statements Nabokov made about Hemingway, reminded the audience that Nabokov had accepted to translate *The Old Man and the Sea* into Russian, and analyzed the correspondence concerning this project, kept by the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library. Indeed, despite the fact that Nabokov's Russian translation of *The Old Man and the Sea* never materialized, available facts testify to Nabokov's quite genuine personal interest in Hemingway's short novel, even if, by the mid-1960s, Nabokov, it seems, became slightly envious of his peer's posthumous fame.
- 28 Sam Schuman (University of Minnesota) gave a talk entitled " 'The Sun's a Thief' Nabokov and Shakespeare—A Quantitative Approach," in which he presented his considerable work-in-progress: annotating every reference to Shakespeare in the Nabokov English canon, and offering the results of his investigations to the community of Nabokov scholars. Sam Schuman explained his method (defining types of references) and presented some of the results obtained so far. One of the many interesting findings his presentation highlighted is that as he wrote more and more works in English, the references to the Bard became more and more numerous.
- 29 After the visit of two wonders of Kyoto, Ginkakuji and Shisendo, and a delightful walk under the cherry blossoms, the last plenary speaker of the Kyoto Nabokov Conference, Michael Wood (Princeton University) gave a talk entitled "The Afterlife of Sebastian Knight," in the enchanting setting of Hakusasonso. Michael Wood analyzed the structure of inquiry Nabokov establishes in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and pursued its recurrence in some detail through his later novels and stories. He also wondered whether the notion of the 'original' of Laura may not be designed precisely to recall the 'real life' Sebastian Knight may or not have. The point is not to suggest that *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is a source or model for Nabokov's later work; only that it provides a distinctive theoretical framework through which much of that work may usefully be seen.

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