

Kaleidoscopic Nabokov. The State of Nabokov Research in France

A two-day conference organized by Lara Delage-Toriel and Monica Manolescu at the English Department of the University of Strasbourg, October 17-18 2008.

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Lara Delage-Toriel et Monica Manolescu

Conference Overview: The “crazy quilt of Nabokov studies in France”



Strasbourg University, the conference's main venue

- 1 There are conferences meant to gather people around an idea or theme, and there are conferences meant above all to bring people from a given field together so as to offer a much-needed cartography of that field and to consolidate the community of researchers. The main purpose of “Kaleidoscopic Nabokov” was that of gathering specialists and Ph.D. students working on Nabokov in France. It was therefore conceived from the very beginning as a cohering event around Nabokov’s work and its French reception (through research, translation and teaching). It is precisely for this reason that no thematic guidelines were imposed (although the organizers did offer some suggestions). The event turned out to be both extremely useful for the academic community of French Nabokovians and unique, since no such interdisciplinary French conference had been organized before. In the end, a genuine Nabokovian web has emerged throughout France – not exactly “the crazy quilt of forty-eight states” (*Lolita*), but still, a colourful quilt of Nabokov scholars, embedded within eighteen French university departments. This quilt is beautifully illustrated by Alexandra Loewe’s

inspired poster, representing Nabokov's eye and a series of colorful intersecting circles and rays. Maurice Couturier (University of Nice), our most senior specialist, was the keynote speaker of the conference, and three Ph.D. students, as well as one Master student, also gave papers, thus offering a complete generational vista of Nabokov research in France.

Image2

The conference poster, designed by Alexandra Loewe

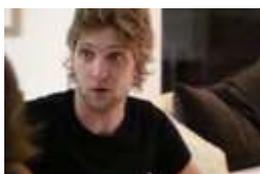
- 2 The image of the *kaleidoscope* imposed itself as the conceptual and visual landmark of the conference. Actually, before it became an image of togetherness and chromatic exuberance during the conference itself, the kaleidoscope appeared to encode not only the richly varied "unreal estate" (*Speak, Memory*) Nabokov has left us, but also the state of Nabokov scholarship in France, which is greatly impaired by a lack of communication between the various departments where Nabokov is studied (Russian, English and Comparative Literature). Indeed, these departments are almost totally hermetic, scarcely ever opening up to researchers with similar interests working on a different floor or across the street. Sadly, this isolation affects writers whose work is multilingual and difficult to categorize from a strictly national point of view, and Nabokov is certainly an eminent case in point. The enthusiasm with which people responded to our call for papers was a proof that researchers and students felt the need to come together and that Nabokov interests and fascinates many individuals in France. For two days (October 17-18 2008), Strasbourg definitely became the capital of Nabokov studies in France, the city where Nabokov was commented on, read and celebrated not only at the university but also at the main bookshop downtown, where actors read Nabokov in three languages to an audience of about one hundred people.
- 3 One of the questions that we formulated in the call for papers was: "do researchers from Russian, English and Comparative Literature departments in France talk about the same Nabokov?" During one of the coffee breaks on the first day, one of the Russian specialists who attended the conference told Monica that "we are not really talking about the same Nabokov" – and the kaleidoscope became meaningless all of a sudden. The conference seemed to be simply a bunch of parallel discourses on several phantom Nabokovs. However, the same person said, at the end of the conference, that she had changed her mind, especially thanks to the stimulating debates, which went beyond academic boundary lines. Thus, the kaleidoscope was revived again together with the idea it represents: that of a unique image constructed by various fragments put together. This impression of a common Nabokov was shared by all participants at the end of the conference. And how can one not mention the incredible amount of complicity, the elective affinities that had brought us together and which created funny situations, with one speaker saying "you all know the quote I'm talking about, it's on page 38 in *Lolita*" and everybody nodding approvingly, since everybody knew *Lolita* by heart (or almost). We may have appeared like a bunch of Kinbotian critics to the outsiders who came to listen to us, but the enthusiasm of us Nabokovians could not be underestimated. The general feeling was one of intellectual pleasure, summed up by René Alladaye when he said: "On est bien entre nabokoviens" ("How good it feels to be among Nabokovians").

Adding new dimensions to the kaleidoscope...

- 4 From the start, the image of the kaleidoscope was also a homage to Nabokov's inventive cross-disciplinary ventures. To make the academic and the non-academic worlds converse through and thanks to Nabokov was another aim of the conference. Thus two visual artists who had no previous knowledge of Nabokov were invited to immerse themselves into his fictional world and present us whatever that exploration may produce. The result was a series of drawings and paintings, as well as videos by Alexandra Loewe, who also gave the conference its visual identity by designing its poster, program and badges. Alexandra also submitted each participant (including non-speakers) to a quiz of her own making, thus making up a collection of personal visions – another kaleidoscope full of insights emerging beside the academic proceedings. Another artist, Georgia Russell, also played the game by creating four artworks out of Nabokov's books (*Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, *Despair*, *Chambre Obscure*). Using a scalpel, Georgia thoroughly dissected each one of these novels, drawing out an essence born from a joint craft, Nabokov's and her own. Both artists expressed their true delight in discovering a writer they might have never thought of approaching, had they not been commissioned. They felt that Nabokov's art had infused their own in fruitful ways. The Kléber bookshop offered the conference organizers a shop window for two weeks (October 1st – October 18 2008) and some of the works by the two artists were exhibited there.



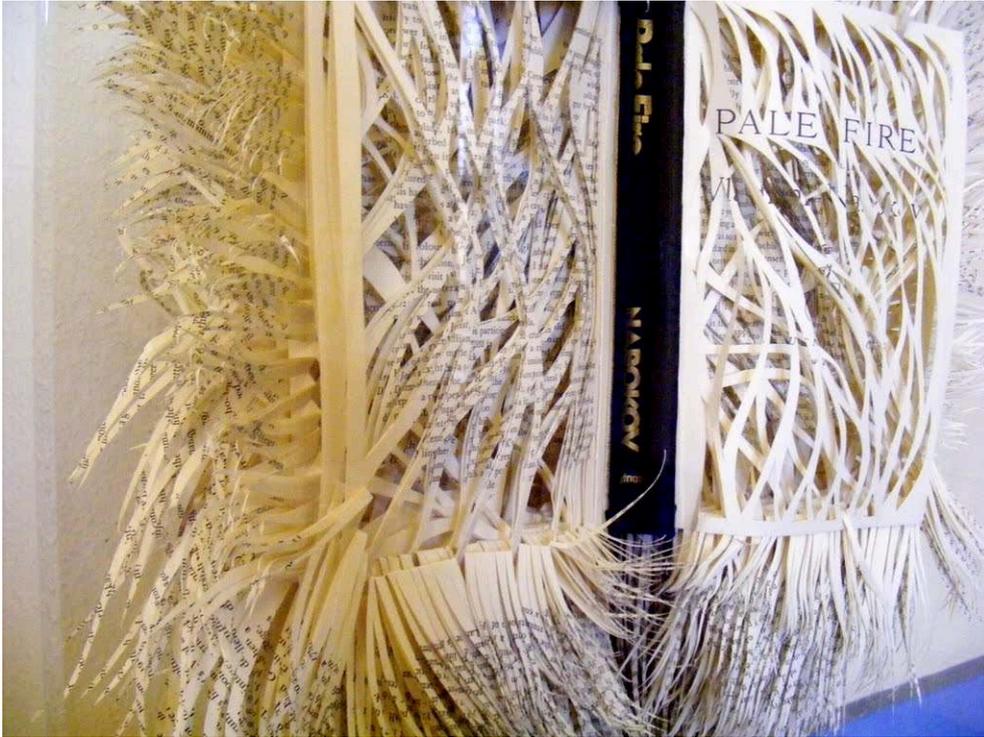
Maurice Couturier being 'put to the test' by Alexandra Loewe



Actor Guillaume Fafiotte, bringing to life Nabokov's written words

- 5 On Friday, October 17 2008, the organizers invited everyone to a Nabokov evening at the Kléber bookshop, with texts by Nabokov in three languages read by actors from the Théâtre National de Strasbourg – Guillaume Fafiotte and Nathalie Bourg – and by a former student from the English department in Strasbourg – Maria Podoprygolova. The Kléber bookshop placed the event on the cover of their monthly newsletter, which attracted a big audience. The principle of the evening was very simple: every conference participant was asked to indicate his or her favorite passage from Nabokov. A collage of all of these texts was created, and almost each text was read in two languages. For those who were not familiar with Nabokov, it was a way of discovering the wide range of topics he wrote about, the variety of moods he explored, the three languages he loved. Even Nabokov specialists rediscovered passages they had perhaps

neglected or forgotten, or never properly read in one or the other language. Nabokov's texts came to life thanks to the vibrant artistry of the three actors, two of whom were reading for the first time (and enjoying!) Nabokov.



Pale Fire, one of Georgia Russell's sculpted books



Strasbourg's main bookshop and its Nabokovian window

Overview of the Papers

Maurice Couturier

- 6 (University of Nice, English Department, keynote speaker) – *La Réception de Nabokov en France: interprétation ou récupération?/Nabokov's Reception in France: Interpretation or Recuperation?*
- 7 Maurice Couturier opened the conference with a vividly detailed panorama of Franco-Nabokovian affairs from the 1930s to present times. Drawing on biographical material furnished by Brian Boyd, Nina Berberova and Dominique Desanti for the 1930s, then on his own first-hand knowledge as senior Nabokovian in France, he reminded us of

Nabokov's sometimes star-crossed fortunes in France: from Jean-Paul Sartre's misconceptions over *Despair* (*La Méprise*) to the rapacious contempt of Maurice Girodias, down to the Structuralists' hostility vis à vis an author whom they deemed a – necessarily reactionary – emblem of White Russia. Parading under cover of a false identity, that of René Tadlov, Couturier presented within (and against) such a context the evolution of his own involvement with Nabokov, one which, although constant, remained at a critical distance from the author's powerful sphere of influence and chose to read him “against the grain” by applying his own personal French influences, from Barthes to Lacan. If the reader's engagement with the author entails an act of appropriation and recuperation, is it possible, then, to draw the contours of a specific recuperation by French academics since Couturier's seminal ventures? Without asserting any uniformity in the design, Couturier suggested there is within the French community of Nabokov scholars a distinctive attention to the aesthetic dimension of his work.

Agnès Edel-Roy

- 8 **(Sorbonne nouvelle, Comparative Literature Department) – Nabokov aujourd'hui, ou “la démocratie magique”/Nabokov Today, or “Magic Democracy”**
- 9 Agnès Edel-Roy's title is a partial reference to Nabokov's concluding statement to his lecture on Dickens, in which he asserts that great literature is “a magic democracy where even some very minor character [...] has the right to live and breed”. Equally inspired by philosopher Jacques Rancière's conception of a “politics” specific to literature (*Politique de la littérature*, 2007), Agnès Edel-Roy made a cogent point about the revolutionary dimension of Nabokov's work, and particularly what she called “a poetics of the *nabok*”, whereby readers are lead to constantly cast a sidewise look at objects and shift their initial position in order to better appreciate the full potentialities of the worlds he creates. To illustrate her point, she made a detailed analysis of four radically different readings that can be made of *Despair*.

Déborah Lévy-Bertherat

- 10 **(Ecole Normale Supérieure – Ulm, Literature and languages) – Écueils de la traversée Est-Ouest: le cas Pnine/The Perils in Crossing from East to West: the case of *Pnin***
- 11 Taking as a starting point the conspicuously Gogolian avatar Nabokov chose to create in the character of Pnin, Déborah Lévy-Bertherat exposed the many intimate and sometimes discreet links and homages which Nabokov paid to Russian literature, notably to Leo Tolstoi in the central chapter on Victor, at a time when he was translating his first autobiography (*Conclusive Evidence*) into Russian and arguably sought to maintain a link with the country from which he had been severed by asserting the abiding vitality of its cultural legacy. The Russian intertexts that were emphasized by Déborah Lévy-Bertherat's cogent analysis pointed to Nabokov's essential anchorage in Russian literature and to the way his texts need to be reread, annotated and examined from an intertextual and intercultural point of view.

Lara Delage-Toriel, with the support of Xavier Fassion

12 “Nabokov in the Classroom”: a sound report

- 13 As a teacher, Nabokov’s method, on his own admission, ‘precluded genuine contact with the students. At best, they regurgitated a few bits of my brain during examinations.’ Yet there is ample evidence that those bits of brain were choice morsels, to be relished for a lifetime. According to one of his former students, “I felt he could teach me how to read. I believed he could give me something that would last all my life – and it did”. Fifty years after Nabokov gave his last classes at Cornell University, what is left of this legacy – his unique vision of life, language and art – in the academic world? How can teachers and students continue to explore the pathways he opened up for us? This piece offers a partial glimpse into the minds and hearts of a handful of 3rd-year students when inoculated during an entire academic term with a weekly dose of Nabokov. Some of these had studied *Pnin*, others, more recently, *Lolita*.

Géraldine Chouard

14 (Paris 9, English Department) – *Speak, Memory ou le temps des images/Speak, Memory or the Time of Images*

- 15 Géraldine Chouard offered us a fascinating exploration of an aspect of *Speak, Memory* which is rarely treated *per se*: its photographs. More than mere illustrations, these family pictures are part of a vast skein of correspondences which were brilliantly investigated within their historical and ideological context, both public and private, and with side references to Roland Barthes and Eudora Welty, who also produced illustrated autobiographies. According to Géraldine Chouard, such photographs give us a false sense of time which allows us to reconstitute a true sense of time, an idea in keeping with Nabokov’s confession, within the text of the autobiography, that he does not ‘believe in time’, preferring instead to fold his ‘magic carpet’ after use. Géraldine Chouard’s minute survey of the photographic details in Nabokov’s autobiographical carpet thus enabled us to better grasp this central motif of time.



Géraldine Chouard, Marie Bouchet, Déborah Lévy-Bertherat

Marie Bouchet

- 16 **(University of Toulouse, English Department) – Hybridity and Mimicry: Two Notions for a Possible Approach to Kaleidoscopic Nabokov**
- 17 Marie Bouchet focused on two notions, hybridity and mimicry, which inform Nabokov's fiction, both stylistically and thematically. Moving from their literary manifestations to their evolution outside the frame of Nabokov's works, her paper addressed the issues she has faced when teaching *Lolita*; she then gave us an intriguing visual and auditory glimpse of Josua Fineberg's multimedia adaptation of that same novel, a striking example of hybridity and mimicry in itself. Indeed, in this opera that premiered in Marseille in April 2008, Fineberg has recourse to innovative voice conversion technologies to mirror the myriad voices that emanate from Humbert's monologue.

Alexia Gassin

- 18 **(Sorbonne, Russian Department) – Le cinéma expressionniste allemand comme sous-texte dans les romans russes de Vladimir Nabokov/German Expressionist Movies as Subtexts in Nabokov's Russian Novels**
- 19 Alexia Gassin's paper demonstrated the ways in which Nabokov drew inspiration from the language and mood of German expressionist films during his Berlin years. Making precise references to emblematic productions such as *Phantom* by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau or *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang, she revisited the framework of Nabokov's first novel, *Mashenka*, discussing, among other features, the emphasis on geometrical motifs within its decor, its peculiar use of light, its metaphorical transitions from human to animal and sometimes even to the inanimate (under the form of the puppet), as well as its atmosphere pregnant with phantom life. According to Alexia Gassin, Nabokov had

deliberate recourse to the oppressive aesthetics of this artistic movement in order to highlight the Russian émigré's nostalgia.

Tatiana Victoroff

20 **(University of Strasbourg, Comparative Literature Department) – L'écheveau de Sirine: les paradoxes du théâtre nabokovien/Sirin and his web: the paradoxes of Nabokov's Drama**

21 The originality of Nabokov's drama, according to Tatiana Victoroff, rests in its multi-layered complexity, which resorts now to cinematographical devices (in *The Man from the U.S.S.R.* for instance) now to pictorial ploys (as in *The Event*), but most of all hinges around the Word as *primum mobile*. His plays are primarily linguistic or poetic events, in which the spectator is turned into a reader. This is particularly true in a play like *The Waltz Invention*, where much of the circular composition revolves around the waltz-like rhythm of discourse. The stage thus becomes a laboratory in which to experiment the paradoxical facets of the projected word and transcend the traditional boundaries of drama. In spite, or perhaps precisely because, of these endeavours, Tatiana Victoroff finds Nabokov/Sirin's plays more alive and engaging when read rather than seen. Much of her paper helped us understand why Nabokov didn't more fully develop his craft as a playwright.



René Alladaye, Chloé Deroy, Alexia Gassin, Anne-Marie Lafont

René Alladaye

22 **(University of Toulouse, English Department) – “The soft detonation of recognition”: Quelques aspects de la réécriture de Lolita dans *Eclipse* de John Banville/“The Soft Detonation of Recognition”: Some Aspects of the Rewriting of *Lolita* in John Banville's *Eclipse***

23 May one speak of a Nabokovian legacy, some thirty years after his death? With this question in mind, René Alladaye undertook a minute study of the possible Nabokovian – and more specifically *Lolitan* – intertext that lies embedded within the pages of John Banville's *Eclipse* (2000). Our attention was drawn to a multitude of echoes – in the handling of plot, character, narrative and style – down to the very title of Banville's novel. By making us follow the meanders of what he termed “Nabokov's little music”, René Alladaye induced us to feel that “soft detonation of recognition” which Banville evokes and provokes in his subtle homage to *Lolita*.

Didier Machu

- 24 **(University of Pau, English Department) – Aspects de la décapitation chez Nabokov/Some Aspects of Beheading in Nabokov**
- 25 Didier Machu offered an erudite survey of Nabokov’s use of the theme of beheading – either beheading proper or death by hanging – in the Russian and American fiction. The amplitude and frequency of this theme, as Didier Machu proved, is quite amazing, pointing not only to a political message (after all, Vladimir Nabokov was the son of V. D. Nabokov, who strongly opposed the death penalty), but also to some larger aesthetic meaning having to do with fragmentariness and (in)completeness. Didier Machu projected the act of decapitation against the aesthetic ideal of the plenary creator – a producer of plenitude, a dreamer of plenitude. The speaker referred to Freud and his reading of beheading as a disguised act of castration, thus linking the political, the sexual and the aesthetic elements in a convincing reading of what the head and its loss may mean in Nabokov’s works.

Jacqueline Hamrit

- 26 **(University of Lille, English Department) – The Ordeal of Undecidability in *Lolita***
- 27 Relying on Derrida’s notion on “undecidability”, Jacqueline Hamrit attempted to reassess *Lolita*’s place within the body of literary criticism. Starting from the judicious remark that critics have tended to lay emphasis either on the aesthetic dimension of the novel or on its ethical dimension, Jacqueline Hamrit suggested that instead of this division, it may be more accurate to proclaim that it is impossible to choose between the two – precisely the meaning of “undecidable”. “Undecidability” has nothing to do with the reconciliation of the two terms, but rather with an endless hesitation between the two. The disjunction and the conjunction of the ethical and the aesthetic are less pertinent, according to her, than the choice of saying that it is actually impossible to choose between the two.

Laurence Guy

- 28 **(University of Aix-Marseilles, Russian Department) – Polenka ou le demi-sourire de la Russie à un jeune barin: une interprétation junguienne de la nymphe/ Polenka or Russia’s Half-Smile to a Young Barin: a Jungian Interpretation of the Nymphet**
- 29 Where does the nymphet come from? This is the question that Laurence Guy formulated in her fresh and surprising reading of the nymphet’s origin and development. Laurence Guy singled out slender and mysterious Polenka in *Speak, Memory*, arguing that Nabokov’s archetypal nymphet is Russian – a plebeian girl charming aristocratic Vladimir, as he spent his holidays in the St. Petersburg countryside. Polenka’s Russianness is essential in Laurence Guy’s reading: she is a condensed image of the lost mother country and of the lost mother tongue as well. All subsequent nymphets in Nabokov’s work are invariably described in terms of national origin, yet none of them is Russian. How come the pure nymphet becomes a temptress, a demoniac being, in later works? In order to move on to another language (English),

the archetypal nymphet had to be demonized, so as to allow the writer to escape her paralyzing charm.

Anne-Marie Lafont

30 **(Sorbonne, Russian Department) – Figure féminine et histoire érotique dans les romans russes de Vladimir Nabokov/Feminine Figures and Erotic Stories in Vladimir Nabokov’s Russian Novels**

31 Anne-Marie, who spent many years in Russia as a child, is currently completing her Ph. D. on eroticism and femininity in Nabokov’s Russian fiction, while also working as a teacher of French language and literature in the South of France. Her paper tried to draw a typology of the various feminine figures in Nabokov’s work and their place within the couple. Her analysis of Nabokov’s treatment of eroticism emphasized the existence of the angelic woman, as well as of the fallen, decadent woman. She talked about the incredible wealth of types of erotic relations within the couple. She finally showed that there is an androgynous image of the couple, ideally present in *Ada*, which is the result of an alchemical type of fusion between male and female.

Isabelle Poulin

32 **(University of Bordeaux, Comparative Literature Department) – Vladimir Nabokov “l’ami de Rabelais”. Enjeux d’une approche plurilingue de la littérature/Vladimir Nabokov as “Rabelais’ friend”. The Issues at Stake in a Multilingual Approach to Literature**

33 Isabelle Poulin offered a broad, dense and illuminating survey of the European novel and established connections between Nabokov, Sterne, Cervantes, but also Rabelais. Her argument started from the remark that from the very beginning the novel (or “roman”) was actually written in “another language”, the “roman” or “langue romane”, the “vulgar” language distinct from Latin. Nabokov wrote in another language, but he also opened novels to translation, notably in *Ada*. Isabelle Poulin established a connection between Nabokov and Rabelais, to whom he referred in the French original of “Mademoiselle O”: “moi, barbare, ami de Rabelais et de Shakespeare” (a reference which later disappeared from the Russian and English translations).

Yannicke Chupin

34 **(University of Franche-Comté, English Department) – Ada ou l’ardeur, une chronique littéraire ou les formes traditionnelles du roman revisitées/Ada or Ardour, a Literary Chronicle or the Traditional Devices of the Novel Revisited**

35 Yannicke Chupin analysed the various ways in which Nabokov revisits the tradition of novel writing in *Ada*. She started by establishing a parallel between Flaubert’s *Education sentimentale* and *Ada*, between Frédéric Moreau and Van Veen. Yannicke Chupin focused on the library scene and the night of the burning barn, insisting on the significant connection between the books that surround the lovers and the love story itself. All the key moments in the book (the first kiss, the separation, the hero’s education etc.) were placed in the larger context of a parody of the narrative tradition.

Chloé Deroy

- 36 **(University of Tours, Comparative Literature Department) – L’Inceste érudit dans *Ada*/Bookish Incest in *Ada***
- 37 Chloé Deroy was the youngest conference participant – she is currently working on her MA dissertation, which focuses on the relationship between Nabokov and Proust. Chloé Deroy’s analysis of *Ada* followed two distinct dimensions: the various fields of knowledge involved in the erotic relationship between the protagonists and the role the Russian language plays in the courtship of *Ada* and Van. She gave examples taken from botany, cartography, entomology, and she also insisted on the affectivity which surfaces in the contexts where Russian is used, compared to English.

Sonia Philonenko

- 38 **(University of Strasbourg, Russian Department) – Vladimir Nabokov, traducteur de Lewis Carroll/Vladimir Nabokov translates Lewis Carroll**
- 39 Sonia Philonenko’s paper focused on Vladimir Nabokov’s 1923 translation of *Alice in Wonderland* (under the title *Anya v stranie chudes*), which, as Maurice Couturier commented, has not received enough critical attention. She analyzed the various ways in which young Nabokov russianized Carroll’s classic book in relation to Nabokov’s translation theory at that time. One of her conclusions is that in the Russian version, Nabokov’s choice of words (for instance *piroshki* instead of *tarts*) marks a more affectionate stance – Russian being for Nabokov the language of affection and emotions.

The debates

- 40 The debates were far from incomprehensible for those who cannot call themselves “specialists”. For instance, the colleagues from the English department in Strasbourg who attended the conference were very sensitive to all the problems related to the articulation between the political and the literary aspects of Nabokov, between the ethical and the aesthetic directions of his work. Jacqueline Hamrit’s paper provoked one of the most interesting debates of the conference – indeed, a memorable exchange on our relationship with and reaction to *Lolita* not only as researchers and authors of scholarly papers, but also as readers and human beings faced with the issue of child abuse. Jacqueline Hamrit commented at a certain point that Derrida’s “undecidability” helped her surmount the embarrassment she felt when reading the novel. Her remark produced a chain reaction: several conference participants confessed similar feelings (Maurice Couturier, among others, talked about his experience of translating *Lolita* into French and the “atrocious” passages he had to deal with as a translator; Marie Bouchet deplored the fact that critics have tended to focus less on *Lolita* and more on Humbert; Monica Manolescu talked about the difficulty of reading *Lolita* once she became a mother, and so on). Group therapy? Maybe. A vibrant moment when all the intellectual and critical concepts disappeared to give way to an expression of sensitivity tinged with despair. People in the audience who were not Nabokov specialists greatly appreciated the discussion as well.

41 Conference web site: <http://monica.manolescu.free.fr/colloque.html>



BIBLIOGRAPHIE

Another interesting debate was sparked by Marie Bouchet's paper, which tackled, among other things, the geography of *Lolita* and the subtle way in which "real geography" offers the basis for a verbal, invented geography in the text. One question from the audience mentioned the problem faced by those who teach the book in French universities: how can one teach *Lolita* to French students, who have such a poor knowledge of American geography, and not obliterate the poetic aspects of the novel? Therefore, how can one avoid being too elementary without being too sophisticated? The question is, of course, a rhetorical one.

INDEX

Thèmes : Actualité de la recherche

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