Pekka Tammi, *Russian Subtexts in Nabokov's Fiction: Four Essays*, Tampere University Press, Tampere, 1999; ISBN 951-44-4584-8, xiii+187 pp. Notes. References. No price available.

Nabokov's often playful use of subtexts, and critics' accounts of spotting them, is certainly not a new topic. In his four short essays, Tammi aims to bring these subtexts into clearer focus, and to lay the groundwork for their categorization. In doing so, we might be able to glean what function subtexts play in certain Nabokov works, and determine thematic patterns between his works and the broader sphere of Russian literature, stretching back to Pushkin.

Tammi's approach is patiently methodical and begins at the beginning, as it were, with a short analysis of the first known works to identify and examine literary subtexts, namely Kiril Taranovsky's critical essays on the poetry of Osip Mandel'shtam. Taranovsky's definition of subtext, quoted by Tammi, is "an already existing text (or texts) reflected in a new

one.”¹ While Taranovsky acknowledged a “surface” plot in Mandel’shtam’s poetry that was intelligible to all readers, he noted that there was also a subtext that imbued every semantic element of the piece with additional or enhanced meaning—whether this subtext was present in Mandel’shtam’s canon, or in the broader sphere of literature. Looking outside the closed system of a work, therefore, allows greater overall comprehension of its meaning. Of course, many readers do this intuitively, establishing connections and motifs almost unconsciously. Systemizing this process, combining these strands into effective interpretation, is Tammi’s challenge.

Tammi admits that there is a leap from examining subtexts in poetry to those in prose—that is, we cannot expect every word of a prose piece to be imbued with subtextual meaning—but does not see this as a problem with a writer as allusively rich as Nabokov. A greater problem, Tammi acknowledges from the start, is the open-endedness of determining subtexts, which can bloom outwards into “unpredictably large intertextual systems.”²

In Tammi’s first example of subtext in Nabokov—comparing a passage from *Lolita* with Turgenev’s *Dvorianskoe gnezdo*—he identifies a parallel between a scene from each text, then picks out allusions in preceding and following passages of both texts. He adds that we might then explore these Turgenevian “echoes” elsewhere in Nabokov’s works, or view them in light of Nabokov’s personal opinion of Turgenev. “Or we might extend the discussion to the narrative functions played by Russian subtexts in Nabokov’s English fiction on the whole,” Tammi continues. “But at some point we must stop...and start looking for some thematic justification behind the intertextual play.”³

This is also an issue in Tammi’s analysis of Dostoevskian subtexts in *Invitation to a Beheading*, the first time it has been linked to the author towards whom Nabokov harbored a notorious distaste. Many excellent parallels are made: the condemned man of Nabokov’s work echoes a similar motif in *Idiot*, and Dostoevsky’s own experience of imminent execution; Dostoevsky’s oft-invoked theme of crime and punishment and the similarity of the names of Nabokov’s antagonists to Raskol’nikov; the motif of the double; spider imagery; and a clever pun of the word “axe” (*topor*) in both English and Russian. But when the allusions stretch to *Alice in Wonderland*, Tammi

¹ Tammi, *Subtexts*, 9. See also Kirill Taranovsky, *Essays on Mandelstam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976).

² *Ibid.*, 12.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

acknowledges that the comparison moves toward “a form of insanity,” quoting the Nabokov text.⁴

So what is the purpose of this subtextual “game,” as Tammi dubs it? Partly, in the latter analysis, it is Nabokov’s playful parody of Dostoevskian style, theme and mood, he explains. In addition, Tammi shows how *Invitation to a Beheading* is a study in religious transcendence, suffering of the soul, and the quest for spiritual rebirth; themes which tie in heavily to the world of Dostoevsky, “the quintessential avatar of mysticism in Russian literature.”⁵ Yet this subtext of Dostoevsky’s beliefs is not anchored in mysticism but in the imagination; the creation of art in Nabokov’s works—the protagonist Cincinnatus writes a prison diary—brings man closer to the “other world,” says Tammi. This refers to the inevitability that the novel will end: seeking to make one last entry in his prison diary, Cincinnatus finds “It has all been written already”—that is, the meaning of his life, the novel itself, is coming to a close and he is off to his execution, to the “other world.” Tammi equates Cincinnatus’s realization with the closing line of *Dvoynik*,⁶ “Alas! He had already known for a long time this would happen” [*Uvy! On eto davno uzhe predchuvstvoval*]. This also ties in with fatalism, another common feature of Dostoevsky’s works, and rounds out Tammi’s Dostoevskian subtext.

In closing his first essay, Tammi writes “An activated subtext is always used by the author for specific thematic ends, and this necessarily affects our interpretation of the primary text.” He emphasizes that, in unearthing subtexts, he does not wish to offer a new interpretation but to fill gaps or embolden the text so that it becomes richer, “something has nevertheless been added that was not previously there.”⁷ This first essay contains the only in-depth analysis of a specific Nabokov text; the remaining three offer further avenues of exploration, possibilities for Tammi’s categorizations of Nabokovian subtexts, and examples of their use.

The second chapter examines the typology of subtexts in polygenetic allusions. This expands subtextual interpretation into “three dimensions,” in that the roots and branches of Nabokov’s “cultural synthesis” are sought. So, allusions come to light in, for example, characters’ names, authors’ names, and the titles of works; quotations can be compounded from different authors. Previously unlinked writers, works, themes, and passages of text are combined

⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁵ Ibid., 30.

⁶ The work by Dostoevsky that Nabokov most respected (rather hollow praise, admittedly).

⁷ Ibid., 33.

and given new meaning in a Nabokovian subtext — a meaning, of course, that is particular and personal to Nabokov:

For here a motif originating in the author's own life conjoins a network of subtextual, cross-linguistic, and transcultural echoes... it is no longer possible to trace such compounds of links to a single biographical or textual source, for they are transmitted through the mind of a poet "to whom life and library were one."⁸

Tammi would have us searching for subtexts within subtexts, as well as comparing and contrasting those subtexts that are independently but simultaneously present. Often this bears rich fruit, as in highlighting Nabokov's scathing criticism of Tolstoy's and Dostoevsky's derivativeness by tracing their style and poetic images back to their source, using parody and barbed comment: of *Anna Karenina* in relation to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and Dostoevsky generally in relation to Gogol'. As for *Look at the Harlequins!*, Nabokov's last work, Tammi deems the narrative constructed "from multiple allusions to his own texts," and from his own life.⁹ But, in expanding a typology of subtexts into "three dimensions," we also illuminate its core problem: again, when or where do we stop searching for allusions? At what point is the technique stretched so far that it becomes essentially meaningless?

Thankfully, Tammi regains some focus in the third chapter, which concentrates on Nabokov's native city of St. Petersburg as a text and as a mechanism for generating texts and subtexts. Tammi shows how the city looms large in Nabokov's literary imagination, although he is, of course, far from the first writer to exude such an attribute: Pushkin, Gogol', Dostoevsky, Belyi, Blok, Mandel'shtam and Akhmatova are given as other, "basic" examples. The list could go on, but one can argue that the influence of the city refracted through the minds of these particular writers was crucial to Nabokov's own view. Tammi puts Nabokov in their league in an attempt to determine the "textual manifestations of St. Petersburg in Nabokovian writing."¹⁰ He starts by unearthing Nabokov's genuine nostalgia for the city from which he was exiled and then shows how this is manifest in his work: for example, the literary focus on that part of the city around Bol'shaia Morskaia and Nevskii Prospekt, where the family home was located; the fact that Nabokov's Petersburg passages are exclusively set in winter, when he was most often there; and the natural antipathy and linguistic superiority that Peterburzhets feel toward Muscovites.

⁸ Ibid., 64.

⁹ Ibid., 60.

¹⁰ Ibid., 67.

Tammi asserts that Nabokov most often represents St. Petersburg in an “embedded second-level narrative reality.”¹¹ Similar to those works of the great writers and poets before him, the city becomes the object of reminiscences, dreams, hallucinations, and stories within stories; that is, characters themselves produce new texts about the city. This mode is weaved into the principal text, creating a blend of realities. Tammi traces the source of this method to Nabokov’s thwarted dreams of returning to his native city. He points out that characters’ physically travel to St. Petersburg only twice in the writer’s later works; and even then, it remains foreign to them due to the inevitable changes that have occurred in their absence. This reveals the sad pain of émigré life: “You can dream about it, or dwell on it in your personal memories, or invent fictions about it. But you can never go back—to the past, or to the twice (now thrice) renamed city.”¹² Tammi tempers this sadness in an endnote explaining how Nabokov has since returned to Russia in the form of his literary legacy.

The final chapter is a pioneering study on Nabokov’s use of fatidic dates, a topic of great fascination for the writer who, in his commentary to *Eugene Onegin*, dwelled on Pushkin’s attempts to discern the date of his death. Like the subtexts explored previously, Tammi finds that dates have a thematic and aesthetic function in Nabokov’s works, and act metonymically: their seemingly casual use can represent a greater, more significant subtextual background; a simple reference may require further research to fully flesh out its meaning. Here Tammi shows how Nabokov uses dates and their corresponding numerals across his work, across the works of Russian literature, and in the creation of an almost mythical persona of himself—that is to say, facts and dates from his own life assume a “textual status” in his writings, which then shape a different persona of the author in his texts—ultimately, another subtext.¹³ This chapter is presented more as reference than a fully fleshed-out essay. Still, Tammi raises some interesting comparisons, including the implications of the difference of twelve or thirteen days between old and new calendars, and how corresponding gaps of time appear as a motif in Nabokov’s works. Nabokov’s games with dates and numbers also imbue particular texts with a certain sense of fatalism—for example, dates of births, deaths, anniversaries, and notable events often reappear in more banal details such as addresses and phone numbers. This lends a certain binding, cohesive effect.

¹¹ Ibid., 81.

¹² Ibid., 85.

¹³ Ibid., 105.

Tammi writes clearly and unambiguously throughout this study and seems an objective, trustworthy and modest commentator. He criticizes Nabokov's "banal" earlier poetic verses about St. Petersburg while, admittedly, showing how Nabokov later alluded back to these selfsame verses, in another example of self-referential subtext. Additionally, Tammi makes absolutely no pretence that his study is authoritative or complete, and refers many times to its introductory nature. Much of it is new ground, or patches of old being fertilized in an effort to bring forth new fruit.

Some particularly interesting suggestions for further exploration are raised throughout, not least a comprehensive study of both St. Petersburg and fatidic dates in the Nabokovian imagination. On the latter topic, Tammi hopes to one day see a "full-scale typology of the functions allotted to dates in literature."¹⁴ In the opening chapter, he also hints at how the analysis of one subtext in one work could be reversed, and interpretive light cast back onto the subject of the subtext: that is, Tammi's analysis of Dostoevskian subtexts in *Invitation to a Beheading* could perhaps reveal hitherto unseen aspects of Dostoevsky's canon.

The overriding concern with this study, which Tammi frequently notes, is where do we draw the line in forming allusions? Again, Tammi acknowledges that we can go too far and, by way of addition, says some of his observations on dates "verge on numerological magic."¹⁵ In closing, referencing Umberto Eco, he warns against "unlimited and uncheckable intertextuality."¹⁶ So, does the fact that we can go too far in extrapolation not diminish its interpretive value, apart from our own amusement?

After all, Nabokov's use of subtexts appears to have been, if anything, an intellectual game. His references are rarely illuminated but, rather, left embedded in the text as a "compliment" to those who will understand them. He seemed to delight in catching out those readers "who do not possess the cultural competence presupposed by Nabokov's semiotic and subtextual strategies."¹⁷ Certainly, pinning down the rules and boundaries of this game looks a difficult task, but Tammi lays down some brave and insightful groundwork in these first steps towards a hoped-for "field guide" to Nabokov's intertextuality.

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¹⁴ Ibid., 146.

¹⁵ Ibid., 94.

¹⁶ Ibid., 112.

¹⁷ Ibid., 2.