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Review of 'Nabokov in Motion: Modernity and Movement' by Yuri Leving

Tim Harte

Bryn Mawr College, tharte@brynmawr.edu

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Leving, Yuri. *Nabokov in Motion: Modernity and Movement*. Translated by Keith Blasing. Bloomsbury Academic, New York, 2022. xvi + 335pp. Figures. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$29.95.

“THE streetcar will vanish in twenty years or so, just as the horse-drawn tram has vanished. Already I feel it has an air of antiquity, a kind of old-fashioned charm,” Vladimir Nabokov submits in his 1925 short story “A Guide to Berlin.” For Nabokov, nothing could ever be static. Possessing an acute sense of modernity’s fleeting essence, the Russian-American writer had a knack for grabbing onto the various trappings of modernity and probing them while they lasted. It is Nabokov’s profound appreciation of modern modes of transportation that lies at the center of Yuri Leving’s *Nabokov in Motion: Modernity and Movement*. An excellent translation of a 2004 Russian monograph by Leving, this wide-ranging study of Nabokov’s predilection for mechanized movement through the modern world takes to heart the dynamism of the era and transports the reader through an abundance of works and motion-filled motifs. Drawing upon an impressive command of Nabokoviana and modernist culture in general, Leving makes a compelling case for why Nabokov’s fiction, poetry, and non-fiction merits analysis through the prism of the modern, urban innovations encountered by the writer throughout his lifetime and storied career.

Rather than provide a lengthy reading of just several works by Nabokov, Leving opts to take an expansive overview of the urbanism pulsating through virtually all of Nabokov’s work. The result is a highly original, captivating study that comes as close as any literary study can to conveying the excitement and enticing thrills of the modern era. The critical insight and associations come fast and furious, yet that is what makes Leving’s study so enthralling and unique. Not surprisingly, trains—along with those soon-to-be obsolete trams—take up the bulk of Leving’s critical attention, as he explores the “myth creation” of the train in not only Nabokov’s work, but also contemporaneous literature and art of the era. Chekhov, Bely, Bulgakov, Kafka, and so many others make noteworthy cameos here to enrich the cultural tapestry woven by Leving as he delves into the modern milieu in which Nabokov emerged as a writer, first in Russia and then in Western Europe and the U.S. As Leving argues, for Nabokov the train “is not so much a means of conveyance for the characters, as much as it is a means for transporting references based on the rules of stylistics, grammar, and the game of literature” (p. 113). Engaging with Nabokov in this game, Leving probes the ethos and essence of train travel, even the crashes and resounding significance of love and fate on the rails.

Although the bulk of Leving’s study focuses on the railroad, cars and airplanes also figure into the exhilarating discussion. As Leving notes, the car did not inspire Nabokov to the extent that the train did, but anyone familiar with *Lolita* will know that the automobile represented no minor motif in Nabokov’s work. From his automobile ride to school (see *Speak, Memory*) to descriptions of love making in automobiles (see *Mary*) to meandering drives amidst the towering trees of Vermont (see *Pnin*), the automobile would work its way into Nabokov’s celebrated oeuvre. The same goes for the airplane; Nabokov may have been reluctant until late in life to travel by air, but reminiscences of early aviation (see “Time and Ebb”) and transatlantic flights (see *Pale Fire*) figure in Nabokov’s work. Here Leving channels the poetry and non-fiction of Aleksandr Blok, among other notable cultural figures of the early twentieth century, in

establishing the prominence of aeronautics for the pre-Revolutionary Russia in which Nabokov came to maturation.

Well-illustrated and featuring a number of relatively rare auto-related photos of Nabokov and his family (his son, of course, raced automobiles as a young man), *Nabokov in Motion* reflects its subject matter in such a fitting, engaging way. It seems a bit churlish to fault the author for leaving out this or that cultural reference from his impressive overview of the era, but Leving might have mentioned Walter Ruttmann's seminal film *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City*, with its frenetic focus on modern contemporary life in Berlin of the 1920s. More so than any early Soviet film Leving happens to mention in his study, Ruttmann's ecstatic, yet somewhat ominous celebration of modern Berlin runs remarkably parallel to the urban world in motion that Nabokov creatively captured on paper as an émigré writer in the city. Nevertheless, Leving captures the long, yet rapid trajectory of Nabokov's progression through the twentieth century like few scholars can, and we are fortunate to be able to go along on this now-translated ride.

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TIM HARTE