

The text is framed by a detailed chronology of Nabokov's life and work and a well-selected bibliography. Both are nicely articulated and provide just the right amount of information. The same principle holds generally for the rest of the work as well. Olsen offers brief but choice data on and insights into the author, the novel itself, its critical reception (both in historical and conceptual overview), its incarnations in other media, especially, of course, the Kubrick film, and the host of critical problems raised by the text. The discussion is given a good grounding both in general critical concerns, and in terms of Nabokov's idiosyncratic approach to writing and to this work, in particular.

Olsen does a commendable job of confronting the complexity and ambiguities of *Lolita*; indeed, he confronts them directly and makes them the focus of his study, whence the reference to Janus in the title. This is hardly an original approach to any text, least of all to a major work of twentieth-century fiction with one foot in the modern and the other reaching for the post-modern. Still, it is not unfruitful, and the reader is presented with a full and satisfying range of possibilities for reading *Lolita*, notwithstanding the brief and introductory nature of this study. Olsen is sufficiently even-handed in his discussion to the extent that his reader can disagree with even substantial individual conclusions and still not feel inclined to disregard the whole.

The only truly regrettable aspect of this useful study is the almost neurotically obsessive apologetics Olsen constructs for the entire enterprise based on his predilection for a deconstructivist and/or postmodernist poetics which does not really allow for the validity of such a study, never mind a series based on the notion of *Masterworks*. The fact that he feels the need to apologize at considerable length for what he is doing implies a somewhat slippery compromise with his own intellectual principles, while the success with which he nevertheless carries out his undertaking would seem to serve as a rather strong challenge to, if not contradiction of, those very principles.

William V. Spanos

*The Errant Art of "Moby-Dick": The Canon, the Cold War, and the Struggle for American Studies*

Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995. Pp. 416. \$18.95

Reviewed by Ricardo Miguel-Alfonso

William Spanos's new book is, like his other previous works, not only an exercise in Heideggerian criticism but also a brilliant demonstration of the effects of (close) textual reading on the appreciation of the value of literary works, from their representational powers and limits to their possible function as canon-makers. And Spanos's choice to focus now on Melville's masterpiece confirms

the interest of his ontological “reading method” to assess the aesthetic and cultural role of fictional works in the academic study of literature.

This new analysis traces a genealogy of literary criticism on *Moby Dick* from its indifferent reception at the time of its publication to the transfiguration and re-appropriation of its cultural, and supposedly canonizing, role in American literary history by the so-called “New Americanists.” Spanos distinguishes four major phases in *Moby Dick* criticism—represented by its contemporaneous reviewers, the “revival” critics of the early 20th century, the Cold War critics, and the contemporary New Americanists—each one of which postulates a specific (and interested) reading of Melville’s work according to its own intellectual occasion in the history of American culture. Each of these “trends” carries out and privileges a reading of *Moby Dick* that serves the institutional and sociopolitical mainstream of its own age, usually cooperating to uphold the centrality of Melville’s novel to the formation and consolidation of the American experience as a (timeless) “errand into the wilderness”—whatever particular form this quest assumes in each of these periods. All of them inevitably appropriate and study Melville’s work not only as the “core” of the novel as a genre in America, but also as a vital thematic source of American culture. *The Errant Art of “Moby Dick”* attempts to disclose, among other things, the ideological bias of all four groups of critics.

For Spanos, Melville’s novel enacts and advances some of the epistemological assumptions of the postmodern age, such as the distrust of totalization and of literary, textual, and philosophical representation. Writing appears more as a process of “pure” (anti-essentialist) interpretation than as a reproduction of the real. In Melville’s work, writes Spanos, “the act of interpretation ... is not intended to break through representation to an ontological essence.... Rather, it is to thematize—to bring to awareness—the *absent* Real that is always already historically specific inscription (textual), and thus always already deferred by writing as re-presentation” (171).

What emerges from this ontological analysis is a reevaluation of Melville’s novel as a subversive text, one in which the different conservative traditions of (Puritan) America are disclosed and dismantled, on the one hand, and in which some of the principles of the postmodern attack on metaphysical representation and objectivity are prefigured, on the other. As Spanos puts it, “[*Moby Dick*] anticipates the difficult posthumanist search for a collective sociopolitical counterhegemonic project that is ‘grounded’ in an absent cause” (148). Melville’s text, therefore, stands in American literary history not as the canon-inspiring work many critics consider it to be, but rather as a de-structive artifact which calls into question the most deep-rooted epistemological and ontological assumptions of American (and Western) literary history and aesthetics. After these four major stages in Melville criticism, now made problematic and maybe

“overcome” by the postmodern occasion and by Spanos’s Heideggerian criticism, will *The Errant Art of “Moby Dick”* inaugurate a fifth one?

Robert Pinget

*Be Brave*

Trans. from the French by Barbara Wright

New York: Red Dust, 1994. Pp. 32. \$6.95

Robert Pinget

*Théo or The New Era*

Trans. from the French by Barbara Wright

New York: Red Dust, 1994. Pp. 32. \$6.95

Reviewed by John Fletcher

Barbara Wright is our foremost literary translator from the French, and in these short texts she deploys her awe-inspiring skills to impressive effect. The only possible mistake (if it is even that) located in the works under review is in the following lines in *Be Brave*: “There was a boat for the islands. / Only passengers without a ticket embarked” (5). The French reads: “*Il y avait un bateau pour les îles. / N’embarquait que passagers sans ticket.*”

What makes one think at first that Wright has misread the French is that *embarquer* here is the transitive form of the verb, whereas in the English version “embarked” appears to be intransitive. (If the French verb were intransitive, it would of course have to be plural.) Wright is well aware of this, but—quite properly, no doubt for reasons of euphony—translates a French transitive verb with an English intransitive verb, which enables her to place the latter at the end of the sentence, which avoids the rather clumsy “Embarked only passengers without a ticket.” (Another way of doing it would be to put “Only passengers without a ticket taken on board.”) Thus the most that can be said is that Wright is guilty of a possible ambiguity (over whether “embarked” is transitive or intransitive), not of an actual mistake.

Such quibbles aside, there are some marvelous felicities in these translations, such as the following in *Théo*: “*Paroles que le rêve fait resurgir toutes frémissantes.*” “Words that surge up, quivering, from the dream” (6). “*Tout ce qui concerne le bonheur enfui. / Enfoui. Exhumable.*” “Everything that concerns lost happiness. / Inhumed. Exhumable” (6). The latter is particularly impressive, since it compensates for the inevitable loss of the pun *enfui/enfoui* with an English play on words (inhume/exhume).

The only serious doubt in my mind is whether this magnificent translator’s efforts would not be better directed towards producing English versions of texts