

Vladimir Nabokov's Lectures on Literature: Portraits of the Artist as Reader and Teacher (Studies in Slavic Literature and Poetics). Bilingual Edition. **Ed. by Ben Dhooge and Jürgen Pieters**. Series: Studies in Slavic Literature and Poetics (Book 62). Lieden, Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2017. 226 pp. ISBN: 978-90-04-35286-5. Hardcover: EUR €110.00 / USD \$127.00



In the opening lines of *Vladimir Nabokov's Lectures on Literature: Portrait of the Artist as Reader and Teacher*, its editors Ben Dhooge and Jürgen Pieters make mention of Nabokov's "creative library" (p. 1), a place where a dash of Dickens and a pinch of Proust could conjure up some concoction both like and unlike the sum of its parts. In the olden days, such talk would evoke images of potions and bubbling brew, a mad scientist working beneath a cadaver, an untamed mane atop his head. Unfortunately, neither Nabokov's temperament nor hair could allow for such things. Instead, Nabokov's laboratory mirrors that of the modern day – sterile, clean, the thought of experiment – still prevalent but only if it is done to perfection. Both visions capture wonder and thought, and both workers are mad for their craft in their own right.

The book under review consists of three parts. The opening section is entitled "Teacher among Authors" and it is also the largest in the volume: it consists of five articles each dealing with one author in Nabokov's respective lectures on literature delivered during his years as a professor at Cornell University. Part 2, "Critic among Critics," focuses on an English classic (James Joyce) and two Russian counterparts, Nikolai Gogol and Anton Chekhov. Part 3, "Author among Authors," offers an analytical perspective on Nabokov's tangled relationship with the leading European writers of the preceding generation – Flaubert, Proust, and Stevenson.

The first article of the book by Yannicke Chupin, "Nabokov's Reflections on 'Proust's

Prismatic People’,” tackles Nabokov as a reader. Here, we are treated to Nabokov's description of reading Proust as “reading through a prism” (p. 25), a round-about way of saying Proust has put a mask over his work, something like a not-quite *roman à clef*. Delving into Nabokov's history, we are given examples of this in his own work – unreliable narrators, doubles, and complex characters. One thing Chupin does not mention, however, is that Nabokov wrote a true *roman à clef* – something that may not be entirely true. While links between Proust’s colourful characters and the author's own life have been made, there is a different type of roman au clef, one where the characters represent historical figures rather than those from writer’s experience: in Nabokov’s *The Gift* the entire fourth chapter is a pseudo-biography of Chernyshevsky, a Russian philosopher, writer, and politician. Here, we see a Proust like prism on full display, though in the case of Nabokov, one might have to reverse engineer the prism – a feat that may prove to be impossible.

This study is followed by another ingredient of Nabokov’s literary concoction, and one of a darker nature, though perhaps it is impossible for somebody so scientific to be truly sinister. Nabokov was nearly forced to teach Jane Austen in his class. In “‘The Author’s Pale Virgin Cheek’: Nabokov on Austen” Luc Herman details the condescension that Nabokov cast upon Austen, of which some damning evidence is presented. While Nabokov surely was sometimes insufferable, he deserves at least some credit – in this chapter, mention of Nabokov’s misogyny and lack of respect for women is brought up far before his wife Vera is, a woman Nabokov respected so much he passed her his pen and most prized possessions for purposes of editing and translation. When she eventually is mentioned, it is only a throw-away line about how Nabokov mistreated her. While Herman’s details of Nabokov’s dislike for Austen are clearly not fabricated, and his hypocrisy fully on display (he likes her literary structure, then belittles it), it is also unfair to judge a marriage from the outside looking in.

Choosing to focus on a wide variety of literature, the structure of *Vladimir Nabokov’s Lectures on Literature* shift from science to séance to satire, and the first modern novel is the object of Nabokov’s (and one of the contributors of the present volume) scrutiny. Nabokov, ever serious, seems to read satire with sensibility, which is almost a fool's errand. Ilse Logie, the author of “Vladimir Nabokov on *Don Quixote*: ‘A Veritable Encyclopedia of Cruelty’,” argues that Nabokov is trying to scrape off the centuries of dirt and sediment that now obscure Cervantes's original meaning – a near impossible task for a writer. Strangely, Nabokov's notes seem to show a man in love with the work, in awe of its wit and charm. Conversely, the notes of his oratory lectures give the impression of a man who thought the opposite; perhaps he didn't think his oratory notes would remain in time. As Logie

lays out clearly and concisely, Nabokov condemned *Don Quixote* as one of the most barbaric and cruel novels of all time. Just as his notes contradict his lectures, Nabokov is quite used to contradicting himself in terms of “art for art's sake”, a principle Nabokov adhered to, but one he also abhorred when it came to other artists, once calling Oscar Wilde a “rank moralist” [Nabokov, V. *Strong Opinions*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973]. As an outsider looking in, it almost seems as though Nabokov wants his biscuit and eat it too. Giving his opinions as a reader, he almost chastises himself as a writer.

Perhaps Nabokov's favourite piece of fiction is *The Metamorphosis* by Kafka. Parallel to Nabokov's attempt to escape back to his old life, Kafka's Gregor too wanted just that; to be back in the world of humans. Both felt out of place, Gregor as an insect and Nabokov as a genius among mediocrity, highlighted in his lectures by his tedious dissection of *exactly* which kind of insect Gregor had be transformed to. Unfortunately, it seems both characters may have failed, but Vivian Liska's attempts at giving Nabokov a touch of humanity in the conclusion of this chapter did not (see “The Beetle and the Butterfly: Nabokov's Lecture on Kafka's ‘The Metamorphosis’”).

As mentioned briefly above, the first, and most important ingredient of any concoction, is its reason for being; its hypothesis, if one would humour such a thing. If one is to reach for the stars and pour every inch of their being into a vial, for what is it for? From the outset of *Vladimir Nabokov's Lectures on Literature*, it seems clear that Nabokov is working towards a love potion, though not one for Véra (she'll come later). Instead, he wishes to be loved and placed in the canon amongst his influences and idols – and he relates to none more than Flaubert. The French author is the subject of multiple articles in the pages of *Lectures*. In “‘As Flaubert Intended It to Be Discussed’: Vladimir Nabokov and Jean Rousset on Madame Bovary,” Flora Keersmaekers does not play a critic but rather a painter of a very unbiased view of Jean Rousset's writings of both Nabokov's and his own views on “Madame Bovary”. Much like the analogy near the beginning of the article in which Nabokov compares reading a novel to viewing a painting, with no beginning or end, Keersmaekers gives the whole picture rather than one restricted by frames.

Every piece of art must reach completion at some point, however, and the conclusion that Nabokov related closely with Flaubert while Rousset related more with the novel itself, Flaubert simply the man behind the curtains, was obvious yet riveting. Not so much on Nabokov's part – he stated that Flaubert was a man after his own heart, if solely on the fact that he wrote only ninety pages a year – but rather Rousset's own ideas about the book spurred by Nabokov's lectures. He describes it as a book about nothing, its shifting view points taking away anything out of the ordinary, like a past day

Seinfeld with the streets of New York swapped out for those of Paris and the same number of affairs. In the end, Rousset describes the book as a world of brutes described as perfect poetry, as though the downtrodden residents of nineteenth century France could escape into prose, if only for a moment.

While such characters might have pined for an escape to this beautiful other world, Nabokov instead wanted only to escape back to the world from which he came; the Russia of his youth. While he thought of Flaubert as perhaps an older brother or cousin cut from his same cloth, Gogol was his pipe smoking grandfather, a man who inspired Nabokov so much that he took time off from fiction to write a book on his life and times – though this is not entirely accurate, as Arthur Langeveld elaborates in his contribution to *Lectures* titled “Gogol Seen through the Eyes of Nabokov”; Nabokov could only stomach non-fiction with a side of the absurd. As Nabokov was wont to do, he fashioned his story of Gogol as only he could, as a tale that begins at the death of the master and focuses on only three major works. According to Langeveld, the work has no message, nor propagate social criticism, but it does take a creative reader to value it properly. He further proposes that this could be because of Nabokov's upbringing during the final days of the empire of Russia, where everything had to not only be for *a* cause, but *the* cause. For Nabokov, the works and heroes of Gogol harked back to the days of Russian squires and workers who lived under no such constraints, their real life counterparts standing amongst the first of Nabokov's bibliography.

Though science is qualified with an explanation and magic at least hints at one, there is another realm that goes even deeper, one that Nabokov seemed to have an affinity for – the supernatural, that is the world beyond humans. Given Nabokov's analytic nature, it seemed odd he would find passion in such things, but then again, not all analysts love to be proven wrong, even if they neglect to show it. *Vladimir Nabokov's Lectures on Literature* tackles two works that have connections to this world, though strangely both achieve it through science. Another supernatural work that the volume co-edited by Ben Dhooge and Jürgen Pieters tackles is Stevenson's novel, an odd choice by Nabokov considering it was hardly considered canon in his time; in his chapter, “Vladimir Nabokov on *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson,” Gerard de Vries paints a picture of Nabokov being ridiculed by other academics for teaching such a thing. Luckily, Nabokov was hard in mind, even suggesting during his lectures that he knew better than Stevenson what his own book is about (Stevenson said it was an allegory for good and evil; Nabokov claimed it may have been one for Stevenson's sexuality). In his analysis, de Vries notes that Nabokov did not cite any influences for Stevenson, but suggests that Jekyll and Hyde was a large influence of Nabokov himself, even going so

far as to claim that *Lolita's* Quilty and Humbert played the parts. Though one may think of this as a reach, one can also appreciate the scrutiny over the straight synopsis contained in some other parts of *Lectures*.

Contrasting views encapsulate Nabokov's thoughts on his readers as is elaborated throughout *Vladimir Nabokov's Lectures on Literature*. The reader of his dreams was one who was cool and calculating, child of a statistician and specialist in Russian studies. Nabokov loved a reader who would search high and low for the true meaning of a novel, the secret known only to the author (and sometimes even they were in the dark). What emerges from the smoke of *Lectures'* effervescent result is the portrait of Nabokov as a nearly unbearable genius, a man with strong opinions and a stronger stature in the classroom. Though Nabokov was an artist, he was also a reader, a teacher, and above all else his own man. One cannot say if *Vladimir Nabokov's Lectures on Literature* truly proved its hypothesis centered around the eccentric author – but did one expect any less?

Travis Russell,
Independent Scholar, Toronto

