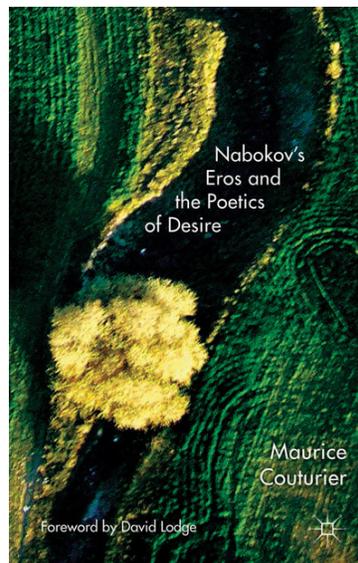


*Nabokov's Eros and the Poetics of Desire*, by Maurice Couturier. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; ISBN 9781137404589. Bibliography. Index. Foreword by David Lodge. Xii+253 pp.



Maurice Couturier's book *Nabokov's Eros* is a valuable contribution to Nabokov studies for at least two reasons. Couturier refuses to be intimidated or dazzled by VN, and the resulting analysis is uncommonly sober. This leads naturally enough to the second virtue, the frank discussion of sex and desire. Nabokov's novels are filled with a singular mix of high-level puzzles and literary riches which scholars cannot be blamed for focusing on, yet the odd result is what stands plainly before all eyes is often neglected.

The first section deals with ordinary sexual behaviour in two sets of novels, young men discovering sex and love (*Mary; Speak, Memory; Glory; The Gift*) and older men being duped by young or mature women (*Transparent Things; The Original of Laura; Look at the Harlequins!*). Section Two addresses what Couturier calls "sterile" perversions, like sadism and bestiality (*King, Queen, Knave; Laughter in the Dark; The Defence; Invitation to a Beheading; Bend Sinister*). Section Three looks at poetically used "creative perversions", like nympholepsy, homosexuality and incest bordering on androgyny (*Pale Fire; Lolita; The Enchanter; Ada*). The final section analyzes Nabokov's evasive statements about sex as he navigates censorship and self-censorship. VN had to show eternally illiterate government censors that his sparkling jewel

*Lolita* wasn't obscene trash, and convince everyday readers that actually he was a normal moral person, not a depraved beast.

Couturier demonstrates how the sexual behaviour of the major characters in all of Nabokov's novels contribute to the plot and aesthetic. He quotes generously from each one, a process which as he points out is a bit like VN in his Literary Lectures. This method interrupts Couturier's own solid prose, but given the nature of the task it is unavoidable. (And reading Nabokov's own words is not so bad!) He might contradict VN at times, but Couturier is an aesthete who dismisses the interpretations of censors and philistine readers. Whether or not you agree with his takes, they are anything but lazy.

Couturier's ambition is modest: he does not claim to have any ground breaking new insights but tries to get closer to his "untutored intuitions." To be sure, his intuition is sophisticated, informed by the works of Joyce and Flaubert, several pertinent erotic poets and thinkers like Barthes, Lacan and Freud.

Also noteworthy, Couturier is a fair arbiter in the eternal battle between Nabokov and "The Viennese Witchdoctor," Sigmund Freud. He doesn't shy from taking sides with Freud against Nabokov, in places taking free license in making mental assessments of the author: "writing was a way for him to 'boot out' the monsters haunting his unconscious" (240). The combination of familiarity with and suspicion of Nabokov is rare and welcome. He knows the author's defences very well, he cites many, but thinks VN does protest too much, and just isn't buying them all.

Couturier recognizes the limits of his outlook and never claims that his lens explains the full depth of Nabokov's novels. He is at his best when applying the question of sexuality to narrative structure (which Nabokov feels is the real key to the art of the novel), as he does examining *Pale Fire*. The section on *Lolita* also has many good insights, such as Humbert's various use of French to simultaneously make his writing seem lofty and poetic, while cloaking the lewd subject and shades of meaning. John Ray in the foreword claims that the writing we are to read has no dirty four-letter words, but it turns out the dirtiest ones are just in French!

Any devoted reader who believes Nabokov discloses himself fully and with 100% honesty in all his *Strong Opinions* should subject their belief to Couturier's well-informed

skepticism. Several times while reading I heard Nabokov's thunderous *nyet*. But connections between literary themes and the author's psychology aside, the beauty and aesthetic genius of the actual novels is never in doubt. About *this* Couturier and Nabokov can agree wholeheartedly.

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