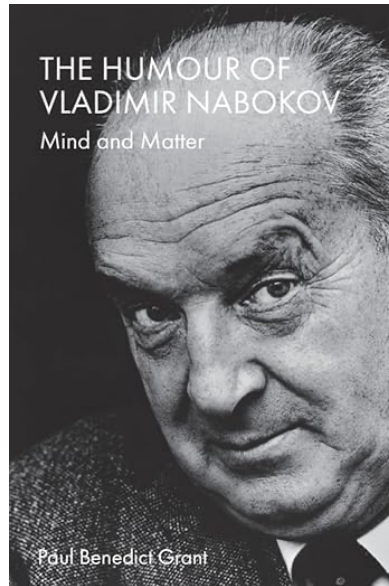


***The Humour of Vladimir Nabokov: Mind and Matter*, by Paul Benedict Grant.** Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024; ISBN 978-1399519212, viii +303 pp. Bibliography. Index



In *Strong Opinions*, Vladimir Nabokov reveals that “one day a reappraiser will come and declare that, far from having been a frivolous firebird, I was a rigid moralist kicking sin, cuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel – and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent, and pride” (193). Despite the apparent gravitas of the sentiment, however, readers may be forgiven for stifling a laugh or two. This arguably derives from the ways in which the three major theories of humour – incongruity, superiority, and relief – are at play: a ‘rigid moralist’ opting for physical violence and chastisement, the championing of seemingly incompatible values, and the suggestion that ‘current’ appraisers had not yet fully understood him as the kind of writer that he really was.

Given Nabokov’s general reputation as an icy, imperious, puzzle-master, it’s perhaps somewhat surprising to think of humour as an integral facet of his writing. Yet, as Paul Grant claims in his new book, *The Humour of Vladimir Nabokov: Mind and Matter*, “humour is one of the most attractive points of entry into Nabokov’s world: once inside, readers will discover to their delight that this seemingly difficult, demanding and intimidating author isn’t always as difficult, as demanding or as intimidating as they may have been led to believe” (16). This initial difficulty also relates to humour analysis to some degree (‘Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind’ [21]), but is also rendered more accessible through Grant’s perspective that

“our responses to Nabokov’s humour are governed by subjective criteria: we bring to his texts our own tastes, attitudes, values, opinions, prejudices, our own stock of experiences, our own set of social, cultural and psychological variables” (4).

This meticulously researched monograph, moving between the ‘comic and the cosmic’ (Nabokov reminds us that the difference depends upon one sibilant [*Nikolai Gogol*, 143]), is divided into six chapters: ‘Life and Art’, ‘Highs and Lows’, ‘Belly and Brain, Mind and Matter’, ‘Comedies of the Flesh’, ‘Tyrants Annoyed’, and ‘Last Laughs’. Chapter one, ‘Life and Art’, traces numerous clever linkages between Nabokov’s personal and professional lives and the topic of humour via figures such as Chekhov, Pushkin, Gogol, Bakhtin and Rabelais. What Grant sees Nabokov championing in Gogol’s humour – the “mingling of the lofty and the lowly, the farcical and the fantastical, the physical and the metaphysical” – is “what, in large part, distinguishes [Nabokov’s] own” (47). As indicated by the monograph’s subtitle, mind and matter, it is ultimately *incongruity*, the richest of the three main humour theories, where Grant mainly situates Nabokov’s comedy. Chapter two, ‘Highs and Lows’, chronicles Nabokov’s “worldly [...] earthier, more grounded” (73) humour and “playful puzzles, polyglot puns, private in-jokes and arcane allusions” (74) via writers such as Beckett and Joyce, while chapter three, ‘Belly and Brain, Mind and Matter’, guides readers through the interplay between the visceral and the cerebral (“he embraces and celebrates both, because he sees them as intrinsic parts of what makes us humorously human” [133]). Chapter four, ‘Comedies of the Flesh’, continues the exploration of the sexual and scatological in Nabokov’s ‘bawdy’ of work, but more so in relation to transgression; how “Nabokov delights in rubbing readers the wrong way and shocking stuffy sensibilities” (140). Chapter five, punningly titled ‘Tyrants Annoyed’, ekes out connections between figures such as Emerson and Bergson in relation to how Nabokov uses humour not just as a coping mechanism for the political farces he had to suffer, but also as a panacea. Finally, despite “death [being] no laughing matter” (269), Grant’s appropriately named final chapter, ‘Last Laughs’, details the ways in which humour and finality intertwine: not only is death a figure to be laughed at (243) – think here of the relationship to incongruity, thingness, and superiority again – but Grant’s chosen passages demonstrate how Nabokov remains ‘laughingly alive’ (274).

Despite the numerous positives of *The Humour of Vladimir Nabokov*, there are a few gripes among the giggles. Firstly, given that Grant suggests that “it’s not only a matter of texts, but contexts” (15), it’s somewhat strange that his work doesn’t make reference to two of the three monographs which seem familial precursors to his study from a critical angle: although

he makes numerous, very welcome, references to Eric Naiman's incendiary, rebellious *Nabokov, Perversely*, for example, neither Leland de la Durantaye's *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* nor Thomas Karshan's *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play* are referred to at all. This is surprising given how de la Durantaye yokes together ostensibly incongruous, yet incredibly fertile, loci in relation to the moral and ethical considerations of stylistic choice, as well as how Karshan characterises frivolity, irreverence, and pleasure as the lifeblood of Nabokov's oeuvre. Secondly, more exploration as to how literary language may engender humour would have been welcome. One may have expected, for example, to see the inclusion of Tom Stoppard's favourite use of parentheses in the English language – "my very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three" (*Lolita*, 10) – in regard to how the callousness of typography and brevity may facilitate the comedic process (perhaps in 'Last Laughs'); or the playful, punning reconfiguration of words in Hermann's "jest in majesty"/"God and Devil [...] live dog" in *Despair* (47); or indeed how the "axe/anxiety" (88) puzzle for readers in *Invitation to a Beheading* may relate to superiority theory in terms of allowing readers insight into Cincinnatus' demise. This might, however, be doing a disservice to Grant. After all, he does suggest that much Nabokovian criticism has privileged 'clever games' and 'puzzles and obscurities' at the expense of his broader, earthier, more accessible forms of humour" (16) (yet the text doesn't shirk away from numerous cerebral explorations elsewhere). Thirdly, although the introduction of *The Humour of Vladimir Nabokov* introduces the reader to the three main forms of humour theory and makes numerous linkages to humour theorists throughout (for example, Plato, Hobbes, Bergson, Morreall, Bakhtin and, at [welcome] length, Freud), slightly more in the way in which theory and practice interact would also have been beneficial. For example, although Grant is quite obviously supremely versed in the nuances of humour theory and demonstrates this in some of his analyses (100, 161, 194/195, 209), more analysis of particular passages (20, 49, 115, 127, 153, 157, 241) through the lens of incongruity, superiority, and relief theories would have helped in terms of reifying the abstract through the practical.

Despite these foibles, *The Humour of Vladimir Nabokov: Mind and Matter* is an incredibly valuable addition to our critical understanding. Not only is it valuable in terms of how it gathers the plethora of existing critical nods to Nabokov's humour into a unified, narrativized whole that positions comedy as a fundamental tenet of his oeuvre, but its value also lies in what it achieves. As Grant claims, "the goal of humor criticism is not to standardize humor appreciation but to refine our understanding of the humor we perceive in literature by

helping us to see how [...] it is related to the expression of values” (5). Grant, as reappraiser, reveals as much about how Nabokov’s ethical norms and experiences shape his relationship with humour as he does our own (all while assigning sovereign power to tongue-in-cheekness, [Sirin’s] talons, and jibes).

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