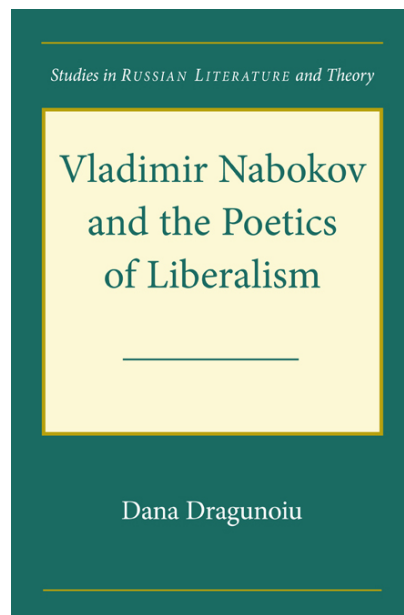


Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism, by Dana Dragunoiu. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011. ISBN 978-0-8101-2854-5, xix+318 pp. Illustrations. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index.



In contrast to the politically engaged writers (Dickens, Mill, Dewey, Orwell, Habermas, and Rawls) whose lifelong efforts were directed to serving human liberty, Nabokov devoutly pursued the private perfection on a par with Plato, Heidegger, and Proust. This well-known proposition in Richard Rorty's seminal essay on Nabokov's morality ("The Barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on Morality" in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 1989) is not irrelevant to the émigré writer's characteristic indifference to politics. Indeed, his forced life in exile originated from a political upheaval in his homeland, and his predicament is reflected and refracted in the nightmarish stories of *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*. Nevertheless, with the recurrent proclamation that any sociopolitical issues leave him "supremely indifferent" (to quote a troublesome phrase in the introduction to *Bend Sinister*),

Nabokov stubbornly tried to keep his readers away from politics and ideologies inherent in his art.

Dana Dragunoiu's *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism* excellently casts light on the writer's doubly obscured politics behind his strong opinions. "When properly situated in the context of turn-of-the-century Russian intellectual and political history," appeals Dragunoiu against Rorty's distinction between *public* and *private* writers, "Nabokov's 'pursuit of private perfection' must be understood as a form assumed by his particular commitment to 'serving human liberty'" (29). Having said this in the introduction ("Speak, Father"), she returns to the American liberal ironist's criticism in the third chapter ("Kant's Eye: *Ada*, Art, Ethics"). Endorsing Rorty's argument about the ethical undertones of Nabokov's assertion on "aesthetic bliss," Dragunoiu scrutinizes Van and Ada's cruelty toward Lucette in terms of Kantian moral philosophy. Such an attempt to disentangle the thorny interlacement of Nabokov's art and ethics, which does share the interest with Leland de la Durantaye's *Style Is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (2007), confirms that yet another fine scholar comes into the line of reappraisers of Nabokov the moralist.

However, outlining "*Ada's* moral vision" (152) is just one part of Dragunoiu's extensive project. Borrowing phrases from the Pines episode in *Pnin*, she states that the goal of her book is "to reconstruct, parse, and interpret the 'few rapid passwords — allusions, intonations' that connect Nabokov's world to the discourses of Russian liberalism" (14). It is Dragunoiu's contention that "Nabokov's fiction is an echo chamber in which the politics of his Russian past resound" (27). This view is exemplified by her marvelous analysis of *The Gift* in the first chapter ("*Homo Ludens, Homo Faber: Nabokov's Inexhaustible Gift*"). In *The Life of Chernyshevski*, Fyodor divulges the contradictions scattered among Chernyshevski's philosophical writings in order to disprove the superiority of materialism. According to Dragunoiu, Fyodor's

biographical approach has a double echo. On the one hand, it reverberates a viewpoint by Konstantin Godunov-Cherdyntsev, Fyodor's father and a celebrated scientist, that "[i]ntellectual integrity [...] is founded upon a scrupulous respect for disciplinary boundaries" (62). On the other, this very belief held in common by the father and the son is resonant with the argument about the "contraband" critique, which was shared by Vladimir Vernadskii and other Russian liberal intellectuals (including V. D. Nabokov), related to a symposium entitled *Problemy idealizma* [*Problems of Idealism*]. Thus, with the history of Russian political philosophy, *The Gift* appears to express Nabokov's own ideological stand against Lenin and George Plekhanov, "the fathers of Russian Marxism" (56, 64), through the refutation of "the positivist-materialist-utilitarian tradition which had conscripted Darwinism into its struggle against autocracy" (57). At the same time, this *magnum opus* of Nabokov shows a conclusive evidence of his position as an inheritor of "the central animating principle of the Russian liberal tradition" (10), to which his own father dedicated his life, i.e. "a foundational liberal respect for *lichnost'*, a Russian term that can mean personality, person, individual, individuality, or selfhood" (10-11). It is also noteworthy that Dragunoiu's reconsideration of Nabokov's anti-Darwinism echoes the current scholarly attention to Nabokov the lepidopterist. In other words, the book itself can be compared with "an echo chamber", in which the recent issues in Nabokov studies are amplified in the light of the writer's political and ideological background.

The Russian version of the essay "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*" can provide an important point for Nabokov's intertextual dialogue with Russian liberalism, because the author-translator significantly revised the final long sentence, adding the word "*ottsov* [fathers']" to "*nasledie* [heritage]." Even though Dragunoiu does not mention this slight but meaningful alteration, she seems to succeed in illustrating Nabokov's best endeavor to transcend his ancestors' liberal heritage in his most famous novel.

The second chapter of the book (“*Lolita* and the Communists”) is intended on rereading *Lolita* as a Cold War novel, which suggests that the afterword to this novel is Nabokov’s self-defensive effort to establish his status as a patriotic American in the era of McCarthyism. Recognizing the “unintended complicity between liberalism and its enemies” (89) in his adopted country, Nabokov was confronted by the same intellectual dilemma that his father had met in the rise of Bolshevism: “a commitment to personal freedoms leaves the state vulnerable to those who wish to destroy it” (131). Considering Humbert’s violations of American law and their justification, as well as his “highlighting the cultural and historical relativism of legal and moral standards” (131), Dragunoiu leads to her (again Rorty-like) conclusion: “*Lolita* [...] tests liberal values from the inside — that is, from within the world’s first modern liberal state” (86). The last comment in this chapter addresses the connection between Nabokov and his contemporary American liberalist-critic from the new angle: “Humbert Humbert will continue to cast a dark shadow across what Lionel Trilling [...] referred to as ‘the liberal imagination’” (141).

Along with other second-generation émigrés, “whose fathers had also played central roles in the history of Russian liberalism,” Dragunoiu claims, “Nabokov understood himself partly through the lens of his genealogical attachment to a great generation of Russian liberal thinkers and activists” (11). The same trope can be found in her epilogue which follows the fourth chapter (“Nabokov’s Berkeley: Fantasy, History, and ‘the Splendor of Lone Thought’”): “Exiled from his homeland by revolution and civil war, Kinbote sees everything *through the lens* of the politics of his ‘distant northern land’” (229, italics added). While each chapter of *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism* presents “a political reading of Nabokov’s deceptively apolitical fiction” (41) through the thick lens of Russian liberal imagination, the annotated political narratives providing the context for discussion (even if sometimes

they seem too meticulous) make the book an informative cultural biography of the political sphere of the Russian Silver Age. Dragunoiu's twofold cartography of Nabokov's political art — mapping out his deceptive politics and drawing the maps of pre- and post-revolutionary Russian intellectual history at the same time — tempts the reader to go farther into Nabokov's Russian past.

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