

***Nabokov, Perversely*, by Eric Naiman. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2010; ISBN 978-0-8014-4280-1, viii + 305 pp. Bibliography. Index.**



Vladimir Nabokov has never really shaken off his label as the dirty old man of literature; as the “crotchety gray old wordman on the edge of a hotel bed” (98) referred to in *Ada*. The supposed Rasputin of ribald literature, leering over ‘nymphets’ (a word he bequeathed to the English language), his persona to one outside of Nabokov studies seems still to be contaminated by his penchant for perversity. However, with *Lolita* under his belt, a somewhat suspicious relationship with his Uncle Ruka, loquacious when lampooning Freud yet laconic when it came to his brother Sergei, it was only a matter of time before the association between Nabokov’s works and all things perverse were to be explored – and with rather unsettling brio at that!

Following on from his last book, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology*, Eric Naiman, Professor of Comparative Literature and Slavic Languages and Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, has thrown Russia and literature into the sack once more. The result is the informed and academic, yet outrageously licentious, *Nabokov, Perversely*, a book that is keen to convey the ways in which the sexual and the interpretative are bound together. The title of the book appears to hybridize what should be known about Nabokov and what will be revealed – the explicit stresses on the second syllable of each word (the former in orange; the latter in italics) signal both how the Russian writer’s

name should be pronounced (see Nabokov's *Strong Opinions*, chapter five, 51-52) whilst the latter describes the way in which his verse, quite literally, is enveloped by perversity. The front cover, too, is revealing – the sinister Nabokov figure observing a group of young children in the foreground acts as a visual introduction to some genuinely disconcerting matters.

The book itself is in three parts: 'Sexual Orientation', 'Setting Nabokov Straight', and 'Reading Preposterously'; a ménage à trois structure that "attempts to navigate a critical impasse, whereby writing performance is correlated with sexual performance" (110). Naiman's method is one of "hermeneutic perversion, a notion that will serve as a pedal point for the chapters to come" (20) and has Nabokov engage in dialogue with Shakespeare, Pushkin and Dostoevsky along the way. The first part is concerned with sexualized readings of Nabokov's post-Parisian trio of novels (*Lolita*, *The Defense*, *Pnin*) whilst the second part, intent on reading Nabokov through the theories of other critics, acts to further our prismatic interpretations of the Russian writer. The third part, as its title describes, offers "temporally preposterous" (12) readings of certain Nabokovian texts in order to wrench them from theoretical cementation.

The book does several things right. The first is that it wholeheartedly challenges the *de rigueur* of Nabokov studies – it is a text that would have terrified Nabokov simply for the fact that it doesn't read him the way he prescribes. Naiman isn't concerned to have his head patted like the automatons who, for example, adopt Nabokov's four criteria of 'How to be a Good Reader' within *Lectures on Literature*. Instead, in turning Nabokov's texts "the other way" (20), Naiman opts for a more conducive, more exhilarating strategy and "problematizes the notion of what it means to be a good reader in the first place" (5) as a consequence. The last section of Part One is noteworthy in exploring the author-reader relationship – Naiman coins the term 'Hermophobia', for example, to describe a "number of responses, including excessive caution, a fear of exposure, shame, and self-protecting (and, thus, self-intimidating) attacks on the interpretative excesses of others" (115). In doing so, Naiman attempts to free Nabokov's readers from being as much "galley slaves" as the latter's forlorn characters.

The book's epilogue, entitled 'What If Nabokov Had Written "The Double": Reading Dostoevsky after Nabokov', is also admirable – in imagining Nabokov having written Dostoevsky's *The Double*, Naiman's method of "retrograde analysis" (270) explores "what happens when the interpretative practices developed in close reading of Nabokov are applied

to other writers” (12). In allowing readers to see what they bring to their analyses, this defamiliarizing exercise acts as “a bracing lesson in paying attention, taking risks and trying to find just the right way to twist the meaning of the word to gain access to a work’s ‘second story’” (273).

Saying that, the book does frequently veer off into lubricity – such delights include Naiman’s idea that “when a reader fondles the details of a text, it is not the text that is more likely to ejaculate” (129) and that Nabokov’s “best readers allow themselves to be taken from behind” (131). The sexual subject matter also seems to seep into Naiman’s own imagery at times. The text appears to be gormandized with innuendo and double entendre – the readers who “want another ride” (104) or the critic who gets a “spanking” (124) are two of the more explicit examples. Although this tendency is addressed explicitly – “I slip too easily into sexual metaphors” (14) – it is dubious whether this fidelity absolves him from the academic scruples that must accompany such criticism. Also, a number of rhetorical questions seem just a bit too personal: “What if we shy away from the author’s sweaty embrace?”, “The reader needn’t thumb his nose at the author, but maybe a wave would be good enough” (7), and “Who wouldn’t want such a hermeneutically affirming experience: a face-to-face encounter with his favourite author?” (124).

Naiman, like Nabokov, appears to be a literal lover of words. Using Lionel Trilling as the example for *Lolita* (which, in turn, Naiman argues, can be applied to Nabokov’s whole oeuvre), he makes the astute point that “there has been a certain reluctance to tackle in systematic fashion the bawdy linguistic games played in the novel” (18) and provides some excellent lexical analysis in the subsections ‘Perversion in *Pnin*’ and ‘Litland: The Allegorical Poetics of *The Defense*’. Nietzsche reminds us, in the preface to *Daybreak*, however, that “[Philology] teaches how to read *well*, that is to say, to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers” (5). Naiman’s foray into “genital punning” (26), although impressively meticulous, seems, at times, to concentrate on chance occurrences rather than genuine instances where the perverse manifests itself explicitly in language. For example, looking at a particular passage from *Bend, Sinister*, Naiman observes “several moments connoting disgust at anal affection: ‘associate’, ‘analyzing’, perhaps ‘classroom’ and ‘bun’” (59, my italics). The ‘perhaps’ seems telling – perhaps, or, indeed, perhaps not. Humbert’s quip in *Lolita* about the difference between the rapist and therapist being only a matter of spacing (150)

seems one of the more obvious examples of the interplay between sex and phonemes and might have fitted well into the ‘Reading Chernyshevsky in Tehran: Nabokov and Nafisi’ subsection (145).

Although preposterous at times, *Nabokov, Perversely* accepts its preposterousness and thus seems to foresee some of the accusations and recoiling that it will undoubtedly invite. For example, it is unclear how Naiman is afforded such insights as “*Nabokov, Perversely* is all about loving Nabokov as he wanted to be loved” (14) and “Nabokov’s texts must be perverted – read improperly – if their richness is to be properly appreciated” (100). Although formication and fornication are not too far apart in this torrid book, the extent to which Naiman repositions Nabokov is praiseworthy. In *Ada*, Nabokov horrifically hybridizes the sexual and the literary in order to invite both our awe and horror: “the little fellow could not disguise a state of acute indigestion, marked by unappetizing dysenteric symptoms that coated his lover’s shaft with mustard and blood” (279). This mixture, related to Joyce’s idea of the writer’s “awehorrority”, seems central to the remit of *Nabokov, Perversely* and Naiman is voluble in attempting to bring Nabokov’s tyrannical persona into relief. Although, at times, certain readings may go just a bit too far, the book will act as a harbinger for things to come in Nabokov studies – no longer are readers subservient to the master’s omnipotence over his texts.

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