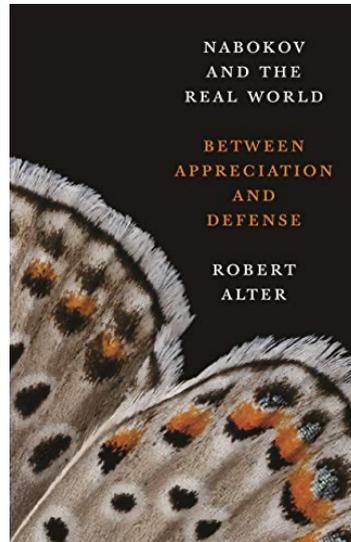


Nabokov and the Real World: Between Appreciation and Defense, by Robert Alter. Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021. ISBN: 978-0-691-21193-0. Notes. Bibliography. Index. 232pp.



Not everyone likes Dickens. Nevertheless, it is generally agreed, even by those who may have a difficult time with Dickens' style, that there is little sense in arguing that the Englishman should not be read or that his peculiar style as well as his commitment to that style constitute a refusal of the inevitability of art to affect real human lives. Now, not everyone likes Nabokov, yet, unlike Dickens, this dislike is commonly accompanied by and, indeed, is grounded in the belief that Nabokov really cares nothing of the seriousness of the human predicament. Against this most common misreading of Nabokov, Robert Alter, in his new book, *Nabokov and the Real World: Between Appreciation and Defense*, shows that Nabokov's literariness, his obsession with style, encodement, and gamesmanship, does not signify on Nabokov's part a lack of concern with the world outside of literature. Drawing upon decades of reading, writing, and teaching great works of literature, Alter shows that this critique of Nabokov is both unfair and incorrect, for not only are such devices as encodement common to all great works of literature, but such self-conscious literariness, when met in the works of other great authors (Joyce, Fielding, Faulkner, etc.), is rarely met with the charge that they care nothing of the real world with its problems and plagues.

As the title of his new book suggests, Alter turns the hermeneutic of suspicion upon itself to ask if the literary academy has been too suspicious of Nabokov, and, instead, invites

readers into a posture of appreciation toward not only Nabokov, but to a version of the academy and the literate class at large that still marvels at the magic of words. Alter shows how such misreadings of Nabokov have and continue to prevent readers from appreciating the ineluctable humanity, the pathos, and the pity, of Nabokov's literary art. Together, these two postures of Alter's book, appreciation and defense, form an indictment against Alter's sense that we are on the verge of losing touch with the enchantments of literary art and its subversive power to critique ontologies that reduce every discourse to one concealed ideology or another.

Typical of his life-long project, as may be seen throughout his acclaimed *Partial Magic: The Novel as Self-Conscious Genre* (1975), *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981) and *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem* (1991), Alter draws upon Nabokov's lectures, short stories, autobiography, and novels to explore Nabokov's fascination with the "ambiguous border between reality and fiction" (3). In this way, Alter helps readers to appreciate the ways that Nabokov utilizes self-reflexivity and realism in an ultimately humane and humanizing gesture to express his "deep concern with representing humanity in the toils of emotional experience and moral dilemmas, struggling with relationships, constricted by the harsh vise of historical circumstance" (13).

There is a sense, however, that Alter's book offers to Nabokovians little that is new, and this is welcome. (Reminders of the joy that we receive from the subjects of our scholarly inquiry are rare and should be welcomed at every chance.) Thus, while only two chapters are new (chapter 1, "Between Appreciation and Defense," and chapter 3, "*Lolita* Now"), and the other nine, having suffered some emendations for the necessary purpose of giving form to this collection, have appeared over the last 47 years (the first in 1970 and the latest in 2017), Alter's book offers an important reminder that the self-conscious aspect of Nabokov's art, his commitment to keeping "reality" imprisoned in scare quotes, is a vital aspect of Nabokov's belief that "the mind was unfettered, that there was 'always more' of reality than the official repressive versions made out" (23). And so as Nabokov's art leads invariably "back to a metaphysic, and one with ultimately moral implications" (160), as Alter observes in his brilliant essay on *Invitation to a Beheading* (chapter 8), Alter shows that Nabokov's concern is with "reality" in the broadest sense, with the mirror of human consciousness and its necessarily creative role in constructing the world we inhabit, and its pesky habit of remaining firmly lodged between ourselves and the purportedly "real" world that is "out there"—objective, cold, inhuman.

It is my hope that the breadth of Alter's scholarship, as it has been received by both the literary and religious academies, will widen Nabokov's readership and correct many

misconceptions of Nabokov which scholars working at the intersection of literature and religion (so very broadly conceived) continue to hold—that he is a nihilist and that he has no substantial interest in morality or any sense of transcendence. Indeed, the breadth of Alter’s influence, one hopes, will widen Nabokov’s readership, if not also his ranks. In this regard, Alter’s book is particularly timely, aimed as it is, on the one hand, at readers who have a difficult time getting past the fact that Nabokov is the man we can blame for *Lolita*, and, on the other, at those whose enjoyment of Nabokov will always welcome a final word—not to mention a whole collection of essays, many of which are now hard to find in their original physical form, for those of us who care about such things as books—from a scholar looking back upon an academic life dedicated to Nabokov.

Yet it is to the former group of readers that Alter’s book should exercise its most profound impact, even as there remain aspects of Alter’s defense that may work against remedying the belief that Nabokov, widely known by the general public as little more than the perverted author of the pedophile book, should be shunned in this moment when we know more of the names of the Humberts of this world than of those who have been exploited into suffering as *Lolitas*. Of course, Alter is not aiming his arrows in their direction. Nevertheless, since most of Alter’s collection has already appeared over the last fifty-one years, I want to focus particular attention upon chapter 3, “*Lolita* Now,” especially as its placement as the first sustained treatment of a single major work by Nabokov seems to me a fitting formal manifestation of Alter’s polemic against philistine didacticism (“look[ing] right through style to the purported grounding of the text in one ideology or another,” 212).

While the real targets of Alter’s polemic are the various ideologues who argue that *Lolita* “may corrupt morals and must be approached with caution by right-thinking people” (34); that its ostensible dirtiness glorifies sex abuse; and that, were Nabokov writing today, *Lolita* would certainly not be published, one wonders if the polemic throughout his chapter on *Lolita* is too pointedly charged with condescension toward “conservative writers” (33) and “the feminist left” (34) to actually convince any of their cultured sympathizers that they have failed to appreciate the profound moral and political concerns that imbue Nabokov’s literary art. What is more, the brute fact remains that there exist some readers who, whether by fault of personality or history, will not only be troubled but may even be scandalized by reading *Lolita*. Not that *Lolita* should not be read, nor that there is one “correct” way of reading *Lolita*—only that there are people who for real reasons much more substantial than “suffering from terminal moralism” or not being “sufficiently literary reader[s]” (43) may be haunted beyond what they are willing or equipped to endure by the moral scandal of *Lolita*’s plot. Even so, “*Lolita* Now”

serves as a gentle reminder of the final revelation of art: that art must glory in the beautiful lie. Thus, Alter's decision to situate this chapter as the first substantial treatment of a single major work by Nabokov is apt, signaling as it does an invitation in good faith to begin where the scandal is felt most poignantly by many of Nabokov's readers, good or bad, as well as an affirmation of faith in the basic arithmetic of Nabokov's art: "*Beauty plus pity*" (*Lectures on Literature* 251).

Having completed his *Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* to universal acclaim in 2019, Alter has given unto us a second *magnum opus*. *Nabokov and the Real World* is a wonderful contribution and an even more beautiful collection. A sumptuous stylist in his own right, Alter flaunts the riches that Nabokov, the most rewarding of authors, bestows upon his attentive, good readers. To new readers of Nabokov, Alter provides the conceptual tools to probe the porous boundary between life and art, and to veteran Nabokovians a sensuous meditation upon why, for all the strenuous effort, we return to works like *Pale Fire* for the sixth, seventh, eighth . . . time. This important and timely study demonstrates that Nabokov's intimate concern with style, his penchant for encodement, for games, for ripping out the rug from under our feet, is an expression of his fundamental belief in the mutual interpenetration of life and art. If, then, there is an ideology in Nabokov's art, then, whatever it is, it stands as an indictment of our having not imagined wildly enough so as to create a world where things like curiosity, tenderness, kindness, and ecstasy are the realest things in the world.

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