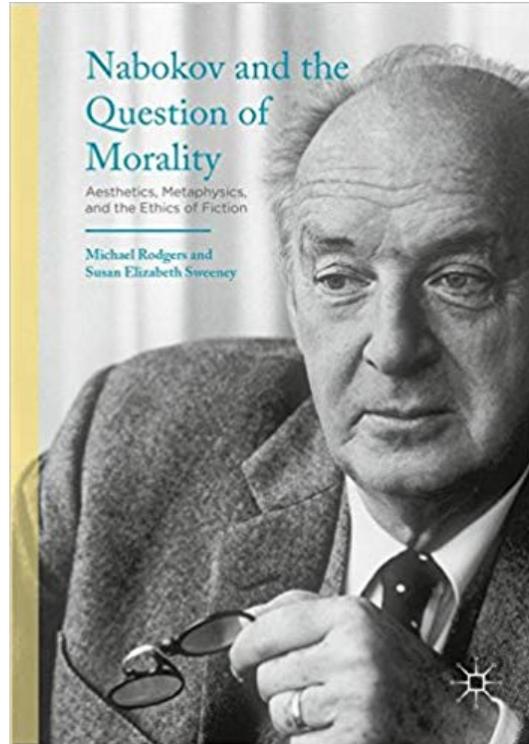


*Nabokov and the Question of Morality: Aesthetics, Metaphysics, and the Ethics of Fiction*, edited by Michael Rodgers and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. ISBN: 9781137596666. Index. 241 pp.



The question of morality has long confounded readers of Vladimir Nabokov, who famously declared, for example, that his provocative novel *Lolita* had “no moral in tow” (22). Yet abundant statements of this nature are contradicted by indications of the exact opposite in Nabokov’s more personal communications, including when he described the same book as “a highly moral affair” to Edmund Wilson (23). At other times Nabokov made ambiguous comments, such as when he ruminated in 1971, “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” (22). Whatever the author’s intentions here and elsewhere, it appears that now the day

of Nabokov's moral reappraisal has come, as indicated by the welcome appearance of the erudite essay collection *Nabokov and the Question of Morality: Aesthetics, Metaphysics, and the Ethics of Fiction*, edited by Michael Rodgers and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney. It signals the arrival of moral considerations into Nabokov studies on a wider scale, although the flexibility of its varied approaches counters the rigidity of which Nabokov spoke.

In recent decades critics have increasingly and productively begun to read Nabokov against the grain, as it were, in different respects. In this sense, *Nabokov and the Question of Morality* rides a wave of moral criticism in Nabokov studies, which Rodgers and Sweeney effectively detail in their introduction to the volume. As they note, Ellen Pifer first explicitly considered *Lolita* in a moral context in 1980 (3), while David Rampton invoked the figure of "the moral Nabokov" for the first time in 1984 (4), being followed by numerous other scholars who address moral considerations briefly or more pointedly. More recently, Leland de la Durantaye devoted his book *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (2007) to the subject of morality in his works. Yet, even against this substantial critical backdrop, the editors are correct in their assertion that "*Nabokov and the Question of Morality* is the first collection to gather, evaluate, and compare these attempts to establish what Leland de la Durantaye calls 'the moral art of Vladimir Nabokov'" (2). This valuable volume's greatest strength lies in the diversity of its approaches to these moral questions, which offer a multifaceted and interdisciplinary examination of thorny but critical moral questions in Nabokov's writings.

The book comprises an introduction and twelve essays by established and emerging Nabokov scholars, reflecting both grounded expertise in the subject at hand and innovative new approaches to his writings informed by other disciplines. Read together, these wide-ranging essays offer an illuminating and largely chronological revisitation of much of Nabokov's career, from his early stories in Russian to his later stories in English and from his autobiographical work and major novels in Russian to his major novels in English and most famous later works. The editors have organized the volume in a logical and evocative sequence and divided the material into four parts that offer substantive consideration of questions of moral values and actions, as well as ethical concerns regarding the reading and representation. At times, the sections and transitions between the essays achieve a synaesthetic harmony in their disciplinary

overlap or differences. Some of the essays prove more directly pertinent to the question of morality than others, particularly those by Tom Whalen, David Rampton, Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, and Leland de la Durantaye (the latter being adapted from *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*) and these fit especially well into the book and add significantly to its topical heft; but all will be of interest to Nabokov scholars.

After Michael Rodgers's and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney's "Introduction: Nabokov's Morality Play," which effectively situates the volume and summarizes its contents, the first section, on "Responsible Reading", includes three essays about the reading of Nabokov's works. Tom Whalen's "And So the Password Is--?: Nabokov and the Ethics of Rereading" teases out the distinction between overt moralizing and deeper morality, encapsulating Nabokov's view: "Better to intuit art's inherent morality, to freely discover it, than have it coerced into being. The aim of his aesthetics is to make this discovery possible" (23). Julian Connolly's "Nabokov and Dostoevsky: Good Writer, Bad Reader?" addresses Nabokov's paradoxical condemnation of Dostoevsky as a writer, even as he employs similar motifs in his writings, and scrutinizes Nabokov's shortcomings as a reader of Dostoevsky. In his conclusion Connolly connects this to the theme of morality by noting Nabokov's irritation at Dostoevsky's overt moralizing, since he himself "strove for subtlety in his exploration of moral issues" (45). In "The Will to Disempower? Nabokov and His Readers" Michael Rodgers explores the interplay between elevated author and subjugated reader in Nabokov's fiction through the lens of Nietzsche and argues that Nabokov's authorial tactics aim to provoke the reader into resisting his work and his authorial persona, as well as to evaluate the ethics of his textual practice.

The second section, on "Good and Evil", includes three essays. Samuel Schuman's "Nabokov's God; God's Nabokov" explores spiritual dimensions and moral perspectives in Nabokov's writing with a focus on the theme of the artist and the deity and through close analysis of Nabokov's early stories in Russian, especially "The Word" and "Christmas," noting the personal elements that enhance their meaning. In his eloquently written "By Trial and Terror" Gennady Barabtarlo argues that Nabokov, though always shunning any appearance of moralizing, always includes a moral plane, and rightly attends to the subject of suffering children in Nabokov's works. Rewriting Auden, Barabtarlo claims that "a book by Nabokov rereads its

rereaders” (101) and notes its ultimately open-ended nature. In “The Aesthetics of Moral Contradiction in Some Early Nabokov Novels” David Rampton focuses particularly on a transitional stage in Nabokov’s career, and argues that at that point “Nabokov was particularly intrigued by questions of moral awareness and aesthetic distance” (115) and calls this “a necessary step in his development as a writer” (120).

The third section, on “Agency and Altruism”, includes only two essays. Jacqueline Hamrit’s “Loving and Giving in Nabokov’s *The Gift*” focuses on the human and ethical dimension of love by tracing three types of love triangles in Nabokov’s great Russian novel, from unrequited romantic love to familial love and, finally, the triangulation of artist, muse, and creativity represented by Fyodor, Zina, and his creative gift. Laurence Piercy’s “Kinbote’s Heroism” explores the instability rendered in *Pale Fire* by Kinbote’s moral action during John Shade’s death scene through a philosophical perspective, observing that Kinbote’s “eruptive heroism only becomes recognizably important when the contradictions of Shade’s death scene are extricated from the bombast of the narrative” (156).

The final section, on “The Ethics of Representation”, contains four essays. Susan Elizabeth Sweeney’s chapter “Whether Judgments, Sentences, and Executions Satisfy the Moral Sense in Nabokov” addresses the “ethics of reading fiction” (161) very directly as she explores the open-endedness of Nabokov’s writings, which typically lack the performance of justice, and concludes that “Nabokov leaves the final determination up to his readers’ own moral sense” (175). Leland de la Durantaye’s “The Art of Morality, or on *Lolita*” calls *Lolita* a moral book because it explicitly treats moral questions and argues that a truly moral book “presents an integral vision of the relation of morality to art” (192). In ““Obnoxious Preoccupation with Sex Organs’: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Representing Sex” Elspeth Jajdelska offers a detailed study of Nabokov’s stylistic methods in representing sexual scenes, with illustrative contrasts displaying how Nabokov strategically represents sex in his fictions to avoid arousal and the obscene, thereby blurring aesthetics and ethics. Finally, a concluding essay on “Modern Mimesis” by Michael Wood rounds out the volume with a meditation on modernism that leaves morality and ethics behind to take a broader perspective.

Overall, the essays in this volume interweave pertinent Nabokov scholarship; consider theoretical models of reader, writer, art, and representation; and relate Nabokov in an interdisciplinary manner to philosophy, religion, law, and sexuality. Although this scope is impressive, one might note the general paucity of references to history, politics, and personal relationships, as well as totalitarianism and Russia more specifically, though the editors acknowledge recent scholarship in this area in their introduction (5). This reader would appreciate more material with a feminist or child-oriented approach, but this may be more of an indication of where my own work on Nabokov wishes to go than a critique of this volume, which had to be circumscribed somehow.

Ultimately, this volume seems to offer a substantially evolved metamorphosis into textual form of the symposium on “Nabokov and Morality,” which Michael Rodgers organized at the University of Strathclyde in 2011 (cf. *Nabokov Online Journal*, Vol. VI, 2012) and thereby preserves it for posterity. The book itself is dedicated to the late Samuel Schuman (1942-2014), whose essay on spirituality appears posthumously within it, evoking the resurrection of the moth it describes in Nabokov’s remarkably tender early story “Christmas.” Indeed, in its deeper moral import and the bigger questions it poses, this book is a fitting memorial not only to this scholar but also to Nabokov himself, whose still living works – “you are in that song” (84) – continue to pose open-ended moral quandaries that challenge readers to not only savor the aesthetics and metaphysics of Nabokov’s writings, but also to see beyond these by considering the problematic but illuminating ethics of fiction.

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