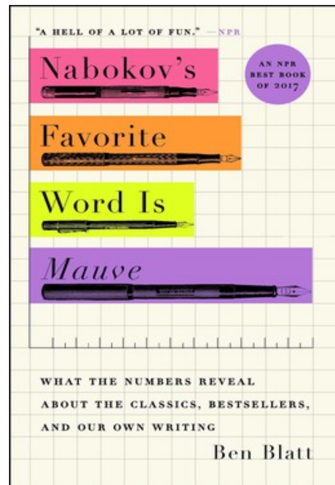
***Nabokov's Favorite Word Is Mauve: What the Numbers Reveal About the Classics, Bestsellers, and Our Own Writing***, by Ben Blatt. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017; 978-1-5011-0538-8, 217 pp.




In the age of technology, scholars have been pondering over the place of digital humanities in literary studies. Situating his work at the intersection of metadata and literature, Ben Blatt ambitiously turns thousands of classics and contemporary bestsellers into statistics and investigates a myriad of contested issues: whether it is possible to uncover a writer's literary fingerprint and tackle the question of authorship with a specific algorithm; whether the well-known advice to eschew adverbs and clichés holds true; whether men and women, the Americans and the British do write differently; and finally, whether shorter is always better in terms of story openers. Blatt's quantitative analysis, which is largely based on the word frequency technique, has historical precedents. As he states in the introduction, Mosteller and Wallace in 1963 applied Bayesian inference to attribute the authorship of 12 of *The Federalist papers* to James Madison, instead of Alexander Hamilton (4). In "Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History," Moretti conveys the same optimism towards computational stylometry, celebrating the value of distant reading in gleaning greater literary patterns and trends. Blatt, similarly, deploys the innovative statistical distant reading over the traditional close reading, which contributes to a controversially experimental paradigm for approaching Nabokov's oeuvre.

Most of Blatt's quantitative findings regarding Nabokov's novels are interesting, but his numbers often become the ends in themselves instead of the means with which he could elucidate and elaborate his insights. Thus, while such mathematization of Nabokov's

texts might offer readers a brief exhilarating moment of defamiliarization, Blatt's inadequate interpretation of his statistics also inadvertently exposes and amplifies the inherent weakness of distant reading, which is the inclination to disregard the textual details. One would realize more acutely – perhaps against Blatt's intention – the irreplaceable role of close reading in Nabokov studies.

In Chapter 1 ("Use Sparingly"), to determine if a high adverb rate would adversely affect the quality and popularity of a book, he finds that Nabokov is one of the few authors "who have written successful books when increasing their adverbs usage" and defied the artistic rule that less is more (28). Despite the fact that "standout books indeed rely on fewer adverbs" (26), Blatt observes, *Lolita* "has more adverbs than any of his other eight books" (28). Then he abruptly draws a rather vague and superficial conclusion that "adverb rate alone could not have such a direct impact on the success of a book" because there are "thousands and thousands of other aspects of writing in play" (28). This unsubstantiated inference points to the limitations of his distant reading and his failure to illuminate the more baffling problems: Is *Lolita* critically acclaimed in spite of or because of Nabokov's unique use of adverbs? What exactly are the "other aspects of writings in play", as ambiguously put by Blatt, that set *Lolita* apart from other books? Does Nabokov's rebellion against the Hemingway-esque advice of avoiding adverbs insinuate that a high frequency of adverbs is not necessarily an indicator of poor writing? These unaddressed problems arising from Blatt's quantitative analysis could have been answered by close reading alone.

One of the prominent strengths of *Lolita* lies in Nabokov's vivid portrayal of Humbert, the enchanting verbal virtuoso who manipulates readers with "a fancy prose style." If one were to scrutinize his prose, it is not difficult to discern that Nabokov's meticulous and stylistic handling of Humbert's adverbs constitutes an integral part of *Lolita*'s literary merit: It is essential in emphasizing the character's erudition and calculation, his ecstatic enjoyment in endless wordplay. In recounting his unconsummated childhood love affair with Annabel Leigh, whom he perceives and portrays as the precursor to Lolita, Humbert writes: "All at once we were *madly*, *clumsily*, *shamelessly*, *agonizingly* in love with each other; *hopelessly*, I should add, because that frenzy of mutual possession might have been assuaged only by our actual imbibing and assimilating every particle of each other's souls and flesh." Stringing an overwhelming amount of emotive adverbs together, Nabokov skillfully captures the passionate and poetic rhythm of Humbert's words and his linguistic inventiveness, which induces in readers a sense of aesthetic bliss. The charm of these adverbs, when reduced to

cold numbers and broad patterns, would inevitably lose their power and fail to be felt. Such is the major drawback of Blatt's statistical method.

Blatt's distant reading of Nabokov's works is also marred by flawed methodology and suppositions. In Chapter 2 ("He Wrote, She Wrote"), he aims to find out whether authors prefer to write about their own gender by measuring their use of gendered pronouns with the "he:she ratio". This method, however, reveals his arbitrary assumption that books with the relatively high usage of "she" must be female-focused, while the greater frequency of "he" as opposed to "she" must imply a male bias on the authors' part. Based on his observation that "Of the 50 classic books by men, 44 used he more than she and 6 did the opposite", Blatt hastily argues: "Classic literature by men is about men by a quantifiable and overwhelming margin" (44). This questionable assertion unmasks his tendency to highlight the favourable statistics that consolidate his claim and exclude the exceptions that invalidate it. *Lolita* is one of the six classics by men which "did the opposite" with a lopsided he:she ratio of "30%: 70%" (42). Yet, as a deviation from the norm, this novel is also a strong case that disproves Blatt's theory, which fallaciously simplifies the use of "she" as a marker of a female-centric book. Despite its disproportionately low he:she ratio, *Lolita* is concerned with both sexes. It is as much about the masculine domination and desire as it is about the suppression of the feminine. The narrator Humbert not only talks about "she", but more specifically his perception of "she", which concentrates on women's physical attributes rather than their psychological world. His objectifying gaze, through which the story is focalized, silences and sexualizes all the female characters that he describes: Valeria is but "a large puffy, short-legged, big-breasted and practically brainless baba," and Charlotte a "clumsy seal." Obsessed with her prepubescent body, her "slender waist" and "ivory-silk" skin, he reifies Dolores as his ultimate nymphet while negating her inner life. Therefore Nabokov's excessive reference to "she" in *Lolita* paradoxically is grounded in androcentrism. By discounting the counterexample of *Lolita* to maintain his hypothesis, Blatt downplays the novel's complexity and discloses how dangerously close "distant reading" is to overgeneralization and misreading.

The most problematic chapter is perhaps Chapter 6 ("U.K. vs. U.S."), which is based on a methodological premise that flagrantly misrepresents Nabokov's identity and his novels. Blatt agrees that "Americans are in fact louder in their writing than the quiet Brits" (141) by counting the "speaking verbs" occurring in the American and the British novels respectively from the following categories: loud (cried, exclaimed, shouted, vociferated,

shrieked, etc), neutral (said, replaced, asked, remarked, uttered, etc), and quiet (whispered, sighed, grumbled, hushed, etc). Considering that the "loud" verbs: "quiet" verbs ratio in Nabokov's English novels (excluding the fragmentary *The Original of Laura*) is 74%: 26%, Blatt classifies him as one of the many "loud" American authors. It is erroneous to presuppose that Nabokov is a typical American who exhibits the standard American linguistic characteristics. Nabokov is a Russia-born polyglot and cultural hybrid: "I am trilingual, in the proper sense of writing, and not only speaking, three languages".[1] Though proficient in English, the writer sees Russian as his mother tongue and acknowledges the inescapable awkwardness of his adopted English in *Lolita*'s Afterword: "I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammeled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English." His language is unable to sufficiently reflect the idiosyncrasies of American speech also because his early exposure to English in St Petersburg came not from his contact with the American culture, but his English governesses and Anglophile parents who would read English literature to him.[2] He spent his formative years in Russia, moved to several European countries, and did not immigrate to America until he was in his forties. What contributes to the "loudness" of Nabokov's English novels is probably the characterization or the plot, rather than his emulation of the American speech. In *Pnin*, the eponymous hero "cried" for many times — not because his or Nabokov's assimilated Americanness is showing through, but because this character is truly in desperation. A hapless Russian émigré professor in America, Pnin struggles to maneuver his alien surroundings. On his way to deliver a lecture in Cremona, he takes the wrong train, loses a suitcase and misses a bus: " 'Important lecture!' *cried* Pnin. 'What to do? It is a catastroph!' […] 'But I must obtain my valise!' *cried* Pnin […] 'My bus to Cremona!' *cried* Pnin." Apparently, the recurrence of exclamatory verbs in *Pnin* serves to underscore the despair of a clumsy, disoriented exile as well as intensify the story's tragicomical effect. It has nothing to do with Nabokov conforming to the American stereotype of being loud.

[1] Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 111.

[2] See Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 68: Nabokov "had first an English nurse and then a sequence of English governesses" from 1903 to 1906. Also, in his letter to Edmund Wilson of May 5, 1950, he recalled: "My father was an expert on Dickens, and at one time read to us, children, aloud, chunks of Dickens, in English, of course."

Nevertheless, shedding light on Nabokov's individualistic aesthetic attitude, Blatt's research is not without merit. To Nabokov, "'style' is matter."[3] Not only does he frolic in artistic freedom, but he explicitly prides himself on his creative wordplay, his ability to liberate the English language from the limit imposed by the authoritative dictionaries: "Conrad knew how to handle readymade English better than I; *but I know better the other kind*. He never sinks to the depths of my solecisms, but neither does he scale my verbal peaks." [4] Not surprisingly, the statistics from Chapter 7 ("Clichés, Repetitions and Favourites") affirm his literary resourcefulness and inordinate fondness for phrase-making. Compared with other writers, such as James Joyce, George Orwell and Mark Twain, Nabokov uses clichés at an extremely low rate. Per 100,000 words, his eight novels merely contain 73 clichés (158). One of his favourite words, which Blatt calls "cinnamon words", is "pun" (175). "Cinnamon words" are an author's top three high-frequency words that he uses disproportionately, compared to other authors from the Corpus of Historical American English (170). In a way, Nabokov's constant mention of "pun" is directly correlated to his inexhaustible passion for intralingual and interlingual puns, and his adventurous pursuit of aesthetics, which are all too familiar to his readers. This linguistic juggler fashions the term "nymphancy" from nymph and infancy, "existentialienation" from existentialism and alienation, and jokes about his exiled Russian protagonist's inability to grapple with the English idioms: "It was a curriculum vitae in a nutshell – a coconut shell." He even puns on most of his main characters' names. Ada is a homonym for ardor; Dolores echoes dolor in Spanish and Latin; Shade evokes ombré, the Spanish of "almost man."

As suggested from the book's title, Blatt's identification of Nabokov's number one cinnamon word "mauve" also unveils the profound impacts of grapheme-color synaesthesia on the texture of his writing. According to Chapter 7, all of the eight Nabokov's English novels contain "mauve" (170). In total, he employs it "at a rate 44 times more common" than it is used in the Corpus of Historical American English (170). More notably, his usage of color words exceeds that of other authors as well: "Vladimir Nabokov uses around 460 color words per 100,000, which is remarkably high. The same colors appear just 115 times per 100,000 in the Corpus of Historical American English" (171). Blatt astutely associates Nabokov's unusually colorful writing with his synaesthesia, a condition that causes him to see

[3] Nabokov, Selected Letters *1940-1977*, ed. Dmitry Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 116.

[4] Vladimir Nabokov, *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov Wilson Letters*, 1940-1971, ed. Simon Karlinsky (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 282.

colors in letters and sounds. This time, his inference appears more tenable because he is able to combine distant reading with close reading to buttress his point. He quotes a passage from *Speak, Memory*, where Nabokov vividly describes his "fine case of colored hearing": "At times, however, my photisms take on a rather soothing flou quality, and then I see – projected, as it were, upon the inside of the eyelid – gray figures walking between beehives, or small black parrots gradually vanishing among mountain snows, or a mauve remoteness melting beyond moving masts […] The long 'a' of the English alphabet [...] has for me the tint of weathered wood, but a French 'a' evokes polished ebony." Supplemented with textual evidence, his argument no longer sounds like a speculation. This synthesis of quantitative and qualitative analyses allows readers to clearly recognize colorfulness as a distinct aspect of Nabokov's literary fingerprint.

That said, Nabokov's scholars might deem Blatt's discovery disappointingly superfluous, for it only reinforces what is widely known about Nabokov's condition and style via close reading, without adding anything astonishingly original to the current discussion. I would even go so far to argue that Nabokov's extraordinary love of mauve is not merely related to his synaesthesia, but also to the immense popularity of this color in the late 18th and the early 19th centuries. As stated by Le Couteur and Burreson, mauve, the first synthetic dye invented by Perkin, had taken the European world by storm during this period: "Mauve became the favorite color of Eugénie, empress of France, and the French court. Queen Victoria wore a mauve dress to the wedding of her daughter and to open the London Exhibition of 1862. With royal approval from Britain and France, the popularity of the color soared."[5] The gay 1890s are famously named the "Mauve Decade." Nabokov's contemporary, James Joyce, also uses "mauve" in *Ulysses* a whopping twelve times – far more than Nabokov uses it in each of his English novels, except for *Ada, or Ardor*. Had Blatt calculated the occurrence of "mauve" specifically in the literature of Nabokov's period, rather than the entire Corpus, his analysis would certainly have been more nuanced and comprehensive.

It is possible that Blatt was quite struck by the glaring imperfections of statistical distant reading when completing his research. With honesty and humility, he eventually admits the inferiority of his method to the conventional close reading in the final chapter, "Beginnings and Endings," where he assesses whether brevity could make a story opener great. Taking into account the considerable variations of the lengths of the twenty best first

[5] Penny Le Couteur and Jay Burreson, *Napoleon's Buttons* (New York: Jeremy P Tarcher, 2004), 175.

sentences in literature (one of which is from Nabokov's *Lolita*), he frustratingly confesses that length is most likely irrelevant to a sentence's worth: "We can see that what each of the best openers have in common is not length but a certain originality or novelty that makes them memorable" (202). Surely, when it comes to a story opener, its form, style and content all matter. Distilling it into a scientific datum would instantly kill its magic. This is particularly true in Nabokov's case. It would be impossible to appreciate the seductive lyricism conjured by the opening line of *Lolita* purely in terms of statistics. Well-crafted with alliterative rhythms and parallel structures, it is meant to be read aloud like a poem, or an incantation: "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins."

Although Blatt's quantitative approach to Nabokov's fiction tends to infuriate rather than intrigue and inspire, his study does not amount to a disastrous débâcle, but signifies a preliminary exploration by the digital humanities. His trials and errors demonstrate the use and abuse of statistics, how to read and how not to read, thereby directing us to contemplate a better way of incorporating metadata and digital tools in Nabokov studies. One lesson is loud and clear: Distant reading and close reading are never mutually exclusive; they complement each other. Relying solely on numbers, formulas and graphs to comprehend Nabokov's texts is inherently paradoxical, if not ludicrous. In *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov writes, "In high art and pure science, detail is everything." He demands critics to scrutinize the intricacies and particularities of his fiction, and to derive aesthetic pleasure from this very process. Nothing elicits more disdain in him than a computerized mind. In his response to Rowe's *Nabokov's Deceptive World*, Nabokov vehemently denounces the "symbolic" interpretations of literature, which, to a certain extent, resembles Blatt's formulaic, pattern-searching distant reading: "I never tire of retelling how I once failed a student [...] for writing that Jane Austen describes leaves as "green" because Fanny is hopeful, and "green" is the color of hope. The symbolism racket in schools [...] destroys plain intelligence as well as poetical sens." A man of infinite jest, Nabokov would have, doubtless, parodied the mechanical ways in which his art is viewed (and distorted) by some well-intentioned digital humanities scholars of our era.

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