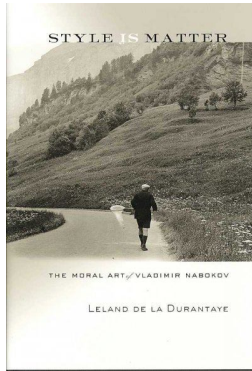


***Style Is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, by Leland de la Durantaye. Ithaca&London: Cornell University Press, 2007; ISBN 978-0-8014-4563-7, viii+210pp. Bibliography. Index.**



The focal point of Durantaye’s graceful and thoughtful book is *Lolita*, in particular the ambivalence – the uneasy mixture of empathy and antipathy – that most readers and critics feel toward the novel’s hero and narrator, Humbert Humbert. At once seducing readers through his rhetorical skill and repelling them through his vile behavior, Humbert raises in especially acute form the question of the interrelationship in *Lolita* of the aesthetic and the moral – a matter that has exercised Nabokov’s best critics, and not only of *Lolita*, as Durantaye points out in his introduction. Therefore, while using *Lolita* as a starting point and a touchstone, Durantaye looks to the whole body of Nabokov’s writing, with emphasis on the English-language works.

In Part I of the book, Durantaye deals with the reader’s response to Nabokov and Nabokov’s attitude toward his reader and, most important, toward his characters. He grapples in Chapter 1 with the complaint, common even among Nabokov’s admirers, of the writer’s cruelty. Durantaye attributes Nabokov’s sometimes heartless manipulation of his personages to his conception of the writer as omnipotent creator, whose “characters are galley slaves” (p. 24) and whose readers are allowed entrance to his artistic universe only on his own terms. In Chapter 2 Durantaye traces this purported cruelty back to Nabokov’s adherence to the principles of art for art’s sake. Quoting from both the writer’s criticism and fiction, Durantaye argues forcefully for his belief that the artist, through the power of his imagination, creates his own “*entirely* subjective” reality (p. 41, italics in the original) that has nothing to do with “average reality.” He contrasts this view to

that of Brian Boyd, who, armed with his own Nabokov quote, asserts that the writer, like the scientist, far from rejecting external reality, takes as his task the most minute examination of the sensory world with the goal – however unattainable – of plumbing to its very essence. Durantaye makes a rather halting attempt here to reconcile this subjective / objective conundrum, to which he is to return in a different context in Part II.

For the remainder of Part I Durantaye turns to Humbert, examining him through the prism of Nabokov's aestheticism as defined in the first two chapters. Humbert, he finds, like the earlier "criminal artist" (p. 48), Hermann of *Despair*, errs in applying the "gifts" and "methods" of art to life (p. 51) – treating the external world as an aesthetic entity that one may manipulate at will. In some of his most perceptive pages Durantaye traces how Humbert, in his relations with Lolita, perverts the highest values that Nabokov attributes to art: its sensuousness, its ability to cause a "tingling" of the spine (p. 57). He develops this perception in Chapter 4, examining Humbert's adaptation of artistic devices to the furtherance of his passionate pursuit. Durantaye offers a surprising sexual equivalency to the artist's creation of a subjective reality: masturbation (in which Humbert frequently indulges early on), which is also carried on in isolation, spurred by the mental image of the desired one (his "own creation," as Humbert calls it), rather than by the real thing. Even after his relationship with Lolita is consummated, Humbert continues to misappropriate the method of the artist, solipsizing the actual Lolita, turning her from "an *ethical subject*" into an "*aesthetic object*," as Durantaye felicitously puts it (p. 71).

This objectification of Lolita, Durantaye asserts, indicates that, for all of Humbert's stylistic pyrotechnics, he lacks the capacity that Nabokov considers essential for the writer: empathy, "the ability to feel his way into another's world" (p. 55). Also wanting in Humbert is the emotion of tenderness, to which, Durantaye shows, the writer assigned the highest value from his earliest to his latest works. Humbert's "brute sensuality" leads to the "occlusion of tenderness," to his total indifference to Lolita's inner life (p. 81). Only his "moral apotheosis" toward the end of the novel (p. 89), the sudden outpouring of tenderness toward the actual Lolita, affords Humbert a "green lane in Paradise . . . once a year," Durantaye concludes.

After having penetrated to the moral core of *Lolita* in Part I of his study, in Part II Durantaye concentrates on the inextricable intertwining of message and form – the “matter” and “style” of his title – in Nabokov. In chapter 1 he returns to the question of Nabokov’s eschewal of the overtly didactic, but finds that his early denial of moral significance in *Lolita* was later modified. In the following two chapters he examines the specific characteristics of Nabokov’s style. If in Part I he emphasized the subjective nature of the writer’s vision, now he turns to his fidelity to the outside world, his “passion for detail” (p. 110) and precision (thus coming closer to Boyd’s view). The primacy for Nabokov of the particular and concrete, Durantaye shows, underlies the writer’s contempt for generalities and accounts for his dislike both of extrinsic schemes in art (symbolism, allegory, myth) and his emphatic rejection of influential modern thinkers such as Freud, Marx, Darwin (Durantaye goes on at excessive length about the first), who impose abstract theories on the unique phenomena of life. This antipathy toward generalization, Durantaye finds, applies also to the writer’s use of language, his indefatigable search for the unique perspective, for the most precise scientific term, however obscure to his layman readers.

Durantaye now makes a more successful attempt to reconcile the subjective and objective in Nabokov than in Part I, based upon the writer’s idiosyncratic view of the natural world. He quotes Nabokov’s declaration in *Speak, Memory* that he found in both art and nature “a form of magic, . . . a game of intricate enchantment and deception ” (p. 143). He goes on in Chapter 10 to trace Nabokov’s fascination with mimicry in nature, which buttressed his conviction that deception in art is not arbitrary play, but a reflection of the natural world. Because mimicry, as he has a character in *The Gift* put it, is “not explainable by the struggle for existence . . . and seemed to have been invented by some waggish artist for the intelligent eyes of man” (p. 151), Nabokov vehemently rejected Darwinism. Instead, as Durantaye convincingly demonstrates, he subscribed to the (now discounted) theory of Intelligent Design, which allowed him to make the “analogy . . . between the creator of a fictional work and the Creator of the created world . . .” (p. 155).

In his final chapter, Durantaye turns to patterning the “figure” woven into the “magic carpet” of Nabokov’s fiction (p. 147). In his effort to plumb the significance of the patterns, he once again confronts two versions of the writer: as aesthete/stylist and as

believer in some transcendent reality. He concludes, perhaps not surprisingly, that Nabokov is both. Nabokov the aesthete, confronted with the bewildering welter of experiences and sensations, “combats anxiety,” as Durantaye rather oddly puts it (p. 166), by imposing form on the chaos through “tracing patterns.” Only after some hesitation does he offer the alternative view (which does not negate the first) of Nabokov as believer, whose patterned creations are a “sign that beyond that disparate plenitude lies a Creator” (p. 169). He hastens to add – I think correctly – that the inference of some higher being does not imply a belief in some established religion. Nor, as Durantaye maintains throughout the study, is there some easily extractable moral message in Nabokov’s works. The moral exists there, he concludes, as an inherent part of his style, Nabokov exemplifying “an idea of art where moral form and moral content were indissoluble, and thus could be expressed in no fewer and no other words than those of the work” (p. 191). Thus the title of his book: *Style is Matter*.

Durantaye’s conclusion is well taken, if not overly original. Other of Nabokov’s most perceptive critics have detected the moral – not to say mystical – threads interwoven in the writer’s “magic carpet.” What makes Durantaye’s study worth reading is the care and sensitivity with which he undertakes his task, the many arresting perceptions he offers along the way. His analysis does, to be sure, depend more upon Nabokov’s highly quotable pronouncements on art than on close reading, but perhaps that is unavoidable in so compact a book. Durantaye’s extensive knowledge of English-language and European literature is especially helpful, an example being his discussion of Pater as a source for Nabokov’s particular brand of aestheticism (pp. 36-37). This strength, however, is counterbalanced by his lesser familiarity with Russian literature. In his description of the “art for art’s sake” movement, for example, he traces its German and French roots, alludes to the English Wilde and Swinburne, yet makes no mention of the aestheticism so prevalent in the Russian Silver Age during Nabokov’s formative years.

A more fundamental problem with the book is certain seeming contradictions in Durantaye’s portrait of the writer. How can Nabokov be cruel, on the one hand, yet value most of all empathy and tenderness? (Attempts to discount the cruelty are not persuasive.) Nor is the tension fully reconciled between the subjective and the objective, between the autonomy of the individual detail “in and for itself” (p. 116) and the intricate

patterns into which these details are woven (and from which the “matter” of his writings emerges). Oddly, however, one senses that Durantaye, in presenting these contradictions, is right on all counts (although he might have tried more to wrestle with or at least acknowledge them). It may well be, in fact, that it is precisely the paradoxical nature of Nabokov’s gift that makes him the endlessly fascinating writer he is.

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