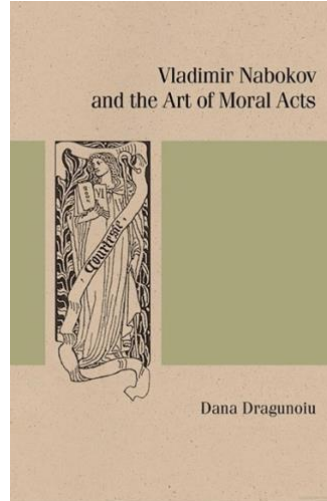


***Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Moral Acts*, by Dana Dragunoiu.** Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2021. ISBN 978-0-8101-4399-9. xxii + 264 pp.



There are two Vladimir Nabokovs. There is the Nabokov of the prismatic detail, a lepidopterist who celebrates with reckless exactitude the rarity of being. Then there is the Nabokov of the morbid secret, an anatomist of pain who cannot decide whether his characters or his readers disgust him more. Call them light and dark Nabokovs. Dana Dragunoiu's monograph unapologetically focuses on the first, the light Nabokov, portraying him as an author with deep ethical commitments legible in his fiction, interviews, memoir, and scholarship.

Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Moral Acts peers at Nabokov—well, mainly five scenes from his novels—through two prisms, French Arthurian romance and Kantian ethics. Dragunoiu sees these three disparate bodies of writing as having articulated a mutually congruent anti-determinist aesthetic and ethic of courtesy. Dragunoiu is not disposed to build a case for historical connections among them. The strongest link is between Nabokov and the medieval romances he studied at the University of Cambridge, introduced in chapter 2. Dragunoiu suggests that the elaboration of a rarefied courtly universe in these tales shaped Nabokov's ideas about class, gender, honor, and the inculturation of virtue. On the next side of the triangle, Dragunoiu does not spill much ink establishing a direct connection between Nabokov and Immanuel Kant. She takes for granted that Kant is the premier exponent of anti-utilitarian philosophical stances on beauty, epistemology, morality, and subjectivity, stances available to inhabit for twentieth-century writers.

That an essay by the Kantian philosopher Sergey Hessen, half-brother of Nabokov's friend George Hessen, appeared in the same volumes of *Sovremennye zapiski* as Nabokov's *Glory* (41–42) is a convenient coincidence that cannot be pressed too far. Van Veen drops Kant's name in *Ada or Ardor* (195), but Dragunoiu makes rather much of this needle-in-a-haystack reference: "Van agrees with Kant that free will. . ." (207), "Nabokov subscribed to Kant's insight that. . ." (209). She seems to miss Van's pun on an unprintable word. As in Fyodor Konstantinovich Godunov-Cherdyntsev's double reference to "Kant" and "*Kont* (Comte)" in the *Gift*, it is the sound of the name, not the content of the philosophy, that triggers the allusion. This is about as near as Dragunoiu can drag Nabokov to the feet of German idealism. The arguments for Nabokov's knowledge of Kant and much of the reading of *Ada* are carried over from her first monograph.¹ Even the tangible connection to Nabokov's Cambridge reading list raises questions Dragunoiu does not address concerning the relation between academic study in the 1920s and literary invention in the 1960s. The epilogue speculates that Nabokov had read the English alliterative romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Completing the triangle, the anachronistic identification of medieval romance morality as "proto-Kantian" (36, 198) is left out on a limb. Insofar as this book wants direct influence to underwrite its comparisons, it disregards its own guidance, which rings true, that Nabokov "returns again and again to problems and topics that he finds worked out in a relatively small collection of masterpieces" (11) by Aleksandr Pushkin, William Shakespeare, and other postmedieval literary authors. Triangulation between Nabokov, Kant, and medieval romance is brilliant, but it is risky.

The brilliance and the risk lie as well in the fact that the five scenes in question, presented in chapter 1, are marginal in their respective novels. In each scene, an honorable woman fulfills superfluous social obligations while under severe emotional distress: Mrs. Luzhin in the *Luzhin Defense*; Helene Grinstein in the *Real Life of Sebastian Knight*; Mira Belochkin in an obliquely attested, parenthetical detail in *Pnin*; Queen Disa in a dream of Charles II of Zembla as reported by himself in the person of Charles Kinbote in *Pale Fire*; and Lucette Veen in *Ada*. Some discourteous actions of Lev Glebovich Ganin in *Mary*, John and Sybil Shade in *Pale Fire*, and Van in *Ada* supply contrast. All these scenes are, at most, of tertiary significance to the plots and themes

¹ Dana Dragunoiu, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 142–85 (145–48 on Nabokov and Kant).

of the five novels. That becomes Dragunoiu's point. The task she sets herself is to demonstrate that a handful of extraordinary, evanescent acts of courtesy, and corresponding acts of discourtesy, disclose "Nabokov's pantheon of values" (86).

To that task Dragunoiu brings wide reading and a talent for uncommon juxtaposition. The book's chapters prosecute their arguments through extra-short sections, some as short as a single page, typically titled according to the formula "X and Y." The sections behave like tesserae in a mosaic, not handoffs in a chain of custody. Chapters 3–6 and the epilogue put Nabokov into play with other writers. Each has a theme: dueling in Kant and Pushkin (ch. 3), hospitality in Shakespeare and Pushkin (ch. 4), deceit in Vasily Botkin and Leo Tolstoy (ch. 5), time in Marcel Proust (ch. 6), and coloration in the *Gawain* poet under "Kant's judgmental eye" (209) (epilogue). Dragunoiu has a knack for finding just the right theorist or scholar or anecdote to bridge an evident gap between two authors or two concepts. Sometimes in her comparatist zeal she gives in to the temptation to build the bridge herself: "Lucette's sublime act of courtesy to the Robinsons—her moral *high desert*, as we might call it—connects her to the scenes at Castle *Hautdesert* [in *Gawain*]" (199). And sometimes the examination of a text misfires. Discussing the Shakespearean allusion in Kinbote/Botkin's name (55), Dragunoiu cites Hamlet's curse "God's bodkin," where *bodkin* is an archaic diminutive of *body*, oddly neglecting to mention the much more famous and sinister "bodkin" ("dagger") in Hamlet's suicidal "To be or not to be" soliloquy. Kinbote glosses *Botkin* "stiletto" in the index to *Pale Fire*. In Dragunoiu's sharper moments, it is the metaphorical language of scholarship on chivalry, cosmopolitanism, and courtesy that effects the jointures created by historical and biographical sleuthing in other modes of literary scholarship. She only occasionally advances an overlooked source text or a claim about literary history. More usually, the book builds a transhistorical, translingual account, centering on Nabokov, of the literary stakes of courtesy, distinguished here from love, pity, and other "heteronomous passions" (13).

Notwithstanding this ostensible remit, chapters 1–5 perform little sustained reading of Nabokov's fiction. Dragunoiu's emphasis falls elsewhere. She excerpts the five scenes from their novels and connects them to one another and to worlds upon worlds of courtesy-discourse, from Chrétien de Troyes to Virginia Woolf. The decision against a thoroughgoing reading means Dragunoiu's treatment of the novels will appear dissatisfying if evaluated as ventured interpretations of artistic works. As she notes, Nabokov has linked the five scenes of extraordinary

courtesy to tragedy: Aleksandr Ivanovich Luzhin's suicide, the funeral of Helene's brother-in-law, Mira's murder at the Buchenwald concentration camp, Kinbote's alienation and implied suicide, and Lucette's suicide. If, as Dragunoiu maintains, the pointlessness of courtesy was the point for Nabokov, who possessed "an ethics of inutility" (4) and abhorred "the tyranny of consequentialist thinking" (134), it is still not clear how to weigh these fleeting scenes of gratuitous kindness within five novels differently darkened by death. *Pale Fire*, of the five the novel in which 'dark Nabokov' had freest rein, is particularly poorly explicated by an ethics of courtesy latent in a single, retrospective fever dream. A poignant moment whizzes by, and then it's back to assassins, paranoia, and suicide for pages and pages. *Pale Fire* emerges as a crucial test-case for the arguments of Dragunoiu's book. It is the novel to which she devotes the most attention. Chapter 5 begins to experiment with a reading, interwoven with corollary comments on *Invitation to a Beheading*, while retaining an intent focus on the same few peripheral interactions among the *dramatis personae* of *Pale Fire* advertised in chapter 1. Correlative with her 'lightening up' of the novel's moral atmosphere, Dragunoiu seems certain that Zembla is Kinbote's invention (19, 129, 144, 149) and that he is supposed to be a repulsive lunatic. Yet nothing in the novel confirms whether it is more like the earlier *Lolita* or more like the later *Ada* in this respect. Kinbote's grasp of reality, and with it the genre identity of the novel and the audience's expected moral response, remains deliciously indeterminate. In short, Dragunoiu succeeds in limning "Nabokov's pantheon of values" in the abstract but not in explaining, as a matter of morality *or* of literary style, why he always submerged his idealism in the swampwater of the appalling way people really treat one another. She cogently remarks on the novelist's "anti-didactic literary temperament" (113) but nevertheless approaches him as if a didactic author. Dragunoiu's couple of scenes of discourtesy in *Mary*, *Pale Fire*, and *Ada* do not suffice to work up a model of the overall strategy of ethical representation in any one of the novels. One could say (but Dragunoiu does not) that Nabokov depicts an inwardly felt ethical imperative smashed to bits on the shores of reality. Even in the climactic final scenes of *Invitation to a Beheading* (128), *Bend Sinister* (32), and *Transparent Things*, which are at first glance grist for Dragunoiu's mill, the protagonists Cincinnatus C., Adam Krug, and Hugh Person exercise full autonomy of the will only at the cost of their earthly existence. This bitter twist makes Nabokov's novels, one would have thought, quite un-Kantian.

In a sense the novel is not the ideal literary form for the scope of argument Dragunoiu prefers. The small aperture of individual sections means she fares best when considering tiny texts: epigraphs, scenes in novels bracketed as hypothetical, Shakespearean dialogue, the medium-length poem “Youth” (ch. 2), and short stories. The Nabokovian work for which she provides the most holistic interpretation is the 1943 story “That in Aleppo Once. . .,” which sits at the apex of chapter 4’s skillful triangulation between Nabokov, Pushkin, and Shakespeare via the figure of Othello. The three sides of this triangle can be penned in with permanent ink. A secondary focus of chapters 4–5, and an exception to my comment about length, is the *Gift*, Nabokov’s longest novel to that point in his career and the ‘lightest’ of all. While the *Gift* contributes its tesserae to Dragunoiu’s mosaic, her selection of moments from this exuberantly rich novel is deft. Because so much of it takes place in the dreamlike reality of an upstanding young writer in love, the *Gift* can approach Dragunoiu’s generalization that Nabokov’s fiction pivots around an insistence upon courtesy in the form of an aesthetic and ethical obligation to preserve honor (ch. 3), welcome the other (ch. 4), and withhold painful truths (ch. 5). Moreover, Nabokov’s last Russian novel brings us closer to the mundane circumstances of his Berlin life, strengthening Dragunoiu’s implication throughout her book that the ethics of certain moments in Nabokov’s novels were none other than Nabokov’s personal ethics. But its luminous warmth and its strong biographical resonance are precisely what make the *Gift* an outlier in Nabokov’s oeuvre.

Chapter 6 differs from what has come before. It braids together extended readings of Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* and Nabokov’s *Lolita* and *Invitation to a Beheading*. The coordinated categories of courtesy and temporality distinguish each of these works from the other two, but all three, according to Dragunoiu, assent to the radical Kantian premise that human morality is immune to time’s passage. Here Kant is invoked to best purpose. This chapter uses his philosophy to specify a different and more intriguing point of contact between Nabokov and courtesy. Instead of being the key to a safety deposit box containing one signed copy of his ethical system, courtesy in chapter 6 is a heuristic for isolating Nabokov’s imaginative response to Proust and to Nabokov’s own prior novels. Dragunoiu could not be on safer ground, for Proust has long been recognized as one of Nabokov’s most important precursors. Her disinclination to do source-studies spadework is not a liability here. Dragunoiu’s contribution to literary history in chapter 6 is to elucidate how Nabokov revises Proust’s memory-play while recoiling from the “all-encompassing” (181),

morally lethargic worldmaking of *À la recherche*. Proust's world is one; Nabokov's worlds always come in twos. Her contribution to literary criticism is the tentative but persuasive unearthing of a buried plotline in *Pnin*, a possible affair between the narrator and Mira.

Even after chapter 6, which makes allowances for Nabokov's 'darkness,' contradictions linger in Dragunoiu's attempt to extricate an autonomous will from the desperately compromised moral scenarios of his novels. The other prism, premodern romance, is a better fit. There, the collision between ethics and sludgy reality has already happened inside the fantastical worlds of Arthuriana. In the best romances—and these are the ones that interest Dragunoiu—the authors convey a Nabokovian self-irony about the implausibility of high-society refinement. A principal merit of the book under review is the extent to which Dragunoiu makes it seem natural to read Nabokov as one would read the *Chanson de Roland*. The romances enter the picture at the edges of the book, ceding the place of honor to Kant. The epilogue strives to prove *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a subtext of *Ada* by observing how much alliteration and green imagery there is in both. I wish Dragunoiu had restricted herself to revelling in the parallelisms, which are illuminating regardless of whether there exists a source relation. (If there is one Nabokov novel that reflects the direct influence of *Gawain*, the obvious choice would be *Invitation to a Beheading*, not *Ada*.) The juxtaposition is again brilliant but risky. Kant feels like a red herring here, and not just because Van makes the philosopher's name evoke an obscene term for the female anatomy. Neither *Ada* nor *Gawain* easily illustrates the Kantian axiom that "certain moral principles are categorical" (198). The novel and the poem go out of their way, in fact, to trouble readerly censure of their leading men, which Dragunoiu rehearses without confronting the difficulties. What the two texts have in common is that it is far from self-evident whether the moral principles enunciated in them can survive the messy experience of human being. Kant's example induces Dragunoiu to flatten out the ethical landscape of *Ada* and *Gawain*. She ignores the inconvenient circumstance that Van's discourteous rejection of the sexual advances of his half-sister Lucette averts a further act of incest. Was he supposed to succumb? Van's attempts to restrain himself with Lucette show his conscience kindling, not his cruelty crackling. Surely they make us like him more—or at least loathe him less. It is misleading to describe his reluctance to multiply incestuous liaisons as "a trite and cruel rejection of a young woman's offer of love" (208)! That his response drives Lucette to suicide can be no argument against it in Dragunoiu's terms, because consequences don't factor

into moral calculus for a committed Kantian. As for Gawain, Dragunoiu joins the majority opinion among medievalists in faulting him for withholding the green girdle from his provincial host in violation of the rules of the exchange-of-winnings game at Hautdesert. But, as many critics also recognize, the poem's denouement subjectivizes Gawain's self-blame, propelling the poem into uncharted moral territory. Bertilak and the court at Camelot both brush aside Gawain's serious-minded self-reproach. After all, he accepted the girdle thinking it might save his life. Meanwhile, there simply is no definite answer within the poem, certainly not a "proto-Kantian" one, to the question of his culpability. *Ada* and *Gawain* are eccentric choices of texts to put through the Kantian wringer. Ironically, given her affinity for Nabokov's lighter side, Dragunoiu glosses over the comic modality of the temptation scenes in *Ada* and *Gawain*.

The "asymmetry" (a favorite word of Dragunoiu's) between chapters 1–5 and chapter 6 + epilogue is itself suggestive. Dragunoiu concludes that *Lolita* and *Pnin*, "Nabokov's darkest novels" (159), complicate his generally Kantian sanguineness about the powers of the will. The Holocaust is held to have instigated this momentary loss of authorial nerve. With *Ada*, Nabokov's scruples snap back into place. "[A]s the memory of children burned in ovens receded from Nabokov's imagination, courtesy returned to its former place of supreme ethical and aesthetic importance" (193). This story is too neat. While the Holocaust certainly disturbed Nabokov and every other thinking being, *Lolita* and *Pnin* are not the first of his novels to place the possibility of moral action in a broken world into serious doubt. Nor, for that matter, would the Holocaust be likely to "ceas[e] to torment [the] imagination" (200) of a "memorious" (163) author such as Nabokov after 1957. The special carve-out for *Lolita* and *Pnin*, albeit habitual in Nabokov studies, is unconvincing.

Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Moral Acts proves its case that Nabokov had an ethical system whose "moral conservatism" (43) recalls the chivalric world of a text like *Aucassin et Nicolette*. However, whatever he may have believed he believed about the supremacy of creativity over contingency, he consistently did something else in his fiction than stage the triumph of ethical action over trivialities of circumstance and consequence. More attention to Nabokov's art could shed light on why so few of the acts represented in his fiction would qualify as moral in the court of Kant. The value of that connection lies less in surmise that Nabokov was a closet Kantian than in how well Kant's philosophy of the will clarifies Nabokov's defensive opposition to a long list

of intellectual bogeymen in biology, criticism, economics, and psychoanalysis. “Smith, Chernyshevsky, Darwin, Marx, and Freud” (10), whose very names are practically scare words in Nabokov, all delineated accounts of the human will trammled and chastened by forces beyond its control. Nabokov may be a recalcitrant witness in the court of Kant, but Kant turns out to be a star witness in the court of Nabokov. Dana Dragunoiu is to be commended for broaching this line of inquiry and advancing original strategies for cross-examining all parties concerned.

Eric Weiskott,
Boston College

