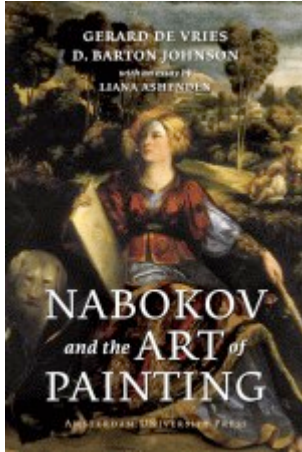


***Nabokov and the Art of Painting*, by Vries, Gerard de, D. Barton Johnson, and Liana Ashenden. Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2006. 224 pp., 25 color plates, 55 halftones. Appendices. Notes. Bibliography. Indices. \$59.**



Perhaps it is better to gaze at the painting before reading the caption. Perhaps not. Perhaps it is better not to read the caption at all. But one only discovers this once one has reached the end of the caption.

While captions accompanying paintings in museums and art galleries may not always be indispensable, *Nabokov and the Art of Painting*, by Gerard de Vries and D. Barton Johnson, with an essay by Liana Ashenden, turns out to be, for those interested in Nabokov (and in art), exactly that. Like a tapestry it weaves the themes, images and autobiographical instances in Nabokov's *oeuvre*, connecting them to real paintings, or imagined hybrid ones, and the elements in these, which may further lead to other origins.

As the scholars make clear throughout the study, the aforementioned threads extend from all of Nabokov's passages, while the reader may be fooled into thinking that the author is indulging in flights of fancy and lulling on the pleasure of aesthetic description. As Richard Rorty quite rightly points out,¹ Nabokov distracts the reader with passing beauty and humorous talk, dropping her at the end of the tale in the self-realisation that the important points were nearly missed. Liana Ashenden identifies this very same reader (minus the final enlightenment) in the form of Demon Veen in *Ada* – in the final chapter of the study, her essay on the relation between the novel and Hieronymus Bosch's works - who thinks that *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (c.1503-10) is solely for the benefit of the eye, and not the soul (159-61).

De Vries, Johnson and Ashenden are equally effective and efficient in making

their mark on the reader, but also perfectly sparse. The volume of 223 pages (including some lovely monochrome images and colour illustrations) is divided into chapters centring around a handful of Nabokov's novels (*Laughter in the Dark*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Lolita*, *Pale Fire* and *Invitation of a Small Creature*) while also referencing his other works, an introductory chapter on the interplay between the two arts in Nabokov's life and creation, and two others focusing on Leonardo da Vinci and Bosch. Later appendixes present a book-by-book analysis of references to paintings and a list of relevant artists. Pedantic but important information such as the nationality of the artists alluded to, the number of times colours are mentioned in a novel, and the chromaesthetic significance of the V and S of the narrator and protagonist in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (red + blue = violet (40-41)) only serve to evidence the importance of the relation, and hopefully satisfy Nabokov's edicts of curiosity, precision and dispelling ignorance. The study's minute concentration on colour is connected to Nabokov's gift of synaesthesia, which neatly ties up the way his prose affects, quite possibly, all the five senses. This the book explores with 17th century still lives which appear in *Laughter in the Dark* and, like everything in Nabokov's art, seem to join the sensory repercussions of images to their allegorical and therefore moral meaning (34-36). The scholars, however, are also careful about making solid claims on the writer's intentions in terms of expressing moral subtexts (28).

The book's strengths are partly Nabokov's. While it gives suggestions that clear the Antiterrean fog, averting the reader's eyes from Ada's and Van's unbridled love and Humbert Humbert's seemingly legitimate charm, it is also perfectly precise (as mentioned above), resourcing exhaustively from Nabokovian and on-Nabokov criticism, history of art and natural history. The connections the writers make are very plausible, to the point of feeling almost forehead-smackingly obvious, but the book is also far from didactic.

Its tour de force is one of its centrepieces, the latter in more ways than one – the regard of the influence of Leonardo da Vinci on Nabokov. Da Vinci's paintings, and the *Last Supper* (1498) in particular, are identified as central to Nabokov's work from the very beginning – “[it], or its shadow, leaves its mark in almost all his works of fiction” (19).

De Vries and Johnson draw the threads, at times gossamer-thin in their “delicate allusions” (89), between Nabokov's works and Leonardo's masterpiece.

Clearly defined, as they expound, are the echoes of the mural in the wonderful *Pnin*, and the protagonist's demonstrations of Russian gestures for Professor Clements's visual exploration of this human form of expression (57). Ada also punctuates her life with gestures, especially in moments of distress. Nabokov's interest in gestures foreshadowed a book on the subject which never materialised.

These connections are traceable, but the path to find them is endowed with the scholars' generosity, reflecting, it seems, *Pnin*'s own, which also leaves room for the reader to draw her own eclectic dot-to-dot between painting and Nabokovian creation. This is probably what makes *Nabokov and the Art of Painting*, as mentioned above, so efficient.

The *Last Supper* may also be central to Nabokov's art because it depicts this generosity, or this grace, of something forgotten, ignored, overlooked and later revisited (connected to *vidére*, to see), the oversight forgiven. In its material form the work is the definition that Nabokov gave to art: beauty plus pity, because beauty must die. The *Last Supper* is disappearing beauty. Contrary to this philosophical notion there is also the metaphysical one of infinity. In *Ada Van* refutes the existence of future, and claims that all endings are banal. This is true, of course. Like beauty we are all fated to just one ending. Yet, as the analysis points out, Nabokov muses that every "work of art is invariably the creation of a new world" (146) – all art is a new beginning. The study discloses that some paintings described in Nabokov's stories are either imaginary amalgams of other existing ones, or more than one version of it is in existence. Ada's combining of orchids suggests that this 'composition on the theme' can be done *ad infinitum*, and art constantly shows that a subject can never be exhausted. These are, therefore, all new beginnings, with no endings.

Given that a picture is a frozen moment in time (the study also explores the influence of photography on Nabokov) it too does not have an ending. The *Last Supper* is the foreshadowing of an ending, which is, however, not really one.

Like two mirrors placed opposite each other in the lobby of a New York skyscraper, like waves lapping on the shore, the image is the same, but never altogether the same. Reflection is a hugely important presence in Nabokov's work. Life imitating art, literature imitating art, imagined universes, anagrams, the very existence of this study, which points to one of the most notable of these instances of reflection: the beautiful portrait of Sebastian Knight (42). The variations on the theme of reflection here seem almost never-ending, the passage, such a perfect combination

of literature and art that the entanglement of intellectual and physical pleasure is almost disorientating. The portrait is the depiction of the reflection of the narrator's brother, as is the novel, of course. The portrait is also so delicately connected to the denouement of the mystery of Sebastian's downfall: the water-spider which the narrator (like the writer) conjures up on Nina's Japanese neck to trick her (like the author tricks the reader) to reveal her true self, which she almost got away with.

Other threads in the analysis are also those of heritage and history. The threads have been created already by Nabokov but the scholars sprinkle them with the gold dust of Titian's *Danae and the Shower of Gold* (1553), which they connect to Mademoiselle Condor (122), or the fluorescent light of the fireflies at Ardis Hall, both appearances in *Ada*, bringing them out of the shadows. By his many allusions to Russian writers, Nabokov is clearly stating who his forefathers are. The connection is also pictorial, as the book points out, the most recurrent and flamboyant being, again in *Ada*, Mikhail Vrubel's tessellated representations of the demon from Lermontov's eponymous poem, which the equally eponymous Demon Veen mirrors in physical appearance and heartbreaking meanderings.

Another history, or rather story, is Vladimir Nabokov's own. Amongst others the book shines the light on the influence of specifically Russian art, the most consistent example being the World of Art (*Mir iskusstva*) group, which, in its endeavour to marry the visual and literal arts, forms an ideal triptych with Nabokov's work and this study. The influence of the World of Art is also close to young Nabokov's senses as the family home was enriched with some works by members of the movement, and, furthermore, it introduced the graphic arts of Aubrey Beardsley to the young aspiring artist. The influence of the English illustrator is felt most of all in *Lolita*, and the book deals with this in the slightly abrupt chapter dedicated to the controversial novel. Abrupt in this sense means unnecessarily short, but perhaps the best is to say as little as possible about something which has already created so much outcry.

The third and final thread here is the microcosm of the history of Western art represented by Victor's very fast progression through his artistic pupilage in *Pnin* (53). The inevitable overlapping of De Vries and Johnson's book with Nabokov's works, the identifying of Russian pre-soviet art as an influence on the author's creations places this strand, subsection, *Unterart* firmly within the history of art. An

art which seems to be undervalued in current Western European and North American scholarship (although not in London auction houses) is given its due prominence.

Pnin presents the history of Western art contained in the nutshell of one young life, one childhood. Microcosms, parallel universes, imaginary worlds etc. are a recurring theme in Nabokov's literature (e.g. Antiterra in *Ada*, Zembla in *Pale Fire*). These, as Liana Ashenden quite rightly demonstrates in her contribution, mirror this very own earth, however horrific, ridiculous or otherworldly those representations may be. After all, what else is there? As the interplay of nature and creativity becomes literature and painting, the world becomes the effect of experience on a single life,ⁱⁱ and everything is contained in the nutshell of the mind, which is full rather than cracked and empty – all these ideas are lucidly presented in the study.

Like a drop of dew sliding off an orchid, *Nabokov and the Art of Painting* gathers the fragrance from that which it covers and reflects. It refreshes, at the same time magnifying details which may have been glimpsed before but had been overwhelmed by the allure of the flower, and illuminates fibres never before guessed at. It takes rereading, and it enriches the rereading of Nabokov, as well as extracting new meaning from paintings which may have become trite from overexposure. And of course, neither literature nor art are divorced from the individual life. *Nabokov and the Art of Painting* holds up the mind to the light to render visible one's imagination watermarked by Nabokov's phenomenal language.

*Eva Montenegro Oddo,
London*

ⁱ Rorty, Richard, *Introduction to Nabokov, Vladimir, Pale Fire*, Everyman's Library: London, 1992,

pp. ix-x, xviii.

ⁱⁱ Brian Boyd, *Afterword to Nabokov, Vladimir, Ada or Ardor*, Penguin: London, 2000, pp. 494-95.