Philosophy and Literature

RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF TARAS, see Darko Sutin, "The Yamabushi (As Presupposed in Taras)," Communications from the International Bruchi Society (1991), pp. 40ff.


10. On this extreme subjectivism negating subjectivity see Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 48ff., and esp. n. 90 on p. 590. Derrida's "philosophy which supposedly negates subjectivity, self-presentation, and full presence and which sees thought as perennially dispersed and 'deferred' in a field of infinite substitutions also exalts the indefinite freedom of play, and presents itself as liberating doctrine. Engagement and extreme subjectivism come together here in a notion of free play, which in its anthropism is antipodal to Schiller's."


Simon Stowy

THE RETURN OF CHARLES KINBOKE: NABOKOV ON RORTY

In 1996, Vladimir Nabokov, an author who continually claimed that "work of art has no value whatsoever to society," paradoxically found himself at the center of a debate between Alexander Nehamas and Richard Rorty over the proper "political" interpretation of Pale Fire. The background to this dispute—which also involved such luminaries as Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty—concerned the extent to which it might plausibly be claimed that immersing oneself in the works of "Great Authors" might serve to make one a better citizen of a democratic polity. Rorty, for the record, argued that it would; Nehamas that it would not. Setting the broader debate aside, this article will focus on Richard Rorty's contribution to the discussion—a contribution made largely through his reading of Vladimir Nabokov's later American novels. It will argue that Rorty's reading of Nabokov provides us with a clear illustration of both the contribution that literature can make to the field of political theory, and the costs of such a contribution to an author's texts. In addition it will suggest that rereading Rorty on Nabokov reveals something very interesting and unexpected about the Rorty-Nabokov relationship, something that forces us to examine in a new light Nabokov's strangely prophetic claim that: "one day a reappraiser will come and declare that, far from having been a frivolous firebird, I was a rigid moralist kicking sin, cutting stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and the cruel—and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent and pride" (SO, p.193).

Even the briefest description of Rorty's work—work which Bernard Williams once famously characterized as "deeply shallow"—should perhaps be enough to alert the careful reader to the suggestion that...
through the civil and women's rights movements. Central to these freedoms, Rorty argues, is the liberty to pursue one's own private obsessions, to create oneself and thereby to become "what one is" in a Nietzschean sense, free from the interference of others. In this respect, Rorty draws a firm distinction between the public and private realms, arguing that certain books, such as "Uncle Tom's Cabin" or Engels's "The Condition of the Working Class in England" are useful for reducing cruelty in the former, and others, such as "Lolita" or "Pulp Fiction," are useful for reducing cruelty in the latter by showing us the dangers of a certain sort of blindness which comes from excessive pursuit of our own obsessions.

Obsession is, of course, a recurrent theme in Nabokov's work, be it the Humbertian lust for Lolita, the Kinbozero passion for John Shade's texts, or Martin Eden's ultimate fatal desire to impress Sotia in "Glory." Nabokov himself pursued certain activities-most obviously lipotropics-with an almost obsessive zeal, and it is undoubtedly a feature of Nabokov's work that there exists a strange relationship between the author and his characters. This is not to say, of course, that one may legitimately search Nabokov's biography for evidence of young girls, nymphic or otherwise, or even that we should embrace John Updike's assertion that Ada is "in a dimension or two, Nabokov's wife." Rather I mean to suggest that despite Nabokov's assertion that what "ideas can be traced in my novels belong to the characters therein and may be deliberately flawed" (SO, p. 147), many of his characters share his obsessions, though often in distorted forms. Just as Nabokov's dismissal of the "Viennese delegation" actually masked a detailed understanding of the works of Freud, Nabokov's dismissal of the suggestion that his characters in any way reflect his beliefs may actually mask the extent to which his characters can be said to be working through themes close to the author's heart. It is in this light, perhaps, that we might best view the Rorty-Nabokov relationship, for it is clear that the former shares much of the latter's concerns.

It is probably no coincidence that Richard Rorty's political values-values which he labels "Postmodernist bourgeois liberalism"—should be closely paralleled by Nabokov's own profession of his political outlook. "Since my youth," wrote Nabokov: "... my political creed has remained as bleak and as changeless as old gray rock. It is classical to the point of triteness. Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of art. The social or economic structure of the ideal state is of little concern to me. My desires are modest ... No torture and no executions" (SO, pp. 34-35). Much like Rorty, Nabokov's political creed
was underpinned by a concern with cruelty. Describing himself as a "mild old gentleman who loathes cruelty" (SO, p. 19), Nabokov readily identified himself as "an old fashioned liberal" (SO, p. 96). Indeed, those novels which lend themselves most readily to "political" readings—Invitation to a Beheading and Bend Sinister—novels which even Nabokov was prepared to admit bridged the "aesthetic distance" between his life and the political events surrounding it, are, in a sense, concerned with the institutionalized cruelty of the Soviet and Nazi regimes (SO, p. 156). In addition, Rotty and Nabokov share a distinctly pro-American outlook. Indeed, in a passage which could have been lifted from Rotty's recent, and highly controversial work, Achieving Our Country, Nabokov declared: "Rightly or wrongly, I am not one of those perfectionists who by dint of hyper-criticizing America find themselves wallowing in the same muddy camp with indigenous rascals and envious foreign observers. My admiration for this adopted country of mine can easily survive the jibes and flaws that, indeed, are nothing in comparison to the abyss of evil in the history of Russia" (SO, p. 131).

Like Rotty, however, Nabokov's patriotism was not without its critical edge—his commitment to ending cruelty made him firmly anti-segregationist even as he supported the war in Vietnam (SO, p. 98).

It is, however, not only in the political realm that Rotty and Nabokov appear to share similar perspectives. Their philosophical commitments—or lack thereof—seem remarkably alike. In much the same way that Rotty rejects the philosophical underpinnings of the representative theory of truth, Nabokov, in response to an interviewer's question about "everyday reality," asserted that "the very term 'everyday reality' is utterly static since it presupposes a situation that is permanently observable, essentially objective, and universally known. I suspect that you have invented that expert on 'everyday reality.' Neither exists" (SO, p. 94). Similarly, although Nabokov denied the influence of Wittgenstein (and just about everybody else) upon his work, it is clear that he, like Rotty, dealt with what might be considered Wittgensteinian themes. In Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein describes the experience of being troubled by an apparently insolvable philosophical problem as being somewhat akin to being stuck inside a room because one is unable to turn around and see the door? Nabokov's central protagonists in both Look At The Horses! and The Defense suffer from similar afflictions. In The Defense, for example, Nabokov describes Lushin's mental breakdown in suitable Wittgensteinian terms: "His vision became darker and darker and in relation to every vague object in the hall he stood in check. He had to escape; he moved, the whole of his fat body shaking, and was completely unable to imagine what people did in order to get out of a room—and yet there should be a simple method." Indeed, one cannot perhaps think of another author for whose work the Wittgensteinian term "language games" is a more appropriate description. Beyond Wittgenstein, both Rotty and Nabokov seem to share an affinity for the ideas set out in the work of Thomas Kuhn. Nabokov seemed to anticipate Kuhn's theory of "paradigm shifts" in The Gift when Fyodor asserts that "any genuinely new trend is like a Knight's move, a change of shadows, a shift that displaces the mirror," and more obviously in Bend Sinister where Krug observes: "The nearest star is Alpha Centauri. The sun is about 93 millions of miles away. Our solar system emerged from a spiral nebula... We can easily imagine in 3000 A.D. sneering at our naive nonsense and replacing it by some nonsense of their own." Not least among the philosophical similarities between Rotty and Nabokov's work is, however, the emphasis that they both place on the role of human agency in creating the worlds in which we live. Indeed, Baroness Bredow's instructions to her great-nephew Vadim Vadinovich might serve as a summary of both Nabokov's and Rotty's philosophical position. "Play!" she said, "Invent the world! Invent reality."

Given the apparent similarities between the two men's work, it is perhaps unsurprising that they have garnered similar reviews from critics. Both have been accused of being frivolous, overly dismissive of other writers, and too playful to be taken seriously. It is, however, from David Hall's characterization of Richard Rotty as the "Cheshire Cat" of contemporary thought that we observe our first real clue as to the best means of conceptualizing the Rotty-Nabokov relationship. Nabokov's own interest in Lewis Carroll's stories—stretching from his famous Russian translation of Alice in Wonderland, to the Red King motif from Alice Through the Looking Glass—which, according to Brian Boyd, illuminates Charles Xavier Veslav's escape from Zembla—suggests that we should not take Hall's characterization of Rotty too lightly. Indeed, when Rotty makes the claim which enrages him in the debate discussed at the outset of this article—that "novels rather than moral treatises are the most useful vehicles of moral education"—we should perhaps consider this view, so opposed to everything Nabokov has to say about the novel, a possible dead-end created by Nabokov to frustrate those who would seek, as I have done, to make one character "the author's stooge" (SO, p. 41). I am suggesting here, of course, that
Richard Rorty's view of the relationship between literature and democracy, the claim that somehow reading makes us better citizens, is largely in keeping with Nabokov's approach to characterization: there are enough similarities between Nabokov and Rorty to tempt us into reading the latter's book, but the moment that we do so, our reading comes to an abrupt halt.

Once we begin to see the Rorty-Nabokov relationship from this perspective it seems so obvious that—in true Nabokovian fashion—we wonder why we did not notice it before. The clues were certainly there from the beginning, such as Nabokov's penchant for the alliterative name—Van Veen, Vadim Vadimovich, Humbert Humbert—and his willingness to invent authors and critics—Pierre Delalande, Sebastian Knight, and John Shade. At least one critic has argued, moreover, that there exists a Nabokovian precedent for an author inventing his own critic (Boyd, p. 445). In addition, the author who once described himself as "a stand-in for Hitchcock" was certainly not shy about appearing in his own texts: be it a cameo in the translation of King, Quam, Knave; a full-blown speaking part in Pins; the role of a deity in Bend Sinister; or a butterfly hunter in his screenplay for Lolita. Against this background, Vladimir Nabokov's appearance in the works of Richard Rorty might make more sense if we inverted the author-subject relationship. Looking more closely, we begin to see further clues. Rorty is not just any old Nabokovian character, but rather quite a specific one. A quick glance at Rorty's recommended approach to literary criticism should help us identify which one. "The critic," writes Rorty, "asks neither the author nor the text about their intention but simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his purpose. He makes the text refer to whatever is relevant to that purpose. He does this by imposing a vocabulary . . . on the text which may have nothing to do with any vocabulary used by the text or its author."7 Similarly, there are perhaps few literary critics other than Kinbote himself who would share Rorty's belief that "Kinbote is absolutely right when he concludes his foreword to 'Pale Fire' by saying 'Without my notes Shade's text simply has no reality at all!'" (QS, p. 164). Charles Kinbote, Charles Xavier Vsefas, Vsefas Botkin, the man who promised at the end of his commentary to "Pale Fire": "I shall continue to exist. I may assume other disguises, other forms, but I shall try to exist. I may turn up on another campus . . ." has, it seems, lived up to his promise. Final evidence for this claim may be provided by the fact that Kinbote has been unable to leave his most successful work alone. The 1992 Everyman's Library edition of Pale Fire contained an introduction by a certain Richard Rorty which presumed: "... to describe the reader's reactions in the course of a first reading of the book." With a modesty typical of Kinbote, however, Rorty suggested that the "... first time reader may wish to postpone the Introduction until he or she has finished the Index." What is, however, typically Kinbootean about this claim, and indeed, about the rest of Rorty's introduction is the suggestion that its interpretation should be read and that it will, furthermore, give the definitive account of the text.

The return of Charles Xavier Vsefas poses, however, a number of Nabokovian problems. More prosaic issues such as chronology and life after death are obviously of little consequence for a writer who did not believe in time or reality, or whose central characters in The Eye and Invitation to a Beheading both managed to survive their own deaths without any undue side-effects. What should concern us, however, the question of why Nabokov has "chosen" Charles Kinbote to be his champion in this, his first serious foray into the world of political theory. In addition we might also ask what it is that Kinbote has to offer us as political theorists. In a suitably Nabokovian fashion, the answer to both of these questions may lie in the answer to a third and much more compelling puzzle: the question of why it is that Richard Rorty, a theorist who appears to advocate such a radical approach to textual interpretation, ends up offering such conservative interpretations of the works he utilizes for his political project. They are interpretations which rely on problematic (for Rorty at least) tropes such as authorial intent and intrinsic textual meaning.7 The puzzle is particularly perplexing because Rorty has consistently been praised as an excellent reader. Leona Toker notes that in his reading of Lolita:

Rorty puts literary critics to shame by connecting the scattered references to Dolly's dead little brother with the existence to happy normal child Ann Bird's little brother at home. He shows the incoherence with which Humbert's wake the kennel barber is also evinced by ourselves if, preoccupied with other things, we do not understand that Charlotte really mourned the loss of her younger child and that, for Dolly, the inaccessible normal family life would come to be represented not only by Ann's healthy pink dad but also by the little brother.6 To solve this puzzle—its more compelling perhaps than the exact location of the Zemblan crown jewels—we must return ever so briefly to the debate with which this article opened.
The ease with which feminists, cultural materialists, and others have introduced politics into the study of literature has, it seems, fooled a number of political theorists into believing that literature can be introduced into political analysis equally unproblematically. Consequently, attempts to subsume or negate Jacques Derrida's claim that there can be "no democracy without literature; no literature without democracy," have generally proved unconvINCING. Martha Nussbaum, for example, claims that reading will make us better citizens by helping us to develop the capacity of "Tancy," by which she appears to mean the capacity to identify with others. In making this claim, she adopts a Nussbaum's Critical approach to the text, suggesting that everything she has to say about Derrida's *Hard Times* is in the book and that if we are unfortunate enough not to understand the text on our own, a process of communal "reflective equilibrium" will eventually reveal its true meaning. Whether or not one accepts her critical approach, Nussbaum's claims appear to be undermined by the lack of faith that she displays in her own argument. Instead of simply assigning texts to students and sitting back to watch as democracy flourishes, Nussbaum feels obliged to point out the moral lessons we should take from the texts that she assigns. In this respect, her work seems to be an example of individual reader response theory universalized for the masses. Equally problematically, Nussbaum fails to define the term "good citizen," and nowhere sets out a convincing account of the mechanism by which this capacity to empathize is engendered. Indeed, even if it could be shown that reading did engender the capacity to see the world from another's point of view, there is little to suggest that this would, in any way, improve the democratic process. There are plenty of examples of exquisitely sensitive torturers, discerning sadists, perceptive tormentors—many of whom were excellent readers as well," noted Alexander Nehamas. "To be able truly to see the world from another's point of view may be the greatest weapon one can wield in a war against another" (Nehamas, p. 45).

Apparently unencumbered by beliefs about "intrinsic textual meaning," and "authorial intent," Richard Rorty would appear free to offer an innovative and interesting approach to the problem of democracy and literature. Literature, he states, is the original source of political thought. However, a number of scholars have criticized Rorty's views, pointing out that his approach is not entirely clear and that there are significant differences between his views and those of other literary theorists. For example, some critics have argued that Rorty's views are too deterministic and fail to take into account the diversity of human experience. Others have suggested that his emphasis on the role of literature in political thought is too narrow and doesn't adequately address the role of other forms of cultural production in shaping political thought. Despite these criticisms, Rorty's views have been influential and continue to be discussed in discussions of the relationship between literature and politics.
the secret of liberalism’s lack of foundations, and those—the majority—
who should be encouraged to continue to believe in quaint ideas such
as Truth and metaphysical certainty. “In an ideal liberal world,” Rory
tells, “the intellectuals would still be irascible, although non-intellectu-
als would not” (GJ, p. 87). Whether or not this—which is at best a
restriction of information to, and at worst, a duping of the masses—
constitutes a form of cruelty is of course, a question for another paper.38
What this willingness to be less-than-honest in his approach to the
population at large does explain, however, is the impetus behind
Rory’s apparently non-ironic readings of literary texts.

As befits his belief in the public-private split, Rory draws a distinction
between his philosophical and his political work, with his work on
literature falling into the latter category. His job here is to create the
liberal utopia which he so desires by altering the shape of the
interpreting community. This is to be achieved by offering interesting, though often
didactic interpretations of exciting texts. As far as the hierarchial split
between intellectuals and non-intellectuals is concerned, Rory offers an
apparently non-ironic reading of the text to both. For non-intellec-
tuals, suggesting that his reading of Lolita is simply the “proper” reading
of the book might convince them to think about the type of cruelty
Rory claims that the book illustrates, and indeed, to amend their
behavior accordingly. For intellectuals, the process will be much the
same but with the tropes of “authorial intent” and “intrinsical textual
meaning” remaining simply as ladders which can be kicked away from
the interpretive process. In addition, however, intellectuals in Rory’s
postmodernist liberal utopia can also utilize his interpretive schema as
a pedagogical tool. Indeed, pedagogy would appear to be one of the
central roles for liberal theorists in Rory’s liberal society. Showing
perhaps shades of his former self, Rory asserts “we have to tempt young
adults into our classrooms before we can start bending their flexible
young minds to our political purposes.”39 Literature is in this respect
bait, simply a means of luring people into a theoretical political
discussion about the society in which they live. Political theory’s need
for this bait might be best explained by noting that few would choose to
read Rawls, or even perhaps Rory, when they could be reading
Nabokov.

It appears then that we have an explanation for the apparent tension
in Rory’s thought between his private philosophical views and his
public commitments, but it does not explain Kinbote’s role in all of
this, nor why I have chosen to characterize Rory as Kinbote returned.

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Kinbote is, I would suggest, an ideal role model for political theorists
seeking to incorporate literature into their methodological toolkit.
Rory, like Kinbote, reads something into the text for a particular
purpose, all the while pretending that it is the text which is speaking. It
is for this reason that he asserts that his introduction to Pale Fire should
be read—either before or after the text—because like Kinbote he
wishes to impose his interpretation onto another’s work of art. In this
way he seeks to shape the reader’s response, and with it, the politics of
the interpretive community in which that reader exists. Unlike literary
critics whose job it might be to help us experience the “tense single
between the shoulder blades” that Nabokov claims comes with an
intriguing insight into the text, rearranging texts for a specific end is
simply part of what political theorists do. In this respect, the role of a
political theorist is perhaps best summarized by another Nabokovian
figure: to be a political theorist, it might be argued, one must be an
artist and a madman. Indeed, so enamoured is this Rory-Rory of his
noble liberal that he seems blind to the cruelty of his own obsessions.
Claiming all the while to respect individual choice and autonomy, Rory
seeks surreptitiously to shape the decisions of freely choosing individu-
als, to say nothing, of course, of his cruelty to another artist’s text. It
is then perhaps fitting that when Nabokov, an author who abhorred “the
literature of social intent” and didacticism in all its forms, should finally
become involved in a debate with political implications, two of his least
sympathetic characters—Humbert Humbert and Charles Kinbote—
should provide his entry into the fray. In this respect his own position
on his unsolicited involvement in a debate over politics should be
clear—something which belies Charles Kinbote’s observation that “...for better or for worse, it is the commentator who has the last word”

(PP, p. 29).

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A version of this essay was first presented at the Vladimir Nabokov panel at the 1998 American
Literature Association Conference in San Diego. It was written with the assistance of a Fellowship
in the Humanities from the University of California at Berkeley. The author wishes to thank
Professor Shannon Samson, Christine Schuch, and Mark Vail for their comments upon earlier
drafts.
28. It might be noted in passing, however, that the remarkably well-read Rorty fails to mention that Nabokov deals with just such a situation in Laughter in the Dark, where Margot and Rex’s tortue of the blind Alisher is based upon a disparity in information available to the powerful and to the powerless.