

irrepressible canine heroes, will try to find “the words to say it”—to say the relations between spirit and brute; between marrying a prostitute and prostituting a marriage; between human sexuality and what Forcione regards as “one of the darkest pronouncements” (p. 110) of Cervantes’s dark narrative: that “flesh has gone to flesh.”

Laurie Clancy

*THE NOVELS OF VLADIMIR NABOKOV*

New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1984. Pp. viii, 177

Reviewed by Charles Stanley Ross

Nabokov’s fiction focuses not on obsessions so much as a range of psychological states that criticism, despite its swelling volume, has not distinguished fully or described precisely. Take the short story “Lik” (1939). Its poetic final cause is to imitate the sensation felt by a neurotic actor engulfed by his own stage performance. Nabokov manages to make the reader feel how the presence of a terrifying derelict suffocates Lik even as the reader, to fully experience Lik’s panic, must understand that his fear is groundless, as if all the events occurred in a play. Nabokov utilizes various means to simultaneously stimulate affective and intellectual responses, and if the psychological state he wished to represent is distasteful, it is not surprising that some of his artistic means, stripped from the context of their purpose, seem perverse. Word games, strong opinions, the seeming intrusion of the author on his created world irritate those who fail to perceive that the manner of expression contributes directly to the final effect sought.

In *The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*, Laurie Clancy has felt on his own pulse, even if he has not always defined precisely, the unifying force of *Invitation to a Beheading*, *The Gift*, *Lolita*, *Ada*, and *Look at the Harlequins!*. As a result, he says, on his last page, “the faults vanish into relative insignificance.” About Nabokov’s other ten novels, however, he has some harsh things to say, though he is essentially silent about the short stories, poems, autobiography, and scholarship. Clancy derides critics who praise everything, calling them dwarfs for whom Nabokov’s cloak is too large, while he himself is ready to find fault, perhaps readier than is consonant with his concluding words. Nabokov’s satire, especially, makes him (and others) see red. Using his experience as a novelist to announce what fails, what succeeds, he boldly charges the matador. The problem is that we are never convinced that he is not charging a cape flung deliberately before him. Often he seems blind to Nabokov’s feints because he has not found their purpose, the pattern the artist makes in the air.

As a result, he spends much time retailing objections to Nabokov’s personality, saying that Nabokov scorned homosexuals (p. 10); poured his petty hates into his work; was egotistic (p. 39); wrote bad books (“a great deal of *Despair* is not very complex at all but merely confused,” [p. 601]); and mocked physical deformity. Ellen Pifer, in *Nabokov and the Novel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, (1980), demolished the latter objection simply by showing that Nabokov’s characters are squeamish, not Nabokov. (The 1984 publication date of Clancy’s study is deceptive; the bibliography essentially stops at 1978.)

Clancy tends to excuse the rubble of word games, artistic self-consciousness, and even authorial prejudice when they are filtered through a narrator such as Humbert or Van Veen whose conventional character permits eccentricity, but he is not willing to permit these predilections and opinions when the only sanction for them is the more or less ghostly authorial presence, vaguely identified with Nabokov, that fills the three masterpieces, *Bend Sinister*, *Pnin*, *Pale Fire*, that he regards, along with everything from *Mary to Despair*, as failures. He argues ad hominem in discussing *Pale Fire*, berating Nabokov for his inability, first, to decide whether Kinbote should be a boring pedant or a brilliant visionary; second, to divorce his character’s voice completely from his own. *Pale Fire*, the great modern version of pastoral poetry, Nabokov’s poetic allegory of the afterlife, he finds to be confused, contradictory, and ambiguous. Again, authorial self-consciousness ruins *Bend Sinister*, but, I submit, only because Clancy has not found the key to the book’s perfect blend of sensuous style and political satire. The pattern of angled pilasters that begins in chapter one, explains the novel’s title, and renders entirely appropriate the author’s appearance at book’s end remains “irritatingly obscure” to him.

Under his reading lamp, *Lolita* is a portrait of human, humane love. (Humbert, the pervert and true lover!—Trilling, who first voiced this opinion, was under the influence of De Rougemont's study of Tristan at the time). But we are not forced to defend Humbert's claim that he loves Lolita, or to deny it; the novel is a comical tragedy, and neither approval nor condemnation matter.

Not quite the study of the master theme of imaginative independence that it claims to be, this sometimes self-contradictory book tends to promote the notion that Nabokov's work is inaccessible, that his theories about art are not those of any sane reader, and that the proper attitude toward his achievement is hateful respect. A more concentrated attempt to sketch the novelist about whom we know precious little or to separate the author from his work—for this is not a psychoanalytic study—would have prevented objections that much recent criticism, based on close reading of the full oeuvre, finds indeed insignificant.

Stephen K. Land

*PARADOX AND POLARITY IN THE FICTION OF JOSEPH CONRAD*

New York and London: St. Martin's Press and Macmillan, 1984. Pp. 311

Reviewed by Camille R. La Bossière

*Paradox and Polarity in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad* examines the syntax governing the plots and character relationships in all of the novels and most of the short stories, in search of a single principle or law underlying the Conradian vision of the world and its artistic expression. Dr. Land discovers such a "fundamental constant" in the vaguely Schopenhauerian paradox that "purposive action is self-nullifying" (p. 2). Taking the works after the apprenticeship of *Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, and the short stories of 1896 in their order of composition, he finds the development of this paradox in four stages: "The early [dreamily idealistic] heroes of the period from Wait [*The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*] to Whalley [*The End of the Tether*] embody the paradox that purposive action is self-defeating. Their successors in the second phase, the 'political' heroes, Nostromo, Verloc [*The Secret Agent*] and Razumov [*Under Western Eyes*], study the case of the man who, for largely selfish reasons, attempts to avoid purposive action by steering a neutral but ultimately untenable course between the conflicts which occupy his fellow men. The heroes of the third phase [*Chance*, the short stories of 1910-11, *Victory*, the short stories of 1912-14, and *The Shadow-Line*], amongst whom Heyst is preeminent, are men who withdraw from the world, not for reasons of self-aggrandisement or self-preservation, but in a spirit of idealistic, philosophical detachment and rejection" (p. 122). The withdrawal of these "eremites" proves a vain stratagem; and *The Arrow of Gold*, *The Rescue*, and *The Rover*, works of the final phase, continue the conceptual architecture of the third, but with this significant development: here, Conrad gives a stronger place to his heroines.

Quite logically, in view of its method, Dr. Land's study is well designed to contribute to an understanding of the works of Conrad's final decade. The notion, for example, that "the development of the rescue motif . . . has its roots in the heroines of the political stories" (p. 177) is certainly instructive, while the argument that *Chance* represents one of Conrad's "most carefully crafted structural symmetries" (p. 190) proposes a useful corrective to the conventional achievement-and-decline reading of the oeuvre. Dr. Land's attention to paradox and polarity, "the mirror effect" in the tales (p. 20), also illuminates the genesis of allegory in *Victory* and sheds new light on Conrad's difficulties in completing *The Rescue*. The thesis that the hero-heroine relationship in *The Rescue* required a plot of the kind Conrad was not equipped to construct in his early years is as refreshing as it is pragmatic.

There is yet another virtue in this study's method: its pedagogical soundness. At no time is the reader made uncertain of the direction taken. The book's introduction makes plain, in point form, what its business will be, and that business is faithfully transacted, with a review to recall the salient points made. There is no playing here, no ambiguity, but the serious work