

Savage: On Richard Rorty's Reading of Vladimir Nabokov.

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Liberal Ironists and the "Gaudily Painted Savage": On Richard Rorty's Reading of Vladimir Nabokov

Leona Toker

Nabokov Studies

International Vladimir Nabokov Society and Davidson College

Volume 1, 1994

pp. 195-206

10.1353/nab.2011.0082

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Nabokov Studies, 1 (1994), 195-206. LEONA TOKER (Jerusalem, Israel) LIBERAL IRONISTS AND THE "GAUDILY PAINTED SAVAGE": ON RICHARD RORTY'S READING OF VLADIMIR NABOKOV Over and over again, my mind has made colossal efforts to distinguish the faintest of personal glimmers in the impersonal darkness on both sides of my life. That this darkness is caused merely by the walls of time separating me and my bruised fists from the free world of timelessness is a belief I gladly share with the most gaudily painted savage.¹ The essay on Nabokov in Richard Rorty's Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity² is important not only as a record of a

powerful mind's journey of discovery but also as an implicit recognition that despite, or because of, Nabokov's rejection of affiliations and engagement, his works have captured some major issues on the modern cultural agenda—even if in ways not congenial to Rorty. Here, however, after discussing Rorty's valuable contribution to Nabokov's studies, I shall have to record a disagreement with some of his statements, or rather "sentences," on Nabokov. Rorty may have expected some such protest. It is one of his central tenets that Truth does not exist "out there," beyond and apart from our 1. Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Putnam, 1966), ¶ 14. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989. The book will hereafter be referred to as CIS with page numbers given in the text. Several scholars have already used Rorty's discussion of Nabokov's work; see John Burt Foster, Jr, "Not T. S. Eliot, but Proust Revisory Modernism in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*," *Comparative Literature Studies*, 28 (1991), 67-82; Julian W. Connolly, *Nabokov's Early Fiction: Patterns of Self and Other* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), p. 7; and David Rampton, "The Last Word in Nabokov Criticism," *Cycnos* 10 (1993), 159-65. Nabokov's constructions of it, or rather our vocabularies for describing reality (see esp. QS 4-19). He regards each scientific or scholarly discipline, and each theory within that discipline, as just such a redescription, adding that "truth" is the property of sentences rather than whole vocabularies (QS 7). Vocabularies can, however, be provisional, partial, unsatisfactory. The "liberal ironist," as conceived by Rorty (QS xv), reads literary critics because he credits us with having "been around," with having "an exceptionally large range of acquaintance" with different vocabularies, and so with being "in a better position not to get trapped in a vocabulary of any single book" (QS 80-81)—even, let us add for pragmatic consistency, if the book is by Rorty himself. Following Judith Shklar's *Ordinary Vices*, Rorty defines a liberal as a person who believes that "cruelty is the worst thing we do" (QS xv); Nabokov is then recognized as a liberal because he speaks out against cruelty. Rorty notes that there are two kinds of novels that do so: "Fiction like that of Dickens, Olive Schreiner, or Richard Wright gives us the details about kinds of suffering being endured by people to whom we have previously not attended. Fiction like that of Choderlos de Laclos, Henry James, or Nabokov gives us the details about what sorts of cruelty we ourselves are capable of, and thereby lets us redescribe ourselves" (QS xvi). In other words, Nabokov's works deal less with victims than with victimizers, showing us why we can all find ourselves on the side of the hammer rather than the nail. According to Rorty, this is particularly true of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, the two novels which he considers Nabokov's "acme" (QS 161n)—though, the question of artistic merit aside, the case of Van Veen of *Ada* would be more to the point than that of *Pale Fire*'s Kinbote. Rorty discusses Nabokov's thematic and rhetorical approaches to the issue of cruelty. The thematic approach consists in the portrayal of artists or quasi-artists who do not synthesize ecstasy with tenderness and, in their pursuit of ecstasy, do not care, or do not care enough, for the suffering of others. Thus, Rorty notes, Nabokov concentrates not on "the 'beastly farce' common to Lenin...

LEONA TOKER (Jerusalem, Israel)

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2. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989. The book will hereafter be referred to as *CI* with page numbers given in the text. Several scholars have already used Rorty's discussion of Nabokov in their work; see John Surr Foster, Jr., "Nab: I. S. did it, but I must: Knowledge, Modernism in Nabokov's Poetic Life," *Comparative Literature Studies*, 28 (1995), 67-72; Julian W. Connolly, *Nabokov's Early Fiction: Patterns of Self and Other* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), p. 7; and David Kington, "The Last Word in Nabokov Criticism," *Critics* 10 (1993), 154-63.





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