Review: Laurie Clancie, The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov

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Except for the work of Andrew Field “who was forced to deal with several of Nabokov’s novels in their original Russian” (p. 2), there exists “no critical study which offers a satisfactory account of the whole body of Nabokov’s longer fiction” (p. 1) and to fill this gap is the aim of Clancy’s book. He feels that “much sharper distinctions need to be made [...] between individual works” (p. 5). Clancy does this by adjudging Nabokov’s masterpieces to be *Lolita* and *Ada*, largely because they are more “human” and “humane,” while subjecting the other novels to some severe criticism. He finds *Bend Sinister* to be marred by a tone that ranges from the ‘childish through the sarcastic and crudely vituperative, to a mannered and highly self-conscious rejection of the imaginative world the artist himself has created (p. 92).

Of *Laughter in the Dark*, he says:

The incessant parenthetical dismissals of any pretensions to moral worth in the characters, the reduction of them to the two-dimensional worlds of pictorial and cinematic art, the deliberate emphasis on the banality of the narrative, the self-conscious employment of parody for purposes of ridicule—all these raise the question of whether there is anything more in *Laughter in the Dark* than a pointless and rather malicious display of technical virtuosity (p. 53).

Of *Pnin*:

the cleverness is often merely of surface ... [and] one cannot help feeling that the reason lies in Nabokov’s inability to commit himself emotionally to the implications of his own vision (p. 124).

Clancy begins his discussion of *Pale Fire* with the promising insight that it treats the themes of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* in a “much more complex, convoluted way” (p. 126), and suggests the important conception of Nabokov’s *oeuvre* as “one giant novel” in spiral form. This valuable truth could have provided a fruitful unifying principle for the book, but it is not developed, and in any case the individual analyses cannot supply material for its application. Kinbote is understood to be a pedestrian pedant whose notes are “relatively jejune” so that any wit in his notes is attributed directly to Nabokov, whom Clancy also holds responsible for the weaknesses of Shade’s poem.

Clancy values “aesthetic detachment,” but finds Nabokov “self-indulgent” in his “high-handed flippancy,” “defensive arrogance,” and “ostentatious display of control,” apparently because he thwarts the reader’s desire to identify fully with the characters. Nor is Clancy very approving of the few critics he cites. A curious omission from the bibliography, given Clancy’s focus on the novels’ moral concerns, is Ellen Pifer’s *Nabokov and the Novel* (1980).
Clancy correctly regrets that Nabokov criticism has been divided between thematic and close readings, but his own remains purely in the first category. His book would profit from some analysis of the way Nabokov uses allusion to construct vast submerged realms of interlocking texts; the allusions would then cease to be "irritatingly pointless" and "irritatingly obscure" (p. 96) and instead suggest whole systems that would motivate aspects of the texts that Clancy considers failings.

Priscilla Meyer


The German author, publisher, professor, and journalist Klaus Menhert, who was born in Moscow in 1906, began to study Soviet Russia in the early 1930s. His first book, *Youth in Soviet Russia* (1932), an enthusiastic description of young Russians at work, had wide appeal in Europe and America during the Depression. He reviewed Soviet life with a more critical eye in *Soviet Man and His World* (1958). He continues his quest to understand the Russians' response to their unique social reality in the present study, but this time reading is his focus.

The book is based on interviews conducted during three month-long trips to the Soviet Union in 1981, 1982, and 1983. From the interviews, Menhert compiled a list of twenty-four contemporary writers whom the people he met, including librarians, considered their favorite authors. These authors were: F. A. Abramov, Ch. Aitmatov, V. P. Astafyev, V. I. Belov, Y. V. Bondarev, V. U. Bykau, A. B. Chakovsky, N. Dumbadze, A. S. Ivanov, V. V. Lipatov, G. M. Markov, Y. M. Nagibin, V. S. Pikul, P. L. Proskurin, V. G. Raspotin, J. S. Semyonov, V. M. Shukshin, K. M. Simonov, V. A. Soloukhin, A. N. and B. N. Strugasky, Y. V. Trifonov, A. A. and G. A. Vainer, B. L. Vasilyev, and I. A. Yefremov. The three parts of the book include sections on the interviews and the Soviet literary scene in general, on the lives of the authors, some of whom he knew personally, and finally on the plots of the novel he identified as popular. There is a brief conclusion followed by appendixes listing the titles of the novels discussed, English translations, numbers of copies of works by each author, and general publishing statistics.

*The Russians and Their Favorite Books* seems surprisingly naive. Menhert sees consumer demand as the main motor of Soviet literary popularity and reads literary works as a mirror of readers' values. Since the authors he found to be most popular stress patriotism and urge only minor reforms, he concludes that "no fundamental change in the USSR can be expected for quite some time" (pp. 256-257). The fact that many of his authors are on the presidium of the Writers' Union or recipients of other marks of official favor did not give him pause. Nor did the age of the authors, who are for the most over fifty, or the complete absence of women among them.

Although the book is not effective as a study of Soviet popular literature, it contains much useful information. Here in succinct form are biographical sketches of twenty-four Soviet authors who "made it" and who appear to have