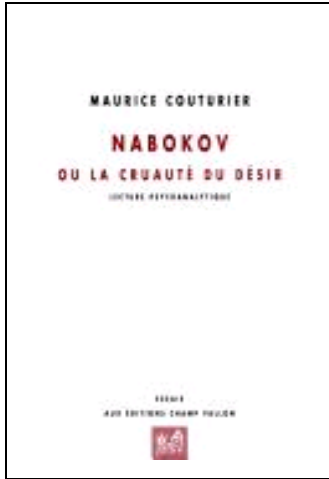


***Nabokov ou la cruauté du désir: lecture psychanalytique*, by Maurice Couturier. Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2004. 382 pp. Bibliography, Index.**

“Eros, the rose and the sore”

Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada, or Ardor*



The cruel desire Maurice Couturier names in his title is not a desire with which his reader will be immediately familiar — at least not consciously. “Desire,” Couturier tells us, “is the endless well from which Western authors have drawn for over two thousand years” (13). As he shows, however, drawing from this well and understanding how it functions are two very different things.

Couturier begins by stating his objections to the “otherworldly” school of Nabokov criticism that placed such emphasis on the role of emissaries from beyond the grave (15). While he rejects Vladimir Alexandrov’s interpretation of religious motifs in Nabokov’s works as vehemently here as he has in earlier publications, he adds a novel speculation. “Perhaps,” Couturier writes, “Alexandrov located an important aspect of Nabokov’s art in endeavoring to isolate a unifying theme therein” (16). Couturier suggests that while Alexandrov was right in responding to “an indefinable element” in the work and in glimpsing something of a “transcendental dimension” therein, Alexandrov nonetheless misunderstood its true nature (16). “Is this beyond [*au-delà*],” Couturier asks, “not precisely the lack-of-being [*manque-à-être*] of which Lacan speaks and which is inextricably tied to a desire clearly present to every reader of [Nabokov’s]

work?” (17). Couturier’s answer to this question is a resounding ‘yes.’ Nabokov’s French translator tells us that “Alexandrov translated this lack-of-being [*manque-à-être*] that obsesses Nabokov’s characters — and, in all likelihood, obsessed Nabokov himself — into the conventional terms” of religious transcendence, and this is a mistranslation he aims to rectify (17).

Desire is the central concept in Couturier’s “*lecture psychanalytique*,” and the psychoanalyst who most directly informs it is Jacques Lacan (there are more references in the book’s index to “Lacan” than to “*Lolita*”). Schematically, the term is best understood in relation to two others: need [*le besoin*] and request [*la demande*]. *Need* is aimed at a specific object which satisfies it. A *request* is more complicated. “The request,” write Laplanche and Pontalis in their *Vocabulaire de psychanalyse*, “is formulated and addressed to an other. If it still concerns an object, that object is inessential as the articulated request is, fundamentally, a request for love.”¹ Lacan’s conception of desire is then to be understood in relation to these two terms, and is born of the distance that separates them. “Desire,” Lacan wrote in his second seminar, “is a relation of being to lack [*un rapport d’être à un manque*]. This lack is, properly speaking, a lack of being [*manque d’être*]” (cited at 14). Going on to expand upon what he means by this “lack of being,” Lacan notes that “it is not a lack of this or that thing, but a lack of being through which being exists [*manque d’être par quoi l’être existe*]” (ibid.). This lack — not of a given object or experience but of an aspect of our very being — is then presented by Lacan as constitutive of human nature and self-consciousness. “A being comes to exist,” Lacan claims, “in function of this very lack. It is in function of this lack, in the experience of desire, that a being attains a sense of self in relation to being” (ibid.). As the reader will easily see, there is much that is suggestive about this definition of desire, just as there is much that is uncertain about it. Both this suggestiveness and this uncertainty characterize the pages to follow.

The other half of Couturier’s title — and book — can only be understood through this initial *desire*. “Cruelty as such revolts [Nabokov],” Couturier notes, “and yet, paradoxically, his works swarm with scenes of unbearable cruelty” (19). This paradox, addressed by a host of Nabokov’s finest readers — from Rorty to Wood, Boyd to

¹ J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de psychanalyse*, Paris: PUF, 2002, p. 122.

Calvino, D. Barton Johnson to Martin Amis — is one Couturier examines in a new light. Couturier astutely notes that “the cruelty that interests [Nabokov] above all is, however, not that inflicted by the sadist, nor that of the desiring individual faced with the disappearance of the object of their desire” — but, instead, a cruelty of a more elusive nature and which Couturier sees as nothing less than that of “the real [*du réel*]” “not covered over by a veil of meaning” (19). This Lacanian “real”, located beyond the cozy confines of our domesticated world, is, for Couturier, the source both of Nabokov’s singular desire and his singular cruelty.

What follows in this long and densely argued book is a series of meticulous readings of Nabokov’s major works — both Russian and English. Their technical sophistication, on the level of exegesis as well as methodology, makes it of the utmost difficulty to do justice to their individual conclusions here. Some idea might be given, however, if we think of the cruelly suffering Luzhin, who “feels passion but is never able to experience a desire that would be a desire for the Other [*désir de l’Autre*] and which would allow him to attain a subjectivity other than as a pawn on a board” (108). Couturier’s diagnosis continues: “[Luzhin] is initially possessed by a death drive [*pulsion de mort*]” and “suffers from a lack-of-being provisionally filled (or repressed) by his monomania but which returns as soon as he finds himself in a position of real crisis (the game against his equal, his double, Turati)” (108). To turn from the Russian works to the English ones, *Lolita* plays a central role in Couturier’s analysis. Couturier describes how the work grew out of his translating *Lolita*, “rewriting this novel with my own words,” and how it offers “an almost perfect anatomy of desire” (14-15; 199 ff.). Humbert’s “diffuse desire,” following Couturier, is for far more than *Lolita*, and involves precisely the ontological element Lacan endeavored to theorize.

At one point in *Nabokov ou la cruauté du désir* Couturier jests that though Nabokov was indeed no Freudian, he might well have been, whether he knew it or not, a Lacanian (210). The idea that the innermost truths of Nabokov’s art are to be discovered only with the help of psychoanalysis has proven as incendiary an issue since Nabokov’s death as it was during his lifetime. Fully aware of all that might seem scandalous about his methodological approach, Couturier proceeds in careful and clear fashion. The references to Lacan are not modish and the claims made are never sensationalist.

Nabokov ou la cruauté du désir is a mature book in the best sense of the term in that it bears every sign of a reflection elaborated with care and consistency over a long period. This is something that, in fact, Couturier directly addresses, noting how his book is the “completion of a long route begun nearly thirty years earlier with my dissertation on Nabokov” (359). He details not only his position, but the hesitations that preceded it. “For many years,” he writes, “I bent to the demands of the author concerning psychoanalysis and sought to bypass them by focusing on the enunciative mechanisms [*les dispositifs énonciatifs*] of his novels, borrowing my critical instruments... from the realms of linguistics, narratology and philosophical aesthetics” (6). As he later realized — with help from a document that, in true Lacanian fashion, only reached its addressee many years later — this manner of bypassing the matter led him astray from his real interests, and where he saw the real interest of Nabokov’s art. Couturier self-diagnoses a case of “conversion” in the titling of his preceding work not “Nabokov or the Rhetoric of the Present,” as he had planned, but *Nabokov ou la tyrannie de l’auteur* (6). In this new and frankly-titled work, he feels that he has at last fully understood and taken into account the objections lodged by one of the readers of his dissertation — Roland Barthes — that “certain confusions would not arise if M. Couturier more openly employed or appealed to psychoanalytical concepts” (cited at 359).

While in *Nabokov ou la cruauté du désir* Couturier embraces the psychoanalytical approach he shied from in the past, he is careful not to fall into the trap of using the work merely as a means to understand the author’s psychology. Unlike many similar enterprises, Couturier keeps his gaze fixed on the text, on the creations rather than the creator, and, as a result, the conclusions he reaches concern the nature of literary experience rather than the author’s individual psychology. Addressing precisely this issue, Couturier writes: “It cannot, of course, be a question of wanting to analyze the author’s desire: my goal throughout his work concerns only the expressed desires of the characters themselves” (246). This is not his last word on the matter, however, and he cannot help seeing a figure, and a desire, rising beyond the individual joys and sorrows of the characters. “I am only interested in the — indeed, sufficiently confusing — desires of the characters and I endeavor to give them a formulation, of Lacanian inspiration, firmly anchored in the text itself” (247). “However,” Couturier continues, “there exist fault-lines

[*failles*] in the text and in the psychic texture of its characters that cannot find their full explanation in the text itself, fault-lines through which I see the profile of the fugitive, fleeing figure of the author” (247). To this, Couturier adds, “whereby I understand... not only his aesthetic but his sexual desire. The intensity and nature of my own aesthetic experience stems on the one hand from my desiring identification [*mon identification désirante*] with these characters and, on the other hand, my desire to exchange with this authorial figure *le fin mot* of his own desire” (247).

While a reader of *Nabokov ou la cruauté du désir* that does not accept the definition of desire offered by Lacan, or the fundamental postulates of Lacanian psychoanalysis, is unlikely to agree with many of the conclusions Couturier reaches, this is far from saying that that reader will not find pleasure and profit in reading the work. Both for its methodological daring and for the philological expertise Couturier couples it with, *Nabokov ou la cruauté du désir* is a book of undeniable interest and will doubtless remain one.

Leland de la Durantaye,
Harvard University

