

# The Last Romantic: Laurie Clancy's Nabokov

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## I. TOWARDS NABOKOV

Laurie Clancy's literary critical books appear for the most part traditional for his context. There is from 1981 a short study of Christina Stead in the *Essays in Australian Literature* series, and in the same year a book on Xavier Herbert in the widely-read American Twayne's series. Another act of professional generosity to readers and his country was Laurie's full and closely considered *Reader's Guide to Australian Fiction* of 1992.

The book that appears, from a synoptic distance, not to fit in is *The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*, published by Macmillan, London, in 1984. An exotic internationalist figure of high cultural standing, definitely uninterested in history and politics of any reformist or even social kind, seeming aloof, elitist, even arrogant, Nabokov does not seem likely to have fitted in alongside Laurie whether in bar, seminar-room or on the cricket-field (though he was a good tennis-player).

There are two ways of understanding the contact between Nabokov and Laurie Clancy, separate explanations which ultimately (like the varied but eventually harmonious Nabokovian discourses in what Laurie reads as his finest novels) productively merge. The first explanation is to note that intelligent and open-minded Melburnian post-Leavis critics were interested in the most complex of the high modernists. Sam Goldberg, who tutored Laurie at Melbourne before setting off on a professorial career that never matched his very substantial gifts, was from an early age very interested in Joyce. When he headed off on the great overseas journey of self-establishment, he wanted to do a B. Litt. on Joyce at Oxford but the local authorities, still wedded to the idea that criticism is a body of knowledge and all that is needed is a bit of honest spade-work, rejected the idea because someone had just 'done' Joyce, so Sam found a topic so insignificant that the university was content. But Sam was persistent: after returning to Melbourne he wrote *The Classical Temper* (1961), seen by some Leavisites as *trahison d'un clerc*, but in fact the book relocates and updates their system of very careful reading and studying the forces of the text for personal and moral meanings—and in title links Joyce back in a striking way to the worlds that modernism was alleged to have abandoned.

In a similar spirit Laurie set himself early in his career as an English lecturer at La Trobe in an MA, submitted in late 1973, to sort out the issues in another very complex, textually difficult, attitudinally mystifying author—whom interestingly Goldberg had also admired—and applied to Nabokov the same approach of very careful reading and evaluations focused on the human and moral issues central to the text's construction. In that serious, text-focused respect Laurie was a sort of Leavisite, though his social and political interests would tend to link him with the left Leavisites (not company he would have objected to, like Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton). And as it is easy for people looking backwards to misinterpret both critics and commentary on critics, and see the Leavis-Clancy connection as negative, let me comment on the importance of Leavis in about 1960, when I too encountered his influence. Students have for some years just not believed me when I tell them that the novel as a genre was a newcomer to English studies then. I never studied a novel at a British school in the 1950s, and there were

very few on the curriculum at Oxford. Mind you, it stopped at 1820—one very good reason, but by no means the only one. By about 1965 a ‘modern option’ was established, including George Eliot. You can see why students don’t believe all this.

The Eng. Lit. curriculum, when it first emerged, was in fact only poetry, and the mostly poetical plays of Shakespeare. There was also all that largely medieval ‘language’ stuff, whereby English dons could claim a sort of parity in suffering with classics and French and German. Actually I rather enjoyed that, and it also had a numinous hinterland—my older brother was lectured to by Tolkien himself. But all the heavy-duty academics in English concentrated on poetry—and indeed Leavis's first books do the same: it was 1948 before *The Great Tradition* made the novel central to serious study. Following Leavis meant you could do more than talk about the rhythms of blank verse or that neurotic who thought he should have been King of Denmark. You didn’t need to buy all that basically nonconformist stuff about morality and its extension via D. H. Lawrence to find that Leavis’s approach offered a way into novels that actually did deal with a recognisable world. With that entry pass (mimed in America by New Criticism, in a sort of asocial way) you could then look for more to do, and the Leavisite access to the social world of the novel, however restricted, was what in fact by the 1970s invited feminists, leftists, gay theorists, postcolonialists, pretty much in that order, to develop new ways of sorting and evaluating the material that was now on the table.

Laurie was one of these innovative, seriously-oriented, novel critics, and the Nabokov book has a strong sense of its responsibility to readers. Published in 1984 it is a carefully edited version of the thesis, with a new final chapter on Nabokov’s last two books. The approach is helpful, professional. This author, it asserts at the start, is now dead (in 1977), all his work is available in English and ‘there is an urgent need for a view of him which will take into account the entire body of his fiction, particularly the fifteen novels’ (5). Others had already been at work, some of them literary biographers like Andrew Field, an American briefly at the University of Queensland. His then wife Michele stayed much longer as literary editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* but had moved on in life and literature, and I never recall her giving a response to Laurie’s book (or indeed her former husband’s). Other Nabokov work, including by Mary McCarthy and Professor Carl Proffer (Vladimir must have loved that surname), tended to buy into the author’s self-projection as a mighty guru, and traced references, overt or concealed, doubles, confusions, deliberate errors by characters, and all the fun of the academic fair. Laurie’s position is in a way more modest: he’s just talking about how the books work about people; but he is also more distanced, not sucked in by an author who was famously bullying of commentators and critics and ran a very tight ship on interpretation of his work.

It is this apparently naïve but also rather firm-minded positioning that opens the path to the second explanation of what Laurie is doing, which both facilitates and also elaborates his post-Leavisite critical reading position. As a thesis this study was called *The Last Romantic*, and very early it quotes Blake (whom Leavis thought little of) saying in his declining years ‘I have been very near the gates of death, and have returned very weak and an old man, feeble and tottering, but not in spirit and in life, not in the real man, the imagination, which lives for ever’ (6). What Laurie’s book does, and knows it is doing from the start, is identity both a ‘real man,’ Nabokov, who has a particular power in the imagination, and a more broadly understood ‘real man’—that is the human possibilities of intelligence and feeling. Laurie will track this arch-humanist Nabokov through all the novels, sometimes finding that the author loses faith in this possibility and recoils into irony, word-games, disavowals, even despairs, but recurrently locating a vital current of the powerfully and deeply intelligently human in Nabokov’s work.

That climaxes in *Lolita* and *Ada*, but can be recurrently, if inconsistently, present from the very start in the Russian-language novels of the Cambridge-educated Berlin exile.

Laurie's method, essentially going for the true voice of the author which he or she quite often could not produce, is in itself a powerful mechanism of Leavis—famously he only permitted half of Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* to be the real thing, and would only, and that a little reluctantly, allow *Hard Times* to be the novelist's only true voice in Dickens (a view which, as a George Reynolds supporter, I find basically valid). This firm approach, basically telling off the author for not being up to scratch all the time, can seem a bit assertive now and then, and Laurie does have the occasional slap for V.N., but what is more striking (and it is hard to believe no-one has noticed this) is that it is so much of its period that it is in fact a move parallel with the 'death of the author' idea that Roland Barthes was to present with such remarkable, and so well-mediated, success in 1967.

The core narrative of Laurie's Nabokov book is the quite forceful arguing for, demonstration of, praise of (when present) and deploring the failure of (when absent), this perceived power of Nabokov to construct an aesthetically powerful discourse which can also transmit the highest capacities of human feeling. *The Last Romantic* was a great title that got this author-concept perfectly. But publishers already then didn't like brilliant titles, they just wanted functional ones that got the book sold and overlooked the flair bit for dull descriptive sub-titles. I feel for Laurie: my 1980 crime fiction book which came out with the not very memorable title *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* was meant to be called *Through the Magnifying Glass*.

But when you look at just how Laurie demonstrates, discovers, elaborates this great romantic Nabokov—and this essay will follow that process through—you do start to wonder if, like Barthes' authors, that particular Nabokov he ever lived? There is a case for saying that this Nabokov is in fact a mind-created double (a highly Nabokovian construct), the written product of the narrator of this particular book, i.e. Laurie Clancy, who has imagined Nabokov as his own potent doppelgänger.

## II. AESTHETICS AND IMAGINATION

Nabokov's writing is immediately notable for a number of formal features: he shows a deep grasp of languages—in St Petersburg he was a trilingual child and could read and write in English before French or even his native Russian—but even then he has a power to juggle, integrate and interrogate languages in a quite unusual way. His literary learning is as powerful: his work is always multi-referential and across the whole range of Western literature. But formal complexity goes further: he is never content with the simple plod of the realistic novel, and his novels are both complicated and enriched with conflicting accounts, possibly false versions, shifts of time, alternative worlds—and there is a strong preference for story-telling from memory, including imperfect memory, rather than the imitation of temporal progress that the classic novel uses to mask its manipulations.

In all these formal effects Nabokov is like the great modernists, especially Joyce. For many of his devoted readers and obsessive commentators this aesthetic complexity—or is it just complication?—is enough, a self-gratifying intellectualism that ratifies author and reader as above the common realist herd. Laurie finds all this trickiness interesting, notes meticulously how it works, but is not at all satisfied that this is the whole or even central issue in Nabokov.

But while a modernist, Nabokov did not reject the classic novel as a form. His favourite novel was *Madame Bovary*, and although early on he disliked Jane Austen he came to admire *Mansfield Park*—that is, he found at the heart of the realist novel an element that he could deeply admire. For all its realism and its social effects, the classic novel is an individualist form—a single writer exposes through a single valued viewpoint her/his insights to a single reader. That meant the form was redeemable for Nabokov, where the writers he felt insistently anti-individualist, notably Marx and Freud, were always unacceptable. He disliked Conrad for (apart from the Russian-Polish thing) the impersonal banality of his style, what he called in Russian *poshlost*, or, to make a translingual joke of it, *poshlust*. What he saw created in *Emma Bovary* and, with some effort (both the seeing and the creating) in *Fanny Price*, was a personal power to elude social and allegedly real constraints through the imaginative creation of emotional transcendence.

This power, for Laurie, is the central value of Nabokov's writing, and it is where he argues the imagination realises the fullest qualities of what it is to be human. This is recurrently honoured through the book and formally described: 'the supreme form of reality resides in the imagination' (8). This will, in what Laurie judges the finest of Nabokov's writing, lead to representation of humanist 'transcendence—a mode that unites the imaginative and the human, the moral and the aesthetic' (109-110).

Laurie is aware of the size of this claim, and the unusualness of it. He sorts Nabokov critics into two categories. Those who think him a clever trickster just amusing himself and us, and so as simply dismissible—a lot of reviewers felt this way, and also those who wanted to disavow uncomfortable elements like Humbert's paedophilia or the uncertainty effect that is deep in Nabokov's writing: Laurie firmly calls this naïve dismissal process 'critical imbecility' (11). The second category, and the only other one he sees around, are those who buy whole the aesthetic elaboration on which Nabokov insists in his puzzles and elaborations 'as if the solving of these were proof in itself of the novels' greatness' (11). Laurie sees Andrew Field as a leader, but there have been plenty more since: a general view today is that through the uncertainty-elaboration Nabokov is acting as an early post-modernist, and his influence on writers such as John Barth and Don de Lillo is a sign of that ultramodernity. For a twenty-first-century reader, Nabokov the post-modernist haunts the argument of this book, but the whole thrust of Laurie's account is to see him as not only more than a trickster, but also more than a mix of powerhouse and smartarse, and to enlist his work firmly as in the tradition (Laurie would not share Leavis's reductive 'great') of English-language writing that, while recognising a realist world, takes its stand firmly in the power of the artist to realise human emotions that have the capacity to transcend the limitations of the everyday and the everywhere.

A writer who deploys aesthetic experimentalism in the ultimate service of the humanist imagination: that is the Nabokov Laurie identifies, and quests through his work, the one with links traceable back to Blake and properly entitled 'The Last Romantic.' The process is rather like Goldberg's construction of a wise supratemporal Joyce and, perhaps more closely, Leavis's own realisation of a D. H. Lawrence who can let flow the deepest springs of human passion and commitment.

### III. AESTHETICS VERSUS IMAGINATION

Nabokov's early novels were written in Russian when he lived in Berlin, earning a scanty living as a translator, provider of chess problems, and tennis coach. They are all now available in English: this was mostly the product of his fame after *Lolita* but some were translated early. Nabokov took gloomy pleasure from the fact there are almost no surviving copies of *Despair*:

it was published in London by Long in 1937 but sold little and was destroyed in the bombing. There must be a few very valuable copies somewhere.

Laurie works carefully through these early novels—a major part of his project is to give a full account of the work—and finds a recurring mix of the aesthetic complication and the emotive-humanist commitment, with varying ascendancies across the years. The first, published in 1926, was *Mashenk'a*, Englished as *Mary*: Laurie finds this a dull translation, but English lacks a good diminutive for Mary—*Molly* might have had too Joycean a reference. The novel offers the notion that love and its memory is better than painful reality, and this is an early and underdeveloped version of the transcendence theme—and also, though Laurie is not interested in biographicism, an idea presumably not unrelated to Nabokov's situation. He was exiled in some misery from his homeland with little hope of return, and facing harsh conditions, earning little, surrounded by dull co-exiles, and it seems at the whim of the fates: his beloved father had been shot by a monarchist assassin in 1922, when trying to protect the actual target.

The second novel, *King, Queen, Knave*, was published in 1928, but this was quite heavily rewritten by Nabokov for its 1968 English version. Proffer offers the details. Part of that was 'the addition of elements of artifice of various kinds' (25). Laurie argues this reworking generated an 'attempt at aesthetic impersonality' that as a whole 'merely resulted in a kind of dismissiveness' (33). The novel has strong modernist and anti-realist elements, including references to cinema as well as the card-game structure, and this too irritates Laurie, leading him to Leavis-like dismissive language like 'the gratuitously repulsive final image' of a woman as a large white toad (31). He finds equally annoying the self-reference to Nabokov and his wife as holiday-makers late on, and the character with an anagram of his own name, Mr Vivian Badlook (wittily, a photographer).

If this novel, especially in its rewritten form, offers little positive, then Laurie simply dismisses *The Defence*, published in 1930, as one where Nabokov 'constantly is tempted into defiling or dismissing with high-handed flippancy the world he has created' (40). A story about chess which ends in the probable suicide of the central figure, Luzhin, who is often himself satirised, is perhaps not a likely domain of humanist transcendence, and Laurie identifies the problem as Nabokov moving away from the realist novel only via irony at this stage, not yet gaining the terrain of symbolic transcendence. As ever, he reads closely, and sees a good deal of linkage to the later novel *Pnin*, both being comic-satiric and both seemingly often heartless. Again, biography might have been easier: Luzhin the disaster-oriented chess fanatic and *Pnin* the comic professor of Russian can be taken as deliberate, even fugitive, self-parody by a Nabokov often too timid, or perhaps just cautious, or even perhaps just too traumatised, to trust in the positive version of himself that Laurie is realising.

Then a step in the world of imagination is made, as painful reality and forms of transcendence come to co-inhabit the novels. In *Glory*, written in 1932, the young central figure Martin tends to live in a 'day-dreaming' (42) world that offers some form of transcendence: he and Sonia imagine 'Zoorland,' both a fantasy elsewhere and a limited realisation of the hated totalitarian regimes Nabokov will later imagine more fully. Here Zoorland operates through tonal mixture as a sort of nursery-slope of intense displacing imagination, and Laurie sees the novel as essentially 'adolescent' (44) and inconsistent. He feels this limits the novel's power to realise the fullness of humanist imagination, but also finds it 'tends to adumbrate and anticipate many of the methods that Nabokov used in a more complex manner later' (47). But that very inconsistency and apparent self-contradiction may itself also be an index to the future Nabokov,

a consistent and insistent resistance to the positive forces that Laurie is identifying and so highly valuing.

*Laughter in the Dark* appeared in 1936 as *Camera Obscura*: it is the first fully powerful novel, and in part, as Laurie notes, a complex replay of *King, Queen, Knave*, with Rex to link the two as well as the cinema connections. In many ways this returns to the dark ironic tones of the early work, but it is also, Laurie holds, ‘Nabokov’s most affecting novel to date’ (57) and this comes through the way writer and reader come to feel for Albinus, the foolish and fooled king figure of the novel (Nabokov would have meant us to sense his name implies ‘whiteness, purity’ in Latin). It is hardly a projection of humanist transcendence, but nevertheless it does seem clear that we are to read him as ‘a suffering human being’ and we are not invited to be scornful of him—as happens in the Tony Richardson quasi-*nouvelle vague* film of 1969, which Laurie pins down as ‘vulgar and gloating’ (57).

The central character in *Despair* (published in 1936) is Hermann Hermann, a dark version of Albinus, who believes he has met his double, and so can murder him for his insurance—but has completely imagined the resemblance. Arnold Toynbee thought this was a silly puzzle, but Field found it very deep: Laurie’s third way finds it without the positive elements he values, and riven by ‘an uncertainty of aim’ (64). Imagination here is entirely destructive: and the title itself suggests these are hard times for any positive Nabokov. Sympathy for Albinus was about as far as he could go, and a similarly tenuous positive can be found in the way in which *Invitation to a Beheading*, published in 1938, ends with Cincinnatus, finally beheaded in this austere realised totalitarian world, finding that ‘imagination has gained ascendancy over its physical cage’ (71). This is at once unrealistic—he does die—and also of supra-mortal value. These may seem scanty elements of positive humanist transcendence, but the context was a dark one, and Laurie may well be right to see this as the strongest positive available to Nabokov. In another parallel to Albinus, in *The Gift*, written by 1935 and the last book to be drafted in Russian (but not published as such until 1952), Nabokov presents an old, struggling and somewhat limited scholar for whom the text clearly invites sympathy, and also a young and Nabokov-like writer feeling he will never return to Russia but will ‘live there in my books’ (75).

#### IV. IMAGINATION THROUGH AESTHETICS

Living in books becomes realised in Nabokov’s first novel written in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* which he produced in 1941 after escaping to America with his wife and son from France as late as May 1940. It would seem that now, driven into another continent and having accepted the priority of another language, Nabokov develops as if necessarily the idea not so much that one can live in books but that, as is shown in the case of Sebastian Knight (another human chess-piece) ‘real life’ is in fact in art. Laurie’s chapter on this novel is titled ‘Parody as Springboard’ and he feels both that this is ‘the most charming and affecting’ (91) of the series, and also that its cleverness and complication are now directed to ‘the primacy of the imagination, not merely as the source of truth, but as the basis for all existence’ (91). If he had, in Nabokov fashion, reworked this material some twenty years later, it seems likely that Laurie would have substituted ‘Postmodernism’ for ‘Parody’ and argued that this novel is the first to show clearly how the ultra-contemporary character of Nabokov’s artifice is also the means of establishing the distinctly pre-modern, that is Romantic, character of his art.

That this is not an easy process for either author or critic to establish seems demonstrated by *Bend Sinister*, the second English-language novel, published first in 1947. Nabokov’s most

serious political allegory, this imagines an ‘Ekwilist’ state—the spelling suggests his evaluation of the system he called Communazi (though its broader context also seems somewhat American). The central figure Adam Krug, so far from being an Edenic champagne-swiller as his name suggests, is a philosophy professor and dissenter, and eventually a victim of random modern brutality. Though he is as capable as any Nabokov hero of living in his dreams, here they do not lead to escape, but only confusion, and all Laurie can find of value is ‘the tender humanity between Krug and his son David’ (100). But the rest of the novel cannot, he judges, admit such ‘currents of feeling’: biographicism might well find this a case of the revenge of the modern, and also of a sense of final exile, but Laurie finds some element of notional transcendence in speaking of ‘Nabokov’s own instinctive dissatisfaction with the novel’ (98).

By the early 1950s Nabokov was settled at Cornell, and busy with the lepidoptery that always occupied much of his thinking (in 2011 the *New York Times* carried a story that science now accepted Nabokov’s 1945 theory about the evolution of the *Polyommatus Blue* butterfly, and on his insect-tracking travels he finished writing what was to be the life-changing book, and is for Laurie the major statement of his romantic positivism, *Lolita*. One of the world’s famous rejected titles (like *Moby Dick* and *Harry Potter*), this appeared in 1955 from the Parisian porn specialists Olympia Press, was widely banned and reviled, made a fortune, became a legend, and allowed the Nabokovs to live out a comfortable life on the sixth floor of a Montreux hotel.

Laurie really goes for it here: this is ‘one of the great—and most humane—novels written in English this century’ (102), and the addition to ‘great’ indicates that this is the ‘culmination’ of what he has valued in Nabokov’s work. In the feeling released by the relationship of Humbert and Dolores, lovingly known as Lolita, he sees ‘a triumphant assertion of human love’ (102) and firmly places it alongside *Tristan and Iseulde*, even if some of the links are for Nabokov irresistibly parodyable.

This is of course a strong statement, given that the narrator speaks from a jail cell, that the beloved nymphet has moved on to be plump and plain, and pretty complaining, and the whole business itself was well outside the law, and often referred to in the novel as unseemly, grotesque, ugly. But in the Nabokovian world where Laurie is finding human transcendence the launching-pad is often crime, madness, vileness and manipulation, and a conflict is usual between painful and affronted reality and the aspirations of the characters. Laurie describes the archetype of this productive conflict:

The energy of the style of the novel is generated by the tension between the tormented desire of the protagonist to transcend the limitations of his finite existence and consciousness and the implacability of the finite reality of the world in which he finds himself. (109)

He argues that this dialectic creates most fully the fully-fledged Nabokovian Romanticism: ‘a deeper and more volatile kind of transcendence with which the novel is concerned, one that unites the imaginative and the human, the moral and the aesthetic’ (109-110).

Part of this power comes from an articulation of authority: with the clarity that comes from a lot of careful reading, and also thinking about the outcomes, Laurie points out that here the narrator is one of Nabokov’s few characters who share his own ‘wit, intelligence and creative vocabulary’ (110); he notes in passing another important and innovative element of the novel, that it includes an affectionate but also sharp satirical account of much of American life from second wives to endless motels. Humbert is aware that he and Lolita are like Europe and

America, and some of the novel's hyperdynamic character comes from this being Nabokov's first, indeed only, truly American novel, well fitted to be the keystone of Laurie's arch of interpretation.

For Humbert, regret can follow delight, and the recoil from partial transcendence to depths of irony that happened between *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Bend Sinister* (and also seems to appear between *Laughter in the Dark* and *Despair*) is clear in the move from *Lolita* to *Pale Fire*, published in 1962 and something of a disappointment to those looking for more in the line of wittily satirical semi-porn. A dream world, doubles, imaginary relationships, banality, intense scholarly parody, these elements of the Nabokov galaxy all fizz through the book, but very few traces appear of humanist value or romantic transcendence. Kinbote, the deranged scholar and fantasy king of Zembla, only has hallucinations, not dreams; the poet Shade is well named for the lack of light that is generated in his work, though he is not in fact overshadowed by Kinbote. Laurie finds the novel's meaning is 'on the surface' (129) and while Mary McCarthy loved explicating its games, he finds it belongs to the world of 'self-enclosed hermetic fantasy' (125).

*Pnin* (1969) is also found a disappointment. A hero who is the opposite of dreaming and intellectual, just a ramblingly uncertain semi-scholar, bungles and bumbles his way through an almost permanently baffled encounter with American academic life, society, and even animals. Laurie finds it 'a flawed and minor novel' (124), where Nabokov overdoes the limitations he wants to locate in Pnin himself and can even, as with memories of a childhood sweetheart dying in a concentration camp, be 'embarrassed by his own show of feeling' (120). Christopher Ricks famously showed that self-embarrassment was a form of Romanticism, notably in Keats, and Professor Pnin is in part a knowing self-mockery and also a deliberate statement of the opposite of the blustering superegotistical heroes that most of Nabokov's novels present. Pnin's anti-transcendence, you might argue, is a small but perfectly formed human value, and in fact the novel does fit in with Laurie's trajectory of Nabokov's work, though in a hesitating, even reversing, kind of way.

This leaves what he feels is the other major novel, *Ada, or Ardor*. A title which only works as a homonymous joke if you are a European speaking British English, this is not as American as *Lolita*, and not as consciously coherent a narrative either. Post-modernism seems in full flow. The anti-realist form is strongly asserted: the novel switches back and forth in time and place, is verbally playful, referential, deliberately contradictory, using all the complications of art that Nabokov has built up over such an extended period—and he worked longer on this novel than any other.

This for Laurie is *Lolita*'s counterpart, the other and different realisation of humane transcendence. He calls it 'a triumphant human work' (14) and 'among the most beautiful and imaginative renderings of passionate love in modern literature' (144)—the link back to *Lolita* and Tristan/Iseulde is strongly and unhesitatingly made. But where in *Lolita* that was only found in Humbert's own perceptions, rather like the dream states and projections of some of the early Russian-language novel central figures, here the transcendence is shared between Ada herself and her brother Van, the two related in passion as much as in place, time and even family. Together they make 'an affirmation of rapture' (154) and Laurie spends some time showing in detailed textual commentary how this is realised through language in 'a remarkably sensual and erotic piece of writing,' which is 'one of the most beautiful and imaginative renderings of passionate love in modern literature' (143, 144).

The critique is itself powerful and persuasive, and looks back strongly to Leavis's best writing on Lawrence. But it also needs to work so well because there is much else in this novel that seems to constrain or even oppose the Ada-Van interrelationship as both central and inimitable. It also offers a full range of allegorical suggestion, linking Ada, the Russian for Hell, with demoniac symbolism, and an extended development of mystical worlds, Terra and Antiterra, with Nabokov writing like H. G. Wells on speed; there is also time travel, and a world of references and incidents which, Laurie notes, are 'refractions, or parodies, of conventional and orthodox notions of experience' (150).

This is a large and bulky novel, almost nineteenth-century in scope if not in simplicity, and could be read, and often has been, as the final and fullest statement of Nabokov's encyclopaedic knowledge of and capacity to comment on literature, politics, human behaviour, and human self-deception. Laurie's argument is that all of that is there, but it all acts as a setting for the ultimate value of transcendence which permits the novel to be 'a celebration of the sufficiency of "this our sufficient world"' (154)—the title for this chapter, and the last words of this chapter—indeed the last words of the whole M.A.

The quoted phrase is Van's, when he is describing the varied worlds of the novel. It is also of course a key concept of humanism, and indeed of Romanticism, that no gods or monsters are needed to improve or destroy the human ambience: we can do it all ourselves, with imagination as a guide. Laurie has found that structure potently created throughout Nabokov's work. He would personally no doubt have wanted to add social interaction as a positive to the vision of art and transcendence that for him Nabokov, in an appropriately modern and admirably complex way, very valuably elaborates. That position shows up in a tiny change: the Introduction to the thesis ends by stating 'Nabokov is a great and moral writer' (32): in the book it reads 'a great moral writer and critic of life' (20).

Those realisations of humane value can, as some of the novels show and Laurie disappointedly allows, be embattled and obscured by doubt and anxiety—sometimes hardly surprising when you think of Nabokov's personal vicissitudes. Some of the realisations are less grand than Laurie finds operating in *Lolita* and *Ada*, and the last two pieces, commented on for the book version of the study, are more retrospective than transcendent. Both fairly lightweight, they play the negative and positive tunes of Nabokov's aestheticised imagination. The novella *Transparent Things* (1973) is about a bombastic but limited person dismissively named Person, and *Look at the Harlequins* (1974) is an amusingly ironic account of the fiction of a writer with distinct resemblance to the author himself: at the least those two show that Nabokov remained a great title-writer to the end.

But these final statements also resume what has been a consistent thread, or multiplicity of threads. Laurie finds *The Gift* and *Ada* the two novels which collect together most of the themes, and, with *Lolita*, display the classic Nabokovian mix, a consistent management of the ultra-modern, in terms of style and attitude, along with the deeply traditional in terms of underlying assessment—both of intellectual veracity and the sense of human possibility. It is that potent projection of personal and collective values which Laurie Clancy has made persuasively central in this powerful, thoughtful and deeply helpful study which has made Nabokov, as the Last Romantic, no longer the lost Romantic.

And actually, remembering the Nabokovian habit of refracting his own concerns through his creation of a central figure—the last and lost romantic, brilliant, elusive, creative, modest to the

point of self-concealing, and richly generous of his wide-ranging abilities, that isn't a bad account of Laurie Clancy himself.

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