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RICHARD RORTY AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF LITERARY CRITICISM

By

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Richard Rorty and the Cultural Politics of Literary Criticism

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Simon Stow warns that the influence of political readings of literary texts could be harmful to political discourse. In particular, he cautions against the growing popularity of political “readings” over political “arguments.” Compared with traditional arguments, readings are, Stow argues, poorly suited for liberal political discourse. To demonstrate this point, Stow challenges the political character of Richard Rorty’s reading of Pale Fire. In this essay, I dispute Stow's criticism of Rorty. My basic argument is that literary criticism (or "readings") can be politically significant and that Rorty's acknowledgement of this fact ties him to rather than separates him from, both the political and literary arenas. To make my point, I reconsider the reading of Pale Fire Rorty offers relative to the kind of reading of Don Quixote offered by Nabokov. By arguing that even the most "literary" of writers reads for political purposes, I hope to situate Rorty within a cultural space where the literary and political converge.

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Introduction

In Professional Correctness, Stanley Fish points out that “in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries . . . the boundaries between the literary and the ‘extra-literary’ were not at all firm and it was quite possible for poets and literary pamphleteers to enter other arenas and to present as their qualifications for entrance their literary skills and accomplishments” (42). Today many intellectuals within the now professionalized field of literary studies are entering other arenas and attempting to expand the cultural role of criticism. We can find evidence for this trend in the proliferation of interdisciplinary conversations, in departmental coverage, and also, revealingly, in the alarm of scholars within other disciplines into which literary agents now are felt to interlope.

Simon Stow reading Richard Rorty

In Republic of Readers?: The Literary Turn in Political Thought and Analysis,¹ political theorist Simon Stow considers the “literary turn” in political studies and, similarly, the “political turn” in literary studies. Explaining what he means by “turns” in literary and political studies, he writes,

A brief stroll through the humanities and social science sections of any North American university bookstore reveals that the study of literature and the study of politics have become somewhat indistinguishable enterprises. In the sections set aside for literature courses, novels—canonical and otherwise—now rub spines with books by thinkers such as Marx, Habermas, and Adorno, while in the section set aside for government or political science classes . . . novels have begun to

¹ Simon Stow, Republic of Readers?: The Literary Turn in Political Thought and Analysis, [Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2007].

appear, and alongside them, books by thinkers and critics such as Judith Butler, Terry Eagleton, and Richard Rorty: works that do not appear to fit neatly into either category, politics or literature. (1)

Stow is especially weary of the growing popularity of literary theorists within political studies. He warns that the political readings of literary texts offered by such theorists could be harmful to liberal political discourse. The task of the literary critic, Stow writes, is simply "to help us experience the 'tell-tale tingle between the shoulder blades' that Nabokov claims comes with an intriguing insight into the text" (75)². The moment the critic supersedes this auxiliary role to climb into the political arena, he surrenders his literary credentials. And once he willfully surrenders his literary credentials to accomplish offer a political reading, his credibility as a community member goes out the window. If literary criticism achieves political significance (or claims to), it does so by defying the rules of the community from which it originates. Political theorists should be deeply suspicious of this defiance, Stow believes, because it exhibits an attitude likely to impede rather than promote the sort of consensus that enables real political progress.

Stow's primary case in point and the literary agent about whom he writes most often is Richard Rorty. Counter to the spirit of the political liberalism he purports to embrace, "Rorty seeks surreptitiously to shape the decisions of freely choosing individuals" Stow writes (75). Where Rorty should respect the agency of his readers by delivering his opinions in the politically traditional form of an argument, he instead offers readings. Rorty's "reading" of literature is not the pleasurable illumination of an aesthetic object that it should be, according to Stow, but a subtle and specious coaxing of the

² Simon Stow, "The Return of Charles Kinbote: Nabokov on Rorty," [*Philosophy and Literature*. 23 (1999): 65 – 77]. Cited hereafter as RCK.

reader toward a political position. Expectations that shape the reader's reception of literary criticism likely distract him from--and hence leave him more vulnerable to--the political argument being advocated for, Stow believes.

Stow first formulates this criticism of Rorty in "The Return of Charles Kinbote: Nabokov on Rorty," an essay that represents his most sustained engagement with "the literary" as he attempts to referee the contest, as he imagines it, between "the author" Nabokov and "the critic" Rorty. He models the contest on the literary struggle he sees staged in Pale Fire between the fictional author of the "Pale Fire" poem, John Shade, and its fictional commentator, Charles Kinbote. Richard Rorty is, Stow argues, Charles Kinbote returned. "Rorty is not just any old Nabokovian character, but rather quite a specific one," he says (70). "A quick glance at Rorty's recommended approach to literary criticism should help us identify which one" (70). The first "glance" Stow gives us is, it would seem, the one that shows better than any other this critical affinity between Rorty and Kinbote, an affinity that Stow believes should cause political theorists to question the incorporation of political readings of literary texts into a discipline dominated by straightforward political arguments. Stow quotes Rorty:

The critic asks neither the author nor the text about their intention but simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his purpose. He makes the text refer to whatever is relevant to that purpose. He does this by imposing a vocabulary... on the text which may have nothing to do with any vocabulary used by the text or its author. (70)

Both Rorty and Kinbote are critics in this "strong" sense, Stow believes. Both impose a vocabulary on a text that reflects their own purposes. Just as Kinbote offers a strong

reading of the “Pale Fire” poem, Rorty offers a strong reading of the Pale Fire novel. Rorty's reading is strong because it is political, and the more political the reading, according to Stow, the less literary, the less of a reading it is. Stow does not believe a strong reading is a reading at all. “[T]here are perhaps few literary critics, other than Kinbote himself,” Stow writes, “who would share Rorty’s belief that “Kinbote is absolutely right when he concludes his forward to ‘Pale Fire’ by saying ‘Without my notes Shades’s text simply has no reality at all’” (70). In traditional philosophical parlance, Stow would like to affirm the autonomy of the aesthetic object that is a literary work.

My basic argument here is that literary criticism (or "readings") can be politically significant and that Rorty's acknowledgement of this fact ties him to rather than separates him from, both the political and literary arenas. To make my point, I reconsider the reading of Pale Fire Rorty offers relative to the kind of reading of Don Quixote offered by Nabokov. By arguing that even the most "literary" of writers reads for political purposes, I hope to situate Rorty within a cultural space where the literary and political converge.

Rorty's political reading of Pale Fire

Richard Rorty wrote two essays on Vladimir Nabokov. In the first, "The Barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on Cruelty," he interprets Pale Fire and Lolita as examples of the sort of book that “show how our . . . private obsessions with the achievement of a certain sort of perfection, may make us oblivious to the pain and humiliation we are causing”

(141)³. In the second, his "Introduction" to the Everyman's Library edition of Pale Fire⁴, he further explicates the interpretation of Pale Fire he began in the first essay.

Contrary to the aestheticist rhetoric for which Nabokov is well known and on which Stow explicitly relies (recall the "tell-tale tingle between the shoulder blades"), both essays emphasize the capacity of the novel to generate moral reflection about our basic responsibilities to other people. As Rorty sees it, Pale Fire dramatizes the potential cruelty of aesthetic obsessions and, by extension, the problematic potential of theorizing aesthetic pleasures as separate from all serious moral considerations. Rorty suggests that the novel does this by seducing the reader into sharing the aesthetic pleasures of Charles Kinbote and then, later, by connecting that blissful pursuit—along with the reader—to cruelty. "At the end of the book," writes Rorty, "we realize that we do not really *want* to feel as warmly as we did about the character with whom we have been hanging out, the one whose company we enjoyed so much" (PF xiii). The ability of real readers to identify with literary characters makes literature aesthetically pleasant. But in Rorty's view, it also makes its moral potential real. The empathy we share with Kinbote, as with Shade, is "as real as we are," he writes (xiii).

Rorty's reading of "literary" texts like Pale Fire is marked by the same audacity that distinguishes his reading of "philosophical" ones. He replaces old, puzzling questions with new and useful ones. Rorty thinks that to buy into the traditional narrative about what purposes texts like Pale Fire serve prior to actually reading them is to "cook the books" (CIS 76). For him, good reading is like good writing: it breaks "the crust of

³ Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, [New York: Cambridge, 1990]. Hereafter cited as CIS.

⁴ Richard Rorty, "Introduction." Pale Fire. By Vladimir Nabokov, [New York: Knopf, 1992. v – xvii]. Cited hereafter as PF.

convention” (66). Just as in a basic way the writer renews the relation of reader to language, the literary critic proposes a new relation between reader and reading. Both involve a number of choices. The literary critic, like the writer, must choose what to include and, with greater difficulty perhaps, what to exclude. Her task is not merely to relay from writer to reader the "original" writing itself. Rather, she must create, choosing what material is most relevant for her purpose while leaving out material of only secondary relevance to that purpose.⁵ Her "reading" therefore may be and often is, preposterous, something very different from what an author may have intended. She may lay emphasis on a word or expression or passage from an author's closing pages by introducing that word or expression or passage early in her own narrative. She may put the last word first and the first last. She might then draw selectively from the body of her chosen literary text, but only as it serves her needs.

Just as writers worry about producing the same old stories, Rorty is worried that, to its own detriment, Western intellectual culture tells itself the same old story about how culture is divided up, about the separation of the scientific from the moral and the moral from the aesthetic. He worries about “the possibly suffocating effect of [these] traditional divisions between ‘spheres of culture’” (66). The “traditional divisions” represent, for Rorty, another crust of convention. He thinks subscribing to these divisions prevents us from taking seriously enough what the Romantics expressed—“that a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change” (7). Thus Rorty's literary criticism challenges the cultural imagination of the aesthetic as autonomous and, hence, morally neutral.

⁵ If she is a courier, she is like Hermes.

Rorty's reading of Pale Fire is an elaboration of this idea. It lends plausibility to the story that, over the course of the past two hundred years, works of imaginative description have replaced theoretical treatises as the primary vehicles of moral progress. Moral progress of the sort Rorty believes is useful to liberal democracy is a matter of expanding the range of one's imagination to include the sorts of persons it previously excluded. He writes:

This process of coming to see other human beings as "one of us" rather than as "them" is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like. This is a task not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel. 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 had 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. (xvi)

Gesturing back to one of the most moving passages of Pale Fire, Rorty concludes his reading with this basic assertion: "That poor lame boy trying to get his spastic brother out of the range of the stones hurled by schoolchildren will remain a familiar sight in all countries, but a slightly less frequent one in countries where people read novels" (xvi – xvii). If we identify with the description of his response to the novel, we might find more appealing Rorty's placement of literature next to rather than separate from the political sphere.

In “The Barber of Kasbeam,” Rorty offers further reason for us to suspect that his description of the political relevance of literary works is one we ought to embrace. He reminds us that literary language is necessarily connected to literalized language. For a reader to understand what sort of literary experiment is being run, that experiment must make use of the series of literalized metaphors with which people tell themselves the stories of their lives. This literalized, familiar kind of language is, as Plato observed, morally coded: it is always implicitly suggesting that we take some things as good and others as bad. Rorty writes:

[T]he point of writing well is precisely to break the crust of convention. But the fact that literary merit is . . . not a matter of success in telling us what we have always known but could not express satisfactorily, should not obscure the fact that literary language is, and always will be, parasitic on ordinary language, and in particular, on ordinary moral language. (167)

He then asserts, “you cannot create a memorable character without thereby making a suggestion about how your reader should act” and in a footnote adds, “For the concreteness of a character in a novel is a matter of being embedded in situations to which the reader can, out of his own life, imagine analogues” (167). For a character to be good, the character must be memorable, and to be memorable is to have a connection with a reader’s form of life, to familiar language. A total disjunction between novel character and familiar (and hence normative) language would not only be unmemorable, it would be unthinkable. So on the reading of Pale Fire Rorty offers, our ability to identify with Kinbote’s aesthetic bliss makes our pity for John and Hazel Shade all the

more powerful. We are reading a fictional work, but that does not mean that our responses to that work are also fictional. They are, again, as real as we are.

Rorty anticipates Stow's objection to this political reading of Nabokov and he does so, ironically, in Kinbotic style: he says it in a footnote.⁶ Although in this footnote Rorty appears to be commenting on Kinbote, we might plausibly read it as Rorty's own self-commentary. He says that Kinbote finds "a motif in the lives of others" and adds, "Kinbote is not 'making something up' when he reads the story of Zembla between the lines of Shade's poem, any more than he is 'representing inaccurately'" (160). "He is reacting to a stimulus, and thereby creating a new stimulus" (160). Kinbote's reading illustrates the point that "a perverse, egocentric commentary . . . is still a commentary," Rorty says (161). Similarly, Rorty is reacting to the stimulus of a creative work and, with his own response, creating a new stimulus for others. Elsewhere explains:

People react to intolerable ecstasy or hopeless longing or intense pain as best they can, and once we leave the realm of action for that of writing, it is no service to anyone to ask whether a reaction was "appropriate." For appropriateness is a matter of taking up a place within a preestablished and familiar pattern. (160 – 161)

Charles Kinbote writes an artful commentary, John Shade writes "Pale Fire," Sybil Shade translates Donne and Marvell into French, Nabokov writes Pale Fire, and Rorty writes "The Barber of Kasbeam" and his introduction to Pale Fire.

Stow is not alone in assuming that Charles Kinbote is as bad a critic as he is a person. Amy Reading, for one, similarly interprets Rorty's criticism as problematically

⁶ Interestingly, this commentary on "the text" (his own), like Kinbote's commentary on Shade's poem, is six times the length of the primary text itself.

Kinbotic because she likewise assumes that Kinbote is not just a bad person but a bad reader. In “Vulgarity’s Ironist,” Reading attempts to “resuscitate the furor surrounding Pale Fire’s publication in order to uncover the mechanisms by which Nabokov has yielded such successful interpretive control” (80).⁷ The evidence of this interpretive control is aestheticist criticism, or readings that presume the autonomy of aesthetic objects from any social context. She maintains that “by defining reading as passive enjoyment and interpretation as puzzle-solving, Nabokov keeps literary interpretation within the canon and firmly under the dictatorship of the author” (85). She therefore finds fault with critics who, by reading Pale Fire according to the aesthetic criteria Nabokov lays out in his own criticism, “ced[e] enormous critical terrain” (80). Among other limitations, this concession has prevented critics from recognizing that Pale Fire is “a deeply social novel in disguise,” she argues, because it mobilizes what she calls high- and middlebrow “cultural anxieties about reading and taste” (80). Reading’s central insight, however, is that the willingness of critics to read Pale Fire as Nabokov would have them read it has stifled critical creativity. For Reading, it seems, readings should be (what Stanley Fish calls) “self-consuming artifacts”: they should explore and at the same time open to exploration more and more “critical terrain.”

Yet, troublingly, Reading fences in the new critical terrain she maps out. Assuring us that “the novel *is* the woefully misguided literary criticism it aims to prevent” (her emphasis, 82) and that Charles Kinbote’s commentary “demonstrates a negative example of how to read literarily” (82), Reading believes that the novel shows

⁷ Amy Reading, “Vulgarity’s Ironist: New Criticism, Midcult, and Nabokov’s Pale Fire,” [Arizona Quarterly. 62.2 (2006): 77 – 98]. Cited "VI" as needed.

us how *not* to read. That Charles Kinbote is a *bad* reader is, for Reading, a factual detail about Pale Fire not up for interpretive grabs. In this sense, Kinbote is a corner piece of the interpretive jigsaw puzzle Reading imagines herself as completing. A reading is not made, but made to fit with a “reality,” Reading posits.

This paradoxical attitude—of disappointment with the limiting readings of others on the one hand, and of satisfaction with her way of reading the critical role of Charles Kinbote on the other—causes Reading, like Stow, to underestimate the novelty of Richard Rorty’s interpretation of the novel. She never considers the possibility that Kinbote is not wrong for ignoring the biography of John Shade when between the lines of the “Pale Fire” poem he instead reads the fantastic tale of Zembla. She seems to take the biographical details about Shade—that Kinbote supplies no less—as the “real” or perhaps “deep” meaning of “Pale Fire.” Thus for Reading it is as though, by likewise ignoring biographical details about Nabokov, Rorty frivolously scatters all the interpretive puzzle pieces.

Rorty’s criticism represents an attempt to get beyond the jigsaw puzzle-solving model of reading. He agrees with Isaiah Berlin’s claim that “the romantics exploded the jigsaw-puzzle of inquiry” (83).⁸ While Reading concerns herself with “uncover[ing]” how Nabokov successfully hemmed in the last forty years of criticism by promoting aestheticism in his own criticism and commentary, Rorty concerns himself with making something new out of the text, with responding to a stimulus. Reading still believes she can get it right; Rorty just wants to say something new.

⁸ Richard Rorty, “Grandeur, profundity, and finitude.” Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers IV, [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 73-88].

In his own essay on “Idealism and Textualism,” Rorty captures the distinction between his way of reading and Reading’s/Stow’s. He writes that his model “is not the curious collector of clever gadgets taking them apart to see what makes them work and carefully ignoring any extrinsic end they may have, but the psychoanalyst blithely interpreting a dream or a joke as a symptom of homicidal mania” (151).⁹ Once we give up on the possibility of “getting it right” or of “uncover[ing] the mechanisms” of writing as Reading aims to do, we can drop questions like “Is this way of reading appropriate?” or “Is it true?” in favor of questions like, “Can Rorty find support for his reading of Pale Fire?” or, more to the point, “Is Rorty’s reading persuasive?”

Kinbote is a cruel aesthete not because of how he reads “Pale Fire” but because of how he treats John Shade. “Pale Fire” is a text to Charles Kinbote just as Pale Fire is a text for us. While as a reader Kinbote is under no obligation to Shade the author, as a person Shade is someone about whom Kinbote should be more curious. Stow offers no reading of the character of Kinbote but assumes a stable interpretative reference point—the *bad* critic. For Stow, Rorty is a bad commentator on Nabokov just as Kinbote is a bad commentator on John Shade. Because Stow tries to argue against rather than read Rorty—to see what, if anything, is new—he simply pits his assumptions about reading against Rorty’s own.

Reading says that “the manner of reading that Nabokov disseminated”—and here she appears to have in mind Pale Fire—“is curiously passive, but corresponds exactly to his pedagogical theories” (VI 83). She is referring to Charles Kinbote’s aestheticism. In it, she finds a perfect “correspondence” with Nabokov’s classroom

⁹ Richard Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism, [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982]. Cited CP as needed.

criticism. For Reading, this sort of correspondence represents a “discovery” of some magnitude. But not only does Reading produce the correspondence she claims to discover, she reproduces the very way of reading she hopes to critique.

Like Reading, Stow relies heavily on what it would appear Nabokov believes. He adopts a definition of literary criticism provided by Nabokov (recall "the tell-tale tingle") and frequently appeals to Nabokov's own self-commentary as a stable interpretive reference point, as the truth about his creative work. For example, he writes: "Vladimir Nabokov, an author who continually claimed that a 'work of art has no value whatsoever to society' paradoxically found himself at the center of a debate" (65); "Indeed, those novels which lend themselves most readily to "political" readings--*Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*--novels which even Nabokov was prepared to admit bridged the 'aesthetic distance' between his life and the political events surrounding it" (68); "Indeed, when Rorty makes the claim which enmeshes him in the debate discussed at the outset of this article--that 'novels rather than moral treatises are the most useful vehicles of moral education'--we should perhaps consider this view, so opposed to everything Nabokov has to say about the novel, a possible dead-end created by Nabokov" (69); and in the final sentence of the essay when he writes of "Nabokov, an author who abhorred 'the literature of social intent' and didacticism in all its forms" (75). This reliance betrays the extent to which Stow, like Reading, conceives of reading as a process of “getting it right,” where the “it” is a thing one discovers from the author's statements "outside" the text.

But even if we were to rely on Nabokov's commentaries, the case against Rorty's political reading is not as clear as Stow would like it to seem. While Nabokov the writer

may have insisted on the independence of his own literary works from any politics, as a critic, and specifically in his commentary on Don Quixote, Nabokov acknowledged the connection between “the literary” and “the political.”

Nabokov's political reading of Don Quixote

Richard Rorty never refers to Nabokov's Lectures on Don Quixote.¹⁰ They receive no mention in “The Barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on Cruelty,” nor are they referred to in his introduction to the Everyman Library edition of Nabokov's Pale Fire. But perhaps the likelihood that the famously well read Rorty did not read these Lectures lends further credibility to the interpretation of Pale Fire he offers in his two brief but intriguing essays.

Among the lectures delivered by Nabokov on Don Quixote in a seminar on the novel he taught at Harvard in the spring of 1952, is one on the theme of “Cruelty and Mystification” in the novel. Nabokov feels “there is something about the ethics of our book that casts a livid laboratory light on the proud flesh of some of its purpler passages” (51). Responding to critics like Aubrey Bell who see in the Castilian classic only humor and humanity, Nabokov asks flatly, “What about the hideous cruelty—with or without the author's intent or sanction—which riddles the whole book and befouls its humor?” (52). From Nabokov's viewpoint, Don Quixote “is one of the most bitter and barbarous books ever penned” (52).

¹⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, Lectures on Don Quixote. Ed. Fredson Bowers, [San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983].

Nabokov uses the opportunity of his lecture to examine the “purpler passages” of the novel in support of this contention.¹¹ And fabulous teacher that he was, his pedagogical strategy is a literary one. To usher his audience into the story he wants to tell about cruelty in Don Quixote, Nabokov relates a legend about King Philip the Third of Spain. King Philip the Third, he says, noticed from the vantage of his palace balcony the strange behavior of a young man down below “who was sitting on a bench in the shade of a cork oak (*quercus suber*) with a book and frantically clapping his thigh and giving vent to wild shrieks of laughter” (53). According to the legend, Nabokov reports, Philip remarked to his courtier that the student was either crazy or was reading Don Quixote. The courtier scurried off and verified that, indeed, he was reading Don Quixote. By invoking the King Philip legend, Nabokov incites his students to identify with this amused student reader. By then addressing the character, he is also [?] able to address his audience; by considering the response of the character, he implicitly asks his students to consider theirs. Nabokov asks, “What exactly provoked this outburst of wild merriment in the gloomy world of the Philips?” (53), and goes on to catalogue cruelty within the novel, cruel acts which, when lined up, are more criminal than comedic. Nabokov says, for example:

¹¹ He is careful to remind his audience that he is looking at the book “from a special viewpoint”; “there are many other things in our knight’s adventures,” he says (53). Nabokov candidly confesses that the reading of Don Quixote he offers is *a* reading—one way of interpreting the novel among a plurality of possible others. Rorty takes this fact for granted in his own criticism. That Rorty does so does not mean that he tries to dupe his readers; rather, Rorty’s rhetoric reflects the different community to whom and for whom he writes. Nabokov’s candidness serves his uninitiated audience—a lecture hall of undergraduate students of the novel. Rorty’s assumption reflects his audience of literary initiates—citizens of a literary culture.

Attitudes of excruciating pain such as that of Sancho Panza in . . . Chapter 15 provoke another moan of mirth. By this time Don Quixote has lost half an ear—and nothing can be funnier than losing half an ear except of course losing three-quarters of an ear—and now, please, notice the blows that he received during one day and one night: (1) wallops with packstaves, (2) a punch on the jaw at the inn, (3) sundry blows in the dark, (4) a bang on the pate with an iron lantern. And the next day is nicely started by his losing most of his teeth when stoned by some shepherds. The fun becomes positively rollicking by chapter 17 when in the famous blanket-tossing scene, some artisans . . . amuse themselves at Sancho's expense by tossing him in a blanket as men do with dogs at Shrovetide—a casual allusion to human and humorous customs. The young student whom King Philip observes is again convulsed as he reads in chapter 18 of Don Quixote and Sancho vomiting over each other. And what fun there is in the scene of the galley slaves . . . (53 – 54)

Over the course of the lecture, Nabokov makes recourse to the character of the student reader of the King Philip legend five times. Five times Nabokov brings his audience back to the student reader's knee-slapping, implicitly inviting his audience to question the his mirth and, by implication, [?] their own response to the novel.

But Nabokov uses other pedagogical tricks as well. As he describes in detail a pathetic Quixote strung up by his hand hanging from a barred window, for instance, “despairing, bewildered, and bellowing like a bull” (55), he refers to “presumably millions of readers doubled up with laughter, as probably were many in the crowd sixteen centuries earlier when the martyred God of those people was given vinegar instead of

water” (55). This comparison juxtaposes the suffering of Don Quixote with the suffering of Jesus Christ, sacrificing easy comedy for tragic effect. What once seemed funny is suddenly shocking. By re-contextualizing events within the novel and in such a way that his students first become cruelty’s perpetrators and later its victims, he forces his students to question themselves.

Before turning to the second part of Don Quixote Nabokov reflects:

Let none think, however, that the symphony of mental and physical pain presented in Don Quixote is a composition that could be played only on musical instruments of the remote past. Nor should anyone suppose that those strings of pain are twanged nowadays only in remote tyrannies behind iron curtains. Pain is still with us, around us, among us. I am not referring to such trivialities—though they also have their place in the history of pain—as the banged heads and kicked groins and punched noses that are such delectable features of our movies and comics. What I have in mind are more trivial things, under the best of governments. Now and then freakish children in our schools are still tortured by their comrades as thoroughly as Childe Quixote was tortured by his enchanters; and now and then bums, colored and white, are as lustily kicked in the shins by burly policemen as the armored tramp and his squire were on the roads of Spain.

(56)

Nabokov's commentary draws a connection between literature and politically relevant morality. Like Rorty, he recognizes a connection between the ability of readers to identify with imaginative characters and the ability of those readers to identify with other

people. As a critic (rather than as author), Nabokov shows that a political reading of a literary work is still a reading.

In his commentary on the second part of the book, Nabokov focuses on the characters of the Duke and the Duchess who, like Quixote, have read the books of chivalry and, he points out, “are very fond of them, in a sleek, chop-licking way” (62). The cruelty of these characters—whose castle Nabokov calls “the torture house” (62)—is unbridled. Their servants, too, “just cannot fight off the temptation to play with the lean madman and the larded simpleton” (63). Redescrining the characters in terms of their relation to cruelty, Nabokov shakes the romantic change out of the story’s pockets. Commenting on this second part, Nabokov’s invocations of the student continue: “I suppose our friend, the young student-reader is again convulsed at this point” (64). And, finally, he remarks on the silence surrounding Sancho’s humiliation as governor, which, he says, “reminds one,” says Nabokov, “of young school bullies who have been tormenting a fat weak boy” (72). Nabokov catalogues all the “purple passages” of Don Quixote. Recapping his lecture on “Cruelty and Mystification” in his next lecture, he explains why:

It seemed to me that in our brutal day, when one of the few things that may save our world is Freedom from Pain, the complete and permanent outlawing of any kind of cruelty, it seemed to me that under these circumstances I was justified in drawing your attention to the cruelty of the so-called fun in our book [Don Quixote]. (75)

Nabokov, like all readers, reads imaginatively under certain circumstances and for particular purposes, privileging some parts of the text, ignoring others, but always in

some measure creating. What his lectures on Don Quixote show is that Nabokov's concerns are at once aesthetic and moral, and he experiments with his means. Whereas in Pale Fire and Lolita he seduces the rapacious reader into Kinbotic and Humbertian fantasies over which the reader can gain no control and about which they receive no authorial reassurance--when, that is, those fantasies victimize--, in the Lectures Nabokov figures his audience into the story he tells and, after making the reader a character, calls into question the response of the character to cruelty.

Conclusion

Nabokov's strategy links ties him to the critical traditional within which Rorty writes. Just as Nabokov emphasizes the identification of the reader of Don Quixote with the cruelties inflicted upon Don Quixote and Sancho, Rorty emphasizes the identification of the reader of Pale Fire with the cruel aestheticism of Charles Kinbote. Both literary readings take a political turn. The way Nabokov reads Don Quixote lends credibility to Rorty's reading of Pale Fire, though Nabokov's "authority" in this regard derives not from his role as author, but from his practice as critic. His reading of Don Quixote shows that like all literary critics or, indeed, like all readers, he reads for particular purposes for particular audiences and, furthermore, that such purposes are legitimately political.

Nor does Rorty believe that those to whom his literary criticism may appeal, appeal to literature merely for the purposes of practicing criticism. Rather members of a literary intellectual culture turn to novels, poems, and plays to take hints about what purposes to give themselves. Political literary practices affect literary practitioners. These practitioners, except in exceptional cases, are also citizens in a liberal democracy and, as such, ought to be concerned with balancing their pursuit of private perfection with

a basic responsibility to others. While the conversations are textual, the readers are flesh and blood. As he makes a politically liberal appeal on literary grounds, then, Rorty writes in the double-mode of critic and citizen. He takes seriously, just as those within the fields of literary and political studies should, the idea of the political literary.

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