

Reading *Lolita* in the Classroom

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Herner Sæverot's engagement with Richard Rorty and Vladimir Nabokov on the topic of moral education brings an illuminating perspective to the use of literature and art in classrooms. There is much to value and reflect on in Sæverot's nuanced discussion, especially his emphasis on the unexpected as an educative phenomenon and the space he opens for consideration of the educator's role in the encounter between reader and text. So I begin with a qualified endorsement of the essay's central claim that moral education is inherently a matter of contingency. That being said, my primary aim here is to develop two considerations that render that endorsement "qualified." The first concerns an interpretation, overlooked by Rorty and Sæverot, of Nabokov's view of the relationship between the four essential qualities of art. Tracing the implication of this interpretation, I suggest a more robust role for educators seeking to draw on literature in the service of moral education.

Sæverot shares Rorty's belief that novels like *Lolita* do indeed carry moral content (though not moral prescriptions), and accepts his insistence that curiosity, kindness, tenderness, and ecstasy not only cannot be synthesized, but are inherently in tension with one another. The hoped for effect of the novel, Rorty and Sæverot agree, is that a reader may become aware that she sometimes lacks kindness, tenderness, and curiosity — in short, aware of her own cruelty. Sæverot differs with Rorty in the means by which he thinks the reading experience achieves such an effect. For Rorty, each reader brings her own commitments and political agenda to the experience, so that only one predisposed to value these qualities (a liberal democrat, for example) will experience this connection between ecstasy and awareness of cruelty. Sæverot follows Nabokov in rejecting this notion, viewing the injection of readers' biases into the novel as a poisoning of art. Instead, he ascribes to novels the power to transform the reader in surprising, unforeseeable ways. Both views highlight the contingency of moral education, but the source of that contingency is starkly different between them. For Rorty, it lies in the cultural and political situatedness of each individual, while for Sæverot it apparently lies in the mysterious and unpredictable nature of aesthetic experience.

I suspect that the source of this divergence lies in a confusion in both Rorty and Sæverot's treatment of the elements of art identified by Nabokov. Even without advancing Nabokov's parenthetical claim as a full-blown aesthetic theory, it seems possible to interpret it in a straightforward way that simply bypasses the dilemma over which Sæverot finds himself at odds with Rorty. Nabokov clearly suggests that curiosity, kindness, tenderness, and ecstasy make up ingredients of the broader aesthetic state, "bliss". Rorty's evaluation of *Lolita*, however, simply conflates, either through carelessness or sleight-of-hand, the notion of ecstasy with that of aesthetic bliss, so that if ecstasy is possible without kindness, say, then the whole structure crumbles. As Sæverot notes, Rorty "indicates that it is possible to

experience this excitement [ecstasy] if the person is not curious, tender, and kind. Hence there is no connection between curiosity, tenderness, kindness and ecstasy.” This conclusion, however, simply does not follow. Humbert certainly exemplifies the possibility of ecstasy without any trace of curiosity, but it is perfectly sensible to distinguish the state Humbert achieves in his conquest of *Lolita* from the state achieved by Nabokov in writing the novel. Humbert lacks curiosity, and this absence infects and corrupts all his projects, twisting love into obsession, and robbing his ecstasy of aesthetic fulfillment. I believe the novel itself suggests this interpretation, in its description of Humbert’s relentless self-loathing and the insatiability of his addiction to possessing *Lolita*. But the afterword attached to later editions of the book by Nabokov makes the point almost explicit. There he describes his desire to write the novel in suggestive terms that invite the comparison with Humbert. “The first little throb of *Lolita* went through me late in 1939 or early in 1940,” he informs us, emphasizing the urgent need he felt, such that his attempts to abandon it were interrupted “by the thought that the ghost of the destroyed book would haunt my files for the rest of my life.”¹ Part of Nabokov’s purpose for commenting on the book in this unusual fashion is to distinguish it, as a work of literature, from simple pornography. The difference, on my reading, is that the novel as a work of art includes all four components of bliss, whereas pornography (or social commentary, or escapist entertainment), like Humbert, fails to exhibit at least one of these.

Sæverot offers an important corrective to Rorty’s one-sided view of the interaction between reader and novel, by defending Nabokov’s belief in the power of art to “master” and transform the reader’s moral consciousness. The value of this insight, though, is undermined by Sæverot’s failure to challenge Rorty’s conflation of ecstasy and bliss. Thus, while noting that ecstasy can be problematic (as in the case of Humbert) by enabling solipsistic obsession and cruelty, he is led to assert that ecstasy can also “produce a moral impact on the reader,” the point that Rorty, in his view, neglects. The problem with this claim is that it provides us no means of understanding these contradictory effects, aside from the “magical” quality mentioned in the book’s prescript and quoted approvingly by Sæverot. But this is John Ray’s description of the power of Humbert’s words, and it is a mistake to attribute the view to Nabokov. After all, the novel’s key moral insight is not that Humbert is a monster and *Lolita* his victim. Instead, it is the recognition that Humbert, in addition to being a monster, is also *us*. Rorty eloquently conveys this point as he discusses Nabokov’s account of the most important episodes in the text, all overlooked by Humbert:

It dawns on this reader that he himself was just as inattentive....The reader, suddenly revealed to himself as, if not hypocritical, at least cruelly incurious, recognizes his *semblable*, his brother, in Humbert....Suddenly *Lolita* does have a “moral in tow.” But the moral is not to keep one’s hands off little girls but to notice what one is doing, and in particular to notice what people are saying. For it might turn out, it very often does turn out, that people are trying to tell you that they are suffering.²

The missing element, in Humbert and in careless readers, is curiosity, one quality separating ecstasy from a true state of aesthetic experience. The achievement of moral insight through reading *Lolita* is not, as Sæverot would have it, a matter of art’s

behaving “in a magical or unpredictable way as it conjures the reader into a state of tenderness.” It is a matter of engaging the text with attentiveness to the suffering of others and openness to the text’s implication of the reader’s own behavior.

This is not to deny the contingency of moral education, but it does call into question the nature and extent of that contingency. Sæverot’s suggestions to explore the history of suffering and present students with surprises and challenges are worthwhile, but nevertheless leave a teacher relying on luck and the magical qualities of art. Nabokov’s afterword, however, implies a more direct strategy. There, as Rorty recognizes, Nabokov calls our attention to subtle clues and hidden connections that guide us to the novel’s moral and emotional core. I suggest that what we have here is Nabokov taking a pedagogical stance, and a didactic one at that. This is so in the everyday sense of the term, in that Nabokov inserts himself between reader and text, and guides our awareness of the text in a particular way. But it also coheres with the long Continental *Didaktik* pedagogical tradition that (1) takes the fundamental feature of education to be a process of *Bildung* or self-formation, (2) understands learning as a hermeneutic encounter between student and world,³ and (3) avoids dogmatic prescriptions in favor of “restrained teaching” that seeks the active participation and autonomy of students.⁴ The contingencies of students’ social contexts and personal interests are embedded in the encounter, as is the texts’ unpredictable influence. But the teacher is in a position to grasp the former in a way unavailable to the artist, and should have the sensitivity and aesthetic awareness to nudge students’ toward the latter’s transformative potential. For these reasons, the role of educator should not be confused with that of artist, nor be reduced to a mysterious notion of contingency bordering on the arbitrary.

1. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 311–12.

2. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 163–64.

3. Frede V. Nielsen, “Music (and Arts) Education from the Point of View of Didaktik and Bildung,” in *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education*, ed. Liora Bresler (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 271.

4. Stefan Hopmann, “Restrained Teaching: The Common Core of Didaktik,” *European Educational Research Journal* 6, no. 2 (2007): 112–13.