

with a gift for well-shaped anecdotes and for perceiving the uncanny in the everyday. She had no shortage of material – from the “help” in the house who went suddenly insane in the middle of the night, to lunatic letters from fans, the pretensions of Hollywood directors (she refused to write a film for Lucille Ball), and the ins and outs of sixteen-year-old Laurence’s career as a jazz musician. Her insights into her own novels are fascinating and her accounts of the agoraphobia and depression of her later years unflinching. She wrote only three sharp letters, one to an uninvited guest who stayed for six hours, one asking her mother to cease commenting adversely on her appearance, and one to her husband reproaching him for belittling her continually and undermining her literary career. Alas, only the first letter was actually sent.

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Jessica R. Feldman, *Saul Steinberg’s Literary Journeys: Nabokov, Joyce, and Others* (Charlottesville and London: Virginia University Press, 2021, \$39.95). Pp. 322. ISBN 978 0 8139 4511 8.

A full-length monograph on the work of the artist Saul Steinberg is a welcome arrival. “The art world doesn’t quite know where to place me,” Steinberg once commented, and his vast *oeuvre* of line drawings, paintings and mixed-media assemblages has been accordingly understudied.<sup>1</sup> Steinberg confounded many of the categories by which the cultural field of the post-1945 US art scene was organized: he was an experimentalist in the modernist tradition and a successful commercial artist, one who drew cartoons for the *New Yorker* but also exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art. He also referred to himself as “a writer who can’t write” (33). This last enigma provides the starting point for Jessica R. Feldman’s *Saul Steinberg’s Literary Journeys*, which approaches his works as one might a literary text, teasing out the meanings of Steinberg’s literariness. In doing so, it reads Steinberg alongside two of his favourite authors, Vladimir Nabokov and James Joyce, identifying common ground between them: the mobilization of parody and spatial imagination. The case of the Nabokov connection is given extra weight by the fact that the two became good friends, after they both published regularly in the *New Yorker* in the late 1940s and circulated in the East Coast émigré intellectual community. They held a literary canon in common, comprising Gogol, Flaubert, and Joyce, and admired one another’s work. “A mind like his,” reported Steinberg of Nabokov in one letter, “serious and playful, is a rarity” (14). Steinberg never met Joyce, by contrast, but we know that he read him first in the 1940s after his emigration to the United States and did so periodically for the remainder of his life. In his own words, Steinberg “took confidence” from Joyce’s use of “the power of the microscopic elements” of his own biography, and from his ability “to do what he wants and still be great and magnificent.” By placing Steinberg in dialogue with these two novelists, Feldman shows how their deployments of parody and the spatial organization of their imaginations function across and between text and image, creating constellations of influence and mutual illumination.

<sup>1</sup> Jean vanden Heuvel, “Straight from the Hand and Mouth of Steinberg,” *Life*, 10 Dec. 1965, 66.

The coverage of *Saul Steinberg's Literary Journeys* is considerable. It devotes chapters to a wide range of Steinberg's work throughout his long career, from his maps and postcards to his autobiographical engagements and table assemblages. These are interspersed with chapters dealing with Nabokov and Joyce, in which their fiction is read through a lens calibrated to Steinberg's idiosyncratic methods. Feldman places herself in the tradition of formalist criticism, prioritizing the internal organization of art objects, the way they constellate our attention, pose questions about their own construction, and open up multiple interpretive paths that ramify into labyrinths. She is very skilled at this mode of criticism, and Steinberg's work emerges from the book richer and more beguiling than ever. Feldman models and celebrates the kind of intellectual pleasure that Steinberg offers us, demanding implicitly that we return to him over again, look more carefully, develop our qualities of attention, notice more, *see* more, just as we might on rereading *Lolita* or *Ulysses*. It must be admitted that, for those familiar with the scholarship on the two novelists, the readings of Joyce and Nabokov are perhaps not always as exhilarating as are those of Steinberg. By now, it is difficult to get excited about Joyce's use of myth. The chapter on Nabokov's often ignored novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, however, is particularly sensitive and illuminating, particularly in its anticipation of Steinberg's approach to parody.

The book's method is facilitated and underpinned by Feldman's extensive use of Steinberg's archives, not only of his art but also of his writing and speaking about art and literature. As fortune would have it, Steinberg was a canny and willing self-publicist who provided interviews and commentary to the mass media and art world throughout his career, especially in 1960s and 1970s when his profile was most well-known. On top of that, we have his voluminous correspondence with his friend Aldo Buzzzi, to whom he wrote of his reading habits and other intellectual musings. In short, Steinberg loved to discourse on art – his own and that of others. This means that we have an unusually detailed sense of his intellectual life and the workings of his strange but brilliant mind: his love for the biographies of Gogol and Rimbaud; his obsessions with human noses and crocodiles; his getting bored with Proust, learning carpentry and watching the New York sunsets. These are the cues that Feldman uses as springboards for her readings and they help to sustain our engagement with the book overall. Steinberg was always playful and occasionally, one suspects, whimsical in his pronouncements, but they accumulate to provide an extraordinary insight into a certain type of highly cultured, cosmopolitan mind in the mid-century US. This kind of mind (Nabokov, as Feldman shows, shared it) is now a historical artefact and it is not the least accomplishment of the book to show it in creative practice.

What do we miss from a book like this one, which prioritizes formalist close reading and biographical detail above all? Feldman is clear from the start about her methods and what we will not find in the book's pages. It is worth noting, however, the limits imposed by ahistoricism, which make it difficult to organize one's thinking about the place these three figures occupy in literary and art history. Steinberg, like Nabokov and other transatlantic émigrés in the United States after World War II, understood modernism to be in some sense over, a set of resources to be taken up and played with. At the same time, they Americanized European modernism and mediated it for an audience newly in thrall to its experiments. This is part of the story of postmodernism's emergence as a force in the 1950s and 1960s, and many of the features Feldman rightly identifies in their work – the emphasis on spatial play and cartography, the

particular approach to pastiche and parody, the melding of popular and highbrow traditions, ostentatious self-reflexiveness – are recognizable as distinctively postmodern features of work in art and literature across the cultural field of this period. Nowhere does the term appear, however. Indeed, Joyce is dealt with last in the book, and treated almost as if he were a contemporary of Nabokov and Steinberg rather than their recently deceased antecedent. The fantasy that postwar New York was a cultural extension of interwar Europe may have been entertained by some of the New York intellectuals, but those who had experienced and survived Fascism – like Steinberg and Nabokov – knew better. The elision of these distinctions risks making for a flattened modernism estranged from the historical conditions that created it. However, *Saul Steinberg's Literary Journeys* stands as the best account we have of his artistic processes, and the most convincing argument for why we need to spend more time with his work.

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