As We Like It: Nabokov and the Passions of Reading

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The topic as formulated invites us to think about how the work of those who write on Nabokov divides up, about annotation vs. interpretation, the respective challenges that inevitably await those who undertake such activities, and the cross-overs and sub-categories they imply. Since participants have been generously given "ample latitude to speak on any subject" related to this theme, this paper will explore some of the further divisions that occurred to me when I began to think about the subject, namely admiration and adoration, and their dark doubles, denigration and detestation. The justification for this way of dividing up readers in Nabokov's world is at least fourfold. First, it reminds us of the passionate ways he read his precursors and contemporaries. Second, it helps us understand better some of his most interesting characters, characters as different as Fyodor and Kinbote. They are both readers who annotate and interpret, certainly, but they stay in our minds because they burn with the love of their subjects, and are conversely animated by a passionate antipathy for those whom they view as obstacles to the realization of their respective goals. Third, such a division casts light on some of the cultural assumptions at work in the responses to Nabokov's fiction. Finally, it can assist a new generation of readers in orienting themselves when exchanges about Nabokov's work become particularly heated. Identifying the shifting criteria at work in this play of responses and describing the ways that literary and historical context have acted to redefine the terms at issue will help shed new light on why Nabokov criticism has assumed its current shape.

We cannot realize *As You Like It* if we are always considering it as we understand it. We cannot have *A Midsummer Night's Dream* if our one object in life is to keep ourselves awake with the black coffee of criticism. (G.K. Chesterton)

The topic of this conference as formulated invites us to think about how the work of those who write on Nabokov divides up, about annotation vs. interpretation as choices among others and the cross-overs and sub-categories they imply, and about how prominently this particular author's intentions should figure in our deliberations. Since participants have been generously given "ample latitude to speak on any subject" related to this theme, my paper will explore what I take to be some tacit assumptions in Nabokov criticism and how our attitudes to him affect activities like the ones we're using to ground our discussion here.

I've chosen to approach the subject from this vantage point because it puts the emphasis on something distinctive in Nabokov studies, maybe even the *sine qua non* of them, namely the advocacy and practice of author-influenced, author-based ways of reading. Of course Nabokov led by example in this sense. Anyone who has engaged with the interviews and the lectures, the commentary on *Onegin* and the reviews, knows how strongly he responded to a range of writers, the famous "tingle of the spine," the ones banned from the bedside table, and how centrally an author – someone who believes certain things, makes certain aesthetic choices, knows certain subjects, and who is capable of evoking certain powerful responses – figures in his commentary on those writers. His critics have in large measure followed suit, and the consequences of such a homogeneous response are worth exploring.

What follows is in three sections. In the first I consider Fredric Jameson's take on how academics should approach literature in the new millennium. No prizes for guessing that he doesn't much care for the passion-centred, author-oriented reading just described, and believes that the notions of reading and authorship so widespread in Nabokov studies have largely outlived their usefulness. Considering his very different set of premises will help me clarify, as if in an obverse mirror, the details of and a justification for an alternative approach to the issues he raises. Jameson has strong views not only about history–how the twentieth-century produced a writer like

Nabokov–but about the best way to approach his books and books in general in the twenty-first century, and I think these views too can be instructive. In a second section, I consider briefly how the work of some recent annotators and interpreters depends on the author-based model and has raised questions about the assumptions that have informed Nabokov studies since the 1960s. Here I'm particularly interested in what these critics take to be Nabokov's tactics and strategies of self-presentation, the ways he covers his tracks, disguises his sources, or works at creating a persona and reshaping a career. Identifying a source or an allusion and examining the consequences of its inclusion involves not only reading the fiction but reading the activities and intentions of someone at work half a century or more ago, with all the difficulties that that implies, and I want to some of the implications of this approach. Finally I speculate about the future of Nabokov studies and their relation to the larger enterprise in which they have to this date played an important part.

Part One

In *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson says that "the end of the bourgeois ego" means "the end of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive individual brush stroke." He also claims that "if the poststructuralist motif of the 'death of the subject' means anything socially, it signals the end of the entrepreneurial and inner-directed individualism with its 'charisma' and its accompanying categorical panoply of quaint romantic values such as that of the 'genius'" He notes that "our social order is richer in information and more literate," and concludes: "This new order no longer needs prophets and seers of the high modernist and charismatic type, whether among its cultural products or its politicians. Such figures no longer hold any charm or magic for the subjects of a corporate, collectivized, post-individualistic age; in that case, goodbye to them without regret, as Brecht might have put it: woe to the country that needs geniuses, prophets, Great Writers, or demiurges!"(309-10). For a writer like Jameson, one has to feel passionate about an issue–class privilege, colonialist oppression–if one is to feel passionate about the literature that can be enlisted to help fight against it. If one is looking primarily for "new ways of understanding the conditions of possibility" of

writers from the past, one need not be moved by their work or even think of them as persons at all.

It is not always clear how this new set of circumstances should affect our view of the figures from the past. Sometimes Jameson seems to be saying that this notion of the genius has been permanently revealed for the empty thing it is. According to this view the writers we think of as the giant figures of modernism had no more talent than their contemporaries, no particularly insightful way of looking at things, reading books, or processing their impressions, nothing that made their literary sensibilities markedly different from those of the rest of us. Other times he implies that these figures must now be redescribed because writers like Proust and Kafka and Joyce (he makes specific references to all three in his account of modernism) are best understood and admired as wily strategists. They did a superior job of assessing what was needed in the area where they chose to excel and acted on effecting "a shrew [sic] maximization of [their] own specific and idiosyncratic resources" (306). They had a "capacity to assess the 'current situation' and to evaluate its potential permutation system on the spot" (307). Like great military leaders, they should be studied for the control they took in fluid situations and for their perseverance in achieving their goals. This clearly makes them dominant actors, at least of a sort. There are other, rather more passive figures who were acted on by the events of the age in a way that makes them more difficult for Jameson to locate. In this special category, he singles out Nabokov (in a reference so passing it does not warrant inclusion in the index) linking him to Borges and Beckett, as well as poets like Olson and Zukovsky, figures who, in Jameson's view, "had the misfortune to span two eras and the luck to find a time capsule of isolation or exile in which to spin out unseasonable forms" (305).

In enlisting support for such claims, Jameson displays a range of theoretical interests and an impressive erudition. He includes, for example, extended analyses of music and architecture of the sort that one seldom sees in a work of literary criticism. He is also an avid reader of twentieth-century literature and someone who is very interested in the direction that literary studies was to take at the end of that century (the book was published in 1991). What intrigues me about Jameson's observations is the way they constitute a sort of anti-program for Nabokov studies. What he sees as an outdated romantic

idea concerning how books get written, and the concomitant inspirational value those still willing to talk about the personal and the unique find in such books, is precisely what intrigues many critics about Nabokov's work. The fact that he created it interests them. If genius is "the power of acting creatively under laws of its own organization," they want to know more about those laws and their organizer and about what makes him distinct from others. The individual brush strokes that Jameson dismisses are the "divine details" that Nabokov's annotators and interpreters feel compelled to pay attention to. In short, there is something personal for many of them in all of this. They tend not to think of Nabokov's work as a space where identity is lost, but rather as a place where they can get a better sense of that identity. They tend to believe that the history of which it forms a part is more than a series of interpretations, and that the object of such a reading is a complex truth linked in intriguing ways to someone who was more than an episteme or a matrix of social energies. Armed with such notions, many of them have been devoted semi-exclusively to such reading for a significant part of their lives.

Even admitting that Jameson's aggressive materialist critique of the idea of a unitary self is widespread and powerful, and that everyone from literary critics to cognitive scientists are currently exploring the implications of conceiving the self in radically new ways, it has proved useful as both survival tactic and heuristic device. Those working on Nabokov in particular seem to have reconciled themselves to the Lazarus-like irrepressibility of the much lamented bourgeois ego. It may be naive to think of human beings as centres of experience, with the capacity for self-knowledge, free will, and the like equally distributed and firmly entrenched, but we may well be incapable of doing otherwise, no matter how enthusiastically we endorse notions of the fragmented self or recognize the importance of the automated and routinised behaviours we once thought were our unique creations.[1] Jameson's idea that whole eras have a certain character is also a problem, for it represents a view that Nabokov convincingly discredited in books as different as *Bend Sinister* and *Speak, Memory*. So too for Jameson's rather gloomy characterization of the period in question. This is the sort of idea that Nabokov would

[1] Daniel Dennett claims that it is impossible for a human being to interact with another without attributing intentions to him/her.

have ripped into with relish, since slogans like “the information age” or “the age of technology” are precisely the sort of period markers announcing the powers of the zeitgeist that he warns readers against accepting uncritically. What is more, willingly to characterize oneself as a member of “corporate, collectivized, post-individualized age” is an act of self-abnegation that most of Nabokov’s readers–and perhaps anyone outside of a department of literature–would have trouble performing.[2] Ultimately, Jameson believes that literature matters because, by analyzing its texts as ideological counters and cultural vehicles, readers can discern their utopian elements, which can in turn help them transform the planet. Being more attentive to the surface of a variety of cultural artefacts rather than trying to plumb the depths of canonized works is in his view the best means of realizing this aim. Such an approach seems fraught with misunderstanding and danger to Nabokov, whose readers, addicted to the range of pleasures his texts afford, surface and depth, details and patterns, tend to agree with him.

Another problem is that Jameson rather blithely makes exile sound like a serendipitous career choice for writers born at an awkward time. Twentieth-century history is full of terrible things that happened to real people, including members of Nabokov’s own family. Whatever one thinks of his extraordinary success in pursuing his career in such circumstances, ascribing it to his luck in finding an “island of isolation” suggests that the dangers of a de-personalizing approach might outweigh those posed by its personalizing counterpart. Then there is the difficulty that the groupings Jameson proposes obscure more than they explain, particularly if onee see the forces of history as being arrayed on one’s side, as he does. Nabokov, Beckett and Borges are all writers who spent significant amounts of time away from their native countries at a crucial period in their lives and became internationally known for their distinctive contributions to literature, but formulae that link them together obscure important differences and leave everything of interest still to be said. A third problem involves the cultural impoverishment occasioned by the view of the past Jameson articulates. Whether we take an essentialist view of the canon or a functionalist one, that is, whether we think of great books as

[2] In his defence of such categories, Jameson says that “If we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable” (15).

telling us universal truths about an eternal human nature or consider them texts that for a range of reasons have meant a great deal to many people for a long time, we are going to react badly to the notion that we should say “goodbye to them without regret”. Jettisoning the past in this wholesale way, for that is what would follow for anyone who lost interest completely in these writers as individuals, is no doubt an attractive option for students keen to reduce the amount of reading they have to do, but the defenders of what Jameson characterizes as “inner-directed individualism” have no wish to do that. Finally, we obviously cannot read the way Nabokov told us to read if we take the rather detached attitude that Jameson advocates. We can’t judge literature by the presence or absence of that telltale tingle in the spine, invoke terms like “aesthetic bliss” or “ecstasy” in our praise for it, or use such criteria to justify the inclusion on syllabi of works that evoke such responses. Nor can we assume the existence of a canon or a continuous culture in which such a notion would be meaningful.

There are other problems with Jameson’s formulation. Take the oft-repeated suggestion that “our social order is richer in information” than previous ones. A number of thoughtful people, even those less hostile to buzzwords than he, have suggested that we actually know much less than we did fifty years or so ago. Imagine trying to explain what a router is or what ethernet protocol means and you can see readily enough that whatever we know or are interested in, it is not the technology itself. Then there is his assumption that the influence of charismatic types in the prophet mode would be necessarily baneful. One can see his point when one thinks about the effects of making someone like Marx an intellectual leader and dedicating oneself to imposing versions of his doctrine on the benighted. Cultural figures of a romantic sort whose followers tend to be more benign figures, because even if they are as large a cultural force as, say, Byron, tend not to have large-scale, humanity-changing proposals to advance. Problematic too is Jameson’s equation of “genius” with “prophet” and “seer”, as if writers must aspire to be Blake or Whitman, and genius only comes as part of a prearranged package in which the vatic stance and inspired pronouncements must figure prominently.

Perhaps it will be argued I have loaded the dice by choosing such a sharply political critique. Nabokov famously had nothing but contempt for the politics implicit in the position Jameson outlines.

Small wonder then that we find ourselves in such alien territory when Jameson writes about the literature in which we are so invested. Those who think highly of novels like *Invitation to a Beheading* or *Bend Sinister* could never subscribe the grimly collective assumptions that inform his critique, however much they might be sympathetic to his downplaying the importance of genius and its attributes. Or so the argument goes. Yet we would have obtained much the same result had we chosen Hillis Miller, and his contention that the text depersonalizes, or de Man, who celebrates the gap between intention and meaning and insists that language itself writes, or Derrida, at least the Derrida who claims that writing is "not the exchange of intentions and meanings," or Foucault, with his insistence that the author "does not precede the work" but is simply "a certain functional principle" (Dasenbrock 77). Such critics are, in their different ways, uniformly hostile to the conviction, widely held in Nabokov studies, that we interpret an author in order to understand him and that our efforts represent degrees of success or failure that can be measured. Expressing in 1977 what has certainly become the consensus among poststructuralist critics of various stripes over the past thirty years, Jonathan Culler criticizes the conventional notion of interpretation as naive, because it thinks of the critic as someone involved in "a nostalgic and retrospective process." He argues that we are logically and morally obliged to practice an interpretation that constitutes an attempt to "transform the world, not merely [an] attempt to recover a past–especially because recovery is, in any case, an impossible goal" (120). No matter how many theorists we try, it seems, we end up with equally antithetical views, the theorists on one side, Nabokovians on the other.

In the fifteen years since Jameson's book was published, cultural studies has changed the literary landscape dramatically, at least in universities. This is of course part of a much larger phenomenon that has seen the subject we study shift from something an individual author produces to an interest in literature produced by eras or codes or intertextuality. Could what looks to some like the semi-permanent triumph of this view have a serious effect on the academic readership for a writer like Nabokov? A recent study revealed that the top twenty-five most frequently cited theorists in the journal *Critical Inquiry*, excluding those like Adorno and Heidegger who died before Nabokov,

are–in descending order of popularity–Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, Lacan, Jameson, Said, Habermas, Cavell, Fish, de Man, Rorty, Culler, Deleuze and Guattari, Gombrich, Hillis Miller, Judith Butler, W.J.T. Mitchell, Homi Bhabha, Raymond Williams, Kristeva, Sartre, Arendt, Michael Fried, and Slavoj Zizek.(222-23). As far as I know only one of these–Richard Rorty–has written extensively on Nabokov. Most of the rest have never even acknowledged his existence in print.

Some of you may well be thinking "so what?" at this point. The names just cited are after all theorists, precisely the sort of readers Nabokov often warns us again. They are busy sorting out meta-critical affairs (or not sorting them out, if one takes a less charitable view). Why on earth should we worry about their lack of interest in our guy? In fact, what better means could we have of knowing that Nabokov's future is secure, since the death of theory, if it hasn't already occurred, is surely imminent? Besides, Nabokov is being taught in classrooms every day with great success, and the amount of academic interest his work generates, to judge by the steady stream of material published on him every year, or by conferences dedicated to his work, or by contributions to the very active Nabokov listserv dedicated to him, suggests no imminent waning of interest in time devoted to this particular genius.

Well, a lot depends on how one defines it,[3] but theory is far from dead, at least in North America. On the contrary, many would argue that in some form the politicized postructuralist position has in effect become the new orthodoxy. I am worried that if the twenty-five most quoted figures in *Critical Inquiry* in 2020 are as uninterested in the idea of genius, or aesthetic pleasure, or the attentive close reading that provides that pleasure as the ones in the list I cited above, then those who want to write about Nabokov and teach him in their courses may start feeling even less at home in departments of literature than they do already.

Part Two

Before I muse about the implications of this state of affairs for those keen to write about Nabokov in the twenty-first century, I want to say

[3] In "Theory Ends," *Profession 2005*, 122-28, Vincent B. Leitch argues that the word "has at least half a dozen different meanings, each of which has a distinct reception history and set of effects" (122).

a word about one of the genuine risks of the personalized approach that Jameson dismisses so peremptorily, and the implications this risk has for Nabokov's would-be annotators and interpreters. Some of his most intriguing works of fiction–some would argue all of them–contain puzzles or riddles or extraordinarily complex designs that need to be deciphered, broken the way a code is broken, if the works in question are to be understood properly. Here is of course another reason why seemingly outdated notions like discovering the intentions of someone who has put together a diabolically clever artefact are still relevant. William Paley was, alas, wrong to argue that the universe was like a watch someone discovers on a stroll across the moors, that a complex design presupposes an omnipotent entity that did the designing; but Nabokov's critics are surely right to insist that readers understand that in his universe a complex design means a designer. The acrostic at the end of "the Vane Sisters" is important. He put it there, and readers need to solve it themselves or have it explained to them. *Pale Fire* presents a far more complex and controversial example, and no one who has engaged seriously with it believes that the resolution of puzzles does not figure importantly in making sense of that novel.

Such critics often feel more confident about the possibility of getting it right in such analyses, but it is never easy. The conviction that there is a single correct answer can make for some spirited exchanges among those who are happy to admit they are annotating and interpreting the work of a genius but are unsure about just where the limits of his control are to be found, or what the implications of a given clue or allusion actually are. All this sleuthing has led to some intriguing attempts to uncover moments in Nabokov's career when he deliberately sought to hide certain things in ways that would influence how future generations would read him. Critics confident that they have detected such moments have successfully confirmed the omnipresence of this particular author figure, with a range of interesting consequences. Five recent cases are worth considering in light of this.

An Australian critic, Joanne Morgan, became convinced that *Lolita* was actually an obliquely encoded account of the sexual abuse Nabokov was subjected as a child to by his uncle. Poor scholarship, lapses in logic, and a remarkable deafness to tone made many of her

arguments singularly unconvincing, and this reading has made no headway whatever. The idea that a cryptic personal confession was hiding in plain view in one of the twentieth century's most controversial novels seemed fundamentally wrongheaded to most. Michael Maar made a much more serious contribution to *Lolita* studies when he pointed out Nabokov's possible indebtedness to Heinz von Lichberg's short story, published in 1916 in German, in which a young girl named Lolita is sexually involved with a (slightly) older man. Did Nabokov never mention this work because he wanted to hide something from future readers so as to make his own novel seem more original? Maar's original article was much discussed in the international press, with words like "unconscious borrowing" and "plagiarism" thrown around rather loosely. Maar himself was unhappy with such suggestions since, in his original article (later a book called *The Two Lolitas*, trans. Perry Anderson), he coined the term cryptomnesia as a description of why Nabokov might have failed to mention his acquaintanceship with the story in question. This thesis has not won universal acclaim, but it has excited a series of debates on what Nabokov may have been trying to do when he wrote *Lolita*, and how we should see it as a result. Christopher Caldwell, for example, has argued that "The consensus for the past half-century has been that *Lolita* is not smut because it is a work of original genius. The new controversy raises skeptics' hopes that they can now win the argument on a technicality, simply by running it backward: if *Lolita* is not a work of original genius, then it is smut." He proceeds to draw the bizarre conclusion that "The smart money would seem to be on the proposition that it is both (11)."

Shortly after the appearance of Maar's original article in the *TLS*, Abraham Socher published an intriguing account of how often Robert Frost had crossed Nabokov's path in the 1940s and 50s. Building on this and the matrix of references to America's premier twentieth-century poet in *Pale Fire*, Socher produces a short poem called "Questioning Faces":

> The winter owl banked just in time to pass
> And save herself from breaking window glass.
> And her wings straining suddenly aspread
> Caught color from the last of evening red
> In a display of underdown and quill
> To glassed-in children at the windowsill. (386)

Socher claimed that the creation of the novel was unimaginable without the poem and that it was a key to understanding *Pale Fire*. In the article, he notes that "Nabokov was, like Frost and Shade, the sort of artist who hid his traces" (15). This is ambiguous between "didn't relish the prospect of having his rough drafts made public" and "deliberately withheld information to make sure that things he had borrowed from other writers would be very difficult to trace". I agree with the first claim but am made uneasy by formulations like the second, for a number of reasons. The poem is intriguing, and the links Socher posits plausible enough, but all the differences jump out too. Owls aren't waxwings, near misses aren't direct hits, "false azure" is antithetical to "evening red", "glassed-in children" arguably don't have much to do with *Pale Fire*, and so on. Is the existence of "Pale Fire" really "almost inconceivable" without this poem about a big bird that swerves away from a window, especially when we know from the notebooks that Nabokov was already thinking of birds like waxwings hitting windowpanes before Frost published this poem? The risk involves not so much hyperbolic claims for this or that detail but a curious displacement of emphasis in which the original gets denatured, and, half a century after the event, Nabokov becomes a slightly suspect entity semi-obsessed with making difficulties for readers by disguising his sources. I know he had a lot on his mind when he was composing his novels, I just can't believe we were that high on the list.

The fourth example involves the suggestion of Alexander Dolinin that an allusion to a real life kidnapping roughly contemporaneous with the one imagined in *Lolita* may well have been "a deliberately planted invitation to the reader to do some research in old newspaper files" (Dolinin, p. 11 *TLS* 9 Sept 2005). Dolinin further argues that that search may compel readers to acknowledge the presence of a "superior authorial agency" that added to the details to the press reports included in the actual text of the novel, in order to make the reader/researcher draw certain conclusions about Humbert and his evil designs. It is interesting to think about how this affects our reading of the novel. Dolinin suggests that the newspaper story "haunts" Humbert Humbert, alerting alert readers to what a *sale histoire* his is, even while he seeks to deny its "similarity," he would "never concede that, in spite of his pretensions to poetic grandeur, verbal skills and

sensitivity, he is no better than Frank La Salle [the kidnapper in question], a common criminal and 'moral leper'" (12). He even speculates interestingly about what Humbert's concealing the fact of LaSalle's victim's subsequent death in a car accident since it "might imply that he hides a similar secret concerning Dolores Haze's fate." This in turn he uses to support the reading that "Lolita does not run away with Clare Quilty, but dies in Elphinstone hospital" (15). But neither Humbert's poetic grandeur nor his verbal skills are a pretense, and although he is monstrously insensitive to Lolita's rights as a person, he is sensitive to that insensitivity in ways that are important for making us keep listening to him, in ways that distinguish him from the Frank LaSalles of the world. As for Humbert's tacking on a fake ending by pretending that Lolita didn't die at Elphinstone, why exactly would Nabokov be complicit in this? After all, didn't he call Gray Star, the place where Humbert tells us Lolita did go with her husband and where she does die in childbirth, the capital town of the book? Not only that: readers will need evidence more convincing than this before they replace the detailed series of poignant scenes that conclude this novel with a trick ending that reduces all the human drama to a bizarre puzzle.

So much for the activities of some recent annotators, and their attempts to deal with what they see as Nabokov's importance as a controlling force in the texts in question. Their efforts to understand the deviousness or deceptive wiles of a cryptographer who loves mysteries and wants readers to work hard to resolve them and an author eager to disguise or mislead in other ways, however one regards the conclusions they draw, are more grist for the mill of those who think that the figure of the author is more than just a figure. My final example involves Professor Dolinin again, but this time what is in question is not a detail in a single work but rather an interpretation of Nabokov's career. He has recently argued that, in his attempt to become an English writer, Nabokov had downplayed the Russianness of his early work in order to create the impression that he was an international or rather trans-national writer from the beginning (135). This seemingly uncontroversial assertion about someone who painstakingly worked at creating a persona in the interviews he granted and the autobiography he wrote elicited some extraordinarily bitter exchanges on the Nabokov listserv, a discussion in which Dmitri

Nabokov took a major role. (He was unhappy with the positions advanced by Morgan and Maar and said so at the time.) Issues raised by politics and family honour stirred the controversy to a white heat before it gradually subsided. The nature of the insults heaped on some of Nabokov's most dedicated and selfless readers (not only Dolinin) was astonishing, both for the vitriol in their expression and for the harshness of the claims they advanced. This case might be taken to illustrate a potential downside of the approach Jameson dismisses above. One can be too passionate about the personal, and the author figure isolated in this debate tended to confuse the critical issues at stake when his attitudes or intentions are discussed. Academic disputes can always turn nasty even without family involvement. Given the role Nabokov played when he was alive–for example, writing a commentary on every article in a collection dedicated to his work–and the shadow he has cast over the exegetical activity that followed his death–one thinks of how those who write about him normally discuss Freud or Dostoevsky–those who work on him should resist the temptation to assess interpretations of the work according to the degree of reverence shown the master in them. Nabokov himself was never relentlessly laudatory in evaluating beloved writers like Gogol and Tolstoy, and he was perfectly willing to criticize works in which he thought that they had fallen below the standards they had set themselves. His critics should be encouraged to follow his example in this sense as well, to read writers as if the personal mattered, to eschew hagiography in doing so, and to discourage those who feel the need to personalize everything.

Part Three

At a conference I attended recently, someone compared those giving papers to a sort of politburo, and those in the audience as the ambitious proletariat eager to wrest the seats from those on stage and review their own May Day parade at the next gathering. There certainly is a new generation of Nabokov critics, rightly going about the business of making their own space, but I can't help but think that that process is less dramatic than the rather grim, pseudo-revolutionary one just evoked. They will surely make their mark by building on rather than displacing what has already been done. However one characterizes the transition though, I am a little diffident

about making predictions concerning how Nabokov studies will evolve, for my gifts as a prophet in this regard are a little suspect. Some readers may recall my 1984 suggestion that, while "the otherworld" might well prove to be important in Nabokov's work, his most important secret was like Poe's purloined letter, lying face up on the table. Buoyed by mis-guessing in such spectacular fashion, I kept at it, and in 1992 at the first of these conferences that Maurice Couturier organized, I offered as "the last word" in Nabokov criticism the possibility that Conrad's romantic egoism, the contingency of self-creation in Proust, and Thomas Mann's complex ironies were subjects Nabokov's critics might think worth pursuing. And at the end of the 1990s, at a conference in Paris, in my peroration, I quoted Colin McGinn's claim that it was easier to distinguish good from evil than it was to learn French, offered my own experience as strong supporting evidence, predicted that a new generation of Nabokov critics would have to recognize the sometimes competing claims of the ethical and the aesthetic in his best work, and argued that we should think about redescribing it as thriving on the tension it creates between the intellectual and the moral virtues. I am still awaiting the rush to take up these carefully considered suggestions.

So much for the obligatory topos of modesty in this regard. My contrarian instincts still make me want to believe that, however it evolves, Nabokov studies will continue to be the sort of free-ranging conversation that blends interpretation and annotation of an appropriately adventurous kind, theoretically inflected by a whole range of ideas about how literature should be read. New discoveries of the riddle solving kind there will certainly be, and recent work on annotations looks has been richly rewarding, but I'm skeptical about the possibility of such new readings changing in major fashion the way we view him. Whatever we do, I think these activities will be author-based in the broad sense that I have been describing, and the more useful for being so. Large questions like the ultimate relevance of intentions will continue to occupy us, because we will continue to care about what this particular author thinks about things, even when we disagree with him.

On returning to Europe from America in late 1960, Nabokov spent some time in Nice at 57 Promenade des Anglais, just east of where the 2006 Nice conference dedicated to him was held. He was working on

Pale Fire and transacting the normal business of a writer, intensely involved in creating two characters who read their respective worlds very differently, on the one hand, and dealing with a publisher like Maurice Girodias, who took a Kinbote-like view of his legal obligations, on the other. Even here I suppose one's critical point of view influences one's "interpretation" of these seemingly uncontroversial assertions. What strikes me as Nabokov's regrettable but very necessary expenditure of time and energy to defend his rights as an author might look to someone else like an attempt to use "a socio-economic class-struggle weapon of legal oppression by which those who have the income from a property get to use non-intellectual brute power to keep those without from sharing in it" (Murphy). In any event, at one point in writing his new novel, he composed some lines that bear directly on our topic, the lines in which Kinbote talks about reading: "We are absurdly accustomed to the miracle of a few written signs being able to contain immortal imagery, involutions of thought, new worlds with live people, speaking, weeping, laughing. We take it for granted so simply that in a sense, by the very act of brutish routine acceptance, we undo the work of the ages, the history of the gradual elaboration of poetical description and construction, from the treeman to Browning, from the caveman to Keats." Unlike the tree- and caveman, Browning and Keats were geniuses. They mark what in Nabokov's view is the ascent of humanity. Their predecessors sent out signals that may not have got through to the god of the hunt but made their way to us, and that should be enough, says Kinbote here, to make us gasp. But there is a second order of emotional impression that the tactile effects of Shade's poem create in him. Kinbote goes on to say that, carrying it, he finds himself "enriched with an indescribable amazement as if informed that fireflies were making decodable signals on behalf of stranded spirits, or that a bat was writing a legible tale of torture in the bruised and branded sky" (224).

This is a gorgeous passage for many reasons, too many to go into here. Nabokov always does brilliant things with endings, and this observation of Kinbote's is an crucial part of the conclusion of *Pale Fire*. For me, the most significant thing about it is the endorsement, at the end of a book about reading, of the importance of our capacity for wonder. Wrong about what he is carrying, Kinbote is gloriously right

about reading in general. In Nabokov's view, anyone who thinks words and the music they make matter is attuned at some level to the mysteries of "blue magic." It's impossible to be a first class annotator or interpreter if you underestimate the importance of that sensibility. Interestingly, in a recent decoding of the novel, James Ramey invoked the caveman Kinbote mentions as evidence for the "phylogenetic pachydermicide" he was tracking down at that point in the argument (211). That needn't mean he missed the music of *Pale Fire*, but part of me would have been reassured if he had mentioned it in passing.

In the epigraph to this paper I quoted Chesterton. He was musing about a quasi- religious intoxication as the goal of a certain kind of reading. This feeling is cognate with the one Nabokov sought to communicate to his students, and some sense of it always comes across in the best things written about him.[4] Chesterton's argument involved the claim that literature, even literature as magnificently life affirming as Shakespeare's comedies, was ultimately inaccessible to us if all we wanted to do was understand it, to keep ourselves detached, to make it ours in some way that meant foregoing the pleasure of enjoying its dream-like qualities, and opting instead for the wide-awake experience of its disarticulation. The black coffee of criticism, as Chesterton imagines it, when taken in excessive amounts, can lead to interpretive insomnia, hyper-activity and a delusive mastery, a mindset that makes us get the meaning and miss out on the actual experience. His reminder about why we read is very simple, but then so is Kinbote's admonishment. The most unreliable character in *Pale Fire* tells us the most important thing there is to remember about reading great books. First there must be the shiver of the spine, as Nabokov and Housman and Emily Dickinson contend in variations on the same metaphor, and we can infer from such remarks that without that there is, finally, just a bunch of comments. (This point about reading has important implications for all the dismissive remarks we make about authors whose works leave us unmoved. Here mimicking

[4] The language Chesterton uses is remarkably similar to some of the intimations of immortality in *Speak, Memory.* Like Nabokov, Chesterton believes that "as man lives upon a borderland he may find himself in the spiritual or supernatural atmosphere, not only through being profoundly sad or meditative, but by being extravagantly happy". *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in *The Bodley Head G.K. Chesterton*, ed. P.J. Kavanagh (London: The Bodley Head, 1983), p. 59.

Nabokov can be both pernicious and insidious. Unmoved by something, we all become singularly less insightful about it.)

Nabokov's career coincides roughly with the flourishing of the departments of literature on the continent where he found a new home. It would be an intriguing irony and a great pity if those departments ended up eviscerating themselves by forgetting the lessons he taught, if they deprive themselves of the chance to keep students awake nights with the experience of actually enjoying the feeling of which his crazy over-reader here speaks so eloquently. Nabokov's readership might well be minimally affected by such a development: he now belongs to the world and the ages. Using whatever stimulants they choose to keep themselves awake finding new ways to recontextualize things, theorists and their students will of course have lots of extra-literary things to occupy them. For our part, those interested in Nabokov can continue to argue for some kind of balanced approach, in which a "quaint romantic notion" like charisma continues to be important. A discipline that dismisses as a sentimental archaism the sense of wonder generated by genius is ultimately doomed to endorse its own irrelevance.

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