



## Dead on Time? Nabokov's "Post" to the Letter

Milesi Laurent

### Pour citer cet article

Milesi Laurent, « Dead on Time? Nabokov's "Post" to the Letter », *Cycnos*, vol. 12.2 (*Nabokov: At the Crossroads of Modernism and Postmodernism*), 1995, mis en ligne en juin 2008.

<http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/423>

Lien vers la notice <http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/423>

Lien du document <http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/cycnos/423.pdf>

### *Cycnos, études anglophones*

*revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice*

ISSN 1765-3118

ISSN papier 0992-1893

### AVERTISSEMENT

*Les publications déposées sur la plate-forme épi-revel sont protégées par les dispositions générales du Code de la propriété intellectuelle. Conditions d'utilisation : respect du droit d'auteur et de la propriété intellectuelle.*

*L'accès aux références bibliographiques, au texte intégral, aux outils de recherche, au feuilletage de l'ensemble des revues est libre, cependant article, recension et autre contribution sont couvertes par le droit d'auteur et sont la propriété de leurs auteurs. Les utilisateurs doivent toujours associer à toute unité documentaire les éléments bibliographiques permettant de l'identifier correctement, notamment toujours faire mention du nom de l'auteur, du titre de l'article, de la revue et du site épi-revel. Ces mentions apparaissent sur la page de garde des documents sauvegardés ou imprimés par les utilisateurs. L'université Côte d'Azur est l'éditeur du portail épi-revel et à ce titre détient la propriété intellectuelle et les droits d'exploitation du site. L'exploitation du site à des fins commerciales ou publicitaires est interdite ainsi que toute diffusion massive du contenu ou modification des données sans l'accord des auteurs et de l'équipe d'épi-revel.*

# EPI-REVEL

Revues électroniques de l'Université Côte d'Azur

## Dead on Time? Nabokov's "Post" to the Letter

Laurent Milesi

University of Wales, Swansea

One of the central concerns in Nabokov's fiction, death is as inevitable as the encounter with it may be mistimed (*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*), mis-aimed (*Pale Fire*) or downright missed (*The Eye*) — to name just a few examples. But how, caught in the triangle of time, existence and death,<sup>1</sup> do Nabokov's characters, directly, indirectly or vicariously, "date" death if death "is ultimately the name of impossible simultaneity" (Derrida, *Aporias*, 65) and time is always set by the Other, "the object is always at another hour, fast or slow, early or late" (Lacan, "Desire..." 17)? What conceptions of temporality and existence are at work in the mistimings of Nabokov's characters, who fall under the Lacanian law of the encounter with the real as always essentially a missed encounter, and of the figuration of the real's inevitability, the "letter of death," as yet always delivered to its recipient sooner or later, though never at his/her own appointed time? Plying ironically between two or more temporalities, and suspended between life-death — existence being "but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness" (*SM* 17) — Nabokov's "(auto)biothanatographic" style is a kind of "still life," a photo-graphy that immortalizes what it perceives into a "frozen stillicide", in the words of one of its victims and practitioners (*PF* ll. 92, 35). It is in the light of such anachronistic dysfunctionings that one may read John Shade's rehearsals of his tragic death, or the unwitting self-defeating irony in Sebastian Knight's "No [...] I'm not dead" (*SK* 75, inverting M. Valdemar's famous impossible enunciation in Poe's tale), in a book whose writing and subsequent reading is predicated upon the past event of his death.

The uncanny temporality in Nabokov's plots, their conjunction of (missed) destination with "McFate," will be examined from various angles, in the cross-light of Lyotard's conception of the future perfect as the temporal mode of the postmodern condition as it intersects with issues of survival and writing, Lacan's inchoate theory of the temporality of the unconscious — his development of Freud's "deferred action" (*Nachträglichkeit*, *après coup*) — and Derrida's challenge of Lacanian determinism in the latter's seminar on "The Purloined Letter". I shall thus infringe two authorial proscriptive attitudes: against (Freudian) psychoanalysis and chronometrics, but I hope thereby to gain a new insight into an already vexing issue: the relationship of Nabokov's fiction with postmodernity.

### 1. Past death's door: Nabokov's misshapen V sign

In *Le temps logique et l'assertion de certitude anticipée* (1945), Lacan first illustrated the temporal dimension of the logical process through which identification is arrived at intersubjectively. Using a parable of three prisoners told by their warden that the first who rushes to the door after guessing through logic the coloured disk fixed upon his back will be granted freedom, Lacan describes the threefold stage by which the story's solution — independently yet communally, the three prisoners rush simultaneously to the gate in order to claim their freedom — is obtained: 1° the instant of seeing what the other is or is not through reciprocal gazing (a problematic which will be reelaborated in the seminar on "The Purloined Letter"); 2° a time for understanding during which the various possibilities are added up and subtracted; 3° a moment of concluding ("precipitation"), which must come neither too early, nor (especially) too late (Forrester 168-218). It is on the usual inability for Nabokov's protagonists to fulfil the latter stage of the process, as a paradoxical condition for having their

---

<sup>1</sup> It can be economically illustrated by Van's "I am because I die" (*Ada*, 123) and Cincinnatus' "the compensation for a death sentence is knowledge of the exact hour when one is to die" (*Invitation to a Beheading*, 15).

(belated) revelation of a higher intersubjectivity, that I would like to focus, with particular reference to *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.

The date of Sebastian's birth, December 31, 1899 — the first information given in the book, almost like a date prefacing a letter — invites speculation about the mistiming of events later in the book. What looks like a slightly premature birth, i.e. one day before the big numerical change to 1.01.1900 which would have aligned the character's official beginning with the symbolic sense of a new epoch, seems to anticipate his equally "untimely death" (SK 6), according to his half-brother V who, at the end, will in similar though inverted fashion rush too late to the hospital and the wrong dying man. The *Real Life* is full of such missed encounters (e.g. SK 30-31, 65-67), not the least being the promise in the novel's title (like Lacan's real, we never truly encounter the "real life" of Sebastian Knight as V gradually substitutes his own vicarious quest for it); their very insistence, like Lacan's *automaton* or compulsively iterative signs, betokens the presence of the "real" beyond, a familiar feeling in the parallel worlds of Nabokov's fictions, the development of which inexorably works towards that intimation. Such temporal (but also spatial; SK 16-17) maladjustments work against Sebastian's "recipe" for the "retrograde" composition of *Success* (the origin — also its ending — is the fulfilled, long-delayed encounter between two lovers, the causality of Fate which is then charted in reverse in an ironic "boy meets girl" novel; SK 79-80) and seem to point to the overall failure of the fictional quest and biographer.

A voice in *The Real Life* bids us "[r]emember that what you are told is really threefold: shaped by the teller, reshaped by the listener, conceded from both by the dead man of the tale" (SK 44); likewise, Nabokov's novel is organized around three main dovetailing temporal axes, all orchestrated within the nesting structure of deferred temporalities (the time of V's retelling, then that of our reading): 1° one that follows Sebastian's life until his death in tandem with the chronology of his fiction and the evolutions of his style and narrative technique, adding another dimension to the *biographie romancée* (cf. SK 17) which could have been Sebastian's next project (SK 34), and on the basis of which some critics have argued that *The Real Life* is the sixth book written by Sebastian himself masquerading as a dead character in his own fiction; 2° one that follows the chronology of V's research, taking into account that facet of Sebastian Knight's literary talent that focuses on the different "methods of composition" (SK 79), the "research theme" or the different ways of doing, being thwarted, rewarded, helped (etc.) in one's quest as a biographer; 3° one that threads together the patchy (non) encounters between the two brotherly halves, to culminate with the finale in St Damier, where the book returns to the scene of its inception. According to this last time scheme, *The Real Life* becomes a book about the process of preparing to write a book, a "pre-text" coming too early and predicated on the narrator-writer's belated rush to his protagonist's untimely death, as much as, therefore, a postmortem coming too late. The part-literary biography and part-metaliterary fiction converge as one gradually approaches Sebastian's death, the fatal point of the book's inception and (dis)solution, thus tracing — or, rather, attempting to trace — the initial V of the nameless narrator as a temporal signature, a letter of time given to the reader as a clue or *date* (*data littera*). As we head towards the nadir of that asymptotic V-shaped construction, the vanishing point of *The Real Life* overlaps with the plot and "method" of Sebastian's last fifth novel, *The Doubtful Asphodel*: there a man-as-book is dying and a luminous revelation seems near at hand, but the preparatory setting for this instant of truth fatally diverts the narrator past it, beyond recall (SK 151). At the end of *The Real Life*, after the patient reconstruction of the hotel's mislaid name, V finally arrives at St Damier, only to be sent by mistake to the bed of one Kegan, an Englishman whose name sounds like book in Russian (*kniga*); the (double) man-as-book are both in their dying moments and V enjoys the belated anagnorisis of an intersubjective identity, between subject and object, the two brotherly halves reconciled and subsumed into an external (Nabokov's?) agency in the

“real.” Beyond the uncanny “automatic” insistence of signs, parallels and coincidences, lurks the missed encounter with the incontrovertible real even at the point of its figuration by death: the two branches of the V can never quite meet as either of the two components always arrives too early or too late and the perfect conjunction is missed. Unlike the successful parable of the three prisoners as an allegory of the timely understanding of identificatory processes through analysis, this truly Nabokovian anagnorisis, a retroactive knowledge coming often too late, is the deferred dis-solution (ana-lysis) that Nabokov’s writing edges its characters towards.

## 2. L’être mort / lettre morte: Nabokov’s pyrification

*Pale Fire* also features an attempted convergence between two different temporalities, until the running commentary of Shade’s poem and the “political plot” meet by mistake, preventing the return of the first line (ending in “slain”) which would have completed the cyclical pattern of the poet’s personal lyric epic: if “every ball has its billet”, as King William puts it in *Tristram Shandy*, the letter of death here gets served up to the mistaken addressee. The “I was” of the first line, never to return, spells the future perfect of Shade’s death and of its impossible enunciation; by the time posterity reads “I was [...] slain” opening the autobiographical poem, Shade will have turned into a *late* shadow or pale *fire* (Fr. *feu*), as befits this self-styled “preterist” (ll. 79, 518) — also a preterite, passed up like the doomed characters of *Gravity’s Rainbow* — since preterition, rhetoric’s “pyrotechnic” figure, at once erases and inscribes. The artist dies, as does the whole text called *Pale Fire*, its metonymic poem remaining incomplete. The preterite work testifies to the “end” of (a life’s) writing in death, and the cyclical loop of creation is looped, back to the ritual burning “in the pale fire of the incinerator” that attends the poem’s genesis (*PF* 15).

Just like ashes (l. 3: “ashen fluff”), which only live through their own death, Nabokov’s writing is endowed with such an incinerating power or *pyrification* (cf. Derrida, *Feu la cendre* 23). One could gather up a pile of such textual ashes, left behind in the wake of his polyglottal writing — the “pale fire” as Nabokov’s metaphor for imperfect translation or what Derrida has called the ashes of translation, what is consumed in the passover from one language to another, for instance:

L’if,	lifeless	tree.	Your	great	Maybe,	Rabelais:
The			grand			potato.
			I.	P.	H.,	a
Institute		(I)	of	Preparation		lay
For	the	Hereafter	(H),	or	If,	as
Called	it	— big	engaged	me	for	one
To		if! —	on	death		term
		— speak				[...]
			You	and		I,
And she,	then	a	mere	tot,	moved	from
To Yewshade,	in another,	higher	state.			New
						Wye

(*PF* ll. 501-09)

“L’if” (leaf), leafless tree: yew (you; U), first letter: Y [“Wye”], not U; IPH whose last letter, *H* (pronounced in French), indifferently initials the French for “axe” (*hache*) or another tree in English [ash]; IPH as if, yew as(h) *if*. Such are, almost at random, some of the scattered ashes of translation at the outset of the third canto, after the painful recall of the beloved daughter’s suicide upon being jilted by a blind date and her obsession with the trans-lation to and from the afterlife. *If*, also the weeping willow of mourning in Kinbote’s Zemblan mirror language (*PF* 222), spells the still ashes of translation as much as those of the dead in *history* with its small *h(ache)*, the fell axe of Fate which ruthlessly fell upon both father and daughter, their love at last reunited after life, the (as)*h* gathered into the IPH, the Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter.

There are other (kinds of) traces of burning, burnt or dead letters in Nabokov, one fictional writing burning another, such as the two bundles of private correspondence that on

Sebastian's instruction in his last letter, at first mistaken to "refer to rough drafts or discarded manuscripts", V docilely commits to "the torturing flame" (SK 32). The first relevant passage leaves out the text of the unclear letter and goes on to elaborate on Sebastian's view of the perfect artistic achievement whose "existence is inconsistent with that of its spectre, the uncouth manuscript flaunting its imperfections like a revengeful ghost carrying its own head under its arm", the messy "litter of the workshop" from which it must be purified (SK 30). Almost at the diametrically opposite end of the book, V discloses the instructing letter, whose wording uncannily echoes that of literary creation earlier on:

Some day you may come upon certain papers; you will burn them at once; true they have heard voices in [one or two indecipherable words: *Dot chetu?*], but now they must suffer the stake. I kept them and gave them night-lodgings [*notchleg*], because it is safer to let such things sleep, lest, when killed, they haunt us as ghosts. One night, when I felt particularly mortal, I signed their death warrant, and by it you will know them. (SK 156)

Misled by this letter "[s]trangely [...] written in Russian", V transliterates as *Dot chetu*, as if the name was written in Cyrillic, Joan of Ark's birthplace Domrémy, the place of calling, the beginning of a quest and its ending at the sacrificial pyre.<sup>2</sup> Among those compromising letters is the one "in a bold feminine scrawl" which V catches a tantalizing glimpse of (SK 32) and whose burning prompts the quest for reconstruction, much of which yields V's *Real Life*, a pre-text born of destruction by fire and witnessing the advent of a belated intersubjective identity, haunted by remaining or dead letters, especially one (Sebastian's), to which it is an unacknowledged postmortem answer.

### 3. Nabokov poste restante: the destinarration of The Real Life

The debt of *The Real Life* to Poe's "Purloined Letter" needs no further demonstration beyond Susan Sweeney's excellent study; what I would like to dwell on rather is how Nabokov's treatment of the intertext obliquely contributes to the still ongoing critical debate surrounding Poe's tale and how a focus on issues of successful or failed transmission of alphabetical and narrative letters can help us further understand the postmodern condition and Nabokov's specific relation to it.

In his seminar on "The Purloined Letter," whose inaugural context was to explore Freud's repetition compulsion, Lacan reads the restitution of the stolen letter to its rightful owner-addressee the Queen as an allegory of psychoanalysis, seen as a successful destination of the letters of the unconscious to their subject. Taking as a symptomatic instance Lacan's own purloined substitution of *destin* for *dessein* in Dupin's vengeful quotation (itself purloined from Crébillon's revenge tragedy — *Atrée* — featuring like "The Purloined Letter" and *The Real Life* two half-brothers or doubles), Derrida opposes structural deviation, remain(der)ing (*restance*) and divisibility, a more Epicurean swerving of the atomic particles of writing (*The Post Card* 489; "My Chances"), to the Lacanian view of the letter's unfailing destination predicated upon its non partitivity. "[A]rrive in time [...] alive" (SK 162), or "Life Everlasting — based on a misprint!", "*Mountain, not fountain*" in Shade's version of the Lacan-Derrida controversy (*PF* II. 802-3), in which one letter may not reach its destination, yet strangely changes the course of Shade's belief about the after-life and thus reunites him mentally with his dead daughter.

*The Real Life* abounds in instances of letters' hesitant destinations or misdirections. The first (improbable) case almost seems to allegorize the Derridean counter-position: in *Lost Property*, the contents of a mail bag are scattered after a plane crash and some letters end up in the wrong envelope; one of these dead letters of eternal *poste restante*, a love letter (cf. *Ada* 127), includes a lyrical description of the word "lovely" (anticipating the suavely erotic

---

<sup>2</sup> My thanks to Alexander Dolinin for drawing my attention to this textual riddle.

labials of “Lo-Lee-Ta”), with “that soft pink “v” in the middle” (SK 93). The narrator’s initial of a name is thus just a middle letter, the synecdochic part of a word within a stray, misdirected letter in Sebastian’s third novel, and later a mere letter in the novelist’s Russian name, Sevastian, in Starov’s ominous telegram (SK 160); V is right to have (like Sebastian) “an aversion for postal phenomena”, with their complex process of finding “the right address” and “the right stamp,” posting and signing (SK 100). It is precisely about rightful *destination* that the following example, from the famous testamentary letter quoted above, is concerned with:

This letter was begun almost a week ago, and up to the word “life” it had been destined [*prednaznachalos*] to quite a different person. Then somehow or other it turned towards you (SK 156).

The letter, while it does not quite “leave turning back” (Major 101), certainly changes tack, is prolonged or, in Lacan’s etymological parsing, “pur-loined” by a *trope* or “internal drifting” (*The Post Card* 489), on which hangs the destiny of *The Real Life* — just as it itself has been purloined by the narrator until near the end of the book which it has brought about. The “pre-destination” (*pred-naznachenie*) of Sebastian’s last post turns round towards V *après coup* and the latter will try to find his way back to that original addressee and his half-brother’s real life.

Nabokov obviously pays a homage to the master of doubles and missing missives, Edgar Allen, a Poet to the T of *destin* rather than *dessein* (Richard 5), but he is also choosing a middle course between two later conceptions of life, literature, psychoanalysis and postal delivery: Lacan’s sure-fire destination and Derridean “destin(Err)ation” (*destinerrance*) — what we could call, in the light of the chance advent of the book’s narration, *destinarration*: the erring letter finally does arrive at its destination but by changing its *destinataire*, the chance condition for the book’s narration. Between Sebastian’s despatch of this ominous testamentary letter (and its late gift to us readers by V) and its first postmortem mention or “arrival” at the beginning of the book, a whole turnabout or tropic movement will have taken place, un-Fate (Atropos)-like, in order to take us back to the missed occurrence of Sebastian’s death by some kind of narrative retroaction or *Nachträglichkeit*: a whole revulsive conception of “postal” movement which we shall now relate to the postmodern debate.

## 4. Towards a new approach of Nabokov’s postmodernity?

*Past/postmortem*: this almost sounds like postmodern. Not that I wish to sound the death knell for a label which has proved difficult to pin down to an isolable period in the continuum of literary history, but rather to rehistoricize it through a more philosophical conception of its periodicity grounded in aesthetic and architectural debates, more capable of revitalizing the notion than its prevailing theorizations by literary critics in terms of formal-stylistic features. For Lyotard (Docherty 38-50), “postmodern” is a procedure in *ana-* by which modernity works through (in a psychoanalytical sense) its own meaning and “elaborates an initial forgetting,” and is “that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself” according to the modality of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*: “post-” comes “pre-” and is as it were pre-destined to that temporality), which can be aligned with the temporality of Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*. What, for him and also Adorno and Blanchot, has triggered off this sense of an “involuntary destination toward a condition that is increasingly complex” is the turning point of Auschwitz, the name for what cannot be subl(im)ated by any kind of thinking or aesthetic process. Naming death as the unrepresentable itself (cf. Lacoue-Labarthe 203-07, mentioning Freud and Lyotard), the holocaust brings to an acute crisis the sense of living on after death, of being a postmortem / postmodern survivor with a “consciousness of being as presence as being somehow or other belated, *nachträglich*, *après coup*” (McKenna 229), and the question of Auschwitz is the question of after Auschwitz.

Set within a linguistic-literary frame, death becomes the asymptotic point where first-person writing and life cannot meet, as we saw with *Pale Fire*, as Poe tried to exorcize in “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” and as Nabokov implicitly admitted through Sebastian’s “No [...] I’m not dead” (*SK* 75). The future of our certain death can never arrive to coincide with our own consciousness in the present save as a fictional experiment such as Sartre’s *Condemned of Altona*, in which suicide Franz von Gerlach’s voice reaches us on a tape after the event of his death, as one who *will have died*. In its consciousness of being a deferred retelling of an earlier event, writing has always been, will always be testamentary, but of a future perfect kind, the posthumous P.S. of a *will have been* rather than a simple *will* since a testament can only operate after its writer’s demise (this is the “theme” of Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*). This situation is nowhere clearer than in *The Eye*, at the point when the first-person narrator recounts his moves preparatory to attempting suicide — which in itself would be enough to ascertain its failure regardless of Nabokov’s astute play on temporal registers in a “posthumous” (*E* 30), “postexistent” (*E* 31), “spectral” (*passim*) world:

to sit down and write his will would be, at that moment, an act just as absurd as winding up one’s watch [...]; the last letter is instantly reduced to dust and, with it, all the postmen (*E* 27).

Here writing is, literally, a fictive postmortem *will have been*, a spectral living-on afterthought not so far removed after all from Sebastian’s view of the laboured manuscript as spectre (*SK* 30); and writing’s holocaust (etymologically: a burnt religious offering) finds its true expression in the spirit in which John Shade erects a sacrificial pyre for his used drafts (*PF* 15) or V complies with the idolized parent’s will, ironically forcing himself to reconstruct and work through the (letter of the) past to discover a higher identity.

Such is the heightened consciousness of a postmodern temporality, the by-product of the traumatic missed encounter with the unsymbolizable real experience of the holocaust, which is marked by an acute sense of mortality and survival, failed postal transmission, the ashes and burnt offerings of failed translation. It is such a temporal modality that Nabokov, coming too early for a post-Freudian psychoanalysis, a past (post)master of the postmortem, has bequeathed us.

## Works cited

Derrida, Jacques. *Aporias*. Trans. Thomas Dutoit. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993.

-----, *Feu la cendre*. Paris: Des femmes, 1987.

-----, “My Chances / *Mes Chances*: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophonies,” in *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis, and Literature*, ed. by Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984), 1-32.

-----, *The Post Card. From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. Trans. and intr. Alan Bass. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P., 1987.

Docherty, Thomas, ed. and intr. *Postmodernism: A Reader*. New York: Columbia UP, 1993.

Forrester, John. *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan and Derrida*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.

Lacan, Jacques. “Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*,” in *iterature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. by Shoshana Felman (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982).

-----, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. by John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988), 28-54.

Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. *Le Sujet de la philosophie (Typographies 1)*. Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1979.

McKenna, Andrew J. "Postmodernism: It's Future Perfect," in *Postmodernism and Continental Philosophy*, ed. by Hugh J. Silverman and Donn Welton (Albany: State U of New York P., 1988), 228-42.

Major, René. "The Parable of the Purloined Letter: The Direction of the Cure and Its Telling." *Stanford Literary Review*, 8, 1-2 (1991), 67-102.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.

----- . *The Eye*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992 (*E* in text).

----- . *Invitation to a Beheading*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963.

----- . *Pale Fire*. New York: Vintage, 1989 (*PF* in text).

----- . *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964 (*SK* in text).

----- . *Speak, Memory. An Autobiography Revisited*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969 (*SM* in text).

Richard, Claude. "Destin, Design, Dasein: Lacan, Derrida and 'The Purloined Letter.'" *The Iowa Review*, 12, 4 (1981), 1-11.

Sweeney, Susan Elizabeth. "Purloined Letters: Poe, Doyle, Nabokov." *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, 24 (1991), 213-37.