



A Prize for the (Post-)Modernist Nabokov

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A Prize for the (Post-)Modernist Nabokov

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I.

Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury! It is you I address first in my prize-giving speech at this year's Postmodernist Literature Festival because I long to congratulate you on your excellent choice. "Vladimir Nabokov" — how can it be that the prize for postmodernist literature comes so late for an author who gave us the gift (or *Dar*) of the new kind of writing so much earlier than the critics realized it was coming? Yet better late than never (as the hero of Nabokov's last novel thought when he finished his autobiography after he had already died). And I am particularly grateful that you have given me the chance to contribute to righting a wrong, or to demonstrate that the alleged late modernist Nabokov "in reality" is an early postmodernist. Not as early as Joyce, of course, but early enough to compete with Borges, and after the idea of progress has abdicated in these post-avantgardist times we are anyway more interested in intertextuality than in priority.

And as all readers and re-readers of Nabokov know, intertextuality is the password for entry into a fictitious world largely built of allusions, ironical and parodic renderings of styles, motifs, and themes of previous writers — with no anxiety of influence perceptible in the artistic feat of creating art from art. Already his most complex Russian novel is a precious *Gift*, in that it offers an ongoing dialogue with no less than a whole literary heritage which the expatriate writer saw threatened by the cultural disruption following political upheaval. If not in function then in method, this pervasive reliance on, distancing from and imaginative play with the forms and themes to be found in the literary canon preempts the stunning combinatorial feats in his major English novels, *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and *Ada*. The profusion of allusions in *Lolita* pretty soon led to an account of critical detective work that fills a whole book,¹ *Pale Fire* triggered a plethora of articles revealing ever more hidden passages to significant sources, and in *Ada* the intertextual riddle took on proportions that a less playful critic like Toynbee held to be "Too much of a good thing."² And it has to be pointed out that from *Lolita* onwards it is not only literary masterpieces but also the products of popular culture and Kitsch that serve as material for this *bricolage*, above all the cliché of genre literature such as the detective novel, cheap romance, the more sophisticated reaches of pornography, and science fiction.

If this alone were sufficient evidence of the postmodern stance we encounter in these novels, the parodic treatment and the multiple crossing of genre-specific structures and elements turn them into supreme specimens of the kind of textual hybridity we relish for its relativizing of representational frames and registers. This all the more so as Nabokov here effortlessly transgresses the boundary between the conventions of fiction and non-fiction, the professedly imaginary and the allegedly referential, thus revealing the all-determining power of language both to open up and to restrict our experiential space. From the biography of Chernyshevski and the criticism of the work of many more "real" writers in *The Gift* to the parodistic use of the psychological case history, the "true" confession of a criminal with its pornographic appeal that is masked as a plea at court, the detective story and the romantic love story in *Lolita*, the styling of *Pale Fire* as a "serious" scholarly edition of a poet's work complete with preface, running commentary and index, including the parodic inversion of the marginal tending to become the center — not to speak of the "serious" professional treatment of the

¹ Carl R. Proffer, *Keys to Lolita* (Bloomington : Indiana UP, 1968).

² Philip Toynbee, "Too much of a good thing", *The Observer* (5 October 1969) 34.

question of life-after-death and the detective story pattern implied in the crazy editor's imagination, and the combination in *Ada* of the pattern of family chronicle, autobiography, incestuous romantic love story and a philosophical investigation of time, there is more than ample evidence of a postmodern multiplicity of genre-frames and the ensuing variety of constructions of "reality."

This effect is heightened by a foregrounding of the manner of representation, be it via the insertion of overt metafictional commentary, by obvious parody and self-parody or a profusion of wordplay, including multilingual puns, telling names, palindromes, anagrams, misprints and circles of cross-reference called "word golf" by their ingenious creator. Already *The Gift* is teeming with meta-remarks that draw attention to the narrator's deliberate use of the stock phrases, well-worn structural devices and thematic clichés of an ample variety of text types and genre forms, so that irony and parody become paramount. In *Lolita*, the autobiographical narrator is as versatile in his choice of textual conventions as he is monomaniacal in his perverse erotic desire — indeed, so much so that when finally he claims to be authentic it is hard to believe that this is not a further ploy. In *Pale Fire*, the parodic inversion of the relationship between commentary and "primary" text leads to an ongoing process of misprision, with wordplay in all its possible varieties seconding the wilful and imaginative semantic twisting. And the two texts linked in this way are brimming with cliché phrases, obvious thematic borrowings, and self-reflexive remarks. In *Ada*, the reader is again and again made aware of the sway of literary conventions ("Then Van and Ada met in the passage, and would have kissed at some earlier stage of the Novel's Evolution in the History of Literature"³), and the postmodern tyranny of the signifier is demonstrated by such a profusion of wordplay that the overwhelmed *TLS* reviewer thought this novel was "Nabokov's Waterloo".⁴

As another prominent feature of postmodern fiction we can consider the high degree of self-reflexivity, the internal mirroring of characters and events that finds its most obvious expression in the astonishing number of doubles in Nabokov's works. To mention just his English works, in the protested likeness between the biographer and the biographee in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, between Humbert Humbert and Quilty in *Lolita*, between Kinbote, Botkin and Charles II of Zembla in *Pale Fire*, between Aqua and Marina, Ada and Lucette in *Ada*, and between the autobiographer and his suspected better model in *Invitation to a Beheading!* we encounter a doubling of characters that succinctly ironises the modernist concept of individuality. This doubling of characters is, however, only part of a much larger network of striking coincidences that mushrooms all over Nabokov's fictitious worlds to such an extent that the characters who live in them again and again suspect that there must be some hidden agency creating the ensuing patterns, an omnipotent author as in *Bend Sinister*, ironically called McFate in *Lolita*, or some anonymous "they" who play the game.⁵ Yet at the same time it becomes obvious that there is no central root to the rhizome, that "precise fate" is only a "synchronizing phantom"⁶ and that the "web of sense" the poet in *Pale Fire* thinks to discover through his art possesses no more validity than the paranoid construction of the mad editor Kinbote.

What we are left with is a paramount postmodern game condition, most poignantly expressed by an author who professed "I have no social purpose, no moral message; I've no general ideas to exploit but I like composing riddles and I like finding elegant solutions to those

³ *Ada or Ardor : A Family Chronicle* (New York : McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 96.

⁴ *Times Literary Supplement* (2 October 1969) 1121.

⁵ "Pale Fire", *Pale Fire* (London : Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), pp. 811-15.

⁶ *Lolita* (London : Corgi Books, 1969), p. 109.

riddles that I have composed myself”.⁷ And the omnipresence of riddle-structured games that likewise condemns the elated reader to the mending task of finding ever more elegant solutions is what turns Nabokov’s novels into “open works” in Eco’s sense or to “scriptible texts” in that of Roland Barthes. For such texts it does not much help to take recourse to the author in order to gain certainty about the one authentic solution. Not only do we find Nabokov, in his occasional comments on his own works, seeming to lead us as much astray as to guide us onto the right path. The parodic blocking or subversion of the intention to reach more certainty concerning authors in order to come to a more “authentic” reading of their work is promoted to a central theme in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Pale Fire*, the epitome lying in the absurd intimation that a fictitious character may be the author of the book he appears in (Krug in *Bend Sinister*, Baron R. in *Transparent Things*). Such a Moebius-strip structure concerning authorship can also be seen as a further ironical comment on the ineradicable metaphysical presumptions concerning art, the inveterate attempt to interpret the artistic “game of words” as a “game of worlds” in an ontological sense. Against this modernist stance Nabokov quite clearly posited the postmodern one: that, like the despicable Humbert Humbert, he has “only words to play with.” Thus, both in his manner of writing and the world-view emanating from the written, Nabokov is a truly great postmodern author, and one of the first ones to boot. He is not only worthy of the prize, but the prize for outstanding postmodern writing will be more precious after having been accorded to him.

II.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury! It is you I address first in my prize-giving speech at this convention of the Society for Modernist Art and Literature because I long to congratulate you on your excellent choice. “Vladimir Nabokov” — a most worthy name, indeed, being as much an emblem of later modernism as “James Joyce” is of the earlier phase, and it seems to me most propitious that after some decades this superb writer is being awarded the prize for modernist literature a second time because more recently a number of totally misinformed critics have not only slandered his reputation by calling him a postmodernist but have even possessed the audacity to upgrade their ignominious prize for postmodernist literature by linking it to his name. What else can I do, then, on this occasion but try to demonstrate that Nabokov, to the very end of his career as a writer, was wholeheartedly committed to the aims and methods of modernist art and that the attempt to claim him for postmodernism only testifies to the superficiality and imbecility of those who undertake it.

This already becomes clear when we look at the main subject of his writing — which is always a “subject” in the literal sense, an individual with a singular consciousness and quite personal emotions. The very fact that he thus has created notable literary characters like Krug, Humbert Humbert, Lolita, John Shade, Kinbote alias Botkin, Pnin, Van and Ada testifies to the fact that he is far from sharing the postmodern view of the fragmentation, disintegration or even dissolution of the individual self. All his English novels are styled either as biographies or as autobiographies, and their main intent is to represent the full scope of an individual view of the world and the self to the point where some mystery precludes any representation. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* this intent is already stated in the title; *Bend Sinister* is, in Nabokov’s own words, above all about “the beating of Krug’s loving heart, the torture an intense tenderness is subjected to”;⁸ *Lolita* consists of the life story of Humbert Humbert, with Lolita at the center of his attention; Pnin again indicates by its title that it is essentially a portrayal of character; in *Pale Fire*, two life stories, the “real” one of John Shade and the

⁷ “Vladimir Nabokov on his life and work - A BBC television interview with Peter Duval Smith”, *The Listener* (November 22, 1962) 857.

⁸ “Introduction”, *Bend Sinister* (London : Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), p. x.

imagined one of Kinbote alias Botkin, are juxtaposed; Ada renders above all Van's view of his own life, with Ada as the center of his desire; what becomes transparent in *Transparent Things* is the life of Hugh Person, and in *Look at the Harlequins!* that of the autobiographical narrator V.

This concentration on individual characters also explains the recurrence of particular themes, the choice of extravagant types and the predilection for particular narrative modes and structures. As to themes, the concern with time in terms of "private time," the sensuous experience of the present and the flourishing memory of the past, is paramount. This is especially so in the infatuation with memory ("To be' means to know one has 'has been'"⁹), which tends to turn Nabokov's main characters either into autobiographical narrators (Humbert Humbert, John Shade, Van and V.) or into persons so much given over to the past that they constantly misjudge the present (Krug, Pnin, Hugh Person). This memory strain quite clearly links Nabokov's fiction with a typically modernist strain of literary art starting with Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

Yet the intense concern with "private time" also includes the awareness of physical mortality and the yearning for immortality. The philosopher Krug in *Bend Sinister* professes that his intelligence cannot

[...] accept the insanity of accumulating incalculable treasures of thought and sensation, and thought-behind-thought and sensation-behind-sensation, to lose them all at once and forever in a fit of black nausea followed by infinite nothingness,¹⁰

but the dying Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* is convinced that the only immortality he can gain lies in his art. In *Pale Fire* this subject receives both ironical treatment in terms of John Shade's lectures at the "Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter" and a more serious one in the mirror image of the "false azure in the windowpane" at the beginning (and perhaps beyond the open ending) of his autobiographical poem. In *Ada* the threat of losing the riches of consciousness in death and the possibility of a world without such loss again becomes a major issue, and in *Transparent Things* the narrator's conviction that "the future is but a figure of speech, a specter of thought"¹¹ agrees well with the dying Baron R's "total rejection of all religions ever dreamt up by man and total composure in the face of total death."¹² If such contrasting views rather give the impression of uncertainty on the part of the author, the very fact that he is throughout his work concerned with a subject like this proves how removed he is from the postmodern agenda, within which metaphysical questions are anathema.

If total death is one threat to the individual, duplication is another, and this explains the recurrence of another theme in Nabokov's fiction, the existence or fear of a Doppelgänger. In the biographer's final assertion in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, "I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows"¹³ to Humbert Humbert's other self Quilty in *Lolita*, in the imaginary doubling of Kinbote/Botkin into Charles II in *Pale Fire*, in Aqua and Marina in *Ada* and V's fear in *Look at the Harlequins!* that he may be just a minor replica of a mysterious major writer, this challenge to individuality becomes conspicuous.

The emphasis on individuality also leads to a choice of extravagant character types. Sebastian Knight is styled as an extremely mysterious person, Krug as a totally impractical philosopher, Humbert Humbert as a sexual pervert and murderer, Pnin as a lovable grotesque, Kinbote alias Botkin as a madman, Van as a superman and V. as a psychopath. And if this is clearly in line with the modernist *faible* for the breaking of taboos, the celebration of the riches of

⁹ *Ada*, p. 559.

¹⁰ *Bend Sinister*, pp. 87-88.

¹¹ *Transparent Things* (London : Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973), p 1.

¹² *Transparent Things*, p 84.

¹³ *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1964), p 173.

consciousness explains the elitist trend in this choice, observable particularly in Krug, Humbert Humbert, Kinbote and Van — a feature definitely not en vogue in postmodern fiction.

And, in a truly modernist vein, these quite unusual characters are granted epiphanies, sudden insights into the larger frame and meaning of their existence. Krug experiences such a moment of vision when he crosses a bridge on his way from the hospital where his wife has died, Humbert Humbert on a Colorado mountain slope while he is listening to the voices of children playing in the mining town far below in the valley, John Shade when he discovers that his vain hope of obtaining more than subjective evidence of the existence of a life after death is based on a misprint, to mention but a few examples. Yet what the discovery of the misprint ('mountain' for 'fountain') makes John Shade aware of is the conjunction of pattern-generating coincidences, a much more significant trait of Nabokovian writing — the abundance of leitmotifs and verbal recurrences forming the wefts in the artistic webs of sense. *Pale Fire* and *Ada* especially are veritable treasure-troves of such patterns. The writer John Shade is convinced that through artistic pattern-making in his poem he can “see the web of the world, and the warp and the weft of that web,”¹⁴ the commentator Kinbote has to give in to his paranoid vein to link everything with everything in order to twist Shade's creation into the imaginary life-story of Charles II, and Van needs sophisticated networks of allusions and near-repetitions to keep together a myriad of acutely remembered details. And as we know from the works of Proust and Joyce and Virginia Woolf, such pattern-making is a distinct feature of modernist fiction, a last-ditch attempt to signify the unity of consciousness in face of the chaotic swarm of sensations and impressions.

Concerning the consequences of the paramount interest in individual consciousness for the style of writing, what remains to be pointed out is the predilection for metaphor — idiosyncratic metaphor signifying the uniqueness of the mind by which it is created. The biographer in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* thus expresses his relation with the biographee in terms of a tennis match between two brothers:

[...] their strokes were totally different, and one of the two was far, far better than the other; but the general rhythm of their motions as they swept all over the court was exactly the same, as that had it been possible to draft both systems two identical designs would have appeared.¹⁵

Professor Krug's special talent in *Bend Sinister* is to clothe his views in apt and vivid images (a gift called “Krugism”), a convincing sample being his interpretation of human existence between infinite time before birth and after death:

Thus we live in a stocking King which is in the process of being turned inside out, without ever knowing for sure to what phase of the process our moment of consciousness corresponds,¹⁶

and, in *Ada*, Van's acrobatic dance on his hands is explained as:

[...] the standing of a metaphor on its head not for the sake of the trick's difficulty, but in order to perceive an ascending waterfall or a sunrise in reverse: a triumph, in a sense, over the ardis of time.¹⁷

If there is some truth in Ihab Hassan's observation¹⁸ that metaphor is as typical of modernism as metonymy is of postmodernism, such revelling in the metaphorical can be taken as a further indication that Nabokov is indeed a modernist writer.

Yet the most cogent proof lies in the view of art he has lent the various writers in his novels and in his ontological stance. As to art, the recurrent discussion of the relationship between art and life in his novels is quite clearly a high modernist theme, and the way in which this

¹⁴ *Pale Fire*, p 289.

¹⁵ *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, pp 28-29.

¹⁶ *Bend Sinister*, p. 172.

¹⁷ *Ada*, p. 92.

¹⁸ *The Postmodern Turn* (Columbus : Ohio State UP, 1987), p. 91.

relation is envisaged is also perfectly in tune with modernist aesthetics. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* the biographer stresses that for reasons of truthfulness he will not “describe Sebastian’s boyhood with anything like the methodical continuity [...] normally achieved had Sebastian been a character of fiction,”¹⁹ and it shows that he comes closest to the deceased author’s individual consciousness by unwittingly turning his own book into a parody. In *Pale Fire* Kinbote for once is in tune with John Shade when describing what a

true artist can do — pounce upon the forgotten butterfly of revelation, wean myself abruptly from the habit of things, see the web of the world, and the warp and the weft of that web.²⁰

In *Ada* the specific relationship between art and science as well as that between art and philosophy are being explored, and in *Look at the Harlequins!* Nabokov, by creating a parodic double of himself, wards off the assumption of a direct relationship between his own work and his life. And, beyond this, he has confirmed in various interviews that he insists on the autonomy of art, an autonomy in the modernist sense of a privilege to invent alternative worlds that yet mirror our anxieties and desires. There remains, of course, an ineradicable doubt about whether the artistic patterns of wordplay and more complex games can, indeed, be taken as intimations of an ontological “web of sense” behind the phenomenal “topsiturvical coincidence.” In this respect, Nabokov shares the epistemological scepticism of the modernist period. Yet his protagonists are still persistently searching for signs of a deeper truth, his narrators still concerned with the question whether they may have an existential author as much as their fictitious characters have one. And problems of this kind are simply no longer of any interest in postmodern fiction, where it is perfectly clear that “realities” are no more than constructions and that even the notion of an unattainable truth is a metaphysical illusion. Thus both in his manner of writing and in the world-view emanating from the written, Nabokov is a truly great modernist author, and one of the last ones to boot. He is not only worthy of the prize, but the prize for outstanding modernist writing will be more precious after having been accorded to him a second time.

III.

After having listened to both speeches and trying to make up my own mind about which one sounded more convincing, I suddenly heard the faint yet unmistakable voice of the master: “Abominable *poshlost!* What do these critics think they are? After all, it [is] only the author’s private satisfaction that counts,”²¹ and only a madman can think that “it is the commentator who has the last word.”²²

¹⁹ *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, p. 17.

²⁰ *Pale Fire*, p. 289.

²¹ “Introduction”, *Bend Sinister*, p. 11.

²² *Pale Fire*, p. 29.