What Kind of Fiction did Nabokov Write? A Practitioner's view

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When Maurice Couturier invited me to participate in a conference entitled *Nabokov at the crossroads of Modernism and Postmodernism*, I was inevitably reminded of the title essay of one of my books of criticism, *The Novelist at the Crossroads*. Starting from the work of Robert Scholes and Robert Kellog on the generic history of the novel, I suggested that there were four aesthetic options open to the contemporary novelist: traditional realism, fabulation, the nonfictional novel, and the problematic or metafictional novel.[1] Later I wrote a book and several articles applying Roman Jakobson's distinction between metaphor and metonymy to the typology of modern fiction.[2] Later again I used the Bakhtinian typology of fictional discourse to try and define the formal characteristics of different period styles in the modern novel.[3] The general orientation of the conference, in short, was a longstanding interest of mine.

None of those books and articles, however, made more than passing reference to Nabokov. In recent years, too, I have lost touch with the latest academic theorising about the novel. Since retiring from my teaching post at Birmingham in 1987, I have been a fulltime professional author, chiefly occupied with writing fiction and dramatic work for stage and television. It was a long time since I prepared a paper for an academic conference. For all these reasons I approached the task with some trepidation, which was not eased by an unexpected distraction of a kind typical of the freelance writer's life. A long-nourished project to adapt a play of mine for television was suddenly given the green light, and I was obliged to write the scripts and attend rehearsals during the very period I had set aside for preparing and writing this paper. There were times when I thought I might find myself in the same position as my character Rodney Wainwright in *Small World*, who for different reasons finds himself behind the lectern at Morris Zapp's Jerusalem conference on The Future of Criticism with a paper consisting of just two and three-quarter pages of double-spaced A4 typescript, and is only saved from professional disgrace by an outbreak of Legionnaire's Disease in the hotel accommodating the conference — a form of reprieve I could neither expect nor wish for.

Well, I did finish the paper, but its subtitle was always intended to be a kind of defensive gesture, waiving any pretensions to expertise on the subject of Nabokov, and absolving myself from the scholarly obligation to check all secondary sources pertaining to my topic before venturing to make my own contribution. I thought I would consider the question of the generic identity and period-style of Nabokov's novels as a practising novelist rather than as an academic critic. However this proved almost as difficult a task for me as writing a conventional scholarly paper.

Nabokov is very much a "writer's writer", a novelist who has been a significant influence on several distinguished novelists of a younger generation — Martin Amis and John Banville are just two that immediately come to mind. But I cannot myself claim to have been deeply influenced by Nabokov in my own fictional practice. I came to his work, I think, too late for that. The formative literary influences of my apprenticeship years were Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh and James Joyce. I could write about *them* in a spirit of *homage*, but not about Nabokov. Furthermore, one could say of critics what they say about Catholics: once an academic, always an academic. When I came to write this paper I found myself inevitably

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[1] *The Novelist at the Crossroads* (London: Routledge, 1971), pp. 3-34.

[2] *The Modes of Modern Writing* (London: E. Arnold, 1977); "Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism," in *Working with Structuralism* (London: Routledge, 1981), pp. 3-16.

[3] *After Bakhtin: essays on fiction and criticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

reaching for the terminology and concepts of the formalist critical tradition in which I laboured myself for many years, and it could equally well be subtitled, "Nabokov and the Typology of Fictional Form". It is, in other words, something of a hybrid.

Whether what I have to say will be new to any Nabokov scholar, I very much doubt, but perhaps the simplicity with which I say it will give it something of the effect of novelty. Sometimes the most obvious features of a writer's work are overlooked precisely because they are so familiar; or because, with our attention closely focussed on the intricacies of individual texts, we fail to perceive character of the whole *œuvre*, missing the wood for the trees. I want to stand back at a good distance from Nabokov's *œuvre*, and consider, from this simplifying perspective, how his practice as a writer might be described and placed on the historical map of fictional form. Fortunately the differences between the Russian and English versions of Nabokov's earlier novels are of little consequence to this exercise, since I am entirely unqualified to comment on them.

Nabokov's novels, needless to say, exhibit great variety of form, as of content, but there are family resemblances between them. If we consider them primarily as *narratives* — that is, simply as representations of events connected in spacetime — we will be struck, I think by how many of the events depicted concern crimes, misdemeanours, detection, arraignment, and judicial punishment. The popular fiction which deals with these subjects — both the classic whodunnit (in which the emphasis is on the solution of a mystery) and the thriller (in which the emphasis is on suspense, generated by the repetition, or threatened repetition, of evil acts, to thwart which the hero risks his safety) —- seems to have provided the narrative model for majority of Nabokov's novels, though none of them conforms to the formulaic patterns I have just described. That is to say, Nabokov plays with, experiments with, inverts and subverts the novel of crime and detection in various ways. For instance: by centering the story on the criminal or miscreant rather than on characters representing social order and justice, making his efforts to conceal his crime, rather than the efforts of the law to unmask him, the major source of suspense, as in *Lolita*; or by portraying the criminal character as a bungling incompetent, as in *King Queen Knave*, where the malevolent Martha concocts absurdly impacticable plans to kill her husband and eventually dies herself of a chill contracted in her final murderous attempt — and even more brilliantly in *Despair*, where the protagonist has committed what he thinks is the perfect crime based on a misapprehension which renders it totally transparent to the investigating police; or by making the character occupying the position of criminal in the story completely innocent (as in *Invitation to a Beheading*, where the condemned man never discovers what his crime was supposed to be, and in *Transparent Things*, where the hero strangles his wife in his sleep); or by making the characters occupying the positions of criminal and detective turn out to be one and the same (as in *The Eye*); or by signally refusing to apportion punishment justly in the resolution of the story (as in *Laughter in the Dark*, where Albinus is punished for his infidelity not only by being deceived in his turn, but by being accidentally blinded, in which state he is cruelly abused and exploited by his mistress and her lover, and finally killed in the attempt to revenge himself); or by making a character occupying the position of hero in a thriller-plot fail — desolatingly — to escape from or overcome the evil forces conspiring against him (as in *Bend Sinister*).

The whodunnit and the thriller are in their most typical manifestations deeply conventional and ideologically conservative literary forms, in which good triumphs over evil, law over anarchy, truth over lies. Nabokov's novels, needless to say offer no such reassurance. Nevertheless the paradigm of the crime novel underlies much of his fiction throughout his long career, and one cannot help wondering whether Nabokov's frequent denigration of Dostoevsky was not a symptom of the "anxiety of influence", because *Crime and Punishment* seems such an obvious precursor of Nabokov's thought-provoking and disturbing mutations

of the crime story, as does *Notes from Underground* of his disturbingly eloquent, morally repellent narrators: Sumurov, Herman, Humbert, Kinbote.

The crime in Nabokov's crime fiction is usually murder. The favoured weapon is a pistol, an object which crops up again and again in his novels, often with a sexual connotation. The most common motive for murder — committed, premeditated or alleged — is indeed sexual infidelity, *e.g. King Queen Knave, Laughter in the Dark Transparent Things*. In *Lolita* the primary crime is the seduction and abduction of a minor (though by a characteristic Nabokovian twist the criminal is to some extent seduced by his far from innocent victim), but murder also enters into the story, first virtually in Humbert's unfulfilled plots to murder Charlotte, and then really in his messy execution of Clare Quilty.

Perhaps the frequent appearance of murderers and murder weapons in Nabokov's fiction strikes me all the more forcibly because they are signally absent from my own fiction. There are very few deaths in my novels and they are all from natural or accidental causes. The only firearms occur in *Ginger You're Barmy*, a novel about military service, and they are only fired on the rifle range. However I think I am a fairly typical English literary novelist in this respect. Excluding novels about war, there are not many guns or shootings in the canonical authors of the century — Henry James, E.M Forster, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, Evelyn Waugh, Henry Green. The exceptions would be Conrad and Graham Greene, both of whom wrote out of the imperialistic adventure story tradition — and, in Greene's case, the gangster film. Contemporary, postmodern literary novelists, are more apt to find violent crime or crimes of violence attractive subject matter for their fiction — and the two novelists I mentioned earlier as being in some sense followers of Nabokov, Martin Amis and John Banville, would be examples in English and Irish writing respectively. Guns are of course ubiquitous in modern American fiction for cultural and historical reasons — the frontier tradition, the constitutional right of citizens to bear arms, the influence of the Western, America's only indigenous literary genre, etc. This is one reason, perhaps, why Nabokov's "English" novels sit so comfortably in the context of modern American literature.

The novel of crime and detection, however twisted, displaced and subverted, depends for its coherence as a narrative on *causality*. The corpse in the classic whodunnit is an effect without an immediately obvious cause, or causer. The narrative consists of the process of identifying that causer, reconstructing the chain of events that led up to the effect by interpreting and fitting together various clues which are synecdoches of the total matrix of events. This kind of novel is therefore a metonymic form in Jakobson's typology, based on relationships of contiguity such as cause and effect, part and whole, rather than similarity. The thriller is a metonymic form in a more straightforward way, since it narrates in chronological order a sequence of contiguous events that keep the hero in continual jeopardy. Despite Nabokov's bold and disconcerting deviations from the stereotypes of these subgenres, it seems to me that his novels are fundamentally metonymic in Jakobson's terms. This may seems a surprising thing to say of a writer who was almost incomparably gifted and lavish in the coining of metaphors; but I am speaking now of deep structure, not surface structure. The coherence of Nabokov's novels depends crucially on sequence and causality. They are for the most part classically constructed, with a clearly defined beginning, middle and end, and often have an Aristotelian reversal-and-discovery in their conclusion (for instance, Herman's realization in *Despair* that his murder of Felix was bound to be discovered and that he himself is therefore a fool and a failure; or Humbert Humbert's discovery that Lolita is married and pregnant and his belated recognition that he can never make amends for robbing her of her childhood).

There is another group of novels within Nabokov's *œuvre* that do not significantly involve crime, but also have a metonymic deep structure. These are the pseudo-memoir or pseudo-autobiographical novels: *Glory, The Defence, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Ada*. (*The Gift* also belongs in this subgroup, inasmuch as it is made up of several biographical

narratives). Fiction modelled on biography is an essentially metonymic form because it reconstructs the chronological sequence of events that make up a life — with inevitable gaps and ellipses, which may be foregrounded (as in *The Defence*) but seldom with the continual shuttling backwards and forwards in time that is characteristic of the modernist, symbolist novel of consciousness (*e.g. Ulysses, To the Lighthouse*). There is also a lot of overlap between the two sub-groups in Nabokov's *œuvre* : some of the novels about crime subvert the genre by being cast in the form of autobiographies or confessions by the criminal (*e.g. Despair, Lolita*), and some of the pseudo-biographical novels (*e.g. The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*) are strongly influenced by the novel of detection.

A general characteristic of modernist fiction is the attenuation of its narrative element. As the modernist novel developed, its mimetic impulse was focussed more and more upon consciousness, the subconscious and the unconscious, and less and less upon the external world seen objectively, as the arena for action. In consciousness and the unconscious the causal and temporal relationships between events are scrambled and distorted by memory and desire, and truth and meaning is adumbrated through mythical allusion and poetic symbolism. There is a congruence in this respect between the masterpieces of modernist fiction and the masterpieces of modernist verse like *The Waste Land* and the *Cantos*. In Jakobson's terms, modernist aesthetics forced the innately metonymic form of prose fiction towards the metaphoric pole which had always been the appropriate domain of poetry. Joyce's progress from the realistic but enigmatic stories of *Dubliners* to the symbolist *bildungsroman, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* to what T.S. Eliot called the "mythical method" of *Ulysses* (based on a metaphorical substitution of Leopold Bloom for Odysseus, and a drastic reduction of the scale of the epic action), to *Finnegans Wake,* in which the differences between personages and events are swamped by a punning insistence on the resemblances between them — this development was paradigmatic. Virginia Woolf's polemical essays, "Modern Fiction" and "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown", proclaiming the obsolescence of the traditional realistic novel, are well known expositions of the modernist poetics of fiction.

Nabokov, needless to say, is not to be bracketed with Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy. He was far from being an unreconstructed exponent of the classic realist text. He shared some of the aesthetic principles of modernism — a quasi-religious faith in the value of art, for instance, and a corresponding commitment to the pursuit of perfection in his chosen form. He learned several techniques from modernist fiction and deployed them on occasion (e.g passages of interior monologue in *King Queen Knave*, synchrony, or "spatial form" as it used to be called, in *Pale Fire*). The lyrical strain in his prose frequently reminds us of the "epiphanies" of Joyce, Woolf, Lawrence and Proust. Nevertheless it is true to say that narrative *as a structural principle* is more important to his work than it was to theirs, and one symptom of this is his fondness for stories of crime and detection, in which narrative interest is heightened by being associated with major crises of life and death and major transgressions of the moral code. But the simple hermeneutic tease of the whodunnit, which merely challenges us to guess the solution to the enigma presented by the crime before the detective does, or the simple narrative lure of the thriller, which keeps us wondering how the hero will survive and triumph, are, as I said earlier displaced or ignored in Nabokov's fiction. Instead of being the passive recipient of clearly labelled clues and narrative excitements, Nabokov's reader is usually engaged from the start in a strenuous activity of making-sense-of-the-story, and a good deal of mystery and suspense is generated by the narrative method itself. Although this is also true of modernist fiction, there is I think something more playful or ludic about the little puzzles, traps and surprises Nabokov sets for his reader.

The Defence, for instance, begins: "What struck him most was the fact that from Monday on he would be Luzhin."[4] Superficially this resembles the modernist practice of beginning a novel by plunging the reader into a stream of ongoing experience in which he must orient himself by a process of inference and deduction, for example the beginning of Viginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*: "Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself."[5] But the effect is actually completely different. In the Virginia Woolf text we do not know who Mrs Dalloway is or why she needs to buy flowers, but we are confident that we shall find out sooner or later and meanwhile there is nothing innately problematic about a woman intending to buy flowers. In contrast, "from Monday he would be Luzhin" is a much more paradoxical and unsettling mystery. It seems that the male subject of the sentence expects to acquire — involuntarily — a new name on a specific day in the near future. In what circumstances could this happen? The question cannot be put on hold, it nags away at us as we read, until by interpeting and connecting other clues in the discourse we arrive at the solution to the enigma: the subject is a young boy who is about to begin attending school, where he will be addressed by his surname.

In the same book — and in *Look at the Harlequins!* — Nabokov first refers to the most important woman in the hero's life by the anonymous pronoun "she", and keeps us waiting for some pages before introducing her properly. In other novels he tricks us into sharing an illusion or misapprehension of the focalising character (for instance the terrified Albinus's conviction in *Laughter in the Dark* that his mistress is hiding in his house from his brother-in-law, when what he thinks is a tell-tale glimpse of her red dress behind a piece of furniture is in fact the corner of a cushion placed there by himself); or the hoax perpetrated by Ivor and Iris Black in *Look at the Harlequins!*, pretending very plausibly that Iris is dumb.

One of the trademarks of Nabokov's fiction from the beginning was the sudden swerve of the discourse in spacetime or from one point of view to another without the usual courtesy of an explanatory link or punctuating break in the text. In *King Queen Knave* and *Laughter in the Dark*, for example, he switches from one point of view to another between paragraphs or even in in mid-paragraph.[6] In *Bend Sinister* there is an abrupt transition, rather like a cinematic jump-cut, from Krug phoning Ember, to Ember later composing a letter to someone else about Krug's call, without any explanation or break in the text between the two scenes: what would be obvious enough in film, because of the shift from one setting to another, is by no means instantly comprehensible in the novel.[7] Even more striking is the temporal ellipsis in *The Defence*, which Nabokov himself fondly compared to an unexpected move in chess, by which sixteen years in the hero's life are passed over in a single paragraph.[8] In *Glory* a description of one of Martin's banal letters written from Cambridge to his mother in Switzerland, and of the envelope in which he sent it, changing an inkblot into the image of a black cat, is followed directly, within the same paragraph, by the sentence, "Mrs Edelweiss preserved this envelope along with his letters" and then, still in the same paragraph, by a description of how she read the letters "years later […] with such anguish" — a premonition, for the reader, of Martin's tragic fate.[9]

These are small deviations from the conventions of traditional novelistic discourse, what Barthes calls the *lisible* text — certainly much less radical than say, Joyce's. But the effect is

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[4] *The Defence* (London: Panther, 1967), p. 11.

[5] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Hogarth Press, 1960), p. 5.

[6] E.g., *King Queen Knave*, pp 83-84: the paragraph beginning, "She would switch the radio from song to speech", seems to be continuous with the preceding paragraph, which is focalised through Franz, and we read it as such until we encounter the statement, "And all the time she would be thinking: 'How much longer would he need to get started?'" which locates the narrative in Martha's consciousness.

[7] *Bend Sinister* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p 33.

[8] *The Defence* (London: Panther, 1967), p 55 [Chap. 4].

[9] *Glory* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), pp. 74-5.

to keep the reader actively engaged in the task of construing the narrative, and aware that he or she is reading a literary fiction. In a way their effect is what the Russian Formalists called "baring the device", and they are related to much bolder frame-breaking moves in Nabokov's fiction, which distinguish him both from classic realism and from modernism, and have been much imitated by later postmodernist writers. I mean his introduction of himself as a peripheral character in his own fictions, or the showing of his own hand as author of the novel we are reading. In *King Queen Knave* the wretched Franz, trapped in the coils of the mad, malevolent Martha, whom he no longer finds even desirable, is tormented by the repeated sight of a serenely happy lepidopterist and his attractive wife at the seaside resort where the story reaches its climax. At the end of *Bend Sinister* the author takes pity on the unbearable sufferings of his hero, mercifully makes him mad and then despatches him with a bullet as he rushes towards a wall where his enemy cringes:

> and the wall vanished, like a rapidly withdrawn slide, and I stretched myself and got up from among the chaos of written and rewritten pages to investigate the sudden twang that something had made in striking the netting of my window.[10]

Perhaps Nabokov's most characteristic device for testing and challenging his reader is the unreliable narrator. This is also a feature of modernist fiction, but Nabokov's use of it seems to me distinctively different. In James's *The Turn of the Screw*, for instance, or Ford's *The Good Soldier*, the ambiguity generated by the unreliability of the narrator is never finally resolved or dissolved. The use of an unreliable narrator affirms the impossibility of ever establishing the objective truth of a human situation. But in Nabokov the truth *is* established, sooner or later. In *Despair*, for instance, Herman's reluctance to face the fact that he has bungled his crime keeps us for a very long time ignorant that a crime has been committed, and then mystified as to the motive behind it, but eventually all is made clear.

Nabokov's most brilliant and beautiful feat in this line, and an excellent example of his transformation and displacement of the crime fiction model, is *Pale Fire*. It is in a sense a double crime story, or the story of a crime and a misdemeanour: there is the mystery of the murder of Shade, which Kinbote "solves" in a way that answers to his own self-aggrandising fantasies, and there is the misappropriation of Shade's poem — Kinbote unscrupulously exploiting the circumstances of Shade's death to get possession of the manuscript of the as yet unpublished work. His commentary is in part a self-justifying account of this action. Like *Despair* and Lolita, it is a kind of confession or apologia written by a wanted or imprisoned man. What is so fascinating and devilishly clever about *Pale Fire* is the way in which the reader is led to see that Kinbote's notes are not what they purport to be, and to construct the truth from Kinbote's distorted versions of events. The clues are as much linguistic as factual. What alerts us to the unreliability of Kinbote are, in the first place, the sudden breaches of scholarly decorum in his style. For instance, the apostrophe to the reader, "Canto two, your favourite."[11] Or the asides about the circumstances in which he is composing his notes: "There is a very loud amusement park right in front of my present lodgings."[12] His disregard of evidence, and of the protocol of editorial procedure become more and more flagrant, until any old word in Shade's poem will serve as a hook on which to hang some nostalgic fantasy about Zembla, but this development also, rather poignantly, reflects Kinbote's deepening disappointment with the actual content of Shade's poem and the palpable lack of any reference within it to the Zemblan story.

I have to dissent from the interpretation of *Pale Fire* put forward by Brian Boyd in the second volume of his monumental biography of Nabokov, greatly as I respect the scholarship and critical acumen displayed in that work. I mean the idea that the whole text -— poem and

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[10] *Bend Sinister*, p. 200.
[11] *Pale Fire* (London: Corgi, 1966), p. 3.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

editorial apparatus — is supposed to have been written by John Shade. The main evidence for this interpretation put forward by Professor Boyd is an unpublished scrap of verse written by Nabokov some years after the composition of *Pale Fire*, which he attached as an *envoi* to a draft of his foreword to a revised edition of *Speak Memory*:

> Nobody will heed my index,
> I suppose,
> But through it a gentle wind *ex*
> *Ponto* blows.[13]

The argument is that this reveals Shade to have been the compiler of the index to *Pale Fire*, in which case he must have written the commentary too, and thus invented the character of Kinbote and the story of how he himself is murdered. This argument seems to me a classic instance of the intentional fallacy as described by Wimsatt and Beardsley in their famous essay.[14] The fragment of verse does not unequivocally assert that Shade wrote the index to *Pale Fire* — it could refer to another index. And even if Nabokov did mean to imply when he wrote the verse that Shade compiled the *Pale Fire* index, it does not follow that he intended such a meaning when he wrote the novel four years earlier; he might have been playing whimsically with the possibility after the event, or thinking of teasing his readers with this possibility in the spirit of a hoax or practical joke, and in any case he suppressed the thought and did not publish the verse. But the main objection to this reading of *Pale Fire* is that it is not *required* by the text itself, while it drastically impoverishes the meaning and beauty of the text and indeed creates further problems of interpretation which are I believe unresolvable.

I can best express this by saying that, as a practising writer, I cannot conceive of myself doing what Shade, according to this interpretation, is supposed to have done: that is, written a transparently autobiographical poem about coming to terms with one of the most painful and tragic events that can happen to a man, the suicide of his own child, and then attached to it a comic, ironic and satirical fiction, in the form of a commentary on his own poem, about a deranged emigre scholar, which entails a description of Shade himself being murdered just after he has completed the poem. Surely Shade himself would have to be deranged to use his own daughter's suicide in this way, as a means of showing up the vanity and self-deception of a fictitious lunatic?[15] (Kinbote must be a fictional creation of Shade's under this interpretation, because Shade could not, for legal reasons, attribute to a real person the actions and motives he attributes to Kinbote.) Of course, since we know nothing about Shade beyond what we learn from the poem and its editorial apparatus, it is theoretically possible that Shade also invented his daughter's suicide, or invented his daughter, or indeed invented everything within the covers of the book — which is of course precisely what Nabokov has done. A *reductio ad absurdum* of Brian Boyd's interpretation abolishes the distinction between Shade and Nabokov. But the power and beauty of *Pale Fire* surely depend on our accepting that

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[13] Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: the American Years* (Princeton: Princeton U.P.), p 445.

[14] W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," reprinted in *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, ed. by David Lodge (London: Longman, 1971), pp 334-44.

[15] In a lively discussion at the conference, Brian Boyd defended his interpretation by saying that Nabokov had in fact exploited the painful trauma of his father's assassination (in mistake for someone else) in composing *Pale Fire*, just as Shade exploits the suicide of his daughter, and acknowledged this by making the date of Shade's death the same as that of his father's birthday, July 21st. I completely agree that the assassination of Nabokov's father is one of the sources for *Pale Fire*; but the analogy is inexact. Nabokov fictionalised, and thus distanced himself and his readers from, painful personal experience, in the whole of *Pale Fire*; Shade (according to Boyd's interpretation) only in the commentary. To draw a more exact analogy, we should have to imagine that Nabokov wrote a memoir of his father, including a detailed account of his assassination, that was completely factual and also movingly introspective; and then attached to it a much longer parodic scholarly commentary, supposedly written by a deranged academic, who insinuated himself into Nabokov's domestic life, and fed him with some paranoid fantasy about himself which he subsequently reads into Nabokov's text, which he purloined after leading the novelist inadvertently to his death. Would we not feel that there was something distinctly odd and misjudged about such a production?

there is within it a distinction between the fictional and the real that corresponds epistemologically to the distinction between the world of the novel and the world in which Nabokov wrote it and we read it. And the only place where you can draw such a line without the whole text unravelling is between the poem and its commentary. The pathos and poignancy of the daughter's death, the force of the contrast between Shade's bleakly stoical meditation on it, and Kinbote's ripping yarn about Charles, the exiled king of Zembla, depend on our believing that, within the imagined world of the novel, the daughter's death is real, and the story of the exiled King of Zembla is a fiction pretending to be fact, the compensatory fantasy of a gifted but deeply flawed human being.

I think this issue is of more than local significance. Nabokov's art assumes that there is a common perceptual world, in which actions have real and sometimes irreversible consequences, and that people who for their own psychological purposes deny or ignore this are deranged and dangerous. He does not, like the classic realist novelists of the nineteenth century, believe or pretend to believe that this world is unproblematic, or totally knowable, or supervised by a benign Providence, or amenable to human notions of what is just and reasonable. On the contrary the world he describes is full of violent and random occurrences which are tragic or comic in their lack of rational motivation. But he does not follow the modernists in supposing that reality is wholly subjective. He does not endorse solipsism. Solipsism is a nightmare from which many of his characters awake, usually too late to undo the consequences: Herman in *Despair*, Smurov in *The Eye*, Kinbote in *Pale Fire*.

It is a commonplace critical observation that Nabokov wonderfully celebrates the thingness of things. His novels are full of objects, often homely and humble, that are noted and described not necessarily because they are of significance in the plot or because they are signifiers of character and milieu, or vehicles of thematic symbolism, but simply because they are there, because the world is full of forgotten, abandoned, contingent objects, every one of which in fact has its own history and pathos, and one duty of the artist is to remind us of this. To Martha, in *King Queen Knave*, rummaging through the drawers of her husband's desk for his revolver:

> found several sticks of gold-tinted sealing-wax, a flashlight, three guldens and one shilling, an exercise book with English words written in it, his grinning passport (who grins in official circumstances?) his pipe, broken, that she had given him long ago, an old little album of faded snapshots, a recent snapshot of a girl that might have been Isolda Portz had she not worn a smart ski suit in the photo, a box of thumbtacks, pieces of string, a watch crystal, and other trivial junk the accumulation of which always infuriated Martha. Most of these articles, including the copybook and the winter sports advertisement she deposited in the wastebasket. She thrust back the drawers violently, and leaving the deafened desk, went up to the bedroom.[16]

To Martha, intent only on murder, these miscellaneous objects are merely irritants, obstacles in her path which she consigns to oblivion. Only her husband's passport photograph evokes an active (hostile) response from her. If she had been more attentive, she would have found among them clues to the fact that her husband has a mistress (he took Isolda Portz to the ski resort; perhaps he was smiling in anticipation in the passport photograph). Her lack of respect for objects, as for anything other than her own selfish ends, is implied by the dully denotative style in which she registers them. The vivid metaphor of the "deafened drawer" is of course the narrator's, expressing sympathetic solidarity with the things so insensitively treated by Martha.

As the narrator of *Transparent Things* explains, such humble objects are microcosms of human effort and ingenuity: to contemplate the full history of their existence opens up

[16] *King Queen Knave*, p. 184.

dizzying vistas of contingency. Hugh Parsons finds in the drawer of the desk in his hotel room, for instance:

> a very plain, round, technically faceless old pencil of cheap pine, dyed a dingy lilac. It had been mislaid ten years ago by a carpenter who had not finished examining, let alone fixing, the old desk, having gone away for a tool that he never found. Now comes the act of attention.
> In his shop, and long before that at the village school, the pencil has been worn own to two-thirds of its original length. The bare wood of its tapered end has darkened to a plumbeous plum, thus merging in tint with the blunt tip of graphite whose blind gloss alone distinguishes it from the wood. A knife and brass sharpener have thoroughly worked upon it and if it were necessary we could trace the complicated fate of the shavings, each mauve on one side and tan on the other when fresh, but now reduced to atoms of dust whose wide, wide dispersal is panic catching its breath but one should get above it, one gets used to it fairly soon (there are worse terrors).[17]

The narrator concludes after quite a few more lines that "the solid pencil itself as briefly fingered by Hugh Person still somehow eludes us", but as readers we are more likely to feel that we have never seen a pencil described more completely.

Nabokov's description of objects is very different from the *chosisme* of Alain Robbe-Grillet, in whose fiction consciousness is entirely solipsistic, and the material world is all geometrical planes and surfaces, all surface and no depth, described in languge from which every metaphorical trope has been rigorously purged. It is not quite like, either, the whimsical anthropomorphism and moody pathetic fallacies of the nineteenth-century novel, or the lyrical epiphanies of the modernist novel, though it has affinities with them. More often than not, the metaphorical tropes in his Nabokov's fiction are purely local in effect, and not motivated by the focalising character's consciousness. The midges in *Laughter in the Dark*, "continually darning the air in one spot"; "the waxed moustache" of a burnished clock at ten minutes to two in *Sebastian Knight*, the "square echo" of a car's slammed door in *Bend Sinister*; the magazine that "escaped to the floor like a flustered fowl" in *Lolita* — such tropes, which swarm over the pages of Nabokov, are in the Russian formalist term primarily defamiliarising in effect — they allow us to see the phenomenal word afresh, and hence to value it. And even when metaphor *is* charged with the emotion of the perceiving subject, this does not interfere with its fundamental task of doing justice to the phenomenal world. For example, this exquisitely sensuous description of Lolita eating an apple:

> She tossed it up into the sun-dusted air and caught it — it made a cupped, polished plop […] she grasped it and bit into it, and my heart was like snow under the crimson skin.[18]

The combination of onomatpoeic phonology and double metaphoric reference — to the physical properties of the apple and to Humbert's feelings — is breathtaking. In such passages Nabokov comes closest to the Joycean epiphany, though there is a romantic rapture in the language that Joyce could never invoke without immediately subjecting it to an effect of ironic bathos.

"The detail is all", Ada asserts in a passage lyrically celebrating the discipline of natural history, one branch of which Nabokov himself practised with distinction.[19] It is the most empirical, least abstract, of the natural sciences. One of the reasons for Nabokov's obsessive hostility to Freud and Freudianism was that its interpretations tried to explain everything in terms of something else, the surface in terms of the putatively hidden, whereas Nabokov thought we should stay on the surface and make sense and sensation out of *that*. This doesn't condemn the writer to a drab realism. What Van de Veen says of Heironymus Bosch would seem to be Nabokov's own aesthetic philosophy:

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[17] *Transparent Things* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973), pp. 6-7.
[18] *Lolita* (London: Corgi, 1961), p. 61.
[19] *Ada* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969), p. 71.

> I don't give a hoot for the esoteric meaning, for the myth behind the moth […] what we have to study is the joy of the eye, the feel and the taste of the woman-sized strawberry that you embrace *with* him."[20]

The profusion of sharply observed and vividly described detail in Nabokov's novels is one reason why, although their stories often deal with sensational actions associated with the crime novel and the thriller, they are not "page-turners", not "good reads", to use the phrases commonly used about successful popular fiction. Roland Barthes in his essay, *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative* proposed a distinction between what he called, with the structuralist's love of jargon, nuclei and catalysers.[21] Nuclei open or close alternatives that are of direct consequence for subsequent development of the narrative, and cannot be deleted without altering the story. Catalysers expand or fill up the spaces between the nuclei and *can* be deleted without altering the story. In the "good read" the proportion of nuclei is very high. In Nabokov's novels it is very low. The travelogue writing in Part Two of *Lolita,* for example, which must have dismayed many of the readers who bought the book on its scandalous reputation, consists of pages and pages of catalysers without a single nucleus.

There is an interesting passage in *Glory* concerning a book written by the hero's friend Darwin. Purporting to be a book of short stories, it apparently consists of short descriptive dissertations on commonplace things, like corkscrews, parrots, playing cards — "their history, beauty and virtues". Martin is enchanted with the book, and the narrator comments:

> If Martin had ever thought of becoming a writer and been tormented by a writer's covetousness (so akin to the fear of death) by that constant state of anxiety compelling one to fix indelibly this or that evanescent trifle, perhaps these dissertations on minutiae that were deeply familiar to him might have roused in him a pang of envy and desire to write of the same things still better.[22]

The association of the writer's obsessive desire to give permanent form to what he perceives, however trivial, with the fear of death crops up again in slightly different form in a passage in *Pnin*:

> With the help of the janitor he screwed on to the side of the desk a pencil-sharpener — that highly satisfying, highly philosophical implement that goes ticonderoga, ticonderoga, feeding on the yellow finish and sweet wood, and ends up in a kind of soundlessly spinning etheral void as we all must.[23]

The sudden transition from the lyrical celebration of the commonplace to a chilling reminder of mortality seems to me quintessentially Nabokovian. It is difficult to think of a modern literary novelist whose works ends more often with a death, usually a violent one — murder, execution, suicide: *King Queen Knave*, *The Defence*, *Laughter in the Dark*, *Glory*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, *Transparents Things*, all end with one or more deaths, and they and the other novels frequently include other deaths in the progress of the story. As we know, violent, untimely and pointless death tragically marred Nabokov's own life when his father was murdered in mistake for somebody else — an experience which left its mark on both the form and the content of his fiction. But unless one has a very naive fundamentalist religious faith, in a sense death is always irrational, outrageous, unjust, whether it comes violently and early in life or late and from natural causes (as it did for Nabokov himself). The story in Nabokov novels nearly always carries that bleak message, while the vivacity of the style defies it. The frame-breaking devices in his fiction, and the intertextual allusions which teem beneath its surface, are clear acknowledgments of the limits of art, its artificiality and conventionality. Art cannot overcome or indefinitely

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[20] *Ibid.*, p. 437.

[21] Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, edited and translated by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 79-124.

[22] *Glory*, p. 64.

[23] *Pnin* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 58.

postpone death, but it was for Nabokov our best consolation against it, above all in its defamiliarising celebration of the particularity of the phenomenal world.