



# Beyond Modernism and Postmodernism: Vladimir Nabokov's Fiction of Transcendent Perspective

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## Beyond Modernism and Postmodernism: Vladimir Nabokov's Fiction of Transcendent Perspective

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In his commentary to Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Vladimir Nabokov wrote: "I cannot think of any masterpiece the appreciation of which would be enhanced in any degree or manner by the knowledge that it belonged to this or that school" (*Nabokov's Congeries*, 281). Nabokov's point here is surely well taken: posterity thinks first and foremost in terms of talent, in terms of vision, in terms of genius. Only on a secondary basis is it useful to observe the proximate affiliation or affinity (from an historical perspective) that might shed additional insight or illumination on the achievement of the artist. Furthermore, Nabokov advocated that "the nationality of a worthwhile writer is of secondary importance [...]. The writer's art is his real passport. His identity should be immediately recognized by a special pattern or unique coloration" (*Strong Opinions*, 63). This, too, is a stalwart observation. From our contemporary vantage point, obsessed with "difference," it is refreshing to appreciate Nabokov's insistence on a shared literary apperception: that great art may move and affect deeply responsive readers across culture, across gender, and across social and historical boundaries. He maintained his point explicitly in his statement that: "I am bored by writers who join the social-comment racket. I despise the corny Philistine fad of flaunting four-letter words. I also refuse to find merit in a novel just because it is by a brave Black in Africa or a brave White in Russia — or by any representative of any single group in America. Frankly, a national, folklore, class, masonic, religious, or any other communal aura involuntarily prejudices me against a novel, making it harder for me to peel the offered fruit so as to get at the nectar of possible talent" (*Strong Opinions*, 113). Nabokov is here proposing that advocacy is no substitute for art. Any critical approach that emphasizes nationality, school, period, approach, instead of genuine esthetic vision, would be indeed misguided.

It is doubly ironic, then, that Nabokovians today — whose goal is the widespread realization (through literary, stylistic, and interpretive means) that Nabokov was a unique literary voice and made a unique and crucially important artistic contribution — devote a good deal of their passionate endeavors to exploring the following questions: what, if any, nationality best exemplifies Nabokov's essence? (Russian? American? French? English? Continental?); what, if any, school, period, or affinity best characterizes Nabokov's literary output? (modernist? postmodernist? romanticist?). Further, despite Nabokov's insistence that "the reader has no business bothering about the author's intentions" ("The Last Interview," 122), Nabokovians concern themselves actively with the question of what does this or that passage, poem, novel, essay, or play truly mean?

To be fair, Nabokovians, like all connoisseurs of great literature, are devoted to establishing a place for their esteemed author in the pantheon of literary accomplishment. And the way to achieve this — where universities, colleges, libraries, and even bookstores are concerned — is through classification, taxonomy, categorization. As deeply and as rightly as Nabokov resisted these obsessions for "square minds" (*Nabokov's Congeries*, 281), the continuing assessment and appreciation of his literary accomplishment takes place within the institutional convenience of descriptive labeling. While granting the correctness of Nabokov's wariness toward reductive generalizations, in practical terms, the alternative to operating within the university and literary community of minds would be to secede and establish a veritable "Vladimir Nabokov School of Arts and Letters." Such an organization would be the epitome of the "club or group" that Nabokov forswore throughout his life (*Strong Opinions*, 18).

Within universities, questions of nationality are crucial, not least in terms of departmental affiliation and organization: is Nabokov a Russian author (Russian or Slavic Department) or

an American author (English Department)? Questions of period and school are significant in terms of course distribution: ought Nabokov to be included in a course on modernist authors? Or postmodernist authors? Questions of interpretive emphasis and approach dictate the kinds of courses in which Nabokov titles might be found: is Nabokov a formalist and thus, antithetical to a theoretical course on postmodernism? (If so, how ought we to approach his admiration for Robbe-Grillet?) Is Nabokov a postmodernist and thus, inappropriate for inclusion in an American modernist course? (If so, how ought we to regard his emphasis on close reading and accurate perception of literary details?) Such ingenuous institutional quandaries often motivate the inclination to classify and categorize. Nevertheless, Nabokov put the matter succinctly when he stated: "I am an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England where I studied French literature, before spending fifteen years in Germany. I came to America in 1940 and decided to become an American citizen, and make America my home" (*Strong Opinions*, 26). Nabokov's insistence on his art and all art transcending national boundaries and types, we may consider, could have some relation to the difficulty he had initially in obtaining a university affiliation and, as he put it, "true, I have rolled and lived to become that appetizing thing a 'full professor', but at heart I have always remained a lean 'visiting lecturer'" (*Strong Opinions*, 27). Nabokov was attracted to the ambiance of learning, the intellectual stimulation, the literary resources of the university, and the subsidy it provided for his writing and literary activities. He most assuredly did not approve of the institutional need for classification and the formulation of abiding generalizations: it ought not to surprise us that he retired from academic life when circumstances allowed him to function independently. His ongoing literary assessment, however, takes place within these selfsame established walls. I should like to contend, however, that while this situation is most definitely ironic, it is not seriously problematic.

Nabokov's fiction confounds those literary critics who would place his writing conveniently in a descriptive container that would all-too-readily explain and enclose the multifarious possibilities and imaginative significance of his work. Indeed, six months ago, at the Modern Language Association convention in San Diego, I witnessed the spectacle of two deeply sincere Nabokov admirers quarreling in public as to whether Nabokov ought to be considered a modernist or a postmodernist author. This sort of intellectual conflict — so unnecessary from Nabokov's perspective as to that with which art is truly concerned — is fueled by the desire to contribute to Nabokov's posterity by arguing as persuasively as possible for his being included in what are the most important literary trends of the day. But these judgments are subjective and change over time. To be frank, what Nabokovians (and all authorial loyalists) want to achieve is that serious attention be devoted to Nabokov in terms of the changing literary concerns of each particular era: over time, the continuing significance of Nabokov will be borne out and establish him as one of the greatest authors in literary history. Mind you, I am not in doubt as to the ultimate success of this enterprise. But it is important to reveal the extent to which — in our desire to validate the efforts of our esteemed author — we may at times be complicit in a process of reductive thinking or critical assessment that violates the devotion to artistic freedom and independence that were so crucial for Nabokov.

By education and training, Nabokov was a formalist: that is, he was accustomed to making informed public comments about all novels in terms of *explication de texte*. An examination of his own critical pronouncements would present him — allowing as we must for his desire that he not ever be categorized thusly — as a close reader. His published academic lectures verify that he approached a book in terms of its stylistics: the nuances, precise details, savored images and ornamentations that, taken together, result in the literary construction of an imaginary world. But if we acknowledge that Nabokov is a formalist, are we coerced into the necessity of exclusively reading him in terms of *explication de texte*?

Nabokov's statements of preference in authors, however, often reflected a taste for pre-modernist writers of the decidedly romanticist variety. Indeed, he parodied the beginnings of his own writing career in terms that knowingly played with romantic assumptions: "I was a boy of fifteen, the lilacs were in full bloom; I had read Pushkin and Keats" ("The Last Interview," 121). His early reading was devoted to Wells, Poe, Browning, Keats, Flaubert, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Blok. He even admitted a formative (but not enduring) enthusiasm for the Scarlet Pimpernel, Phileas Fogg, and Sherlock Holmes (*Strong Opinions*, 42-43). But if we acknowledge that Nabokov was shaped by the writers of the nineteenth century, are we somehow manipulated into denying his future relevance?

To further confound things, Nabokov's novels may be viewed as being modernist: for instance, in terms of Nabokov's emphasis on authorial conceptualization and control and his concern with the accurate and correct reading of his work. However, it is equally appropriate to view his novels from a postmodernist perspective: for instance, in terms of his generic innovation, his use of parody to usurp the conventions of traditional forms, his polyphonic use of dialogic voices within his fiction, and his playful conception of himself as an authorial fiction — a fictive impersonation of the persona of authorship. The paradox for Nabokovian critics is that critical training rewards acute pigeonholing. If we pigeonhole Nabokov as a modernist, we are prodded into the type of competitive assessment that Nabokov disdained but that suited Hemingway and Mailer: for instance, how does Nabokov compare to the literarily canonized James Joyce? Ought Nabokov be pitted against the novel — Joyce's *Ulysses* — that he regarded as the greatest masterpiece of twentieth century prose (*Strong Opinions*, 57)? If we pigeonhole Nabokov as a postmodernist, we are able to discuss with insight his proclivity for games and parody but we are checked and mated by the proscription on singular, literal, and discernible authorial meaning.

Similarly, a pre-modernist stance — that is, some variety of a romanticist perspective — does not solve the difficulty either: for while he was steeped in eighteenth and nineteenth century literary sources, and interacted with these writers as if they were his continuing contemporaries, he took the novel to genuinely new and untraveled regions that would be unrecognizable to those writers who first gave him pleasure. Unlike Joyce (who begins as an anti-romantic social realist and ends as a high modernist) or Kafka (whose career epitomizes the ironic problematizing of modernism), Nabokov's writing resists easy situation within any of a number of categories and classifications.

I would maintain that the key to this conundrum lies in Nabokov's goal of transcending time and history. By conceiving of himself as a unique author who included within him Russian, French, English, German, and American influences and intellectual traditions, he was able to reflect a multitude of perspectives within his writings. Furthermore, his efforts to "circle back" and translate his earlier work in Russian into English and have it released in the United States as the later work of an already known American writer point toward a movement beyond postmodernism — an ongoing process of self-invention and self-recovery that is as important today as ever. I propose that we view Nabokov's artistry as a unique and highly individual fusing of what he had learned and observed from romanticism and modernism with his own esthetic inclinations and innovative imaginative genius. He was free enough to not simply be a modernist reactive to social realism, or a postmodernist tethered to and obsessed with modernism: thus, he was able to create genuinely new and uncanny fictions of the future. I should like to consider one of the concluding passages from *Lolita* in order to illustrate my point. Nabokov described the image of "the tinkling sounds of the valley town coming up the mountain trail" as one of the "nerves of the novel," one of the "secret points, the subliminal co-ordinates by means of which the book is plotted [...]" (On a Book Entitled *Lolita*, in *The Annotated Lolita*, 318). Humbert, while being carried off by police and paramedics, "evoke[s] a last mirage of wonder and hopelessness": he conjures a memory of a "melodious unity of

sounds rising like vapor from a small mining town that lay at my feet, in a fold of the valley.” He speaks of a “vapory vibration of accumulated sounds” and “all these sounds were of one nature” (*The Annotated Lolita*, 309). Humbert realizes that he is perceiving the “melody of children at play,” and “this vapor of blended voices [is] majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic.” He stands “listening to that musical vibration” and he realizes “that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord” (*The Annotated Lolita*, 310). In this moment of concord — that is, the agreeable harmony of musical tones — Humbert realizes that he has deprived Lolita of her participation in that concord: he has robbed her of her childhood.

Now here I shall introduce Goethe, fully cognizant of the limitations of Nabokov’s German, and mindfully aware of Nabokov’s wry remarks that “there is a dreadful streak of *poshlust* running through Goethe’s *Faust*” (*Nikolai Gogol*, 64). Nevertheless, Nabokov lived a significant part of his life in Germany, he had translated in 1932 the opening prologue of *Faust* (Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art*, 372), and his knowledge of the nature of romanticism was deep and profound. Goethe would recognize sympathetically the image created in Nabokov’s passage. In his 1797 dedication to *Faust*, Goethe speaks of being “seized by an unaccustomed longing/ For that still, earnest, kingdom of spirits,/ It is suspended only in indefinite tones/ My whispered song, like an aeolian harp,/ A shudder seizes me, tears follow tears,/ The strong heart, it feels mild and tender” (*Faust*, 66, my translation). Goethe is here evoking the image of a harmony of voices that was central to his notion of “Geist”: spirits, souls, essences, minds. Goethe’s “unbestimmten Tönen” (indefinite tones), his indeterminate song from an aeolian harp, is in harmony with Nabokov’s “concord” composed of a “vapor of blended voices.” Goethe’s dedication concludes with: “What I possess, I see as far away,/ And what is vanished to me is reality” (*Faust*, 66, my translation). Compare this to Nabokov’s refrain in *Speak, Memory*: “I see again [...] A sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth pervades my memory. That robust reality makes a ghost of the present” (76-77). For both writers, what is preserved through memory creates a connection, a passageway, to the community of “blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near.” This concord is both elusive and perceptible, lost and yet attainable.

It is important not to compartmentalize what either author may have meant with these pictures of concord and harmony. Goethe insisted that he did not write *Faust* to convey an “idea” and he did not “strive for the embodiment of something *abstract*. I received *impressions* — impressions that were sensuous, vital, lovely, motley, hundredfold — whatever a lively power of imagination offered me; and as a poet I did not have to do anything but round out and form such visions and impressions artistically [...]” (conversations with Eckermann, translated and quoted in Walter Kaufmann’s introduction to *Faust*, 10). Nabokov, too, maintained: “I don’t think in any language. I think in images” (*Strong Opinions*, 14); “this writer’s task?” he remarked, “is the purely subjective one of reproducing as clearly as possible the image of the book he has in his mind” (*Strong Opinions*, 122). For both writers, an image or impression is transcribed accurately through art: thus, no abstract idea or creed is being conveyed. Rather, specific images create the sensation that what is vanished in the past is — through art — more real than the tenuous “reality” of the present. The artist’s creation of art redeems him from all that is ethereal, far away, and insubstantial in life.

Now what is the significance of this moment in which Nabokov inserts into Humbert’s sensibility a perception that resonates with Goethe? An excessively compartmentalizing approach would emphasize that Nabokov was utilizing a romanticist touch, but I would prefer that it be put another way: Nabokov, whose knowledge of romanticism was profound, chose to bestow upon Humbert an image of a concord of sounds that were of one nature; he did not do this because the image was romanticistic, but rather, because the image conveyed *his* picture: Humbert’s realization that he loves the “hopelessly worn” Mrs. Richard Schiller

“more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else” (*The Annotated Lolita*, 279) makes of him a Faust — despite the depravity and evil of his life, he is able to reach for a transcendent, redemptive vision. In Faust’s case, he calls out to the evanescent moment: “Remain, you are so beautiful!” (*Faust*, 468) — and he is saved. In Humbert’s case, he determines that the woman before him *is* Lolita and, despite everything, he loves her — when he is unable to have this Lolita, he immortalizes her in the best and only mode remaining to him: through art. It is for this reason that, in Nabokov’s words, for the “neurotic scoundrel” Humbert, “there is a green lane in Paradise where [he] is permitted to wander at dusk once a year” (*Despair*, 9). But where Goethe dramatized the opposition between Faust and Mephistopheles, Nabokov melds them together into one oppositional being: Humbert Humbert. Nabokov’s image hurtles back in time to Goethe; and in so doing, it “provide[s] informative links with earlier or later patches of the past” (*Strong Opinions*, 143). Nabokov’s artistic perspective escapes modernism and postmodernism: by circling back to the past, he underlines art as a continuity and a process — and points our way to the future.

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