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The V-Shaped Paradigm: Nabokov and Pynchon

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Let me begin by explaining my title. This essay presents biographical and textual evidence of Nabokov's influence on Thomas Pynchon. Since both writers have a penchant for oddly appropriate names, I thought a clever title was in order. I toyed with *The Crying of Lolita*, *Gradus's Rainbow*, and *Veenland*. As the essay took shape, however, I decided to focus on each writer's first novel in English: Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*; Pynchon, *V*. I considered the title "V-1 and V-2," perhaps because I couldn't get *Gravity's Rainbow* out of my mind. But I was interested in the letter V's shape, as well as the sound that it makes (or doesn't make). I finally settled, then, on "The V-Shaped Paradigm."

Nabokov's first English novel is filled with V's, from the usual dedication "to Véra" opposite the copyright page to the violet theme, the knight's move, the name of Sebastian's mother Virginia, the spelling of "Sevastian" in Starov's telegram, and the narrator's first initial. The V that I have in mind appears in Sebastian's novel *Success*, which investigates Fate's attempts to bring two people together. In this essay, I use the design of Sebastian's novel as a model for my own biographical investigation and for Nabokov's and Pynchon's narrative form. The novel's structure, as Nabokov's narrator describes it — "two lines which have finally tapered to the point of meeting" — is shaped like a letter V (97).

I.

The V shape offers an apt paradigm for the conjunction of these writers. *Success*, according to V.'s synopsis, traces "the exact way in which two lines of life were made to come into contact" (96). I begin, then, by finding and following the undulations of two other lives that ultimately converged.

Fate managed to bring both Nabokov and Pynchon to Ithaca, New York, in the middle of this century. Nabokov arrived in 1948 after escaping from revolutionary Russia, Nazi Germany, and wartime France, and spending years curating lepidoptera at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology and teaching Russian at Wellesley. Pynchon arrived at Cornell as a student five years later, in 1953, although he promptly entered an undergraduate program in Engineering Physics that prevented him from taking Nabokov's courses. After two years he left the program — but he also left Cornell altogether to join the Navy (Winston 257). In fall 1957 he returned, changed his major to English, and was able at last to take a class with Nabokov — and just in time, because Nabokov was already negotiating with Putnam's for the American publication of *Lolita*. By February 1959, its phenomenal success had enabled him to leave teaching, academia, and Ithaca for good.

For three semesters, then, these writers coexisted in Cornell's literature departments; yet it is strangely difficult to pinpoint the extent of their contact. Pynchon may have taken one of Nabokov's literature courses: 311-312, "Masters of European Fiction," or 325-326, "Russian Literature in Translation." But because his transcript is confidential, and his Cornell dossier has become lost property (Winston 252), it is not easy to determine which course he took, if any. A Pynchon scholar says it was "probably [...] Nabokov's large lecture course, which surveyed the Russian novel" (Plater 2); a Nabokov scholar, that it "surely was" Masters of European Fiction (*Strong* 77). The latter course is more likely, if only because by the time Pynchon returned to Ithaca it attracted ten times as many students (Boyd 315).

One of Nabokov's former students, Alfred Appel, told him that Pynchon had doubtless taken Literature 312, and asked what he thought of Pynchon's fiction. Nabokov had no memory of Pynchon, however, and no knowledge of his work (*Strong* 77). Véra Nabokov, who often graded her husband's exams, said she remembered his "unusual" handwriting, which

combined cursive and printing: a detail appropriate to the conjunction of two writers and the orthographic nature of the V-shaped paradigm (*Strong* 77n3). Unfortunately, Charles Hollander, a scholar in pursuit of the very private Pynchon, has acquired "a bootlegged copy" of his transcript which shows no sign that he studied with Nabokov.

Pynchon may have audited Masters of European Fiction, of course: one Cornell classmate told Hollander, "Everybody who was anybody audited the legendary Nabokov lectures" (12), and others report seeing him there. But even if Fate did bring Nabokov and Pynchon to the same classroom, at the same hour, three times a week, they would have had little interaction. Although Nabokov was a splendid lecturer, his relations with students were distant and magisterial. As he himself remarks, his "method of teaching precluded genuine contact" with them (*Strong* 104).

Nabokov may still have influenced Pynchon even if he did not teach him. Nabokov was famous on campus: Masters of European Fiction, one of Cornell's most popular courses, was known simply as "Nabokov" (Updike xxiv), and his lecture on "Readers, Writers and Censors in Russia," in April 1958, drew such crowds that the Nabokovs themselves couldn't find a parking space (Boyd 360). By the time Pynchon returned to Ithaca in 1957, moreover, the Olympia Press edition of *Lolita* was "circulated hotly around campus" (Kahn 229). Pynchon, his best friend Richard Fariña, and other young writers at Cornell all read it in this sub-rosa manner and developed what Boyd calls a "Nabokov cult" (316). They even asked him to read *Lolita* to a group of students and faculty; when he demurred, Fariña and professor Marc Szeftel read from it instead (Kahn 229-30).

Did Fate ever succeed, then, in bringing Nabokov and Pynchon together? Field asserts that "there was no personal acquaintance between them" (273). Hollander argues that "no photo, letter or magazine article by any third party giving an eyewitness account of a meeting between" them has ever appeared (13). The only tangible evidence, aside from Véra Nabokov's memory of Pynchon's penmanship, is the fact that Pynchon mentions Nabokov in a 1959 grant application to the Ford Foundation to write an opera libretto — but even this bit of name-dropping doesn't confirm that he knew the great writer personally (Weisenburger, "Thomas" 295).

And yet, as in Sebastian's novel, Fate made several attempts to unite them — from the classes that Pynchon may have audited to that student-faculty reading of *Lolita* which the evening's host persuaded Nabokov not to attend (Field 305). Shortly before Pynchon returned to Cornell, Nabokov told Katharine White that he was culling his students for "potential *New Yorker* contributors" to recommend to her (*Selected* 202); I wonder if he would have given Pynchon such encouragement. I wonder, too, whether Pynchon attended Nabokov's lecture on Soviet censorship but was too shy to introduce himself afterwards. Even better, I like to imagine that Pynchon was the anonymous student who in the fall of 1957 walked up to Professor Nabokov, bearing a copy of the Olympia Press *Lolita*, and simply bowed (Boyd 316).

But does it matter whether their lives converged in the flesh or on the page? The narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* seems to be Sebastian's ideal successor and biographer because he read his work so attentively. The same could be said of Pynchon's relation to Nabokov. We know that he read *Lolita* at Cornell, and he often alludes to it — as in the reference to "these Humbert Humbert cats coming on so big and sick" in *The Crying of Lot 49* (147). But Pynchon's fiction indicates that he studied Nabokov's other works as well.[1] He may have read *Pnin*, in particular, because it was published and nominated for the National

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[1] Hollander notes their similar backgrounds, values, and stylistic devices (15); Henkle likens their sense of nostalgia, and claims that *Lot 49*'s philately parodies Nabokov's allusions to lepidoptera (214, 218); Cooper compares their use of fabricated plots, arguing that Nabokov sees these as sources of aesthetic bliss but Pynchon relates them to historical meaning (40-43).

Book Award the year he returned to Ithaca, and was thought at Cornell to be a caricature of Russian history professor Marc Szeftel (Boyd 288-89).[2] But he could have also read *Laughter in the Dark* (1932; trans. 1938), *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), *Bend Sinister* (1947), *Conclusive Evidence* (1951), and — by the time Nabokov left Ithaca —*Nabokov's Dozen* (1958). He probably knew of these works, too, because at the meeting where Szeftel and Fariña read from *Lolita*, Szeftel discussed what he called the novel's primary motifs — destiny, doubles, and games — in terms of Nabokov's previous writing (Szeftel 28). Moreover, Nabokov's other English fiction was readily available: because he taught at Cornell, the university library collected first editions of his works (Strehle 39; Kann 237).

As an aspiring young writer, Pynchon must have been especially fascinated by *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. It is a masterpiece of narrative complexity; a technical *tour de force*, its author's first novel in English; a detailed account of a writer's development; and a thorough evocation of the literary life — from writer's block, romantic inspiration, and the revision process to agents, editors, and reviewers. Although we do not know when Pynchon read it, textual evidence indicates that he did so before he wrote his own novel. *V.* first took shape as a short story, "Under the Rose," that Pynchon wrote at Cornell in 1959 and later expanded into the novel's third chapter. Pynchon characterizes the story as a case of "literary theft," although he cites only Baedeker's 1899 guide to Egypt and Buchan's and Oppenheim's espionage fiction as sources (Introduction xxvii-xxviii). Certainly the most Nabokovian elements in the novel are not present in the story. But by the time Pynchon completed *V.* in 1963, he had obviously read *Sebastian Knight*.

II.

V. resembles Nabokov's novel in plot, character, narration, and style.[3] To describe *Sebastian Knight*'s influence on *V.*, however, I want to invoke the V-shaped paradigm. Pynchon's novel is organized around the letter V's eerie proliferation. It has two major storylines: first, the picaresque adventures of Benny Profane, hapless schlemihl and human yo-yo, as he careens around America and Europe in the 1950s; second, the sinister appearances of a woman named "V." at pivotal moments in European history. Connecting these plots is Benny's friend Stencil, who is obsessed with V. and who narrates the chapters in which she appears. In tracing *Sebastian Knight*'s influence on Pynchon's novel, I will focus on the letter V, the lady V., and Stencil's role as obsessed, dissociated, unreliable narrator.

Pynchon's title alludes directly to Nabokov's narrator in *Sebastian- Knight*. That initial stands for many things, however. Just as V.'s true identity in *Sebastian Knight* remains obscure — a mystery emphasized by Nabokov's linguistic play with the letter — so the referent for "V." in Pynchon's novel seems to change each time it appears. Like Nabokov before him, Pynchon evokes both its labial sound (his characters' names are filled with f's as well as v's) and its visual appearance, which he repeats and inverts in capital N's, M's, and W's (Stimpson 82). Chapter 3, for example, opens with several analogies for the letter's shape: "As spread thighs are to the libertine, flights of migratory birds to the ornithologist, the working part of his tool bit to the production machinist, so was the letter V to young Stencil" (50). (Those migratory birds even echo *Sebastian Knight*'s "V-shaped flight of migrating cranes" [139]). The letter also appears in words like "venery," "virgin," and "veil"; in the Roman numeral V; in allusions to the Virgin Mary and Botticelli's "Birth of Venus"; in references to such places as "Vheissu," "Venezuela," "Vesuvius," "Valletta," "the Vatican," and a club called "The V-Note"; and in names of characters like "Varkumian" and "Vogelsang."

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[2] Weisenburger cites *Pnin* as a source for "*gorodki,*" a game mentioned in *Gravity's Rainbow* (*Companion* 120).

[3] Other critics agree that *V.* is indebted to *Sebastian Knight*. Henkle cites Nabokov's novel among other subtexts (208-12); Mesher compares Stencil's quest to V's; and Strehle claims that both novels juxtapose fabricated and authentic realities, a practice she calls "actualism."

The letter recurs, in particular, in various avatars of V. herself: Victoria Wren, Veronica Manganese, Vera Meroving, and simply V. This elusive *femme fatale* evokes a similar figure in *Sebastian Knight*: Madame Lecerf, also known as Nina Toorovetz and Nina Rechnoy, who pretends to be Helene von Graun and resembles Sebastian's mother Virginia. Just as Nabokov's narrator learns of Nina's existence when he finds her letters among his brother's papers after his death, so young Stencil discovers a cryptic reference to V. in his father's journals after *his* death: "There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she" (43). Like Nabokov's narrator, Stencil sets off on this mysterious woman's trail so as to elucidate his relative's death and give meaning to his own life. Like Nabokov's narrator, too, he becomes utterly obsessed with her. Pynchon further emphasizes the œdipal nature of this search, since Stencil believes that V. was his father's lover. Whereas Nabokov considers the bond between half-brothers, Pynchon is concerned with father-son relationships and "apostolic succession" — a preoccupation that suggests his sense of himself as Nabokov's literary heir (52).

Despite these V's and *femmes fatales*, it is Stencil's role that shows *Sebastian Knight*'s influence most clearly. Like Nabokov's narrator, he is a self-styled detective, "a professional spy without any employer" (51). Although V. investigates literary biography, and Stencil history, their approaches are identical. Stencil, too, depends on what Nabokov's narrator calls "inner knowledge" of his quarry (33). He too has great expectations for the "grand Gothic pile of inferences" that he is "hard at work creating" (209). Just as V. believes that Sebastian's life and art will reveal to him the very meaning of existence, the "absolute solution" (180), so Stencil plans to decode "the century's master cabal" (210). Like V., moreover, Stencil becomes so fixated on the object of his search that he loses his own identity. Practicing a "forcible dislocation of personality," he refers to himself, even in casual conversations, "in the third person" (51). If he has any identity, he muses at one point, it is "He Who Looks for V." (210).

In both novels, the detective's obsession makes him unreliable. Stencil's narration is the most significant change that Pynchon made in "Under the Rose" when he transformed it — after reading *Sebastian Knight*, I believe — into the third chapter of *V.* The short story matter-of-factly presents the events surrounding a secret agent's death in Egypt in 1899. The chapter filters those same events through several points of view, just as Nabokov's narrator embeds various versions of Sebastian in his biography. As in Nabokov's novel, moreover, it turns out that those perspectives may have been forged by the narrator. Despite the verisimilitude of the events he narrates, Stencil admits that his only evidence is a few "veiled references" in his father's journals; the rest is "impersonation and dream" (52).

Stencil's name — referring to a process by which letters are formed, and thus suggesting the single initial that identifies Nabokov's narrator — encapsulates their similarity. That stenciling is a kind of duplication emphasizes that both narrators experience life vicariously. But a "stencil" is also a pattern or design produced by a stencil, just as each narrative's apparent web of sense is fabricated by its narrator. In *V.*, for example, when Stencil retells an anecdote he has just heard, it is quite different; as another character says, it "ha[s] become […] Stencilized" (211). Because of these associations with writing, repetition, and reproduction, the name may also be Pynchon's covert acknowledgment that he used another text as model.

III.

Success provides a useful paradigm, too, for tracing the formal similarity between these novels and between Nabokov's and Pynchon's work in general. An investigation of causality, and an example of Sebastian's "research theme" (104), it has the structure of a detective story. Stencil's quest for "the ultimate shape of his V-structure" creates a similar form for his tale

(209). *V.*, like *Sebastian Knight*, consists of two storylines linked by a single character's perceptions; and a reader proceeds through each novel expecting that those lines will finally converge.

Nabokov apparently identified the detective genre with narrative form: he described his class in European fiction as a "detective investigation of the mystery of literary structures." Classic detective stories feature two separate plots: the tale of the crime, which occurred in the past, and the tale of the investigation, which occurs in the present (Sweeney, "Locked" 5-6). These two plots are connected by the detective's analytical process, but they don't actually converge until he solves the mystery and the story ends. In this sense, the V-shaped paradigm — "two lines which […] tapered to a point of meeting" — exemplifies the detective story's formal design (97).

And yet the investigations in *Sebastian Knight* and *V.* end with missed connections rather than convergences. In the last pages of *Sebastian Knight*, the narrator recalls the name of Sebastian's hospital, undergoes an agonizing journey, and finally arrives at his brother's bedside; he later learns, however, that it is the wrong bed and Sebastian has already died. "So I did not see Sebastian after all, or at least I did not see him alive," V. admits (204). But he claims that this mistake doesn't matter because he has become Sebastian, or Sebastian has become him, "or perhaps we are both someone whom neither of us knows" (205). Pynchon's novel concludes with an epilogue, set in Valletta in 1919, that describes the older Stencil's "first meeting" with a woman named "Veronica Manganese" whom he suspects "he had met before" and "would meet again" (448). After their last meeting, he dies in a bizarre boating accident that remains mysterious because the sea shows "nothing at all of what came to lie beneath" it (463). Disturbingly, young Stencil never knows how his father died; he has already abandoned Valletta as a hunting ground and headed to Stockholm. Rather than concluding with the definitive closure demanded by the V-shaped paradigm, both novels end with a return to the beginning — to the very death that prompted the investigation — but without resolving it. A convergence occurs only in the mind of that "someone whom neither of us knows," the author or reader.

In these novels, then, Nabokov and Pynchon deviate from the expected detective-story ending. They also parody two classic themes in detective fiction: the *femme fatale* and the purloined letter.[4] Indeed, they revise this narrative genre throughout their fiction, in order to question narrative itself — especially in terms of causality, reliability, and closure — as well as the nature of meaning and interpretation. Their novels thus resemble other "metaphysical detective stories" (Merivale 295) by writers such as Alfau, Borges, Robbe-Grillet, Perec, Eco, and Auster.

This reading of *Sebastian Knight* and *V.* shows that Nabokov's and Pynchon's shared affinity for epistemology, self-reflexivity, experimental form, and generic parody locates these novels precisely where two other lines — modernism and postmodernism — also taper "to the point of meeting" (97). Both novels use the V-shape, in fact, to dramatize the convergence of modernism and postmodernism. One storyline asserts the modernist tenets of completion, wholeness, and artistic unity — as represented in the marvelous consistency of Sebastian's *œuvre* and the utter centrality of V. in European history. The other storyline, however, fosters a self-reflexive awareness that that sense of unity is unstable, unreliable, and subjective. These revisions of the V-shaped paradigm suggest, in fact, that the metaphysical detective story may be the quintessential postmodernist text.

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[4] On *Sebastian Knight* as a detective story, see my "Purloined Letters".

IV.

I want to end my own detective investigation with an anecdote that concludes the series of missed connections between Pynchon and Nabokov, even as it illustrates their inherent convergence. We know that Pynchon read Nabokov, even if he did not study with him. Nabokov may have read Pynchon; at any rate, he knew of his first novel.

Nabokov was told about *V.* by Appel, who recommended it despite what he considered an unfortunate tendency toward sophomoric humor. Appel cited a character's name, "Dewey Gland," as evidence of this flaw. But the inventor of "Mr. Swine" and "the Duchess of Great Payne and Mone" was delighted rather than disgusted: "Nabokov almost fell off his chair with laughter. 'That's wonderful. Dewey Gland! Marvelous!' he roared." Nabokov also enthused over the novel's title, exclaiming: "lovely title, lovely!" (qtd. in Henkle 208n2). The letter V had special significance for him, of course; he even chose his autobiography's original title, *Conclusive Evidence*, for its back-to-back *v* sounds suggesting Vladimir and Véra (Boyd 629). Nabokov's tribute to *Pynchon's* title repeats the *v* sound again, and echoes his synaesthetic gloss of the word "lovely" in *Sebastian Knight*: "when I say 'lovely', I mean doves and lilies, and velvet, and that soft pink 'v' in the middle and the way your tongue curled up to the long, lingering 'l.' Our life together was alliterative" (112).

In this repetition of V's, Nabokov's and Pynchon's novels and lives become alliterative as well. Indeed, given Nabokov's evident approval of what Appel told him about *V.*, I like to imagine that he did read the novel, and that Fate thus finally induced him to meet Pynchon, too — on the printed page, if not in "real life."

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