



## Introduction

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# EPI-REVEL

Revue électronique de l'Université Côte d'Azur

## Introduction

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This special issue of *Cycnos* presents the proceedings of the Nice conference on Nabokov which was held at the “Faculté des Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines” on June 24, 25 and 26 1992 under the auspices of the CRELA (Centre de Recherche sur les Ecritures de Langue Anglaise). It was the third international conference on Nabokov after the Yale conference organized by Vladimir E. Alexandrov, and the Moscow conference, and it brought together some of the best specialists on this author.

The topic I selected for this conference, “Autobiography, Biography and Fiction,” was dictated by a number of circumstances, the main one being of course the recent publication of Brian Boyd’s monumental biography of Nabokov which, at last, provides the specialists and the general public with reliable data concerning Nabokov’s private and public life. I also wanted a topic that would suit the majority of the participants, both the specialists in Slavic studies who have often provided very useful annotations of Nabokov’s works, and the specialists in English or Comparative Literature who have generally been more concerned with textual analysis or genre study. It also seemed a good idea to choose such a topic considering the fact that Nabokov lived in Nice or on the French Riviera at various periods of his life and that he abundantly described this part of the world in his novels, especially in *Glory*, *Laughter in the Dark*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, *Ada* and *Look at the Harlequins!* For him, this was something like a second-best dreamland after Vyra.

It may also be time to rehabilitate the author, one way or the other. Ten years ago, William Gass, once a great admirer of Nabokov, delivered the following diatribe in the very room where the present conference was held:

Yet when readers read as if the words on the page were only fleeting visual events, and not signs to be sung inside themselves — so that the author’s voice is stilled — the author’s hand must reach out into the space of the page and put a print upon it that will be unmistakable, uneradicable. With lipstick, perhaps. And if, in their new-found yet unearned annoyance, the critics ululate at the death of the author — one more god gone — we shall merely remind them that we were never myths, rode our lovers to death long since, and before they drew breath, and shall henceforth create texts so intelligent they will read themselves.<sup>1</sup>

It is true that the structuralists and the deconstructionists have more or less supplanted the author in their criticism, especially when studying complex works like those of Joyce, the *Nouveau Roman*, or so-called postmodernist fiction which seem to defy our understanding and to leave us no choice but to impose our own critical discourse upon them, our own text. Yet, the novel remains an interface, as I have tried to show in *Textual Communication*, and it brings together two real persons, sometimes centuries apart, the author and the reader.<sup>2</sup>

Though Nabokov was very secretive and refused to understand that his readers could be interested in him as a person when they should only be concerned with his books, it is clear that when we read his novels we establish with him a kind of paradoxical communication that he has cleverly programmed. This communication is paradoxical because the novel as a genre always involves in my opinion an element of bad faith, and Nabokov was the most skillful handler of the genre. There is probably an element of bad faith also in his interviews, and

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<sup>1</sup> William Gass, “Tropes of the Text,” in *Representation and Performance in Postmodern Fiction*, ed. Maurice Couturier (Montpellier: Delta, 1983), p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Couturier, *Textual Communication: A Print-Based Theory of the Novel* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991). I take up this theory at greater length in my forthcoming book, *Nabokov, ou la tyrannie de l’auteur* (Paris: Le Seuil, collection “Poétique”, spring 1993).

particularly in his critical statements about Humbert or Van Veen. The debate that took place on this subject during the conference testifies to Nabokov's ability to "reach out into the space of the page" without allowing his readers to have access to him.

The conference had its great moments, when for instance Dmitri Nabokov, whose discreet presence and participation was very stimulating for all the participants, read an unpublished poem of his father that he had translated, or again when Michael Meylakh talked almost apologetically about his years in the Goulag because of his literary preferences, or again when a butterfly flew briefly into the conference room. Yet, we all missed the presence of Gilles Barbedette who, in his too brief lifetime, did so much for the Nabokov studies in France.

I must thank the "Faculté des Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines," the English Department and the "Centre de la Métaphore" for making this conference possible, and the "Bibliothèque Universitaire" for hosting it. I am also very grateful to the American Embassy in Paris for covering partial publication costs of these proceedings.