"Annotating vs. Interpreting Nabokov: The Author as a Helper or a Screen?"

Couturier Maurice

Cycnos, études anglophones
revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice
ISSN 1765-3118 ISSN papier 0992-1893

"Annotating vs. Interpreting Nabokov: The Author as a Helper or a Screen?"

Maurice Couturier

The debate about annotating vs. interpreting turns around the problem of the over determination of the text and the kind of contribution the reader can, may or must bring to it. Barthes and Foucault, while proclaiming the death of the author, clearly favored interpretation. Henry James, in "The Figure in the Carpet", intimated that the author continues to inhabit his work of fiction as a figure, and to hold sway over his reader. Nabokov held such "strong opinions" in his interviews that his best readers have devoted most of their time and energy to annotate his works, being afraid that any interpretation might run counter to the author's "intention". This paper tries to lay some of the theoretical foundations necessary to understand this difficult question.

Nabokov is, with Joyce of course, one of the twentieth century novelists whose works have generated and continue to generate the greatest amount of annotations. Novels like *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, *Ada* or *The Gift* are so complex and teem with so many literary, historical, linguistic references, what could be called Nabokov's encyclopedia, that many erudite Nabokovians have devoted themselves to annotating them, for the greatest benefit of us all. Dedicated colleagues have recently undertaken to annotate *Transparent Things* on the Nabokov forum, under D. Barton Johnson's kind tutelage. There may be limits to such an enterprise, as the debates around *Pale Fire* and *Lolita* (see *Nabokov Studies* # 2) have shown, but we have no idea what those limits could be. On the other hand, Nabokov's mastery is such that many specialists have been reluctant to launch bold interpretative strategies based on some acknowledged hermeneutic, afraid perhaps that they might overlook some important elements in the text (i.e. overlook a necessary annotation) and fall into a trap laid by Nabokov who, in his interviews and prefaces, keeps warning us. And those who do offer interpretations of this or that novel are often tempted to

validate those interpretations by reference to some statement made elsewhere by Nabokov.

The whole debate about annotating vs. interpreting naturally turns around the problem of the over determination of the text and the kind of contribution the reader can, may or must bring to it. Does it contain or suggest its own interpretation? What is the authority one is prepared to recognize to the author over it and therefore over us as we are reading it? Can an interpretation run counter to the author's recommendations in his interviews or prefaces? For example, is it possible to read Nabokov's works with Freud's interpretive grid (Lacan's in my case) after Nabokov's virulent attacks against the Viennese witch-doctor, especially in his prefaces?

1 – The Death of the Author

Forty years ago, two French critics arrogantly questioned the role of the author: Roland Barthes, in his 1968 essay "The Death of the Author" which became the chief manifesto of structuralism and, later, of deconstructionism, at a time when he had totally changed his views on the subject, and Michel Foucault, in a lecture given in 1969 before the French society of philosophy and entitled "What is an author?"[1]

Barthes' essay, "The Death of the Author", opens upon a theory of writing that we have come to call Derridian: "Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique thing in which our subject recedes, the black-and-white in which every kind of identity, and that of the writing body to start with, dissolves."[2] Writing is not considered as a communication medium, an interface, but as a neutral space into which two subjects who are only implied, the author and the reader, dissolve themselves as by magic. The author, Barthes explains (and Foucault will confirm), is an invention of our modern era in which the "prestige of the individual" has kept increasing, particularly as the producer of wealth, and, I would add, as the consumer of pleasures. In the *bourgeois* logic, the literary work draws its meaning and value from

---

[1] "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?" *Bulletin de la société française de philosophie,* LXIII (1969), 3, 73-104. It was published in English in *Textual Strategies,* Josué V. Harari, ed. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979). The references to the essay are keyed to the 1979 English version.

[2] *Le Bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), p. 63. This article was originally published in *Aspen* and was brought out in French by *Manteia* in 1968.

the individual who engendered it: the *explanation* of the work always tends to be sought on the side of he who produced it, as if, through the more or less transparent allegory of fiction, it was always eventually the voice of one single person, the *author*.

Barthes reformulates Proust's celebrated denunciation of Sainte-Beuve's type of criticism. Not that Proust considered the author as expendable; he only thought it was useless to question him when trying to understand his work. Barthes, who was closer to the Russian Formalists than to Proust at that point, claimed, as Mallarmé before him, that "it is the language which speaks, not the author."[3] This thesis has been taken up repeatedly since by such theoreticians as Iuri Lotman, Julia Kristeva, Derrida and Paul de Man: it basically claims that the language imposes its laws on all those who use it and takes precedence over the creative ability of the author who, as a consequence, can be excluded from the process of textual exchange. The author is thereby disqualified as a subject, being supplanted by the enunciation: "language acknowledges only a 'subject', not a 'person', and that subject, empty outside the enunciative act which defines it, is enough to 'uphold' the language, that is, to drain it out."[4] Following the linguistic theory of shifters, Barthes holds that the subject is like a vacant seat which anybody can occupy at a given moment but that nobody, including the author, can durably claim as his property. The author is therefore a mere copyist who "can only imitate a gesture which is always anterior, never original; his only power is to intermingle the writings, to bring them to thwart each other, so as never to lean on any single one."[5] This is another formulation of the Bakhtinian (later Kristevian) theory of intertextuality: the author does not invent anything; he only knocks together a text with the assistance of former texts and obeys the laws of language.

In this language-based logic, it is imperative therefore that literary criticism should disregard the author completely: "To attribute an Author to a text amounts to imposing a stopper on the text, providing it with an ultimate signified, sealing off the writing."[6] In other words,

---

[3] *Ibid.*
[4] *Ibid.,* p. 66.
[5] *Ibid.,* p. 67.
[6] *Ibid.,* p. 68.

literary criticism has nothing to do with deciphering a message since the text holds no secret, no "ultimate meaning". As Sean Burke demonstrates in his excellent book *The Death and Return of the Author*, Barthes promotes the author to the rank of an inaccessible god (the word "author" is always capitalized in his essay) in order to proclaim his death in Nietzschean accents: "Roland Barthes in 'The Death of the Author' does not so much destroy the 'Author-God', but participates in its construction. He must create a king worthy of the killing. Not only is the author to be compared with a tyrannical deity, but also with bourgeois man himself."[7] What is at stake in this Byronic struggle between author and critic becomes amply clear when Barthes declares, in his conclusion: "the birth of the reader has a price: the death of the Author."[8] The author must be declared dead because he constitutes an obstacle to the free enjoyment (and appropriation) of the text by the structuralist or deconstructionist reader who refuses to accept a limit to the proliferation of meaning.

It is all too easy now to stigmatize the extravagance of such a manifesto. One must not forget that French criticism, at the time when Foucault and Barthes were developing their theories, was still very much under the influence of Sainte-Beuve and Lanson; most of the time, it drew its interpretations from the author's biography and declarations, as the titles of most Ph.D dissertations written in those days testify ("X, the man and his work"). Barthes's essay was truly a militant act purporting to bring down from his pedestal the god who had been worshipped by generations of French critics, namely the author as the custodian of meaning, and to promote a "science of literature" based on a science of meaning, semiotics. American and English criticism did not always understand this militancy because it was already leaning a little more towards a formalist approach, especially thanks to T. E. Hulme, I. A. Richards, and the New Critics, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, R. P. Blackmur, Cleanth Brooks Monroe C. Beardsley and W. K. Wimsatt. In France, the structuralist movement, using the sophisticated instruments of post-Saussurian linguistics, was a Copernician revolution in reverse, the semiotician reader now occupying the central position in the galaxy of the text. In

---

[7] *The Death and Return of the Author* (Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), p. 26.

[8] *Le Bruissement du langage,* p.69.

this battle of the text, the new reader was not claiming to supplant the author, as does Kinbote at the end of his preface in Nabokov's *Pale Fire,* but simply to propose a scientific analysis of his texts.

Foucault approached the subject more as a philosopher and discourse analyst than as a literary critic, examining the relationship between the text and its author and the "manner in which the text points to this 'figure' that, at least in appearance, is outside it and antecedes it."[9] Yet he subscribed to some of the major structuralist dogmas of the period, acknowledging the fact that "writing has freed itself from the dimension of expression," and that the "mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence,"[10] if only because writing is intimately linked with death which it purports to foil. He went a great deal further than the structuralists, however, and attempted to define the text in relation to the author whose name, he said, marks off "the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being."[11]

Foucault, who was interested in the reception rather than in the production of the text, created a new concept, that of the "author-function," borrowing John Searle's theory of speech acts in the circumstances. He rejected Sainte-Beuve's view of the author as the custodian of meaning, and defined the author-function as the "principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning"[12], in other words as the ultimate restraint against the free interpretation and appropriation of the text by the reader. He was acutely aware that this function was liable to change historically, predicting that "the author-function will disappear, and in such a manner that fiction and its polysemic texts will once again function according to another mode, but still with a system of constraint," as it had disappeared in scientific discourse for example.[13]

The essay raised a number of very interesting problems but failed to attract much attention among literary critics, largely because the

---

[9] *Ibid.,* p. 141.
[10] *Ibid.,* pp. 142 and 143.
[11] *Ibid.,* p. 147.
[12] *Ibid.,* p. 159.
[13] *Ibid.,* p. 160. I analyzed this essay in greater detail in *Textual Communication: A Print-Based Theory of the Novel* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 231-5.

structuralist revolution was then in full swing. The exclusion of the author was a prerequisite for the semiotic study of poetry and the narratological analysis of the novel, and a necessary step towards giving to literary criticism the same scientific legitimacy as that granted to linguistics. The question of the author, henceforth out of season, was then supplanted by that of the narrator and other enunciative *actants* in studies dealing with fiction.

The author-free theories developed by Wayne C. Booth, Gérard Genette, Käte Hamburger, Umberto Eco, F. K. Stanzel, Ann Banfield, Monika Fludernik and many others have furnished literary criticism with useful instruments and valuable concepts (implied author, homo-heterodiegetic narrator, protagonist, narratee, empirical reader, ideal reader, etc.) to disentangle the various layers of discourse and to disambiguate passages written in free indirect style, for instance. This erasure of the author has undoubtedly contributed to a better understanding of the novelistic text; yet, there has since been growing discontent with this approach which excludes the original enunciator: the multiplication of the narrative *actants* still fails to account for the extreme complexity of texts such as those of Sterne, Joyce or Nabokov, perhaps because the *actants* are not genuine subjects, though they are mediators between two subjects who are, indeed, real, even if they are only the subjects of their unconscious to paraphrase Lacan—namely the author and the reader.

Jauss and Iser, despite their important contribution to contemporary criticism, have played a lesser part in this quest: they are less concerned with the mechanics of the text and of the reading process than with the theory of reception per se, usually paying more attention to the repertoires and the grids exploited by the reader to disambiguate the texts than to the texts themselves. Though their approach has been influenced by communication theory, the only subject which they take into consideration is the receiver, the reader. For Iser, communication does not take place between the author and the reader but between the reader and the text:

> Communication in literature, then, is a process set in motion and regulated not by a given code but by a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment. What is concealed spurs the reader into action, but this action is also controlled by what is

> revealed; the explicit in its turn is transformed when the implicit has been brought to light.[14]

It is not clear what he means by "the implicit" which, he claims, begs to be made explicit; what is clear, on the other hand, is that the interaction he mentions never involves the author who has written the text and generated the implicit.

2 – The Figure of the Author

Five years after "The Death of the Author", Roland Barthes, who, with his wonderful ability to weave paradoxes, was often many steps ahead of his contemporaries, admitted, in *Le plaisir du texte,* that, as a reader, he desired the author, not so much the individual as his figure such as it is projected in the text: "The text is a fetish and that fetish desires me (…). As an institution, the author is dead: his legal, impassioned, biographical entity has disappeared; dispossessed, it no longer exercises upon his work the formidable paternity of which literary history, education, public opinion were in charge of renewing the myth: but, in the text, in a way, *I desire* the author: I need his figure (which is neither his representation nor his projection), as it needs mine (if mere babbling is to be avoided)."[15] The concept he defines is multi-layered: like Proust, he refuses to accept Sainte-Beuve's God-like author, disregarding the empirical author's small talk; yet he desires his figure which he defines as it were in *intaglio* through two negative phrases. He concedes that he needs an interlocutor who is modeled by him in the act of reading, be it to mock him.

The *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* explains that the Latin word *figura,* from which the French and English word "figure" derives, "is constructed upon the root *fingere*, 'to fashion (with clay)', which in French gave the verb *feindre* [to foreign]." The *in figura* portrait of the Renaissance was a particularly bold species of feint: in order to transgress the (comparative) interdict which then prevented artists from painting self-portraits, some artists like Dürer did not hesitate to picture themselves with the features of a saint or even Christ, as Nietzsche was to do in his own way, centuries later, in *Ecce*

---

[14] *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 168-9.

[15] *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), pp. 45-6.

Homo.[16] Aware of his irrepressible Narcissism, the artist borrows the mask of a tutelary figure endowed with great cultural or religious prestige to hide and expose himself at one and the same time.

To explain what that figure is or means, let us examine Henry James's famous story, also mentioned by Wolfgang Iser in the introductory chapter of *The Act of Reading,* "The Figure in the Carpet". Iser claims that, for Vereker, the author of the text which the young critic desperately tries to decode, "meaning is imagistic in character"[17]; this interpretation is also the one adopted in the French translations of the text which are all entitled *"L'image dans le tapis".* According to Iser, the young critic, in his obstinate interaction with the text, does not attempt to recover the author's discourse but to identify the signifying image which circulates throughout the author's works and innervates them: "Such a meaning must clearly be the product of an interaction between the textual signals and the reader's acts of comprehension. And, equally clearly, the reader cannot detach himself from such an interaction; on the contrary, the activity stimulated in him will link him to the text and induce him to create the conditions necessary for the effectiveness of that text. As text and reader thus merge into a single situation, the division between subject and object no longer applies, and it therefore follows that meaning is no longer an object to be defined, but is an effect to be experienced.[18]" Of all the possible meanings of the word "figure", Iser chose to retain only that of the signifying image which, in the act of reading, is supposed to be engendered by the text in the reader's imagination. The reader's contribution consists in filling out the blanks in the text, in clearing it of its "spots of indeterminacy" (Ingarden's terminology), "the effectiveness of the work" eventually depending on his degree of participation.[19]

A few lines earlier, Iser took the liberty of critizing James, who perhaps "exaggerated the effect of the literary work."[20] After analyzing the effect produced on him by the text and elaborating his

---

[16] On the *"in figura* portrait", see Michel Beaujour, *Miroir d'encre* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), p. 40.
[17] *The Act of Reading,* p. 8.
[18] *Ibid.,* pp. 9-10.
[19] *Ibid.,* p. 10.
[20] *Ibid.*

interpretation, he now turns against the author, as if he were censoring him, openly attributing to him an intention, though he had always denied that he wanted to reconstitute the text as the author's discourse. There seems to be a contradiction here. Iser claims that the act of reading is an interaction, but he does not believe for a moment that this interaction could involve the author; this, in my opinion, constitutes a serious flaw in his system.

Let us briefly reexamine James's text. "The Figure in the Carpet" is the metaphor used by the young critic to represent what Vereker calls "the little point… the thing… the little trick" which is hidden in all his works. Here is how the young critic, who is also the narrator, reports his dialogue with the author on the subject: "It was something, I guessed, in the primal plan; something like a complex figure in a Persian carpet. He highly approved of this image when I used it, and he used another himself. 'It's the very string,' he said, 'that my pearls are strung on!'"[21] The young critic, like Barthes, cannot help representing the secret hidden in the text as a figure interwoven in the woof and warp of the Persian carpet, a reminder, perhaps, of the etymology of the word "text" (*textus*, that which is woven). He does not believe, at first, that this figure has anything to do with the author whom he will never see again after offering him this metaphor. Yet, it is the compelling figure of the absent author which will haunt him and compel him to read and reread his works relentlessly.

Vereker seems to approve of the critic's simile, yet he uses another metaphor, that of the string (sometimes James uses its French equivalent, *"ficelle",* in his criticism) on which his pearls are strung. He does not claim that this string is the image of himself, only that it is the binding principle which guarantees the coherence of his works. Yet, isn't it also the instrument (like the thread in Freud's *Fort-Da* parable) with which the author now keeps his reader on a leash, now draws him towards him, attempting simultaneously to seduce him and to snub him? Curiously, the reader who identifies this *ficelle* (this trick) is irremediably doomed to die, as if he had approached God, the guardian of truth (Vereker, the caretaker of verity!), too intimately. Corvick, the young critic's famous friend, dies after discovering it; his wife, to whom he transmitted the secret and who once claimed that

---

[21] *The Figure in the Carpet and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 374.

this secret was her whole life,[22] also dies, as does, of course, the author himself.

The young critic, who is denied access to the secret, feels as if he were in prison: "I was shut up in my obsession for ever—my jailers had gone off with the key."[23] He is kept in solitary confinement by those who knew and paid so dearly for the privilege of knowing. He is imprisoned in the citadel of his imagination, of course, and when he claims, somewhat arrogantly, that the secret is nothing, he merely confesses his inability to regain his freedom and to disburden himself of his obsession. The figure which haunts him, and which would allow him to discover the link between all of Vereker's texts, is probably none other than the figure of the author which appears in filigree through all the pages of his texts: such is probably the secret whose existence was broadcast by the author who naturally wanted to keep his hold on the reader after his death.

Once he has discovered the existence of the secret but found out that he couldn't hope ever to find the key to it, in other words once he has recognized the "author function", the young critic adopts a totally new way of reading: now he feels he has no right to manipulate the text whichever way he likes. He embarks upon an obstinate quest, analyzing it more thoroughly, trying to unearth its thematic and stylistic components, with the secret hope, forever thwarted, of drawing nearer to this figure which irremediably recedes before him. It is this elusive figure which prevents him from complacently appropriating the texts and projecting his symptom upon them, and which also compels him to reread them scrupulously, making use of all the methodological tools at his disposal to unearth this secret which those who knew it took into their graves. The secret is unspeakable, and the figure endures only in the reader's imagination. It is like the oasis which the traveler lost in the desert catches sight of: it disappears when he tries to approach it, and yet he thinks or fools himself into thinking that it does exist somewhere. The author is out there somewhere beyond this authorial figure which I patiently

---

[22] After the young critic suggested that the secret is nothing, she reacted violently: "'It's my *life!'* As I stood at the door she added: 'You've insulted him!' / 'Do you mean Vereker?' / 'I mean the Dead!'" *The Figure in the Carpet and Other Stories*, p. 392.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 395.

fashion while reading and analyzing the text, and I occasionally catch sight of him or it, not so much perhaps in the little and big enigmas which I manage to elucidate through my annotations, as in his denials, his repetitions and also his blunders, as he is himself imprisoned in the mesh of his conflicting desires.

In 1982, at a conference held in Nice, William Gass inveighed against the critics who refuse to take the author into account: "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 ulutate 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."[24] Six years later, at a conference at Brown where Robert Coover had gathered some of the best representatives of American postmodernism, Gass reiterated his attack, openly stigmatizing deconstructionism this time.[25] All the other writers present, except John Hawkes, displayed the same scornful attitude towards the critics. Stanley Elkin claimed that he wrote "for Faulkner looking over [his] shoulder"; Donald Barthelme drew the portrait of his model readers: "They are extremely intelligent, and they're also physically attractive"; William Gaddis quoted Samuel Butler who had once said that "he wrote because he wanted to have something that he would enjoy reading in his old age." As for Robert Coover, who had also invited some critics (including the present one), he declared with a certain lack of courtesy towards his less prestigious guests: "while all of us really want all these critics to read us, none of us reads the critics.[26] Gass countered him at that point. The debate was all the more interesting as, during the morning session also attended by the writers, the critics had tentatively (and sometimes humorously) attempted to define the unwieldy concept of

---

[24] William Gass, "Tropes of the Text," in *Representation and Performance in Postmodern Fiction*, M. Couturier, ed. (Montpellier: Delta, 1983), p. 41.
[25] "Unspeakable Practices," *Critique*, XXXI, 4 (summer 1990), p. 247.
[26] *Ibid.*, pp. 237-6 *passim.*

postmodernism. The authors obviously wanted to remind the critics that they were mere amanuenses laboring forever under a higher law.

The author's vanity, especially when it is fanned by such an immodest moderator as Leslie Fiedler, as was the case then, is obviously unwarranted: the author does need the critics, and not only to boost the sales of his books, though a writer like Robbe-Grillet would no doubt have fewer readers now if critics like Barthes or Bruce Morisette had not made his novels more readable. Gass and his fellow postmodernists justifiably attack the critics who impose strict grids upon their works and seem to lay claim to the poetic prowess of their works, yet they ought to rejoice, as did John Hawkes, that such dedicated intellectuals volunteer to work so obstinately on their novels, trying to make sense of them: the sophisticated analyses, some of them no doubt too complacent, indirectly testify to the poetic achievement of the works themselves. Readers and authors occupy symmetrical positions on both sides of the text, each trying to impose his law on the other, even censoring the other if necessary. They both labor under the *haine-amour* (love-hate) that Lacan talks about, desiring, and running away from, each other, hoping never to be the other's dupe. Each tries to ignore the dilemma and to suppress his anguish by intimidating or erasing the other.

Structuralism and deconstructionism, by eliminating the author and his figure, gave a spurious legitimacy to a number of pseudo-scientific snobberies and complacent ramblings. Such author-free criticism is out of season: reading a text does not mean appropriating it or projecting one's symptom upon it; it is a sophisticated type of exchange between two subjects separated in space and time. Literature, like any other art, is a form of communication, not so much in terms of binary data as of intersubjective relation. It is largely because contemporary criticism has stubbornly refused to structure its discourse in terms of intersubjective communication that the author-function mentioned by Foucault has thus far not been taken into consideration.

Two author-centered forms of textual practice indirectly show the way. The first one is genetic criticism which tries to unearth the various layers of the text produced and erased by the author in the act of writing, and of which the final version often bears oblique traces; these traces often constitute the so-called spots of indeterminacy

mentioned by Ingarden and Iser. The second is the teaching of creative writing which, in the United States and in England, are academic disciplines in their own rights. The writer learns how to write the same way as the musician and the painter learn to practice their own arts. Henry James's essays and prefaces paved the way for the development of this discipline: he knew that writing a text did not only mean creating spaces wherein the reader could inscribe his symptom; if it were the case, a madman's writing would be as efficient as that of Joyce. Writing means creating a technically over-determined and esthetically valid object bearing the scars of the author's desire and stirring powerful echoes in the reader.

The figure of the author as I have just defined it (that is, the author as reconstructed in the very act of reading as the prime enunciator of the text) is inextricably linked to self-censorship. It is largely because the author seeks to promote his ideal ego to the rank of the super ego in the eyes of the reader and absconds as completely as possible from his text while giving the illusion that the ambiguous desires of his protagonists have nothing in common with his own, that the authorial figure arises in the reader's imagination as the custodian of a secret. The kind of institutional censorship imposed by the book industry, by the police or by the courts until the middle of the twentieth century strongly encouraged the author to abscond as a liable subject and to hide himself under the mask of his textual figure, as I tried to demonstrate in *Roman et censure ou la mauvaise foi d'Eros.* The theory of the novel has never really taken this element into consideration: the modern novel is essentially about love, both sentimental and sexual. The novelist wants to give a free rein to his desires but claims at the same time that he should not be blamed for the sins committed by his narrators and protagonists. There is a great deal of bad faith involved here, not only on the part of the author but also of the institutions, the critics and the readers: the novel is a powerful machine which inextricably binds the fate of all those who toy with it or try to suppress it.[27]

[27] *Roman et censure ou la mauvaise foi d'Eros* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1996).

3 – Annotating vs. Interpreting

The annotator and the interpreter, readers in their own right, have apparently two different agendas but, ultimately, they achieve more or less the same thing, being driven as they are by similar motivations: to assume an element of mastery over the text as well as over the other readers of the text. The annotator, in his quest to unearth all the little clues and secrets hidden in the text is trying to unearth the author's intention, even at times to emulate him; but in his devoted attempt to do that he brings together little details gathered here and there that he can never be totally sure are meant to cohere. How does he choose those little details? Simply by paying close attention to the text? Isn't he consciously or unconsciously influenced by some of his "preconceptions" (as Lawrence Sterne would put it), that is by a set of values, an encyclopedia, which is largely a result of his individual culture and of his personal taste and desire? In other words, the annotator, no matter how conscientious he may be, depends upon a number of often unacknowledged hermeneutics, whether he likes it or not, to decipher the text he is working on. The interpreter is doing more or less the same thing, but the other way around. He begins by exhibiting the hermeneutic or hermeneutics which he is going to use in his analysis of the text, and then gathers the elements in the text which otherwise might not have appeared to be meaningful: he, too, is annotating the text, but he doesn't believe that he text, no matter how much one annotates it, contains all its potential significance, circulating as it does in a given culture, in a given historical period, and being couched in a language which can never be totally tamed and made to mean only what the author meant.

The good writer, as William Gass intimates in the passage quoted earlier, and as Nabokov explained when he claimed "to be the private dictator in that private world" is the one who is capable of overdetermining his text, that is of having a powerful control over the words he uses and of programming his text, and therefore of guiding his reader more efficiently than the average user of the language. Nonetheless, there remain many spots of indeterminacy in his text which the interpreter can make meaningful through the use of a given hermeneutic. What distinguishes the annotator from the interpreter, eventually, is that the former fully trusts the author and the latter fully

trusts the text. They are developing two different kinds of interpretation, to borrow Paul Ricoeur's theory: a remystifying one versus a demystifying one. Their contributions are complementary, of course.

The reason why I chose to offer this topic for discussion in the present conference is that, I believe, the specialists of Nabokov, myself included, have allowed themselves too often and too long to be intimidated by Nabokov's "strong opinions". They have preferred to annotate his works, without always realizing how much they were abiding by Nabokov's avowed or unavowed hermeneutics or following their own unconscious ones. It took me thirty years before I could violate Nabokov's interdict against one particular hermeneutic, psychoanalysis. During my doctoral defense at the Sorbonne, Roland Barthes, who was on the panel, recommended that I borrow psychoanalytical concepts to tackle the problem of enunciation in Nabokov's novels. I eventually did in *Nabokov ou la cruauté du désir: lecture psychanalytique*[28] but without trying to psychoanalyze the author, of course.

*

I want to conclude this introduction with an anecdote which will show how tumultuous my relationship to Nabokov, the author, has always been. As I was preparing the first conference on Nabokov in Nice, I received a fax from Dmitri Nabokov asking me if he could join us. I immediately faxed him an invitation which was supposed to be cleverly worded. Thinking that he was perhaps too busy to stay for the duration of the conference, or stupidly fearing that he might interfere too much in our debates if he chose to stay the whole time, I included the following sentence in my message: "We would be honoured if you could make an appearance", the French word I used, "apparition", being dangerously polysemic. But I made a fool of myself by faxing the message not to Dmitri (who naturally had a great laugh at my expense and turned out to be extremely friendly and cooperative during the conference) but to Vladimir, whom I had stubbornly avoided meeting while writing my dissertation when there was still time. I was then living a little more than a hundred miles from him, but, having adopted an approach which, I knew, he wouldn't

[28] *Nabokov ou la cruauté du désir : lecture psychanalytique* (Seyssel : Champ Vallon, 2004).

necessarily appreciate, and having read some of the things he had said about some of his critics, Rowe among them, I preferred not to approach him yet. One day in London, less than a year after defending my dissertation, I opened the *Guardian* and suddenly shouted "*Oh, non*!" He had just died, making it impossible for me ever to meet him. I couldn't forgive myself for never shaking hands with him.