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A FORTY-YEAR JOURNEY IN NABOKOVLAND

When I wake up, some days, I wonder what my life would have been like had I not come across Nabokov. Given my family background, there was little chance that I would ever become a specialist of, or even read, his works. I was born in a rural part of France almost totally devoid of literary culture and imbued with archaic Catholic values, as I explain in *Chronique de l'oubli,* the recently published story of my peasant boyhood.[1] To be sure, my mother was an avid reader, but the literature she favored was more of the Louisa May Alcott variety than of the Nabokov kind. And I was brought up in Catholic schools which kept a strict eye on the kinds of books made available to students.

Curiously, though, I bought my first copy of *Lolita* at the campus library of the University of Notre Dame days after arriving there in September 1970 with a three-year contract as assistant professor. It was Alfred Appel, Jr.'s annotated edition, which had just come out. The year before, I had read *Pale Fire,* about which I was to publish my first article in 1976, but I doubt that I would ever have become an aficionado of Nabokov had I not read *Lolita,* a book to which I am heavily indebted and on which I was to spend so many intoxicating years of my life. After defending my first dissertation (on Zona Gale!!!) at the Sorbonne, I began doing research on Nabokov, having decided to study his novels from a structuralist, mostly narratological, angle. I was strongly influenced at the time by Gérard Genette, whose *Figure III* had come out in 1972; I even wrote to him saying how much I had appreciated the book, not anticipating that he would one day publish my second essay on Nabokov, *Nabokov ou la tyrannie de l'auteur* as well as *La Figure de l'auteur,* in the

[1] *Chronique de l'oubli* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008).

prestigious series, *Poétique*, which played such a key role in the structuralist movement in France.

When I started writing my dissertation, I was living in Grenoble, a hundred miles or so from Montreux. Several friends and colleagues urged me to try to meet Nabokov, but I refused, fearing his judgment and preferring not to expose myself to the kind of devastating remark William Woodin Rowe had been the target of ("And he will be read, he will be quoted, he will be filed in great libraries, next to my arbors and mists!"[2]) My formalist approach was unlikely to meet with his approval. I had already come face to face with him a number of times in my dreams, and had always experienced pleasant surprise at his kindness towards me. There had been no time to change my mind and to seek an interview with him before I heard of his death one morning as I was opening *The Guardian* in London. Grieving but also angry (at myself, no doubt), I shouted "Oh, no!" realizing that my dream of meeting him would never be fulfilled.

Fifteen years later, arch blunderer and dreamer that I am, I deceived myself into believing that I could summon him from the dead. As I was organizing the first Nice conference on him in 1992, I received a message from Dmitri Nabokov, via Gallimard, inquiring about the forthcoming event, which he seemed interested in attending. I immediately faxed him an invitation worded in a strange fashion, fearing that he might not wish to stay with us the whole time: *"Nous serions heureux que vous fassiez une apparition"* [We would be delighted if you were to make an appearance], the word *"apparition"* being terribly ambiguous in French. Dmitri responded immediately and kindly, but excused himself for being unable to pass on the message to the addressee: I had faxed my invitation not to Dmitri but to Vladimir! Dmitri was amused by my gaffe, of course, but he agreed to come all the same, and participated with grace in the debates throughout the conference.

Once I had finished writing my dissertation (by then I had been appointed as "assistant" at the Sorbonne), I began seeking, with my research director's approval, a structuralist dignitary willing to sit on the defense panel. Luckily, Roland Barthes agreed, my cause having been convincingly championed by a friend of mine (and of his), a young American draft dodger, a writer and translator, who was close not only to Barthes but to Foucault, Kristeva and Robbe-Grillet as well. When I first met Barthes to hand him a copy of my dissertation (which he soon lost; I had to send him another), I discovered that he had probably never read Nabokov. Most structuralists (Genette excepted), Marxists at heart, held

[2] *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 307.

Nabokov to be an arch-conservative and ignored him chiefly for political and ideological reasons; this largely accounts for Nabokov's loss of popularity in France in the sixties and seventies after the swell of enthusiasm generated by the publication of *Lolita*. On D-Day (defense day), Barthes kept us waiting for a quarter of an hour at the Sorbonne, and when he did arrive, he seemed not to realize he was late. During his half-hour portion of the five-hour defense, he spoke mostly about my theoretical approach, which he seemed to appreciate, suggesting I had performed a kind of self-analysis in my dissertation (which, by the way, was written in the first person, contrary to academic mores). During the cocktail that followed the defense, I asked him if he still believed in a "science of literature"; he answered "no", suggesting that it was a contradiction in terms. This was one of the things I liked about Barthes: he kept changing his views on important things, baffling some of his disciples in the process. Nearly thirty years later I received his hand-written post-defense report which my research director, André Le Vot, had just discovered in his own copy of Barthes's *Essais.* Such reports were not made available to young scholars at the time, though they often played an important role in their subsequent careers. In this "posthumous" message, Barthes said that my narratological study, which he obviously enjoyed, was subliminally grounded on psychoanalytical presuppositions and he deplored the fact that I hadn't gone further in that direction. I answered his request in my *Nabokov ou la cruauté du désir*,[3] in which I pay tribute to him on the closing page.

After my doctoral defense, I contacted Gérard Genette again; he was interested in my approach and asked me to write a shorter version of my dissertation for publication in the series he then co-edited with Tzvetan Todorov, *Poétique*. I did as he asked, but Tzvetan Todorov did not authorize the publication, alleging that the series was not supposed to publish essays on a single author. I then contacted L'Age d'Homme, a Swiss publisher specializing in Russian and East European literature; my proposal was accepted but I was asked to include, as an appendix, a text by Nabokov not yet published in French. I chose "Details of a Sunset" and translated it under Véra Nabokov's epistolary guidance. The book, the first about Nabokov to appear in France, came out in 1979. The following year, Véra suggested to the Editions Juillard that I translate *Glory.* While working on the translation, I met both her and Dmitri, then convalescing after a long stay in the hospital, at the Montreux Palace Hotel. Véra made a number of recommendations in her letters about the translation, which came out in 1981, as well as about the translations of two collections of short stories, *Details of a Sunset*

[3] Selections of which are viewable online through Google Books: http://books.google.com/books?id=lfNWd7cByaIC

and Other Stories, and *Nabokov's Dozen* (which the French publisher chose to entitle *Mademoiselle O,* in an attempt no doubt to capitalize on the ambiguous fame of *Histoire d'O*; the book came out in a kinky black and pink cover!). I completed the latter two translations and that of the *Lolita Screenplay* with my wife, Yvonne. I would write the first draft, which Yvonne would then read, suggesting many corrections; finally the two of us would work in marathon sessions to finalize the text. This was always the most exhausting portion of the task, although our priorities were the same: complete faithfulness to the original text, and flowing French. There were disagreements between Véra and us towards the end of the process, due partly to our linguistic shortcomings, no doubt, and to our faulty knowledge of what international trains looked like at the beginning of the century, but also because of Véra's claim that her French was impeccable. As a result, we stopped translating Nabokov for a while and undertook instead the translation of the novels of David Lodge, a writer with whom I had become acquainted through our mutual friend Malcolm Bradbury. Today, after translating other books and revising the translations of many others for the Pléiade edition of Nabokov's novels, I am aware that our technique, in the early eighties, was far from perfect: a good translation reflects, foremost, a careful reading and sound understanding of the text, which requires not only a perfect knowledge of the language in which it was written, but also a good literary sense, a long familiarity with the techniques of translation, and a genuine mastery of one's native tongue. The good translator must be a competent writer (which I was not at that time). It is only through a long practice of manipulating words and sentences that one can manage to fit all the pieces of the puzzle into a harmonious whole. Nabokov described this complex art with deadly accuracy in a passage from *Bend Sinister* dealing with the translation of poetry: "Like pulling a grand piano through a door. Take it to pieces. Or turn the corner into the next line. But the berth there was taken, the table was reserved, the line was engaged."[4]

Between 1984 and 1991, my interest in Nabokov was also distracted by the fact that, in collaboration with colleagues from other departments, I was creating a new "arts and communication" department at the University of Nice. I learned a great deal from the other disciplines involved in the project. This very exciting and fruitful experience resulted in a new book, my third,[5] *Textual Communication: A Print-Based Theory of the Novel*[6] (Routledge) in which Nabokov is repeatedly mentioned. The book paved the way for another, *Nabokov ou la*

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[4] *Bend Sinister* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1964), pp. 28-9.

[5] With my friend Régis Durand, I had meanwhile written a little book in English on Donald Barthelme, the first, in fact, on that author (*Barthelme,* London: Methuen, 1982).

[6] Previewable online thanks to Google Books: http://books.google.com/books?id=udQ9AAAAIAAJ

tyrannie de l'auteur, a post-structuralist study of Nabokov's novels which openly transgressed the death-of-the-author dogma; it was followed, in 1995, by *La Figure de l'auteur,* in which I pleaded for a reassessment of the dogma popularized by Barthes and Foucault, as well as for a formalist approach based on aesthetic preconditions. *Roman et censure ou la mauvaise foi d'Eros*[7] published in 1996, a sequel to *La figure de l'auteur,* was basically a study of novelists' bad faith, both in their works and in their subsequent statements about them, in cases where the depiction of sexual acts is concerned. My intention was not to rehabilitate the author as ultimate guardian of meaning but to demonstrate that a literary work is an interface between two subjects who have no knowledge of, but struggle to communicate with, each other. Through my analyses of incipits, paratexts, intratexts, free indirect style, etc., I tried to show how the interaction between, on one hand, real author and ideal reader, and, on the other, real reader and ideal author, operates.

In a review entitled "The Great (Textual) Communicator, or, Blindness and Insight" published in *Nabokov Studies,* Brian McHale strongly criticized my approach, claiming at the outset that "it is the sort of reading that Nabokov would have endorsed and might even, one imagines, have undertaken himself, the sort of reading that his texts anticipate and for which they are, as it were, pre-programmed."[8] Although McHale's statement might be read as a compliment, it was in fact a criticism. I wonder whether McHale had read, previous to writing his review, Nabokov's lectures on literature: they have little in common with my interactive approach, which takes into account the author's as well as the reader's blind spots, together with their respective insights. His chief criticism is the following: "Couturier's commentary is at its best when it is most in touch with the narratological paradigm, and with Genette's narratology in particular. Conversely, his readings are (relatively) weaker – less lucid, less tautly organized, less persuasive – whenever there is no particular descriptive paradigm to underwrite them."[9] He further accuses me of being "strangely ungrateful towards [my] intellectual benefactors".[10] McHale should have noticed that I had borrowed my title and some of my ideas from one of those "benefactors", Barthes, and that it was another such "benefactor", Gérard Genette, who had published *Nabokov ou la tyrannie de l'auteur.* After publishing *La Figure de l'auteur*, Genette had also agreed to my writing a third book on the same subject, but I never found time to do it, largely because I had, in the meantime, been

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[7] Previewable online thanks to Google Books: http://books.google.com/books?id=C1ujacwGkhIC

[8] "The Great (Textual) Communicator, or, Blindness and Insight", *Nabokov Studies,* Vol. 2, 1995, p. 275.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 280-1.

[10] *Ibid.,* p. 281.

appointed editor-in-chief of the Pléiade edition of Nabokov's novels. Barthes's theoretical views changed considerably throughout his life, as did Genette's, which shifted from narratology to aesthetics. McHale, steeped in deconstructionism more than in structuralism proper, was suggesting in his criticism of my books that all interpretations ought to be based on existing hermeneutics, and that the task of the critic was to apply a given interpretative grid to the text at hand, not realizing that he was thereby programming the speedy obsolescence of critical essays – a position sanctioned by the book market I am afraid, hermeneutics with a scientific ambition being often short-lived in the field of literary criticism. I grant McHale that even the most unsophisticated critic is unconsciously tapping some interpretative grid, but this does not imply that all sophisticated critics should be content with applying known hermeneutics. If literary criticism and literary theory are to serve not only pedagogical but epistemological and aesthetic functions, their practitioners must be capable of breaking new ground and of contributing in their own fashion to the hermeneutic venture.

Though I did not respond to McHale's attack, it is tempting to claim that I won the argument given the frequent appearance in Nabokov scholarship of the subtitle of my book, the "author's tyranny", but I realize this is not the case, since those who borrow it usually do not mean the same thing as I do. Nabokov's opinions on literature are so strong that many of his exegetes have felt the need to stick to a kind of criticism he himself practiced or would have sanctioned; and they have refrained from venturing into more daring interpretive realms, psychoanalysis for instance. Among major twentieth-century writers, Nabokov is, along with Joyce, one of the most frequently and abundantly annotated authors. The search for intertexts in his novels is endless, as was Nabokov's own search for Pushkin's intertexts in *Eugene Onegin.* Nabokov specialists are heavily indebted to Carl Proffer, Alfred Appel, Jr., Dieter E. Zimmer, Brian Boyd, Gennady Barabtarlo, Alexander Dolinin and the many others who have annotated the novels; they are paid tribute in my forthcoming annotations of *Lolita* for the Pléiade edition, which add my own little discoveries, such as the eighteenth-century madam, Charlotte Hayes, whom I accidentally stumbled across thanks to Apollinaire and *Fanny Hill.* Annotating is, above all, an attempt to discover the author's sources and consequently his intentions as well. To be sure, some scholars may overdo it at times, pouring the contents of their immense erudition into their annotations in an attempt to develop an idiosyncratic understanding of this or that novel, but, on the whole, annotating remains, by definition, an author-based practice.

In my view, Nabokov specialists have tended to rely too much on the author's avowed or alleged intentions. Vladimir E. Alexandrov, in the opening page of his *Nabokov's*

Otherworld uses Véra Nabokov's claim that "*potustoronnost'*" [otherworldliness] was Nabokov's "main theme" to justify a metaphysical interpretation of his works.[11] And Brian Boyd, in his monumental biography, claims that Nabokov "had Shade in mind as the author of foreword, poem, commentary, and index" because of the draft of a brief poem included at the end of the foreword to the revised *Speak, Memory.*[12] At the second Nabokov conference in Nice, David Lodge took Brian to task in a friendly manner, saying, "This argument seems to me a classic instance of the intentional fallacy as described by Wimsatt and Beardsley in their famous essay."[13] Brian later acknowledged that his argument was unsatisfactory.[14] Yet, such examples clearly show how difficult it is, in the case of Nabokov, to escape the author's tyranny. What I mean by this phrase is that Nabokov builds into his novels such elaborate constraints that his critics are induced to devote much of their time and energy to annotating and reformulating his texts; they seem plagued by qualms about interpreting -- that is interacting creatively with -- them. Hence the topic I chose for the third Nabokov conference held in 2006, "Annotating vs. Interpreting Nabokov."

While I was waging that private little war against my so-called "intellectual benefactors", Gallimard urged me to take over the chief editorship of the Pléiade edition of Nabokov's novels. In the late eighties, Gilles Barbedette, a young writer who had recently started a new series of translations at *les Editions Rivages* for which my wife and I translated David Lodge's *Nice Work* and five other of his novels, had pressed me to undertake this editorial task with him and Georges Nivat, an excellent specialist and translator of Russian literature. Being at the time very busy and not over anxious to become involved in such a lengthy and thankless enterprise, especially as neither Gilles Barbedette nor Georges Nivat were true specialists of Nabokov, I had declined the invitation. When Gilles died prematurely, of AIDS, in 1992, Gallimard contacted me, insisting that I take over the task which, in fact, had not seen any progress in four years, due no doubt to Gilles's long illness. I still had misgivings about my capacity to oversee the project, precisely because, until then, I had been an interpreter rather than an annotator of Nabokov's novels. Moreover, I was none too confident in my ability to steer a team of contributors I had had no part in selecting. Ultimately I accepted on the implicit condition that I be allowed to complete a new translation of *Lolita,* and I asked that Alexander (Sasha) Dolinin be appointed as consultant for the

[11] *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 3.
[12] *Vladimir Nabokov: the American Years* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991), p. 445.
[13] David Lodge, "What Kind of Fiction did Nabokov Write?", *Cycnos,* Vol. 12, # 2 (1995), pp. 142-3.
[14] Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Discovery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 115.

annotations, especially for volume one, which was to include novels originally written in Russian.

Unfortunately, Gallimard, who had published most of the existing French translations -- the exceptions being *Mary* (Fayard), *Glory* (Juillard, my own translation), and *Laughter in the Dark* (Grasset) -- was unwilling to finance new translations of the Russian novels. As a result, the French translations in volume one were made from the English versions, with one exception, *Invitation to a Beheading,* translated directly from the Russian; there existed a translation of the Russian *Camera Obscura* made in the 1930s by Nabokov's agent in Paris, Doussia Ergaz (who later recruited Maurice Girodias to publish *Lolita*), but a translation by Christine Raguet-Bouvart from the English version, *Laughter in the Dark*, which differs considerably from the Russian original,[15] was chosen for inclusion in the Pléiade edition. The members of the team had been asked to update and improve the existing translations -- in revising the translation of *Glory* I practically rewrote it -- but it remained for me to review the revisions; this was in fact the most tiresome part of my work on volume one. There was a great deal of disgruntled negotiation with certain collaborators, some of whom may have resented the fact that I had taken over as editor. Two months before the book was due to come out in 1999, Dmitri fired off a number of corrections to one of the revised translations with which I had always been personally dissatisfied; the colleague responsible for it, who repeatedly resisted my suggested new wordings by stating "*C'est mon style*" [It's my style], this time had to surrender. Another colleague claimed that revised translations returned to him with my comments and corrections had gotten lost in the mail, and Sasha Dolinin's comments on the annotations mailed to him were not always accepted with grace. Much friction is involved in this line of work, but preparation of the translations and annotations was finally completed. Brian Boyd wrote a detailed chronology for the volume and I a long introduction.

Unsatisfactory as it was, volume one was published in September 1999 and was very favorably received (too favorably in my opinion) by the French press. *Le Monde* interviewed me; every major newspaper and magazine had an article, sometimes two, to celebrate the event. Though I was almost a cripple at the time, having just undergone surgery for a slipped disk, I went to Paris to promote the book. After a dinner hosted by Antoine Gallimard where the guest of honor was Dmitri, a meeting with journalists and friends was convened at La Maison de l'Amérique Latine, where we waited and waited for Dmitri to join us, until we were told that he had had a minor accident and could not come. I had invited Gérard Genette,

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[15] See, for example, Christine Raguet-Bouvart, "Camera Obscura and Laughter in the Dark, or, The Confusion of Texts," in *ZEMBLA*: http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/ragko1.htm

who spoke at some length and with great enthusiasm about both the book and Nabokov, whom he had always admired. Not once did he say or even imply that I had been ungrateful to my "intellectual benefactors," himself among them.

Thanks to Dmitri's friendly intervention, Antoine Gallimard finally agreed to finance a new translation of *Lolita,* a project I had always meant to undertake. Nabokov had expressed strong reservations about the first French translation, by Eric Kahane, Maurice Girodias's brother. In a letter to Girodias dated May 14, 1957, he lists a number of mistranslations, concluding, "And so on, at a rate of at least three on every page."[16] Later, in a letter to Richard Schickel, he says: "I am in the very act of revising the French translation, and have spent several hours trying to explain to the French reader the meaning of 'majorette'."[17] This probably explains why, in his Russian translation of the novel, he gives a lengthy definition of the term "cheerleader".[18] In one of his interviews, he explains that it was precisely while correcting Kahane's translation that he decided to translate the novel into Russian someday: "In the hands of a harmful drudge, the Russian version of *Lolita* would be entirely degraded and botched by vulgar paraphrases or blunders. So I decided to translate it myself."[19]

Despite Nabokov's revisions of Kahane's text, there remained many approximations and blunders. Here are a few samples of Kahane's translation and mine:

– «Annabel was, like the writer, of mixed parentage: half-English, half-Dutch, in her case » / Kahane: «*Annabel, comme l'auteur, était d'origine mixte: fille d'un Anglais et d'une Hollandaise*.» Couturier: «*Annabelle, tout comme le présent auteur, avait une double lignée: moitié anglaise, moitié hollandaise, dans son cas*.»

– «I remember her features far less distinctly today than I did a few years ago, before I knew Lolita.» / Kahane: «*Ses traits sont aujourd'hui beaucoup moins nets qu'ils l'étaient il y a quelques années, avant Lolita*.» Couturier: «*Je me rappelle ses traits beaucoup moins distinctement aujourd'hui qu'il y a quelques années, avant que je fasse la connaissance de Lolita*.»

– «our actually imbibing and assimilating every particle of each other's soul and flesh » / Kahane: «*en nous imprégnant littéralement l'un de l'autre, en nous dévorant réciproquement*

[16] *Selected Letters* (San Diego, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), p. 219.
[17] *Ibid.,* p. 240.
[18] *Lolita* (New York: Phaedra, 1967), p. 211.
[19] *Strong Opinions,* p. 38.

jusqu'à la dernière particule du corps et de l'âme». Couturier: «*en absorbant et en assimilant jusqu'à la dernière particule le corps et l'âme de l'autre*».

– «unable even to mate» / Kahane: «*nous ne pouvions pas même nous aimer*». Couturier: «*incapables de nous accoupler*».

– «the only privacy we were allowed» / Kahane: «*nous ne connûmes jamais qu'une solitude dérisoire*». Couturier: «*la seule intimité qu'on nous accordât***».**

– «then, her opalescent knee would start on a long cautious journey » / Kahane: «*ou bien c'était son genou opalescent qui commençait de ramper à ma rencontre en un long et prudent voyage*». Couturier: «*puis son genou opalescent commençait sa longue et prudente pérégrination*».

– «sometimes a chance rampart built by younger children granted us sufficient concealment to graze each other's salty lips» / Kahane: «*parfois, un rempart adventice [qui n'est pas inné] érigé par des enfants nous offrait un abri précaire derrière lequel j'effleurais ses lèvres salées*». Couturier: «*parfois, un rempart fortuit érigé par des enfants plus jeunes nous offrait un abri suffisant pour échanger des petits baisers salés*».

– «these incomplete contacts drove our healthy and inexperienced young bodies to such a state of exasperation» / Kahane : «*mais après ces caresses incomplètes, la tension exaspérée de nos jeunes corps ignorants et vigoureux*». Couturier: «*ces contacts incomplets exaspéraient à tel point nos jeunes corps vigoureux et inexpérimentés***».**

Kahane simply misunderstood a number of English words:

«primly» / «*simplement*» instead of «*pudiquement*»

«fat» (woman) / «*boulotte*» instead of «*grosse*» or «*opulente*»

«famished region» / «*région perdue*» for « *ravagée par la famine*»

«shamelessly» / «*franchement*» for «*honteusement*» or «*scandaleusement*»

«frenzy» / «*désir*» for «*frénésie*».

Some of the differences between his translation and mine are due to the fact that our target audiences were quite different: Kahane was translating a novel which had been first

published in the "Traveller's Companion Series" of the Olympia Press, whose catalogue included pornographic books like *Tender Was My Flesh, The Loins of Amon, The Sexual Life of Robinson Crusoe, White Thighs* and many others, and he was doing so for French readers, many of whom were aware of that series' notorious reputation. Kahane tended to be more sexually explicit, even vulgar at times, in his translation, although Nabokov is careful to write in a poerotic style (my coinage), a style at once erotic and poetic that is wholly devoid of coarse language. Moreover, Kahane was prone to "overfrenchifying" the text, especially proper names, thereby omitting important echoes. For instance, he translates "Our Glass Lake" as *"lac voisin"* [neighbouring lake] and "a woodlake (Hourglass Lake – not as I had thought it was spelled)" simply as *"un lac de forêt"* [a forest lake] so that the wordplay is totally lost.[20] I chose to retain the names in English, having the privilege, granted, of being able to explain them when necessary in my annotations. I also took into account the fact that more and more French readers of a novel like *Lolita* now have enough English to understand wordplay like the instance just mentioned.

My translation came out in May 2001 and was acclaimed by the French press as almost a new novel (an exaggeration, of course). Gallimard published a paperback edition a month later. I was not totally pleased with my text, aware that there still were quite a few problems I had not solved to my satisfaction. Three years later, I made a considerable number of corrections to my translation, sometimes following the recommendations of helpful readers, and Gallimard published a new edition in 2005. There will be a third, again with many changes, in the Pléiade, when the second volume comes out next year; in the process of completing the annotations, I found other approximations and mistakes that had to be corrected.

In the meantime, I had written my fifth essay on Nabokov, *Nabokov ou la cruauté du désir* (2004), a Lacanian reading of the novels. For more than thirty years, I had (reluctantly) submitted myself to Nabokov's interdict concerning psychoanalysis and the "Viennese witch doctor", struggling to circumvent it by using various theoretical strategies, as Barthes had been aware when he read my dissertation. My "authorial figure" approach had developed, in fact, partly as a result of my Freudian bent. To be sure, I understood, and in some cases approved of, Nabokov's criticism of psychoanalysis, especially of its American, often Jungian, brand, with its emphasis on gross symbolism. But I have always believed that his statements about sex are often tainted with bad faith, as when he said, in his 1964 *Playboy*

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[20] *The Annotated Lolita* (London: Penguin Books, 1991, pp. 43 and 81 respectively, and *Lolita,* trans. by Eric Kahane (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), pp. 52 and 96 respectively.

interview, “Sex as an institution, sex as a general notion, sex as a problem, sex as a platitude—all this is something I find too tedious for words. Let us skip sex.”[21] What he meant, I suppose, was that he refused to use sex as an easy means of identification between readers, narrators and characters, but considered it rather as a poetic challenge. To be sure, he bitterly indicts Humbert: “Humbert Humbert is a vain and cruel wretch who manages to appear ‘touching.’ That epithet, in its true, tear-iridized sense, can only apply to my poor little girl.”[22] In this bitter attack, Nabokov obviously tried to distance himself from his protagonist. In answer to an interviewer’s question about the cruelty and perversity of some of his characters, he once said, more honestly, I think, “Some of my characters are, no doubt, pretty beastly, but I really don’t care, they are outside my inner self like the mournful monsters of a cathedral façade—demons placed there merely to show that they have been booted out. Actually, I’m a mild old gentleman who loathes cruelty.”[23] The poetic image he uses may contain his most open admission of the dialectic relation existing between himself and Humbert: “I’m not like him,” he seems to say, “but I could have been, as I sense within myself desires which, if not kept on a leash, could have led me to commit similar crimes.” In all these declarations, he clearly wants to show that he is endowed with a strong moral sense and that he does not confuse his chimeras with reality.

In my essay, however, I did not attempt to use the Lacanian scalpel to scrutinize the author’s case, being only concerned with the characters Nabokov invented in his novels. His psychological insight was extraordinary. Nabokov’s relation to Freud, in fact, was not unlike that of Henry James with his brother William, the philosopher and psychologist (Nabokov would of course dismiss the comparison): as a novelist, Henry James had an understanding of the human psyche which clearly surpassed that of his brother. I was amazed to find out how easy it was to capitalize on concepts such as “aphanisis,” “demand,” “need,” “denial” invented by psychoanalysists, Lacan especially, to analyze characters like Luzhin, Margot, Cincinnatus, or Humbert Humbert. And for the nonce, I was using a known hermeneutic hat stand to hang my interpretative hat on, which should please Brian McHale (but would have no doubt led Nabokov to remark that I was speaking through the damn thing!). My chief ambition while writing that book was to dissect the various types of cruelty betrayed by the respective characters. Rarely does one find in the literary canon such sadism, for instance, as that exhibited by Rex in *Laughter in the Dark,* Fyodor in his biography of Chernyshevski, the

[21] *Strong Opinions,* p. 23.
[22] *Ibid.,* p. 94.
[23] *Ibid.,* p. 19.

authorities in *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister,* or Humbert Humbert in *Lolita.* Such characters rely on cruelty to remedy their "lack of being" (Lacan's expression) inherent in their cruel desires. This psychoanalytic reading casts a new light, I believe, on the behaviour of the characters and the unfolding of the stories, consequently enriching our understanding of the novels.

I was given an opportunity to explain my views on the subject in the presence of young Nabokov scholars when Tatyana Ponomareva invited me to teach a seminar at the Nabokov Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, in August 2004. That was my second visit to the museum; I had given a lecture there in 2001. The seminarians, among them Will Norman, the co-organizer of the 2007 Oxford conference, were a little puzzled, I think, feeling probably that I was violating Nabokov's oft-repeated interdict and betraying my chief "intellectual benefactor."

My Lacanian reading has received little attention so far from Nabokovians, and not simply because the book is in French. Many prominent Nabokovians read French; one of them, having received a copy, read only the index to see if and how he was being mentioned or criticized. Perhaps I am too rebellious and contentious to be a bona fide member of the great Nabokov community. To be sure, I have been invited to quite a few conferences and have been asked to write papers for this or that special issue of a periodical or for this or that book, but on the whole, I have always felt that my discourse fell flat or was not deemed quite appropriate. I have tried to compensate for this perceived shortcoming by organizing three conferences and bringing to Nice the most prestigious Nabokovians, choosing each time a slightly controversial topic: "Autobiography, Biography, Fiction," "Nabokov at the Crossroads of Modernism and Postmodernism," and finally "Annotating vs. Interpreting Nabokov." As most participants in all three conferences have agreed, the debates have been very stimulating and the atmosphere extremely friendly and relaxed; some, like Beth Sweeney, have generously congratulated their host, but the latter remains convinced nonetheless that he is not leaving any marked imprint on the tortuous path of Nabokov studies, except in France.

On the European side of the Atlantic and the English Channel, any editor-in-chief of "his or her" author's works in the prestigious *"Bibliothèque de la Pléiade"* (the series' full name) is deemed to be the foremost specialist of that author, at least in the closed circles of academe and the Parisian press: in the eyes of your colleagues, it is your *bâton de maréchal*, which shows how limited the ambitions of many academics can be. As mentioned above, I never wanted the job, if only because, until ten years ago, I had no Russian. I did not

particularly enjoy working on Volume I, except for the long introduction, and my contribution to it was comparatively slight. Volume II, on the other hand, has been the source of great pleasure. The revision of the translations has been less conflictual, with the help of my wife and René Alladaye. Annotating *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and, above all, *Lolita,* has been very rewarding; in this enterprise, not unlike panning for gold, I have stumbled upon a few nuggets that Nabokov seems to have dropped in trust into my purse. In order to avoid playing the role of the mad alchemist, I asked Brian Boyd to read my *Lolita* annotations; which he graciously agreed to do. The volume should come out sometime in 2010, the editorial work and the printing proper usually taking about ten months. The book will be expensive, like the first volume, not because the editor-in-chief and the other contributors are well paid (they are not!) but because of the royalties, the cost of paper and, above all, that of the sheepskin cover (almost half the price of a volume).

Last October, Lara Delage-Torriel and Monica Manolescu organized a conference at the University of Strasbourg with French aficionados of Nabokov from English, Russian or Comparative Literature departments. They invited me to give the opening address and to present a summary of Nabokov's reception in France. Fearing to speak too much of myself at some point, I chose to parade in my paper under a mask, that of René Tadlov (invented in my first novel), which totally confused my audience, I am afraid; nobody dared to ask questions at the end, practically, as they feared no doubt that they had overlooked an important French Nabokovian with a Russian name. But the conference was an important event nonetheless; it brought together a great number of young French scholars who are already playing a prominent role in the field of Nabokov studies.

This long journey in Nabokovland has been one of the most exciting experiences of my life. It has left a strong mark on my imagination and improved my writing, in English and above all in French. Sustained intimate contact with Nabokov's works, which teem with exciting stories, poerotic passages, breathtaking metaphors, and unforgettable imagery, has kindled my desire to write fiction (other Nabokovians have had the same experience, I believe). I wrote my first novel in 1977-78, just after attending the first conference on American literature held behind the Iron Curtain (in Poland, in fact), a surrealistic event during which I met Malcolm Bradbury, who later wrote *Rates of Exchange* as a result of the conference. At the event I read a paper on "the subject on trial in Nabokov," in fact my first foray into the Freudian forest; according to Brian Boyd, the published version of that paper may be the first long piece on Nabokov to have come out behind the Iron Curtain. The organizer of the conference, spied upon by people obviously sent by the Warsaw government,

later landed in prison. I am not sure that the novel I wrote based on the event, *La Polka piquée,* was any more surrealistic than the event itself. The story's dénouement is precipitated by a banknote given as change by a taxi-driver to the protagonist and on which has been written a short poem in English:

> Hereby I blow my last buck.
> No one will know my good luck
> But you, my wayward lass,
> Shrouded in "yellow blue vass."
> Fashion a plane or a boat
> With this tiny banknote,
> And fare you well!

A tribute, to Nabokov, of course.[24] The printed book reached me an hour before the opening of the conference on postmodernism I had organized at the University of Nice and which was held in the presence of several renowned writers: Stanley Elkin, William Gass, Michel Butor, Clarence Major and Malcolm Bradbury. The novel, like my first essay on Nabokov, was published by L'Age d'Homme, and did not sell well, the publisher doing very little to promote his books, although it is still in print today, twenty-seven years later.

My appetite for writing fiction was not sated by that first thrilling albeit disappointing experience. I subsequently wrote a very bad novel in English which, fortunately, moulders in the dungeon of my archives, and also a second novel in French, *Ziama,* about the Algerian war and its French aftermaths, written in a style akin to American New Journalism; it has just been published, along with the memories of my peasant childhood, *Chronique de l'oubli*. And I am already well into a new, partly surrealistic, novel about a Quixotic Petersburg librarian who has little in common with Nabokov but dreams of becoming a writer.

I can never repay my debt to Nabokov, but the present article may be an oblique attempt at partial payment. Were it not for him, my life would have been a great deal less exciting and less creative, and there are a great number of good people I count as my friends whom I would likely never have met. I feel that my intelligence, my imagination, my

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[24] "Yellow blue vass" is a reference to the phrase "yellow blue vase," "vass" being a rendering of "vase" as pronounced in British English. Brian Boyd recounts the following anecdote in the second volume of his biography: "A student in his beginning [Russian] class recalls that on the first day of the term, Nabokov happened to find on his desk a yellow vase with blue flowers. He went to the blackboard, wrote 'yellow blue vase,' and asked the students what it said. 'Yellow blue vase,' of course. 'That is almost "I love you" in Russian,' he explained, and repeated the phrase, *ja ljublju vas*, adding: 'That is probably the most important phrase I will teach you.'" (*Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. p. 122). The expression appears in *Ada,* of course.

sensibility, my literary style and, simply put, my soul, have been elevated as a result of my life-long interaction with Nabokov's work. In my nowadays less frequent encounters with him in my dreams, I still sense a kind of tolerant benevolence towards me; yet I still think (and some or many Nabokovians will no doubt agree) that my publications about him do not deserve to brush shoulders, on the bookshelves of libraries, with his noble works.

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