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THE LYRIC SYLLABUS AS FOUND OBJECT:
AN EXPERIMENTAL COURSE
ON NABOKOV AND COGNITION

COURSE DESCRIPTION: AN ORIGIN STORY

In “Good Readers and Good Writers,” a prefatory essay from *Lectures on Literature*, Vladimir Nabokov recommends, famously, a psychobiological strategy for literary appreciation: he writes, “The mind, the brain, the top of the tingling spine, is, or should be, the only instrument used upon a book” (4). This dictate has proved to be unusually prescient, inadvertently anticipating the so-called “cognitive turn” in literary studies. Now nearing its fourth decade of axial rotation, the movement has gained considerable momentum in the last fifteen years, emerging as a complement to long-established critical approaches, with the blessing of the MLA. On one level, cognitive criticism appears to be attuned to Nabokov’s formulation, as the field’s methodology includes branches derived from cognitive psychology (the reading mind) and from neuroscience (the reading brain); experiments in neuroaesthetics even promise to account for the tingle at the top of the spine. Yet, Nabokov’s maxim, as we’ll see, offers as much admonition as incitement for the cognitivist enterprise, which remains deeply

controversial. For some, the “turn” constitutes a revolutionary leap forward. For others, it’s merely a risible flop.¹ The debate isn’t likely to be resolved soon, but this contentious climate itself has its advantages, and might be in its own way instructive. If nothing else, the present wave of accelerated activity, and heightened publicity, in this pioneering field invites us to consider anew the basic hows and equivocal whys of literary reading.

Such, at least, were my thoughts when I chose the topic—literature and cognition—as the theme for an advanced writing seminar, with an interdisciplinary bent, for Honors students at the university where I teach. However, given the controversial nature of cognitive criticism, and my own agnosticism with regard to its promise, I organized the course even more deliberately around the literary pole in the binary; our representative specimens, I decided, would concentrate on the works of a single writer, the singular Nabokov. With its lexical difficulty, its densely patterned surfaces, its affinity for puzzles, puns and dissimulation, Nabokov’s fiction is engineered to tax relentlessly the reader’s cognitive faculties, and thus is especially well-suited to a cognitivist inquiry. What’s more, Nabokov’s body of work includes additional bridges between the arts and the sciences; his activity as a lepidopterist and as a composer of chess problems, I foresaw, would add further interdisciplinary twists in the course design. But already, I can see that I’m telling this backwards, simulating a rhetorical bait-and-switch, or a kind of expository dyslexia. That is, in planning the course, my primary aim was to introduce students to Nabokov’s corpus, and only secondarily to explore, without a rooting interest, the intersection of literary fiction and cognitive science. The resulting syllabus was even more experimental and pedagogically innovative than I had anticipated.

The syllabus that I’m describing has its own workaday creation myth. When I was an undergraduate at Columbia, in the early nineties, I had a campus job as an office assistant in the English Department. The position involved me, in a furniture-moving capacity, with the review process for graduate program admissions. In those days, applications were submitted on paper, via the regular mail, and it took some modest ingenuity and pluck to keep the stacks, and

¹ Jonathan Gottschall, of Washington and Jefferson College, believes that “a scientific approach can rescue literature departments from the malaise that has embraced them over the last decade and a half,” according to *The New York Times* (Cohen). William Deresiewicz doesn’t share Gottschall’s enthusiasm: “Oh, those [brain-imaging] studies. They always have a lot of data, but they so often miss the point.... They’re either jaw-droppingly obvious or head-clutchingly misguided.”

eventually boxes, of applicant files in serviceable order. Despite this intimate contact with the physical mechanics of the process, and my aspirant's knowledge of the documents bundled in each arriving packet, the assessment criteria for those applications remained mysterious to me. I didn't really understand what differentiated the "yes" pile from the "no" pile. One day, however, circumstances conspired to shed some light, albeit oblique and glancing, on the program's selection rationale.

I was at my post in the office, advancing the cause of Western letters by manning the department phone—or maybe leafing through a volume of the *OED* (hard binding like elephant hide) to settle an etymological bar bet in Brooklyn (such was life before *google* became a verb). At some point, a long-time graduate assistant, one of the first screeners of applications, came striding out of his private office, a candidate's dossier held triumphantly aloft. He sang out a single word: "Nabokov!" I believe he put the accent correctly on the middle syllable. Even at the time, I could do the math, catch the upshot of this cryptic pronouncement: the applicant in question had submitted a writing sample on Nabokov's work, and this fact alone served as a badge of distinction, as if Nabokov's name were itself a byword for academic excellence and intellectual achievement.

A more tactical thinker would have hustled out immediately and begun to read the complete works of Vladimir Nabokov. For my part, two decades would elapse before I would find occasion to recognize and pursue the simple question posed at that moment in the department office: namely, why? Why would Nabokov's name be synonymous with academic excellence? Granted, the opinion of this small band of Ivy League admissions personnel doesn't necessarily represent a consensus view of Nabokov's work. Nor does this estimation of Nabokov necessarily reflect the priorities of current admissions committees. So let's just say that, at one point in time, in at least one elite circle of literary taste-makers and degree-minters, Nabokov's name had this kind of cachet. But even with this qualification, as the premise for a course, the question in question seemed both sound and enduringly relevant; I proposed to explore this fundamental question—about the correlation (perhaps a causal relation?) between Nabokov's work and intellectual prowess—in varied ways with a group of high-achieving undergraduates. The class would be a case study, and a kind of practicum, in the cognitive impact of literary reading. Because this was an advanced writing course for advanced students, the theme-based

content loomed larger in the curriculum than explicit rhetorical instruction; core components of the latter—the basic critical-thinking strategies of analysis and synthesis—were embedded implicitly in our approach to the readings. As I envisioned it, the class would challenge students with some unique writing assignments and engage them in novel forms of textual problem-solving. There would be no midterm or final. We would not read *Lolita* or *Pale Fire*. But despite my best efforts to rope off the borders of our inquiry and spare my students both the vertigo and the ecstasy of Nabokov’s most intricate novels, the course design resisted such facile circumscription, almost as if it had a mind of its own. The class, as I discovered only belatedly, would enlist all of us in a forced contemplation of aesthetic experience by other means. In addition to bridging disciplines and crossing genres, this experimental syllabus would propel us into a space where aesthetic theory informs and subsumes instructional practice.

ASSIGNMENTS AND READINGS

A description of the three formal writing assignments and their correspondent readings offers a time-lapse overview of the class. The first short paper invited students either to observe the local bird and butterfly life on our campus, or to compose a chess problem. For the latter, students were required to supply the problem’s solution, plus some elaborative discussion of the problem’s special features. This assignment was an unsubtle attempt to engage the interests of, on one hand, biologists and, on the other, mathematicians and computer scientists (or any student in a discipline amenable to chess). However, to prepare for the chess option, we read essays by W.K. Wimsatt and Janet Gezari: “How to Compose Chess Problems, and Why” (by Wimsatt alone) and “Vladimir Nabokov: More Chess Problems and the Novel” (by both writers in tandem). I had expected these essays to have only local significance, helping us to compose our own chess problems, or allowing us to contemplate, per Nabokov’s directions, the *sui mate* structure of his “Christmas,” etc. As it turned out, the essays by Wimsatt and Gezari proved to be central, rather than tangential, to our enterprise, equipping us with a concept that was rarely absent in our interpretive wrangling with Nabokov’s fiction.

The chess concept here is the notion of *virtuality*, which refers to “the area of what *might* happen in a problem, or does almost happen, but not quite” (Wimsatt 83). As Wimsatt explains,

“Multiple near solutions, close tries or attractive-looking false keys, especially if forming a clear pattern of relations to the actual play, have always been taken as a thematic merit in a problem” (83). Nabokov in particular prized this virtual dimension of chess problems: in *Speak, Memory*, he writes, “a great part of a problem’s value is due to the number of ‘tries’—delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray” (290). In simplest terms, the notion of virtuality privileges play over mate, possibility over certainty, openness over closure. It’s a little like Derrida’s *differance*, or like *conceptual blending* from cognitive linguistics, in that the concept is flexible enough to apply anywhere, but it proved especially relevant to our reading of Nabokov’s famously evasive works. See, for example, the cliffhanger ending of “Signs and Symbols,” in which a ringing phone, fraught with consequence, is left to continue ringing in perpetuity.

(Admittedly, we got less mileage out of the bird-and-butterfly-chasing option, though as work proceeded on this paper, I did sight, for the first time, a spotted towhee. I also read an observational essay as good as anything that I’ve seen in fifteen years of teaching. Both additions to the life list.)

The second assignment in our class, a longer paper, was modeled after *Anatomy of a Short Story*, edited by Yuri Leving. The book is an eclectic casebook study of the singularly cryptic “Signs and Symbols” mentioned above, and the assembled essays approach the story from vantage points informed by chess strategy, mathematics, cryptology and even the cognitive sciences. For this assignment, I split the students into small groups (with three to five members) and assigned each group a single, particularly enigmatic short story (“Ultima Thule” and “Lance” were among the options); the students were obliged to purposefully diversify their approaches to the text and produce a casebook study of their own. As the days passed, it dawned on me that this task was, in itself, a collaborative experiment in textual virtuality, as the group members were required to imagine alternate approaches to the story, the various pathways that might result in “mate.” The complications of the casebook format added significantly to the assignment’s degree of difficulty.

To prepare the groups for the challenge, I introduced the class to a number of secondary sources, each of which supplied a different framework in which to analyze the story. The two most prominent examples here were Wolfgang Iser’s seminal essay “The Reading Process” and

the first part of Lisa Zunshine's *Why We Read Fiction*, which focus, respectively, on matters of consciousness and cognition in the reading mind. Iser offers an intricate map of the phenomenology of reading that Nabokov himself surveys glancingly in "Good Readers and Good Writers": to explain why "an active and creative reader is a rereader," Nabokov notes how "the very process of laboriously moving our eyes from left to right ... stands between us and artistic appreciation" (3). Only a rereading, Nabokov argues, allows us to apprehend the text as a whole, the entirety of its design, in a simultaneity similar to that in which we experience a painting. Iser explains more precisely this procedure by which readers imagine and interpret textual worlds: from the line-by-line conversion of narrative shards into a three-dimensional Gestalt reality, to the management and rationalization of gaps and dissonances in the text. Interestingly, Iser's disquisition itself proceeds strangely, following a recursive structure in which the writer will raise a core proposition and later revisit it, to draw out some additional implication or pursue a different angle, without acknowledging the repetition.

This retrograde motion is evident from Iser's first paragraph, where he broaches in his own way the *virtuality* of literary texts, adding, for our class purposes, a secondary meaning to the term. Iser's *virtuality* refers to "the convergence of text and reader [required to bring] the literary work into existence." He continues, "this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader" (279). In other words, the literary text depends for its existence on a melding with the reader's mind, which is itself dependent on and constrained by the literary text in this virtual system.² This is an eminently lucid and sensible start to Iser's essay. However, five pages later, after discussing many finer points of the reading process in the interval, Iser blithely remarks, "The literary text activates our own faculties, enabling us to recreate the world it presents. The product of this creative activity is what we might call the virtual dimension of the text, which endows it with its reality. This virtual dimension is not the text itself, nor is it the imagination of the reader: it is the coming together of text and

² Nabokov describes a similar communion between the reader and the text in "Good Readers": "Since the master artist used his imagination in creating his book, it is natural and fair that the consumer of a book should use his imagination too.... But <...> the reader must know when and where to curb his imagination and this he does by trying to get clear the specific world the author places at his disposal" (4).

imagination” (284). In this passage, Iser appears to reprise, more or less verbatim, the starting point of his essay, asserting as if for the first time what has already been established (though the context has changed). This rhetorical strategy is typical of “The Reading Process.” Ideas undergo a strange kind of progressive modification, an uncanny revisitation, almost like a haunting, or maybe just textual déjà vu.

Compared to Iser’s essay, Zunshine’s book proved to be a refreshingly linear read, if less analytically useful, for the students. In Part I, Zunshine highlights the importance of mind-reading in our interaction with fictional characters; she argues that 1) literary reading tests the cognitive faculty known as Theory of Mind (ToM), our ability to intuit mental states from behavioral cues, and that 2) some works push this faculty to its limits, challenging us to keep straight multiple layers of embedded intentionality, a kind of “who knew what?” puzzle, as in, “A wants B to believe that C thinks that D wanted E to consider F’s feelings about G” (Zunshine 29). Linearity, with its connotations of straightforwardness, has an understandable appeal, though Iser’s recursive structure is more indicative of the syllabus design. To complement these mentalist approaches, we also read, at intervals, selections from Nabokov’s *Lectures on Literature*, which gave the students some grounding in classical literary analysis and hinted at other, less orthodox interpretive frameworks. For example, in his lecture on Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis,” Nabokov sketches a taxonomic profile of the beetle hero (258-59), thus demonstrating how entomology can contribute to literary analysis. Likewise, Nabokov’s typology of writers—storytellers, teachers and enchanters (“Good Readers” 5-6)—supplied an interpretive vocabulary for the parsing of his own fiction.

In our class meetings, I gave the students some practice reading other Nabokovian stories through each of these (and a few more) theoretical lenses: our dress rehearsal, so to speak, for the casebook papers. By such means, the assignment required students to pursue discrete readings of a single text, only some of which were explicitly informed by cognitivist concerns, but in aggregate, the task heightened our awareness of hermeneutics itself as an intellectual activity. The implicit subtitle for this second assignment was “How (and Why) to Read a Nabokovian Short Story.”

The culminating assignment was in some ways the obverse of the casebook paper. Where the latter required students to consider a single story within a specific interpretive framework, the

final paper asked them to explore in broader terms and more directly the central question driving our inquiry: What, if anything, is the cognitive impact of reading Nabokovian fiction? With this premise, the final paper functioned as a kind of self-reflective essay—but outward directed, as if the genre were turned inside out—inviting students to formulate the intellectual dividends of our literary labors. And as with the casebook project, our course readings provided the students with several ways in which to approach this task. The students might have chosen to delve deeper into Zunshine’s work and assess reading’s impact on the brain (in a figurative sense); in Part II of her book, Zunshine concentrates on the cognitive faculty of metarepresentation, our ability to apply source tags to assertions and hold information “under advisement” (50), remaining undecided about its truth value. She links this faculty to our experience of unreliable narration in literature, and as an extended example, she offers a targeted reading of Nabokov’s *Lolita*. In these exegetical chapters, students might have found a viable blueprint for the task of the final paper.

Additionally, to supplement Zunshine’s cognitivist analysis, students were able to explore fiction’s impact on the brain in a literal sense. I had included among our readings a brief essay by Maryanne Wolf, a neuroscientist at Tufts, on the circuitry of the reading brain, and periodically, we examined those recent studies in which imaging technology maps the neural activity associated with literary reading and/or questionnaires attempt to isolate changes in readers’ perceptual capacities. In one such study, brain scans suggested that literary reading yields long-term changes to neural networks, particularly in language-processing regions and those regions associated with “embodied semantics,” which simulate the sensory experiences of the fictional world (Ryan). Although *The Atlantic* publicized the researchers’ findings as breaking news in 2014, Wolf’s 2007 *Proust and the Squid*, to name one title immediately at hand, appears to have established authoritatively that the brain forms new neural networks in order to make reading possible at all. Nevertheless, the new study purports to offer concrete and slightly more specialized evidence regarding the neural activation and decay patterns associated with literary reading. The study’s subjects read Robert Harris’ *Pompeii* in the evenings and underwent fMRI scans in the mornings—resting-state scans—to track the lingering changes in brain connectivity.

Conversely, for their final papers, students were welcome to scuttle the science and board the life-raft that I had attached to the hull of the syllabus before setting out: in *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, Alain de Botton takes a pop approach to the same question that concerns

cognitive critics—how can fiction change our minds?—and throughout the course, sporadically, we had been reading chapters from his book to consider in less rarefied, more experiential ways the impact of literary reading. As de Botton divulges the life lessons embedded in Proust’s masterpiece, he argues overtly (and controversially) that literature can be therapeutic. For example, in one chapter, de Botton shows how Proustian aesthetics direct us to savor the details in our lives and induce a dilation of sensory experience (31-48); in another, he posits that Proust’s work can recalibrate our perception of beauty, helping us to find it in the mundane (133-58). In both ways, de Botton claims, literature can alter the reader’s consciousness and perception of the world, yielding a net increase of contentment. I had expected that students working in this vein might produce papers in the whimsical spirit of Lila Zanganeh’s *The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness* (2011); in her book, Zanganeh describes her own attempts, inspired by Nabokov, to chase butterflies (135-47), she pays homage to the delights of his diction and word play (170-72), etc. Indeed, the spirit of Zanganeh’s recent book, along with David Kleinberg-Levin’s more philosophical *Redeeming Words and the Promise of Happiness: A Critical Theory Approach to Wallace Stevens and Vladimir Nabokov* (2012), supplied an impetus for the creation of the course. While cognitivists and neuroscientists assess the experience of literature in terms that are essentially quantitative, these writers, like de Botton, remind us to consider a more qualitative approach to the matter.

There was one last option available for the final paper, and it invited students to stake out the conceptual middle-ground, somewhere between de Botton’s chipper moralizing and Zunshine’s tinkering with cognitive software. In “Formative Fictions,” an excerpt from his book *How to Do Things with Fictions*, Joshua Landy argues that some, not all, literary texts “assist us in fine-tuning our mental capacities” and thus contribute to our intellectual growth in precise ways (183). In layman’s terms, fiction makes us smarter. On this point, Landy approaches Iser, who asserts that literary reading allows us to formulate a previously “unformulated faculty of deciphering” (299): that is, a literary text elicits from us new problem-solving techniques, training our minds to perform certain operations in order to make sense of the text. Where Iser identifies a general principle of all literary reading, Landy catalogs the specific intellectual abilities cultivated by texts like the Christian Gospels, Plato’s dialogues or Mallarmé’s poems. In their final papers, my students were given a chance to map in a similar fashion the distinctive

problem-solving challenges encoded in Nabokov’s work and to speculate (concretely) about the intellectual prowess that such work might develop. Essentially, I had positioned the students to follow in the footsteps of not just Landy, but also Brian Boyd and his prize-winning *Nabokov’s Ada: The Place of Consciousness* (2002). In the chapter titled “Resistance and Solution,” Boyd tracks the ramifications of a brief passage in *Ada*, noting the mysteries that arise within it and the sequence of discoveries that allow for their resolution. He summarizes Nabokov’s method as follows:

Nabokov enjoys deeply the bright immediacies of the world, but he always craves the excitement of discovering what remains unknown just behind the apparent—and what remains behind that, and so on, and so on. Resistance and solution recreate the possibility of this excitement: behind the immediate attractiveness of Nabokov’s prose lurk intimations of hidden but extricable meaning, incentives to read on and read again, drawing us back time after time to the novel until we can see how the process of concealment and discovery puts into kinetic form the philosophical (epistemological, moral, metaphysical) problem of consciousness, which for Nabokov is ‘the greatest mystery of all.’ (43)

An article that nearly made it onto the syllabus, but didn’t, deserves mention here because, echoing and extending the work of Landy and Boyd, it extracts from Nabokov’s fictional techniques the model for a radical pedagogy. In “Educative Deceit: Vladimir Nabokov and the [Im]Possibility of Education,” Hener Saeverot argues that, in *Lolita*, “Nabokov acts as an ‘escamoteur,’ or a hyperphenomenological deceiver, as he causes ‘things’ to disappear by provoking deceptions. In other words, he makes the reader ‘see’ hyperphenomena that are made invisible as they appear” (606). As representative examples, Saeverot cites the novel’s fictional foreword, by the blinkered John Ray, Jr., which poses as an authoritative comment (609-10), as well as Humbert’s initial depiction, later revised, of strained relations between Charlotte Haze and her daughter (610-11). By such means, according to Saeverot, “Nabokov tries to sharpen the readers’ curiosity and sense apparatus so that they shall realize that they have been deceived and

at the same time be able to grasp ‘the secret’ with no essence behind it” (607).³ Because Nabokov does not, for Saeverot, deceive with the intention of reaching some specific didactic terminus, some moral revelation, readers are ideally free to think for themselves and draw their own conclusions. However, Saeverot notes the risks in Nabokov’s methods: “this process of education is unpredictable because Nabokov, the deceitful educationalist, is teaching about the practices of double-dealing and broken promises by enacting them” (607). Even so, Saeverot ultimately advocates this kind of educative deceit in real-world instructional practice because it draws students “out of a state of passivity and into a state of action, or a profound process of reflection, where they evaluate and rethink former beliefs and moral matters” (617). As Saeverot describes a classroom that would replicate the ambiguity in *Lolita*, he makes explicit and literal something that remains mostly latent in Boyd’s analysis: the instructional potential of Nabokovian fiction. And though I didn’t share Saeverot’s or Boyd’s work with the class, I expected that, by following Landy’s lead, the students might explore similar terrain: my students were invited to survey those dynamic processes of concealment and discovery in Nabokov’s fiction, and to speculate about their ultimate impact on human intelligence.

This is an extensive menu, though not quite a surfeit, of options, and students were free to mix these approaches, or to concentrate on just one. The only fixed stipulations for this assignment, besides the length requirement, were that 1) the paper should be synthetic, mixing primary and secondary sources, and that 2) it should reflect a thorough and thoughtful reading of at least one of the two Nabokovian novels—*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Invitation to a Beheading*—that we had read as a class.

CURRICULAR NEGATION — ARTS

In all of the above, my instructional strategy was simply to prepare the students to excel in each of these writing tasks, which are both wildly divergent and strangely overlapping. But this isn’t to say that the course as a whole lacked a developmental trajectory. The papers themselves formed an escalating series, consistently expanding in length and scope. In our

³ In a footnote, Saeverot links this “‘secret’ with no essence behind it” (607) to the adidactic experience of “aesthetic bliss” (qtd. in Saeverot 607) that Nabokov found in art.

reading, we turned our attention from Nabokov's stories to his novels as the weeks passed, and likewise, the impact of reading on the brain occupied more of our attention in the second half of the term. And finally, at the very end of the quarter, our course texts led us to confront the broadest issue at stake in our multifaceted exploration of cognitive criticism: the use of literature itself. No matter which approach we consider—the experiential therapy of de Botton, the different sorts of brain-boosting that interest neurologists and Landy, the flexing of cognitive faculties per Zunshine—they all presume to assign some cultural role, some use-value, for literature. All of these theorists, in various ways, directly and indirectly, make arguments about how and why we read literary fiction. To get students to engage this broadest question, I asked them to read a lyric essay by Erik Anderson called “The Sum of Two Cubes (or the Uses of Literature)” from the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Actually, at the last minute—hedging, I suppose, revising the syllabus on the fly—I offered the class a choice of readings: Anderson's essay or Brian Boyd's “Arts, Humanities, Sciences, Uses” from *New Literary History*. They opted for Anderson, though Boyd might have had more practical utility for the task of writing the essay.

The lyric essay is itself a strange genre, the charismatic love-child of the poem and the expository essay. And Anderson's specimen, composed of disjunctive segments, all with a poetic lilt, presents in an oblique, mosaic fashion a restrained defense of the uselessness of literature. Near the end of his essay, Anderson writes,

All would tell you—as would certain champions of the Virtues of Literature—that language has a profound capacity to shape who we are, how we think, what we buy. I agree. Wholeheartedly. But literature? ... Language as tool, language as literature: even if the two occasionally overlap, it's unlikely any work of literature will change your life in the way that an instruction manual will teach you how to run your new microwave. Whatever use there is to literature has nothing to do with this kind of efficacy. Instrumental language reduces possibility—push this button—but when literary language touches the world, meaning proliferates.

Anderson compares this lack of utility with a similar pointlessness that inheres in theoretical mathematics: much of Anderson's essay concerns the lives and careers of G. H. Hardy and Srinivasa Ramanujan, both celebrated 20th century mathematicians, each possessed of profound but at-the-time pointless talents. Ramanujan, for example, had the ability to perceive at a glance that the number 1729 is the lowest number that could be expressed as the sum of two cubes in two different ways. The *lowest* number that could be so expressed. Anderson comments on this intellectual feat, "I don't know about you, but the mind that could grasp this complexity instantaneously is so foreign to me as to induce a kind of naïve awe." For Anderson, this combination of profundity and pointlessness seems to capture the essence of literature.

I had thought that Anderson's contrarian position was important to include as a counterpoint to our literary-instrumentalist class content (and that the lyric essay as a genre would jostle in meaningful ways our ideas about essay writing). Even if literary fiction does make readers smarter—as I think it certainly does, though not automatically or straightforwardly—I'm not sure that we do literature justice, or ourselves any favors, by foregrounding this purpose. (Does one really read, say, *Lolita* in order to become smarter?) The students saw the matter differently. Some of the more literal-minded had obvious objections to Anderson's position (hasn't literature, at times, helped to change the world? doesn't it change the world one mind at a time?); very few of them were willing to grant the value of uselessness. And consequently, in their final papers, very few students considered the ways in which it might be problematic to conclude that reading Nabokov makes people smarter (or happier). This surprised me, not least because we had seen repeated examples in the fiction of cognition gone haywire, of characters incapacitated by virtue of their heightened Nabokovian consciousness. Take Sebastian Knight's predicament, for example:

[I]n my case all the shutters and lids and doors of the mind would be open at once at all times of day. Most brains have their Sundays, mine was even refused a half-holiday. This state of constant wakefulness was extremely painful not only in itself, but in its direct results. Every ordinary act which, as a matter of course, I had to perform, took on such a complicated appearance, provoked such a multitude of associative ideas in my mind, and these associations were so tricky

and obscure, so utterly useless for practical application, that I would either shirk the business at hand or else make a mess of it out of sheer nervousness.

(Nabokov, *Real Life*, 67)

From here, obviously, it is only a short stroll to the experience of full-blown referential mania (which tortures the characters in “Signs and Symbols”) or charges of gnostical turpitude (which likewise torture Cincinnatus C., the beleaguered protagonist in *Invitation to a Beheading*).

But to put this another way, despite the evident arc, the developmental progression, in the syllabus design, the trajectory so devised tracked ultimately toward the cancellation or negation of our very course impetus.

In fact, this self-cancellation was more thoroughly inscribed in the course. In all of our literary reading, we endeavored to apprehend the paradoxes and irresolution inherent in Nabokovian narratives, particularly in their endings. What does it signify, for example, that triumph and tragedy appear to merge in the ecstatic ending of “Spring in Fialta”? Is the conclusion of *Invitation to a Beheading*—in which the narrative world dissolves just as the executioner’s ax falls and the condemned stumbles into a new, more benevolent world—meant to be taken literally or metaphorically, or both, or neither? This interpretive strategy anticipated the position that Anderson articulates in his essay, but so did the works of our theorists, and even more explicitly at that. In “Formative Fictions,” Landy asserts categorically that literary works are not reducible to their “propositional content,” their “function [is not] to deliver laws of experience [or] deep abiding truths about the world” (Landy 180). Instead, they offer us experiential immersion in the aesthetic properties of life and language; we inevitably grapple with existential crises and philosophical dilemmas along the way, but as a rule, literary texts preserve an artful silence on matters of ethics and education. In this way, they sustain a proliferation of meaning that resists being flattened out to a single didactic intent. For hosts of practiced readers, this equivocation constitutes the artfulness of literary art.

The anti-utilitarian view of literature also found support, among our class readings, from an unlikely quarter: Lisa Zunshine’s *Why We Read Fiction*. Zunshine stakes out a bold position when she concludes that a “cognitive necessity” (160) underlies both the reading and the *writing* of fiction. She addresses the reader’s side of the equation in her book’s broadest claim: “we ...

read fiction ... *because* it engages, in a variety of particularly focused ways, our Theory of Mind” (162, emphasis mine). Less conspicuously, Zunshine also presumes to explain the origins of literary creation: “What drives the creative process is our hankering for mind-making and mind-reading” (160). Nevertheless, she offers an important qualification to these strong opinions when she stipulates that the practice of reading fiction doesn’t necessarily enrich or improve our cognitive faculties: “Theory of Mind makes reading possible, but reading fiction does not make us into better mind readers, at least not in the way that I can theorize confidently at this early stage of our knowledge about cognitive information processing” (35). Zunshine’s book dates to 2006, but a recent study, from 2013, purports to confirm the hypothesis that Zunshine wasn’t prepared to entertain. While the title of the resultant paper is unambiguous—“Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind”—the study’s actual findings are somewhat more modest and problematic (Comer Kidd and Costano).⁴ For now, suffice it to say that, for our class purposes, Zunshine, like Landy, expresses some ambivalence with regard to the utility of literary reading.

Of course, the notion of artistic pointlessness, or aesthetic inutility, is more old saw than fresh insight—Cleanth Brooks’ 1947 essay “The Heresy of Paraphrase” bears remembering—and not surprisingly, the notion had been circulating in our course readings from the very start. For the first day of class, I asked the students to read “The Art of Literature and Commonsense,” in which Nabokov lovingly disparages the moralistic novel:

I never could admit that a writer’s job was to improve the morals of his country, and point out lofty ideals from the tremendous height of a soapbox, and administer first aid by dashing off second-rate books. The writer’s pulpit is dangerously close to the pulp romance, and what reviewers call a strong novel is

⁴ The researchers acknowledge that long-time exposure to literary fiction may account for the test subjects’ apparently enhanced ToM facility (Comer Kidd and Costano 380), as measured by their prowess in matching emotions with photographs of faces and making inferences about people’s beliefs. Further, the study clearly states its assumption that literary fiction challenges our ToM faculty in ways that popular fiction doesn’t (377-78). However, absent any textual analysis to show that the study’s representative texts do in fact challenge ToM in this way, its conclusions seem tenuous. What’s more, the paper doesn’t disclose the raw numbers elicited by the trials: how much better were the readers of literary fiction in ToM tests? A lot or a little? And how do we know that the subjects’ apparent ToM superiority isn’t attributable to some more general increase in alertness in the wake of literary reading? While the study is admirably ambitious and no doubt exemplary in its procedures, I’m not convinced that it makes a compelling argument for the value of literary reading.

generally a precarious heap of platitudes or a sand castle on a populated beach, and there are few things sadder than to see its muddy moat dissolve when the holiday makers are gone and the cold mousy waves are nibbling at the solitary sands. (376)

Only by degrees did we come to confront the problem squarely, but it was as if we had been looking at it all the while.

To further exacerbate this sense of futility, in the selections from the fiction that I'd assembled, there was a surprising sameness in the narrative conflicts and themes. Numerous stories concerned the loss of a child: from the early "Gods" with its elliptically sketched death of a toddler to the "Christmas" tale of moths and mourning, to "Signs and Symbols" in which a deranged teenager courts self-annihilation, to "Lance" in which the child's death is more figurative and reversible, a space voyage taking the Boke's grown son beyond the limits of the known. Men tortured by female promiscuity: we have Victor, in "Spring in Fialta," who never quite discloses the extent of his jealousy and thus seems like a more naturalistic variant of the farcically cuckolded Cincinnatus (who surprises his wife in the act of fellating one of her many lovers (141), hears her complaining of his executioner's erectile dysfunction (199), etc.). Both cases are arguably less tragic than the fate befalling the narrator in "'That in Aleppo Once...'", a man who loses contact with reality and likely turns to murder and suicide as a result of his romantic suffering. Most striking was the preponderance of narratives concerned with the afterlife (or "otherworld"), which would include many of the works mentioned above, plus "Perfection" and "The Vane Sisters,"⁵ and more subtly, "A Letter That Never Reached Russia."⁶ The most explicit textual repetition: Sebastian's secret—"something of boundless importance" (192)—tantalizingly withheld in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, appears to be the same

⁵ "Perfection" ends with the protagonist's dawning recognition of the fact of his own death, by drowning (347). More famously, the final paragraph of "The Vane Sisters" contains an acrostic by which a dead woman attempts to communicate with the story's narrator (631).

⁶ This plotless, epistolary narrative ends with intimations of an imminent suicide and a quiet assertion of immortality: "The centuries will roll by, and schoolboys will yawn over the history of our upheavals; everything will pass, but my happiness, dear, my happiness will remain, in the moist reflection of a streetlamp, in the cautious bend of stone steps that descend into the canal's black waters..." (Nabokov, "A Letter" 140).

immortal knowledge possessed (and likewise withheld) by Adam Falter in “Ultima Thule” (his solution to “the riddle of the universe” (509)).⁷

As we read these works successively, the family resemblance among them was unmistakable. And I was keenly aware that this narrative repetition compulsion left a small but statistically significant number of students perplexed, even dulled their enthusiasm for our work. Although I sympathize with this sentiment, I can’t share it or accommodate it. On the contrary, I suspect that something essential resides exactly here, in the strange resemblances among our literary texts. It recalls Nabokov’s theory of speciation, as outlined in the fictional excerpt “Father’s Butterflies” (corroborated also in the autobiographical *Speak, Memory*):

By “species” he intends the original of a being, nonexistent in our reality but unique and definite in concept, that recurs ad infinitum in the mirror of nature, creating countless reflections; each one of them perceived by our intelligence in that selfsame glass and acquiring its reality solely within it, as a living individual of a given species. Aberrations, chance deviations, are but the consequence of less “faithful” areas of the mirror, while the recurrent falling of a reflection on one and the same flaw may yield a stable local race, the idea of which tends toward the periphery of a circle, the center of which, in turn, is the idea of species. (66)

Stephen Blackwell, in *The Quill and the Scalpel*, clarifies: for Nabokov, “a species is not a static unit; rather, it is an ephemeral manifestation of nature’s growth and development through time, and the attempt to visualize the rhythmic form that characterizes the evolution of species is typical of Nabokov’s approach to science” (35). This principle, in which the singular holotype is, strictly speaking, non-existent—a useful chimera, an asymptote for a species’ varietal range—

⁷ The correspondences among the readings shed some light on something that has long puzzled me in Nabokov’s oeuvre. “The Art of Literature and Commonsense” contains a teasing aside, cloaked in editorial brackets, that reads simply “[two pages missing]” (377). This indicated omission occurs in the course of a paragraph that presumes to affirm the likelihood of immortality: “That human life is but a first installment of the serial soul” (690). Perhaps owing to the brackets, rather than a parenthesis, I have never been able to decide if this is a Nabokovian joke, or if in fact the manuscript is incomplete; that is, I have long wondered whether Nabokov or the book’s editor, Fredson Bowers, is responsible for the bracketed phrase. A similar eclipse in “Ultima Thule,” in a letter from the omniscient Falter, on his deathbed, to the narrator—“two lines [of] which had been painstakingly and, it seemed, ironically, blacked out” (522)—suggests that Nabokov’s hand is behind the essay’s elision.

offers a way to conceptualize the eerie recurrences in Nabokov's fictions. From the students' perspective, each work would ideally be a distinct subspecies, each a living holotype; this linear diversification, typical of survey courses in literature, enhances variety and reduces the contempt bred by familiarity. However, our readings concentrated on only a small number of narrative paratypes (three, by my count), which themselves overlapped and merged into each other. In retrospect, I have concluded that this arrangement of readings is more of an advantage than a liability vis-à-vis student interest. Just as Nabokov endeavored to tease apart, through close observation, subspecies of butterflies, so were we challenged to trace the unique—and often mutually contradictory—features of each narrative. What's more, this selection of readings created optimal conditions under which to test Landy's theory that notional content (the message) matters less than artistic execution (the form). I do concede, however, that the close kinship among the selected readings served to sabotage that sense of linear advance that usually obtains in a syllabus.

CURRICULAR NEGATION — SCIENCES

The class' experience of the theoretical and scientific texts was likewise characterized by consternation. In our exploration of cognitive criticism, our sampling of the recent fMRI studies, our experiments with de Botton's School of Life philosophy, we were always compelled to acknowledge the limits and the problems in the approaches of these researchers and critics. A study that presumes to link literary reading with heightened brain function, for example, seems problematic from both the scientific and humanistic perspective. Others have roundly criticized such experiments,⁸ but as a local illustration of the neuroskeptical position, consider the findings of Natalie Phillips, whose widely publicized study required PhD candidates to undergo fMRI scans while reading a Jane Austen novel in two different modes, "pleasure" reading and "close" reading. In a public talk about the study, conveniently available on YouTube, Phillips shared two sequences of brain-imaging snapshots. The first showed the comparative difference between the neural experience of "pleasure" reading, such as a browser might perform in a bookstore, and

⁸ See, for example, Raymond Tallis's "The Neuroscience Delusion" in *The Times Literary Supplement*, April 9, 2008.

that of “close” reading, such as a PhD candidate would perform in order to write a dissertation: the images of the brain revealed a storm of red, like a Doppler graphic of a tornadic thunderstorm blanketing the continental US. Then, Phillips displayed another series of images: these showed the comparative difference between the reading brain and the non-reading brain. In the images, it looked as if someone were targeting a small number of peripheral cities with a laser pointer. The conclusion that Phillips draws from the data derives from the first set of images: how we read is more important than what we read, as Phillips stresses to a reporter from the Stanford News office (Goldman),⁹ because “close” reading triggers this dazzling surge of bloodflow independent of any change in the external stimulus. But the second sequence of images makes the first seem less impressive. In absolute terms, it appears that only a modest uptick in cerebral bloodflow is required to fuel reading of either variety. And if very (vanishingly?) small biological changes can occasion the difference between beach reading and doctoral analysis, it’s not clear that bloodflow is the best metric for understanding this division of intellectual labor. And what of the quality of the resultant “close” readings? After exiting the fMRI scanner, the study’s subjects were asked to produce a short essay, a testament to the more intensive mode of reading. Were the “better” ones—the more attentive, the more plausibly novel—linked to more bloodflow or slightly less? Is it possible to verify that the subjects were shifting uniformly between “pleasure” reading and “close” reading, rather than alternating between simply “skimming” and “reading”? Such questions hint at the primacy of performance standards that are better corroborated by those exit essays than the fMRI. For now, viewed most sympathetically, imaging scans of the reading brain would seem to confirm what we already know: books can make us think, some perhaps more than others (both books and readers).

On this point, it’s instructive to recall the context in which Nabokov invokes the physiological effects of literary reading: his prefatory essay in *Lectures on Literature*. With regard to artistic appreciation, neuroscience seems poised to contribute a preface or a postscript, but not to write a new chapter. To be fair, Nabokov repeats his maxim about the biological sensation of literary enjoyment, the tingle in the spine, even within the substantive analysis of individual works. For example, on Dickens’ *Bleak House*, he begins by reminding us, “Although

⁹ In her talk, Phillips mentions some other implications of the study: among them, she highlights that “Close reading [is] not merely a state of ‘heightened,’ selective, or directed attention to literature.”

we read with our minds, the seat of artistic delight is between the shoulder blades” (64). However, the sources, in Dickens’ novel, of that delight, that “little shiver” (64) in the spine, also suggest an incompatibility between Nabokovian aesthetics and literary neuroscience. At the end of his lecture, Nabokov cites Dickens’ rendering of a peripheral character, “one of those extraordinary specimens of human fungus that spring up spontaneously in the western streets of London,” and who, when paid for some minor assistance, “receives his two-pence with anything but transport, tosses the money into the air, catches it over-handed, and retires” (qtd. in Nabokov, “Charles” 124). Of this passage, Nabokov writes, “This gesture, this one gesture, with its epithet ‘over-handed’—a trifle—but the man is alive forever in a good reader’s mind” (124). This epithet offers an apt illustration of a frequent Nabokovian refrain: “the supremacy of the detail over the general,” which Nabokov himself celebrates as an “irrational standard” of judgment (Nabokov, “Art” 373). It’s hard to imagine that Dickens’ phrasing is uniquely capable of triggering psychosomatic brain activity; harder still to imagine that a biological model could account for the diversity of responses to such a passage (ranging from nil to hallelujah). And that understanding and appreciation can be cultivated and trained, in different ways by different readers—“like learning to swim or to make a ball break” (Nabokov, “Art” 375)—itself raises serious questions about the search for biological trends in responses to literature. While literary neuroscience may yield important discoveries about the function of the reading brain, such experiments might not contribute reciprocally to our understanding of literature, in isolated cases or in the aggregate.

To see how the same neutralizing skepticism also applied to my class’ exploration of cognitive criticism (as distinct from literary neuroscience), we have a convenient shortcut in Brian Boyd’s review of Zunshine’s book; his largely negative appraisal captures many of the problems that my class encountered firsthand. Boyd sees and defends as well as anyone the merits of the cognitivist enterprise, particularly as a tool for literary analysis; of Zunshine’s ToM-oriented reading of *Lolita*, Boyd writes, “No one has hitherto cocked so attentive an ear to this recurrent note in the complex chords of Humbert’s confessions” (“Fiction” 595). However, Boyd carefully observes the numerous missteps and overreaches in Zunshine’s argumentation, both within and beyond her discussion of *Lolita*. In his review’s terminal sentence, Boyd renders his verdict: “Cognition and evolution in general, and ToM in particular, augur deeper

explanations of fiction, but Zunshine's *Why We Read Fiction* is not only a provisional but also an often wrong-footed step in this promising direction" (600). Boyd's assessment is, in my view, eminently fair, inclining to generous. In my class's experimentation with Zunshine's approach, we found that cognitive criticism supplied a minimally useful vocabulary for textual analysis, but that a pall of redundancy inhered in this shift of interpretive nomenclature, and Nabokovian fictions tended to rebuff, as much as admit, analysis by such means.¹⁰ Boyd himself puts his finger on this more global limitation in cognitive criticism when he writes, "Few would dispute Zunshine's 'we need to keep reapplying a very strong source tag' (p. 102) to Humbert's assertions, but does such phrasing take us any further than simply saying 'we need to be wary of what Humbert writes'?" (596-97). This process of adopting and questioning the principles of cognitivist criticism (metarepresenting all of its claims, as it were) was typical of the course—which is to say that, every step of the way, our exploration of the subject matter, both artistic and scientific, was shadowed by a sense of futility.

RECOGNIZING THE LYRIC SYLLABUS

As I was finalizing the syllabus, the fitful, self-cancelling nature of the inquiry impressed itself palpably upon me, and I suspected that something unusual was transpiring. Rather than imparting to students a reliable body of factual knowledge, I had recruited them in the scrutiny of paradoxes, contradictions and otherwise specious propositions. This course design is less radical than it might seem; it is in fact typical of writing courses with their aim of developing the critical reasoning skills required for participation in academic discourse.¹¹ What better way to foster

¹⁰ Zunshine's own view of cognitive criticism appears to have evolved since the 2006 publication of her book. In "Theory of Mind as a Pedagogical Tool" (2014), Zunshine describes a seminar that she taught on cognitive narratology at Aarhus University in Denmark. While she stresses the utility of ToM-oriented criticism, she also acknowledges its limitations: "Personally, I would not want to dedicate more than two class meetings to this methodology because I do not find 'pure' cognitive interpretations sufficient on their own. That is, once I make students conversant with the concepts of mental state, sociocognitive complexity and intermental unit, it makes sense to consider them not as the analytical centerpiece of my course but as a supplement to other theoretical perspectives" (Zunshine, "Theory" 104-05).

¹¹ Lower-level writing courses fill this negative-space curriculum, this questions-but-not-answers approach, with explicit rhetorical instruction, which becomes then the positive, quantifiable outcome of the class. With rhetorical instruction relegated to the periphery—like something redundant, worthy of cursory review, per the needs of advanced students—the intellectual activities of reading and writing themselves come to the fore as the class'

such skills than by examining the hits and the miscues in a pioneering field? But something even more novel, pedagogically speaking, emerged from the course's architecture.

One accidental feature of the class, something that I hadn't quite anticipated, was that the course material itself addressed, with some frequency, matters of curriculum and pedagogy in higher education. If we translate only slightly, cognitive criticism and literary neuroscience constitute a de-facto referendum on the place of literature in higher education—as if the discipline were in need of additional scientific legitimation—so it seems inevitable that the course readings would have led us to contemplate the very creation of syllabi. Jesse Matz does this in a remarkably ambitious essay called “The Art of Time,” which seeks to turn cognitive criticism to some meliorative purpose. As his title indicates, Matz examines time and memory as facets of human cognition, and he explores the manner in which literary texts might remediate crises with regard to both aspects of human experience. For example, Matz speculates broadly that Proust's experimentation with narrative time might have sought to heal a rift, a sort of cultural-temporal discontinuity, forming in 20th century France (281). Similarly, Matz proposes that time schemes in fictional narratives might have a political thrust and efficacy—Ellison's *Invisible Man* is his model here (283-84)—and he notes how temporal techniques in literary fiction might inform the real-world practice of Narrative Therapy (286-87).

By such means, Matz's argument begins to sound ever more like de Bottonian theorizing got up in academic clothes,¹² and it's vulnerable to the same critique. All theoretical positions

educational content: as if the writing course were stripped down to the bare intent of inciting students to read closely and critically, to reason complexly and to establish connections among data points (both within and across texts). Nabokov's fiction uniquely develops and rewards this kind of attentiveness, as do my class' selected readings in cognitive criticism and literary neuroscience.

¹² Surprisingly, Nabokov's own thinking tacks in this de Bottonian direction; in “L'Envoi,” he writes,

The novels we have imbibed will not teach you anything that you can apply to any obvious life problem.... But [they] may help you, if you have followed my instructions, to feel the pure satisfaction which an inspired and precise work of art gives; and this sense of satisfaction in its turn goes to build up a sense of more genuine mental comfort, the kind of comfort one feels when one realizes that for all its blunders and boners the inner texture of life is also a matter of inspiration and precision. (381)

While Nabokov, like de Botton, finds something salutary in artistic appreciation, this spiritual uplift is at once nonspecific and tied to the perception of the inspired precision of a singular work; thus, Nabokov's comment seems more adequate to the variety of artistic production.

inevitably privilege a limited range of works, and most require us to accept the critic's ideas about optimal practices, interpretive or behavioral. However, in the case of de Botton—who promotes bourgeois contentment—and of Matz—who advocates an integrated experience of “the temporal manifold” (288)—these methodological restrictions seem particularly dubious, inadequate circumscriptions of art's purview and essence. And though I wince when I try to imagine a therapeutic practice informed by the temporal contortions of Proust's masterpiece, I confess that, for me, Matz strikes a nerve when he describes, at the end of his essay, a speculative syllabus engineered as an antidote to linear temporality. Matz is well aware of the perils of his enterprise: he cautions, “if the practice of narrative temporality occurs through forms of instruction that derogate aesthetic experience to an instrumental status [it] would contravene the free play of pleasure and sensibility, the irresponsible gratification essential to the real value of texts like *A Christmas Carol*” (288). To circumvent this danger, Matz advises, “Coursework in the art of time [could] match the reconstructed pedagogy of those texts geared toward temporal invention in its ability to link together texts and contexts, theory and practice, pleasure and possibility” (288). In the end, the course that Matz envisions would collapse distinctions between life and art: “If narrative temporality is not a matter of restrictive chronological linearity but instead a free exploration of the possible relationships among aspects of the temporal manifold, then the practical application of it to real-world possibilities might entail a form of engagement little different from aesthetic experience itself” (288). It seems at best risky to organize one's life experience, educational or otherwise, in accordance with artistic principles—many Nabokovian characters try exactly this, with disastrous results—but here, Matz's article gets to the very root of the strangeness in the syllabus that I had designed.

Dawning on me progressively as the course proceeded—not unlike Victor's paradoxical epiphany at the close of “Spring in Fialta”—was the conclusion that my syllabus modeled the hallmark features of literary texts, as described by Landy, Iser, Anderson, and even Nabokov himself (with a good deal of ToM activity operating, besides, in my attempts to gauge my students' responses to the material and the students' attempts to infer my expectations). That is to say, I discovered that, somewhat inadvertently, I had devised what might be called a lyric syllabus. While I knew that my course would confront my students with problems rather than supply them with answers, I wasn't aware that the course could, in this way, be said to mimic the

notional pointlessness—I prefer *artful silence*—of literature. And the syllabus itself, I realized, could be conceived of as an intellectual arena with its own kind of *virtuality*: a liminal space that depended, for its efficacy and its existence, upon the students’ intellectual labor.

The latter point is not unique to the lyric syllabus. Rather, Iser’s notion of virtuality provides us with an excellent model of the instructional compact made in every classroom, all of which instantiate a virtual interface of the curriculum (the syllabus) and the student. Establishing this connection between these disparate intellectual spheres might do little to alter the practice of either; however, it does help to reaffirm the special closeness of the bond between the solitary act of literary reading and the larger mission of higher education. Moreover, as Iser elaborates on the nature of this textual virtuality, he hints at a category error lurking in the premises of cognitive criticism. Toward the end of his essay, Iser cites Georges Poulet’s “Phenomenology of Reading,” in which Poulet offers a radical proposition: “so long as it is animated by this vital inbreathing inspired by the act of reading, a work of literature becomes (at the expense of the reader whose own life it suspends) a sort of human being, <...> a mind conscious of itself and constituting itself in me as the subject of its own objects” (qtd. in Iser 298). Iser balks somewhat at the mysticism in Poulet’s theory: he writes, “Even though it is difficult to follow such a substantialist conception of the consciousness that constitutes itself in the literary work, there are, nevertheless, certain points in Poulet’s argument that are worth holding onto” (298). However, as Iser proceeds to modify Poulet’s contention “along different lines” (298)—the reader’s subjectivity isn’t eclipsed entirely—he never fully dismantles Poulet’s vision of the literary text as a domain of immanent or latent consciousness, distinct and separate from that of the text’s author. And here, Iser, with a boost from Poulet, supplies, in theory at least, a corrective to the cognitive critics’ insistence on the importance of mind-reading in our interaction with fictional characters. If good readers attempt to peer into alien consciousnesses and engage in mind-reading, the text itself might be the consciousness that they seek to decipher.¹³

Poulet arrives at his vision of the text-as-consciousness through a simple process of deduction: the reader is undeniably thinking the “thoughts of another” (Poulet 55), but the

¹³ The pedagogical analogue might clarify further: in a classroom, students and teachers might engage in mind-reading, as is typical of any social situation, but the objective of the class lies elsewhere. Literal mind-reading, while an important precondition, functions as a footnote or an aside in the class’ progress through the curriculum.

writer's biography fails to coincide with or otherwise explain the totality of that "other" who is "thinking" in the reader (58). Therefore, the text can be said to possess the properties of a singular and migratory consciousness. It does sound a bit mystical, almost like spirit possession¹⁴; however, Iser's essay itself corroborates, albeit indirectly, Poulet's vision as Iser discusses another property of the reading process: namely, its recursivity. Iser writes, "the activity of reading can be characterized as a sort of kaleidoscope of perspectives, preintentions, recollections" (284). For Iser, the reader's mind is continuously alternating between "anticipation and retrospection" (285). Recurrent patterns in art—of images and motifs—are obvious markers of this recursivity, but for Iser, this back-and-forth motion is virtually ubiquitous in a literary text. This intrinsic recursivity gives literary works their dynamic and kinetic quality, like an immanent capacity for animation, what we might call intelligent design. And because the possible triggers for this recursivity, the potential connections to be made, are variable, the text seems not fixed, but mobile, sort of breathing, seething with latent sentience, rich in implication and signification, in this sense *alive*. Nabokov's own fiction epitomizes this kind of artistic involution, so perhaps it's no surprise that his Humbert encroaches on Poulet's "substantialist" hypothesis when he sketches a "theory of perceptual time, based on the circulation of the blood and conceptually depending [...] on the mind's being conscious not only of matter but also of its own self, thus creating a continuous spanning of two points (the storable future and the stored past)" (*Annotated Lolita* 260). What Humbert posits as a theory of pantemporal human consciousness in fact serves to describe the novel's artifice, with its circulatory system of motifs and images and its Iserian interplay of anticipation and retrospection—which is to say that the novel embodies the structure of that theoretical consciousness. As *Lolita* helps to concretize Poulet's abstract vision, the latter seems less outlandish and heretical and more like a literal extension of a critical commonplace concerning the "self-consciousness" of literary texts. In any case, the least that we might say about the perception of such recurrences is that it makes an essential contribution to the aesthetic experience, the sensation of confronting something beautiful.

¹⁴ In an essay on "The Vane Sisters," Nabokov's haunted text, Zoran Kuzmanovich writes that "reading [for Poulet] is very much like one of those rarely realized telepathic conditions" (301). Elsewhere, Kuzmanovich captures the uncanny quality, "the strangeness of the act" (288), when he writes, "every ghost story is on one level an allegory of reading" (288).

This recursive property of literary reading also found its analogue in my course syllabus, which yielded surprising harmonies and symmetries, mostly unplanned, in the sequencing of the readings. For example, in the eighth week of class, we read a pedagogically minded essay by Ann-Marie Carusi on the relative merits of digital and print literacy; for the latter, Carusi drew heavily on the article by Iser that we had read a month earlier. Similarly, Nabokov's lectures, de Botton's chapters, selections from Leving's and Zunshine's books were distributed like leitmotifs across the class calendar. In the last novel that we read, *Invitation to a Beheading*, the action gradually converges on matters of both chess (as the condemned Cincinnatus plays against the executioner Pierre (144-46)) and Lepidoptera (as a fugitive moth in Cincinnatus' cell foreshadows, with the invisibility cloak of its camouflage, the prisoner's own miraculous disappearance (203-04)); and thus, the last of our literary readings pointed recursively to the first of our essay assignments. These recurrences were not merely inert and cosmetic; rather, the readings were continuously engaged in meaningful conversation, the writers echoing and just as often challenging each other's premises and conclusions. Like the readers of literary texts, per Iser's discussion, my students experienced a continual modification in their horizons of expectation, and they received frequent prods to recollect and revise their understanding of the ground already covered. And in this way, too, the syllabus echoed the subversion of linear temporality that is encoded in literary texts.

My favorite of these curricular correspondences derived from the placement of Leona Toker's "Signs and Symbols' In and Out of Contexts" as our final selection from Leving's *Anatomy of a Short Story*. In that essay, Toker attempts to synthesize a metafictionally oriented, referential-maniac reading of the story with a more emotional and humane interpretive approach. Initially, I had assigned Toker's essay to this late slot in the class calendar for purely rhetorical reasons; her essay supplies an admirable model for research-assisted writing, and it interweaves skillfully primary and secondary sources, Nabokovian novels as well as short stories. The main thrust of Toker's argument also reveals a neatly bifurcated structure, as she shifts from one type of reading to the other, the metafictional to the emotional, that might have stimulated my students' own thinking about organizational matters. I had expected that my students might benefit from a review of these essay-writing fundamentals as the deadline approached for their final papers.

In practice, however, the substance of Toker’s argument proved to be relevant, *resonant*, in a way that I hadn’t anticipated. Early in her essay, Toker considers the cerebral, metafictional view of the story: “the death of the character <...> may be brought about not by a chain of causes and consequences in the plot but by a structural pattern, by the presence of a slot for the motif of death in a chain of homogeneous recurrences” (206). Here, she seems attuned to approaches that would be favored by Landy and Iser, with an eye to the intellectual challenges of Nabokovian fiction. But later, her observation of the interaction between the story’s husband and wife would surely delight Lisa Zunshine: “the ‘quick smile’ (A14: 182) of her husband,” Toker notes in an access of ToM faculties, “expresses his sympathy, relief, and his awareness of the cause of her fright” (208). And by the end of her essay, after noting the evidence of simple human inconvenience and grief in the story’s details, when Toker writes, “For Nabokov, the fragment of the divine within every human being belongs not only to the transcendent dimension but also to this very real world of ours” (214), her eloquence has some affinities with the existential reassurances of Alain de Botton. Toker’s essay synthesized not only readings of “Signs and Symbols,” but also the vertices of our course inquiry. And when she writes of the deranged boy’s predicament, “The young man’s tragedy is that in his ‘sullen’ and ‘confused’ (A10:30) detachment he makes himself inaccessible to his parents’ love” (214), she might have reminded the students of something older still in their experience of literature, something that preceded their entrance into the class. The point here is not that Toker’s essay afforded a convenient review or timely demonstration of our interpretive frameworks, but rather that the inadvertent correspondence merely registered, for me at least, as beautiful.

OUTCOMES

Of course, the differences between academic syllabi and fictional narratives are numerous and significant, and even if it is possible for the former genre to mimic defining features of the latter, I don’t know that there is any generalizable lesson to be drawn from the experiment. This lyric syllabus germinated under special conditions, driven largely by the limited and equivocal nature of the material (the one-author study, the trial-and-error advance of cognitive criticism). While Matz and Saeverot envision similar curricular possibilities, this specific lyric syllabus

might be—perhaps must be? perhaps should be?—a singular phenomenon in higher education. The only measures that I have for the course’s efficacy are the students’ evaluations—generally favorable—and the quality of the writing they produced—largely excellent, often astonishing. However, the educational outcomes were not necessarily grander or more uniform in this class than in any other. Predictably, the students left the course differently inclined with regard to both the merits of Nabokov’s fiction and the promise of cognitive criticism. And they left the course, as they entered it, with varying proficiencies as academic writers, having variously mastered the discursive capabilities encoded in our writing assignments. To the extent that those papers were successful, the course might be said to offer novel reinforcement for an educational truism: that knowledge is something to be created, through active, participatory reading, not passively consumed.

If there is anything uniquely advantageous about the lyricism in this lyric syllabus, it might be that the students received an intimate experience—concrete and immediate, bearing directly on their lives—of the purposive “pointlessness” traditionally associated with literary reading. Whether such exposure equips students with more flexible thinking about the notion of utility, and thus makes them more conscientious participants in a capitalist democracy, or whether it reorients their assumptions about the nature of an undergraduate education, is, in either case, hard to say. Perhaps it does both, unevenly. But as the class design visits upon students this artistic principle—call it an epistemological dislocation—it does have the advantage of clarifying exactly what the “futility of literary reading” entails, tempering somewhat the overstatement inherent in such a claim. That is, while our class did not supply students with many fixed truths, they did acquire some factual knowledge about Nabokov’s fiction (his favored literary devices, his tampering with time schemes), human cognition (the suite of ToM faculties, the difference between semantic and episodic memory, the brain activity associated with literary reading), academic rhetoric (how to formulate a thesis, organize a paragraph, integrate evidence, use a semicolon), the composition of chess problems, local birds and butterflies. However, these tangible academic gains, measured against the systemic frustrations in our methods and material, amounted to not a lot. Perhaps the collision of foci in the course—Nabokov, cognition, rhetoric—diffused our attentions, led us to concentrate on intersections among them, rather than emphasizing each for its own sake, in its own right; thus, the students’ experience of each of

them might have seemed like glancing contact, perhaps negligible. This was my sense of the course.

Even so, these perhaps modest intellectual gains approximate the analogous gains—the point, the utility—of any literary text. *Invitation to a Beheading* might be read, variously or concurrently, as an indictment of a totalitarian and conformist society, as a primer in literary style, as an allegory of the individual consciousness confronting its mortality, as an educative parody of familial relations, as a test of inferential reasoning or ToM facility. The list here is almost endlessly extendable, each item itself admitting scores of differing emphases and conclusions. Clearly, it's possible to discover and attribute a “point” to literary reading, but the ramifying possibilities of pointedness are so numerous as to be beyond saying, ineffable, none of them finally adequate on its own, none of them accounting for the formal necessity in the design that radically vitiates and, for some of us, nullifies all of those gestures at external utility.¹⁵ *Pointlessness, futility*: I see these familiar descriptors of literary art as synonymous with, not antonyms of, terms like *plenitude* and *inexhaustibility*. Perhaps a lyric syllabus captures better than a “prosaic” syllabus this Tantalean elasticity of literary reading.

Though the results of this curricular experiment are in many ways equivocal, what my students accomplished was no small feat. The class was nothing more and nothing less than an elaborate gymnasium for the mind: at once a performative hiatus in curricular linearity and a simple, even humble, occasion for students to produce brilliant work. That the class design made such resplendent work possible doubly confirms, for me at least, the supreme value of literary reading. But even so—and here I need a transition that would indicate a palindrome of thought—in the end the only thing that seemed of *enduring* value, the only works inscribed with “the secret of durable pigments” (Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita* 309)—and this includes my class notes, my students' papers, and everything we read, up to and including the syllabus—the only texts that

¹⁵ Landy is surely right to insist that formal invention trumps any ethically didactic intent in a literary work; however, he proceeds to conscript form into a different kind of didactic service, a fostering of special capabilities. My lyric syllabus works in the same way, directing attention away from fixed truths and toward process, intellectual procedure, the mastery of the “forms” of critical thought. When factual content is displaced or suppressed, such a formative agenda serves as the pedagogical warrant for the course, something indispensable in the context of higher education, but maybe only there. Beyond the walls of the academy, literature might do a good deal more, or less, than develop intellectual capabilities. Further, the perhaps inessential lyricism in the lyric syllabus (see, for example, the harmonic placement of Toker's essay in the class schedule) quietly suggests, as a counterpoint to Landy, that the beauty of form might be stubbornly superfluous.

seemed vested with permanence were authored by Nabokov. Call it an accidental consequence of an experimental syllabus.

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