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A SHORT STUDY OF VLADIMIR NABOKOV’S LITERARY THEORIES
by
Lawrence Hansen

Of all the reasons a student of literature might have for exploring the critical thoughts of a particular literary figure, a chance mention of that figure by the principal conductor of the Metropolitan Opera should probably not rank very high. Yet it was just such a passing remark made by James Levine in an interview that led me, when I saw Vladimir Nabokov’s name in an impressive list of literary theorists, to choose Nabokov as the subject of further study. As it turned out, Maestro Levine’s excellent artistic sense in musical matters carries over to literature, for Nabokov, in his Lectures on Literature, presents some novel and individual ideas, along with a few that are not quite unique but could perhaps best be described as ones that oft were expressed but never so well said, to paraphrase Pope (and perhaps re-arrange his meaning). Actually, the Lectures on Literature were never meant to be a complete, concise manifesto of literary theory, but were really compiled for publication after Nabokov’s death and derived from his extensive notes for lectures delivered while he was teaching at Wellesley and Cornell in the 1940s and ’50s. Since he wrote out his lectures almost verbatim before delivering them, one should not fear that excessive liberties had to be taken by the editor, although one should keep in mind that these lectures were geared for college juniors and not for professional academics. As a result, their scope is not as rigorous as some theorists’ work might be. Bearing these thoughts in mind, we now should take a close look at some of Nabokov’s ideas to see what they hold and if they might still be of use in the study of literature.

Although Nabokov’s approach to studying literature broadly followed that of the New Critics, he was not a partisan of critical schools or movements. He didn’t believe literature was meant to be a vehicle for transmitting indictments or lightly concealed analyses of society or politics and was unabashedly scornful of those who did. What Nabokov feared in critical approaches that did not put the literature itself - in itself - first and foremost was the danger of denying literature its special place as a unique endeavour of its own. Criticism from a political or socio-economic point of view seemed to miss something, some part of the essence of art that makes it an exciting and active experience to which people keep returning for enjoyment, even if they don’t know exactly why. He was a radical in the sense that, in a time when the study of literature was beginning to try to make itself more “scientific” in approach, to remove the mystery surrounding it, he continued to see a marked difference between the everyday ordinary world and art. Art is a separate world related to and derived from the empirical world, but altered, colored, and reorganized by the prism of the artist’s mind. It does not simply present a mirror image of the outside world. John Updike, in his Introduction to Lectures on Literature, says:
He asked, then, of his own art and the art of others a something extra - a flourish of mimetic magic or deceptive doubleness - that was supernatural and surreal in the root sense of these degraded words. Where there was not this shimmer of the gratuitous, of the superhuman and nonutilitarian, he turned harshly impatient, in terms that imply a lack of feature, a blankness peculiar to the inanimate....*

Despite his concentration on the importance of the literary text itself, Nabokov, unlike many modern critics, was also greatly concerned with the roles of the writer and the reader.

Like the New Critics, Nabokov believed that a close reading to gain a basic understanding of the actual words - what they meant and how they fit together - was the only way to take the important first steps toward getting to understand a piece of literature. He wanted to discover and display how literary masterpieces worked, how they were put together, and how they touched the reader's understanding. For Nabokov, the study of a work's details - each little component part - was vitally important, along with explaining the physical setting of the story and appearance of its characters, without the understanding of which the reader could never fully grasp the work and derive the full excitement and thrill it could provide. A good reader, he said, has to pay strict attention to the details, to "notice and fondle" them. Generalizations must be made after examining the details because if one starts out with a generalization, a specific set of preconceptions, one will end up missing the whole point of the work (or most of it), which is unfair to the author and makes one's reading of the work a wasted exercise. "There is nothing wrong about the moonshine of generalization when it comes after the sunny trifles of the book have been lovingly collected" (1). A work of art is the creation of an entirely new world; one has to study it as an isolated whole of its own, on its own terms, without reference to pre-existing works (very much a New Critical approach here). After it has been closely studied and understood on its own terms, then one can explore its relations to other works and other areas of knowledge.

Like T. S. Eliot, Nabokov insisted (probably for the benefit of his students) that literature is not the place to learn facts, that works of literature are not historical chronicles that give descriptions of ordinary, every-day life in a particular period. True literature is never simply a picture postcard sent to us from the age or society from which it comes. But at the same time the raw materials of artistic creations - the source of an artist's inspiration, so to speak (more on that later) - is that everyday world of physical, technical, physiological, empirical events. For the artists, they are not commonplace "borrowed from the circulating library of public truths," but events which he sees in a unique, totally novel and individual, highly idiosyncratic way. He is able to express his impressions and feelings in a distinctive and exceptional manner so as to let the ordinary individual, the reader, share in the excitement of his discoveries. Nabokov's views here and elsewhere are often rather in the vein of many nineteenth-century critics, although more concisely presented, and would probably be summarily dismissed as romantic nonsense and not a valid area of speculation by more esoteric modern critics like Northrop Frye, Terry Eagleton, and the like ("Terry and the Pirates," as

I have taken to calling them). However, Nabokov’s approach is so far removed from theirs that the task of indicating every little point of disagreement is scarcely worth the trouble. Minor authors of more pedestrian capabilities settle for “ornamentation of the commonplace” as their milieu. They don’t interpret the world in a new way, but rather they merely borrow the worn cliches and hackneyed conventions of pulp fiction. These writers have a wide appeal to poor readers who like to see their own limited, trite notions and stock aphorisms comfortingly repeated and reinforced, perhaps even with some considerable surface eloquence. I suppose a good example of this love of banality can be seen in the plots and characters of most popular television programs whose main purpose is to continually present the same dull, stereo-typical characters and situations in slightly altered settings. On the other hand, a television program with a truly original approach rarely seems to acquire much of an audience and survive the ratings battle. (Nabokov doesn’t really spend any time discussing the question of how to define “great” literature or even literature itself. Presumably the good reader should be perfectly able to discover great literature on his own by developing some artistic sensibility or taste, and the worthwhile works are those that withstand the repeated examinations of many good readers).

A good author, then, sees the world as a potential source of fictions, but in the real world events occur in a chaotic, haphazard manner - they just happen. The artist takes those chaotic events and orders them, classifies them, and reorganizes them into a whole which can be apprehended and understood. It is this selective reconstruction of the confused constituent parts of reality that is the artist’s job: the placing of ideas and emotions into an order - not necessarily a neat, classical sense of order, but rather simply some definition of the boundaries of the collection - in which they can be unpacked and experienced. This touches upon a worry I have long harbored about so-called stream of consciousness writing which seems to me to be an abdication of the writer’s responsibility to take a jumbled set of sense perceptions and cognitive components and present them in some order that is accessible to another person. To put ideas down on a piece of paper in the same chaotic state they possess in one’s mind seems to be the exact opposite of the purpose of writing - any writing. But I am digressing while the subject at hand begs to be continued.

For Nabokov, a “good” reader is not somebody who belongs to a book club (i.e., lets somebody else decide for him what is worth reading), who identifies himself with the hero or heroine of the work, who is concerned only with socio-economic interpretations of a book, who demands only action and dialogue, who prefers to see a book as a movie (i.e., is too lazy to exercise his mind in the task of reading), or who is a prospective author hunting for good ideas or a style to borrow. A good reader is somebody with an imagination, a memory, a dictionary, and some artistic sense (presumably a receptiveness to new works and a desire for more than pedestrian gratification). Nabokov is said to have been very pleased by a student who said he took his course because he liked to read stories. In other words, a good reader is the whole person with an open mind and a desire to experience and grasp new works - new worlds. As a whole person, his social and political views are part of him - one can never be completely divorced from individual parts of one’s world-view - but they should not be in the driver’s seat of his literary inquiry. Unlike Eagleton, who would have us believe man is entirely a zoon politikon, Nabokov insists there is more to him, a separate part that is addressed by works of art.
For Nabokov the truly good, active, creative reader is a “rereader.” One cannot fully understand a book by reading it once; one misses too much of deeper significance because one is too concerned with the mechanics of the physical act of reading, moving one’s eyes, running to the dictionary, and constructing pictures of the setting and the characters in one’s mind’s eye.

When we read a book for the first time, the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, this stands between us and artistic appreciation... In reading a book, we must have time to acquaint ourselves with it... a book of fiction appeals first of all to the mind. The mind, the brain, the top of the tingling spine, is, or should be, the only instrument used upon a book. (3-4)

It is not so hard to find some corroborative evidence: I find that after reading a book (or a poem or a play) once, I don’t really remember much of it beyond some incomplete snatches of plot or theme; the act of reading remains an essentially cognitive task. However, on successive readings the dormant synapses in the brain go to work and supply the previously attained mechanical understanding so that one can really begin to concentrate on enjoying and probing the depths of the work (hence, Nabokov’s insistence that a good reader have a memory). As a result, in being an English literature major in college, one is not involved in a complete or even partial study of literature as a whole, but rather a mere beginning, an introduction to as much literature as possible to make one’s operating level skills as strong as possible. Later on, in subsequent years, the real reading and enjoyment of many of the works one studied can begin.

Another point that emphasizes the importance of rereading is that one can’t have a cogent, credible opinion of a work of art one has experienced only once. In fact it often happens that the works one comes to enjoy most were the very works that one didn’t care for much at first because of the difficulties in making one’s way through the very complexities that later make the work so attractive. I can remember that many of the pieces of music I most cherish now were the ones I utterly detested on first hearing, like Wagner’s Parsifal, Berlioz’s Damnation of Faust, or Mahler’s Fifth; and it was the same with literature—a poem to which I paid little attention in freshman English suddenly became very impressive a couple of years later (notwithstanding repeated admonitions from persons in authority that I was supposed to like it!).

A truly outstanding book by a master artist is created with imagination, Nabokov tells us, and in order to get from the book what it has to offer, the reader must employ his imagination in reading (or rereading) it. The good writer evokes in the reader (provided he is good) the same emotions and sensations of the subconscious that he felt. The written word becomes a medium for translating experience, sensual as well as intellectual, in the same way a digital audio recording machine preserves and reproduces sounds.

Nabokov, echoing I. A. Richards, describes two kinds of imagination a reader may have. The first is the “lowly kind,” that of Richards’ “mnemonic irrelevancies,” in which simple emotions of a personal nature are evoked in the reader. He is reminded of something that has happened to him in the past, a place he has been, or a person he has known, and this nos-
The alictic experience is what he enjoys from the work. Or even worse, he can identify himself with a character in the work, making it a mere vehicle for narcissistic enjoyment.

The correct approach for the reader is to search for his enjoyment in exercising “impersonal imagination” and deriving “artistic delight.” The work should be at the center of his enjoyment, not his own self.

We ought to remain a little aloof and take pleasure in aloofness while at the same time we keenly enjoy - passionately enjoy, enjoy with ears and shivers - the inner weave of a given masterpiece. To be quite objective in these matters is of course impossible. Everything that is worthwhile is to some extent subjective. (4)

There should be a balance between the reader’s mind and the author’s mind, neither dominating the situation completely - an intense interaction in which each takes equal part. By maintaining a slight distance one is able to imagine the physical settings of the work and grasp its emotional and intellectual import, but the imagination should be restrained from running away with the reader. The best temperament for a good reader, Nabokov says, is a combination of the scientific and artistic, one counterbalancing the other and neither dominating his approach to the work. By way of analogy I am reminded of the brilliant performances, both technically and emotionally, Arturo Toscanini could create by demanding from his players both exemplary technical precision and skill and that they play with “blood” and “fire.” Nabokov calls for a similar balance of analytic objectivity and passionate commitment from readers. Reading literature becomes an experience of the whole person - the sensual and the emotional, as well as the ratiocinative and intellectual, part.

Literature for Nabokov may be a metamorphosis or synthesis of elements of reality, but it is also still a fabrication, an invention, of the human imagination. “Between the wolf in the tall grass and the wolf in the tall story there is a shimmering go-between. That go-between, that prism, is the art of literature” (5). A major writer is a combination of a story-teller, a teacher, and an enchanter - we are partially back to the old “delight and instruct” idea here - but it is his ability to be the latter effectively, that makes him a major writer.

...it is here that we come to the really exciting part when we try to grasp the individual magic of his genius and to study the style, the imagery, the pattern of his novels or poems.... It seems to me that a good formula to test the quality of a novel is, in the long run, a merging of the precision of poetry and the intuition of science. In order to bask in that magic a wise reader reads the book of genius not with his heart, not so much with his brain, but with his spine. It is there that occurs the telltale tingle even though we must keep a little aloof, a little detached while reading. (5-6)

(One should note how he re-iterates his belief in the integrated double necessity of a scientific and artistic balance of temperament, by switching around the adjectives in the “precision of poetry and the intuition of science.”) His “tingle” of the spine is, I think, more than just an assertion of the notion that a great work of art is one that makes the hair on the
back of one’s neck stand on end while shaving, or something like that. It is an attempt to articulate the sense of physical, autonomic, mental, and emotional arousal that results from one’s being fully attuned to a work of art, the senses and sensibilities stimulated and excited.

“We can take the story apart, we can find out how the bits fit,” Nabokov says, how one part of the pattern responds to the other; but you have to have in you some cell, some germ that will vibrate in answer to the sensations that you can neither define, nor dismiss. \textit{Beauty plus pity} - that is the closest we can get to a definition of art. Where there is beauty there is pity for the simple reason that beauty must die: beauty always dies, the manner dies with the matter, the world dies with the individual. If Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” strikes anyone as something more than an entomological fantasy, then I congratulate him on having joined the ranks of good and great readers. (251)

We seem to be wandering into Romantic pastures again: affirming that much of the impact and the source of enjoyment in art is the pathos evoked by perceiving beauty and knowing it is mortal and mutable; and that there is a mysterious mechanism, an agent all its own, that art sets off within each of us. I suppose I am committing a terrible academic crime by countenancing these outrageously out-dated notions. But Nabokov has stated an argument that just won’t die, despite the re-impressive rhetoric of modern critics: that art cannot be dissected, picked apart, probed, re-constructed, collated, categorized, theorized, journalized, sorted, shuffled, jargonized, and parcelled out in duplicate and triplicate word-processed reports that explain and illuminate its every aspect, even the most shadowy and recalcitrant ones. I am reminded of a class of high school seniors, most of them destined for careers in technical fields, who became very vexed when they were told that there simply was no exact date marking the beginning of a particular literary period. Art must, after all, be a dreadful irritation to completely literal minds who want everything neatly pigeon-holed and categorized with nary a loose thread or ambiguity. Sometimes one \textit{does} wonder if the various “schools” of literary criticism have forgotten the lowly literature which they are supposed to study - and without which they would be seriously unemployed - and if these schools have not been partially peopled by refugees from a technocratic world who would benefit from Nabokov’s insistence upon retaining a little \textit{artistic} sense in the study of literature. “...Art and thought, manner and matter, are inseparable....” (252)

Not surprisingly, Nabokov was much opposed to the Freudian approach to studying literature - Freudian psychoanalysis was designed for studying the minds of living human beings, not works of art. Furthermore, he was chary of the symbolic approach - symbol hunters can too easily get carried away:

I am very careful not to overwork the significance of symbols, for once you detach a symbol from the artistic core of the book, you lose all sense of enjoyment. The reason is that there are artistic symbols and there are trite, artificial, or even imbecile symbols. You will find a number of such inept symbols in the psychoanalytic and mythological approach to Kafka’s work, in the fashionable mixture of
sex and myth that is so appealing to mediocre minds. In other words, symbols may be original, and symbols may be stupid and trite. And the abstract symbolic value of an artistic achievement should never prevail over its beautiful, burning life.

He did not deny that symbolism was a common, even effective, literary device, but he felt that it could often be of merely aesthetic, decorative, or logical significance. It is one of the details - and knowing the details is important - but one should not get so bogged down with it that one forgets the work of art as a whole, *qua* work of art.

While art for Nabokov may be a world separate and distinct from the “real” world, the artist cannot afford to be so isolated. He has to mix with the crowd and interact with his fellow men. How could one create a unique, separate artistic world if one didn’t know the one with which it is meant to contrast? How could one probe the depths of human nature if one didn’t know any humans? At the same time the artist needs a little distance:

But taken all in all, I should still recommend, not as a writer’s prison but merely as a fixed address, the much abused ivory tower, provided of course it has a telephone and an elevator just in case one might like to dash down to buy the evening paper or have a friend come up for a game of chess, the latter being somehow suggested by the form and texture of one’s abode.... But before building oneself an ivory tower one must take the unavoidable trouble of killing quite a few elephants. (371-72)

The first elephant to eliminate is *commonsense*.

Like Eliot, Nabokov sees commonsense as just that - sense made common, a set of trite, banal, ordinary cliches and stock responses, institutionalized errors, mediocrity and stupidity used as a means of bludgeoning into submission or conformity any person or idea that is new, different, or out of the ordinary. Commonsense reduces everything to a low “common” denominator and crushes innovation, originality and invention.

It is instructive to think that there is not a single person in this room, or for that matter in any room in the world, who at some nicely chosen point in historical time-space would not be put to death there and then, here and now, by a commonsensical majority in righteous rage. The color of one’s creed, necktie, eyes, thoughts, manners, speech is sure to meet somewhere in time or space with a fatal objection from a mob that hates that particular tone. And the more brilliant, the more unusual the man, the nearer he is to the stake. *Stranger* always rhymes with *danger*. (372)

An appeal to commonsense, then, can be an appeal to not thinking for oneself and surrendering oneself to the flow of the mob’s ideas, to a set of preconceived notions emerging as reflex action response to a situation.
This defiance of old commonsense is not presented just for its shock-value - Nabokov is deadly serious here on an ethical level. "Commonsense is fundamentally immoral, for the natural morals of mankind are as irrational as the magic rites that they evolved since the immemorial dimness of time" (372). Part of the defeat of commonsense for the artist is maintaining the seemingly irrational belief in the goodness of mankind in defiance of the dismal facts of history. A fundamental faith in the goodness of the world is a vital tool in the artist’s bag of tricks:

This means that goodness becomes a central and tangible part of one’s world, which world at first sight seems hard to identify with the modern one of newspaper editors and other bright pessimists, who will tell you that it is, mildly speaking, illogical to applaud the supremacy of good at a time when something called the police state, or communism, is trying to turn the world into five million square miles of terror, stupidity, and barbed wire. (373)

Is this all just florid prose, or does he make a point?

Goodness continues to be a legitimate force in our world simply because the belief in it somehow manages to be kept alive by somebody, somewhere, even under the most adverse conditions. The mere fact that, despite the worst horrors the twentieth-century world can summon up, goodness cannot be exterminated completely would appear to make it a powerful force, a standard by which the worst agents of evil are still judged. Are real-world examples so hard to find? Jacobo Timerman, in his book *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*, which made some waves a few years back, describes his personal ordeal and that of Argentina as a whole during the Argentine military’s reign of terror from 1976 to 1980. Timerman, a newspaper publisher, had consistently and vocally defied the military leadership and exposed its atrocities - and those of the opposition terrorist organizations - by naming names of both victims and perpetrators, and publishing the truth about them. Friends urged Timerman to do what everybody else did to survive - to stop writing inflammatory articles, stop irritating the authorities, leave the country until things cooled off - but he refused until he was arrested, and suffered two-and-a-half years of torture and imprisonment. Timerman himself cannot completely explain why he did what he did - the commonsense of the survival instinct certainly advised against it - except that it was the right thing to do and he had to do it.

According to Nabokov, the artist behaves in much the same way, heeding the dictates of "irrational and divine standards," placing the details of the world above the generalities, valuing the parts in themselves above the whole. The artist has the seemingly irrational ability to recognize and be fascinated by the trivial things that the rest of us simply pass up. His behavior is governed by an urge that operates beyond the calculations of the rational mind.

The artist is a danger to evil because, since he is so attuned to assimilating detail and the components of structure, he can easily discover and point out the cracks in the foundation, the inconsistencies in the facade. In portraying evil he inadvertently points up its absurdity, stupidity, and lack of imagination. He can portray Hannah Arendt’s “banality of evil.” (Of
course, moralistic denunciation of evil should not be, and is not, the main purpose of a great artist). In its banality, the totalitarian mind, on the other hand, can't see the world from anybody else's point of view—somebody once said that totalitarian governments are run by their countries' "D" students. Anything such a mind encounters must meet its unrealistic picture of the world, and if the nonconforming element doesn't fit, it is forced or exterminated through violence, terror, and concentration camps. The totalitarian mind can't see the grey areas and ambivalences in anything—its perception of the world is a black-and-white picture with no middle ground. The result, Nabokov tells us, is that the Russian poet who smiled through the ordeals of interrogation, torture and imprisonment during the Revolution had to be executed because his behavior couldn't be explained. The very ambiguities, multiplicities, and alternate views of reality that are part and parcel of literature make it a serious worry to the totalitarians: that is why during totalitarian repression, the artists are among the first up against the wall to be shot.

In Nabokov's view, then, madness is really "commonsense" run awry. Great artists are not close to madmen, but quite the opposite, they possess the "greatest sanity of spirit." There is a difference between inspiration and obsession. The artist dissociates parts of the world, true, but he puts them back together into an artistic whole. He is aware that he is moving toward a specific final goal. Inspiration occurs in an instant where - touched off by an event either inside him or from without - the artist is flooded by a whole pack of sense perceptions and emotional and mental associations that suddenly integrate themselves into a future work of art, complete in every detail of architecture and plan. The whole work of art, an artistic universe, pops into the artist's mind in that flash, even if he himself isn't fully aware of it. One might remember Richard Wagner's description of how he stepped out onto his balcony one evening and saw a marvelous sunset over the Rhine (or was it Lake Lucerne?), which inspired him to write the prelude to Die Meistersinger, he claimed, exactly as it appears in its final form.

The actual writing of the book, Nabokov continues, is a cooler, calmer task, in which what is in the artist's mind is sorted out and written down (something like Michelangelo's claim that the statues he carved were already in the marble and he just let them out). Like Eliot, Nabokov tells us the artist should be "distanced" while executing this task, just like the reader who should remain a little aloof while reading the work. He describes these two stages of creation as vostorg - "rapture" - and vodknovenie - "recapture."

Obviously this is a highly subjective, personal account of the creative act and the nature of the artist - Nabokov is not being very academic here. But he is pointing out that works of art start from ideas whose appearance is largely the result of coincidence and chance, and not from a strict procedure or set of rules. Whether one is willing to believe him is another question, but if nothing else can be gained from this discussion, perhaps Nabokov does present for budding authors one good reason for banishing

...the monster of grim commonsense that is lumbering up the steps to whine that the book is not for the general public, that the book will never, never - And right then, just before it blurs out the word s, e, double-l, false commonsense must be shot dead. (380)
Nabokov concedes that the love of literature is to some degree an acquired taste, but that every person, whatever his particular disposition happens to be - artistic or practical - has some need for something a little removed from the vicissitudes of daily life. Of course, works of art can never directly solve the problems of life: they are not the key to life, the universe, and everything in it. Nabokov echoes Oscar Wilde when he notes that, from a limited utilitarian standpoint, art is really quite useless, even absurd. One can't eat it when one is starving or make money from it (as a rule), or get much practical instruction and direct moral training from it. To some degree, art must exist for art's sake in order to truly be art: “I have tried to teach you to read books for the sake of their form, their visions, their art” (381-82). A “willing suspension of disbelief” would seem to be one of the prerequisites for enjoying and understanding works of art, which is why they do not convincingly lend themselves to purely rational or mechanical systems or analysis.

However, those of us who engage in the study of literature for two years or four years, or an entire lifetime, are not wasting time and energy on a useless but amusing intellectual or subarctic set of exercises. The mind is like a muscle: the workout it gets in stretching and struggling to come to terms with a complex piece of literature, makes it more flexible and fit to deal with some other problem or situation not necessarily involved with literature. The powers of the mind and the imagination (as well as the less abstract capacities of being able to read and express oneself satisfactorily), those highly complex faculties that to a large extent determine how we react to and cope with the rigors and joys of life, are strengthened and expanded by studying literature. We learn

...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)

And that is one of the best explanations I have ever encountered for justifying the study of literature and the existence of art in general.