

Playing for Keeps: Using Nabokov to Teach Composition

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Why Nabokov?

The celebrated novelist, Vladimir Nabokov, a poster-boy for theoretical meditations on anti-realism in postmodern fiction,¹ was known also to the professional world as V. Nabokov, a writer of scientific papers, entomological studies that could straightforwardly address difficult problems of taxonomy while transmitting detailed and unambiguous descriptions and analyses of data. The paradox of the novelist who said he did not believe in an “everyday reality” (*SO* 100-101) sharing mental office space with the naturalist who could fashion propositions like “The simple reality of course is that... are separate species” captures neatly the character of Nabokov’s idiosyncratic challenge to the conventions of the realist novel (“On Some Asiatic Species” 221). Nabokov may question the adequacy of realist epistemology and techniques, but he has little interest in the usual postmodern formalist approaches to dealing with these problems. Ordinary, prosaic reality never gets entirely lost in the funhouse of Nabokov’s fiction; rather, the iteratively mirrored images of the “given world” remain with the reader, “intertwinkling facets” of a grounding presence, threads of the passive warp upon which the author weaves the fabric of a more encompassing reality, the world of the imagination (*SO* 32, *SM* 126). Borrowing a phrase from one of V. Nabokov’s comparative studies of butterfly species, one might observe that

“there seems to exist a curious mimetic affinity” between the two species of fictional reality, the Nabokovian and the conventional (“Lysandra” 266). Though certainly a practitioner of self-conscious metafiction² who “manipulates genres to attack realism” (Stark 87), Nabokov nevertheless stops short of a complete break with the representational mission of the novel, advocating instead “not text but texture...Not flimsy nonsense but a web of sense”—an expansion both of the means of portrayal and of the nature of what can be portrayed (*Pale Fire* 62-63).

The playful stylistic techniques that Nabokov brings to the task of separating the multiplicities³ of the world of the imagination from the univocal realm of pedestrian reality—the distortions, exaggerations, parodies, ironies, antitheses, phrasal tmesis⁴ often associated with images of mirrors, webs, spirals, prisms, refractions of color—act in his fictions as finely-tuned distancing devices, allowing Nabokov to construct the extraordinary out of the raw material of the ordinary, to erect a layered hierarchy of realities founded on mimetic affinities, to create “in the dimensional scale of the world a kind of delicate meeting place between imagination and knowledge, a point arrived at by diminishing large things and enlarging small ones” (*SM* 166-67). It strikes me that it is precisely here, at this point of stylistic contact between the world of imagination and the “given world,” that the teacher of composition can find a way to exploit the symmetries underlying the defamiliarized⁵ world of Nabokovian reality and the world that is represented in academic writing.

If I can show my literature students how Nabokov can take them from familiar representations of experience to representations of less familiar experiences, from a knowledge of the given world to an understanding of the world of the imagination, then, it seems to me, I

ought to be able find some way of showing my composition students how to do it the other way around. I ought to be able to reverse-engineer what I do in my literature classes and come up with a way to use Nabokov's distancing techniques in my composition classes as a means of probing the limitations of familiar models of representation, of helping students come to an understanding of the ways in which too great an adherence to convention can betray the sense of what they hope to convey in their writing.

This experiment in using Nabokov to teach composition adapts some of the methods I described in "In Search of Another Way: Using Proust to Teach Freshman Composition," an earlier investigation of how one can successfully import into the teaching of standard representational writing some of the techniques that are used in the literary representation of a non-standard way of perceiving the world. The similarities and differences of the methodologies described in these two studies reflect related complementarities that I find in my readings of Nabokov and Proust. In their shared post-symbolist concern for the uses of perspective in representing a larger reality, my two authors may be usefully thought of as providing dual solutions to the problem of finding a new way of representing experience, a pairing of alternative approaches to constructing a world of the imagination that defer neither to the worn-out conventions of literary realism nor to the opposing symbolist aesthetic of radically severing the connections between perception and reality. The nature of this pairing of stylistic alternatives can be neatly characterized by a quick comparison of references to painting in Nabokov and Proust. Both authors invoke the naturalist tradition in Netherlandish painting as an important influence in their rethinking of realist conventions. For Proust, the stylistic prototype is Vermeer's *View of Delft*, with its impressionist-like use of "layers of color" to represent a patch of yellow wall

(*Captive*, 244). For Nabokov, the prototype is Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*, with its distorting duplications of reality suggested by the "microcosmic version of a room (with a dorsal view of diminutive people) in that very special and magical small convex mirror" (*Pnin* 97).

In my earlier study I used the techniques of Proust's inwardly circling, self-reflexive scrutiny of the interaction of thought and experience to teach my academic writers how to structure thought in language. Proust views his world of the imagination through the multiplicity of his "other eyes" (*Captive* 343). His is an impressionist's vision of the world, a blurring of sharp-edged distinctions in the service of a closure—an ultimate, unified, focused apprehension. Nabokov, on the other hand, multiplies our visions of the world rather than our means of viewing it. Nabokov constructs his reality outwardly, in an ever-widening arc, at each step fragmenting and thus exposing as "illusions of reality" the univocal distinctions that stand in the way of his progressive fashioning of a "consciousness [that] constitutes and transforms the world, creating new patterns with every stage of awareness" (Bruss 54), a "spiral...uncoiled, unwound,...set free" (*SM* 275).

Nabokov's fragmenting and distorting of conventional reality and the distancing devices that he uses to accomplish his reconfiguration of the given world provide the starting point in my thinking about how I might reverse-engineer his literary agenda and turn the procedure around for my composition students. On a number of occasions, Nabokov speaks of "reality" as "one of the few words that mean nothing without quotes" (*AL* 312, *SO* 94). His remark serves for me—and for my students when I explain to them for the first time my purpose in asking them to imitate Nabokov—as an epigram, a key to epitomizing how we will be working in our exercises and what we can hope to achieve. In this Nabokovian manner of speaking, then, one of my tasks

as a teacher of academic writing is to teach my students how to put the quotes on “reality”—to help them to understand the conventions of the rhetoric of reason, to distinguish between academic writing and personal writing, to know where the lines are expected to be drawn between knowledge and belief. And, most importantly, what I hope to impart to my students is a knowledge of how to negotiate a middle-ground and establish for themselves an empowering, personal voice, how to exchange the “unreality” of the superficial and unconvincing attitude of impersonal expertise that student writers often feel obliged to assume for one of genuine individual authority that comes with the imposition of personal presence (see my *Voicing Reason*).

Another Way: Placing This Study in the Literature/Composition Debate

The often strained conversation between rhetoric and dialectic, between the arts of expression and the arts of thought, is the oldest continuing feud in institutionalized learning. At issue are, and have always been, crucial philosophical and political questions about how we determine what is real and who has the authority to make these determinations.

The divide between those who seek to exclude literature from the composition class and those who advocate its inclusion has been the topic of frequent and continuing discussion among compositionists for years. In “Who Killed Annabel Lee?: Writing About Literature in the Composition Classroom,” Mark Richardson sums up this longstanding debate. Those who oppose writing about literature cite the “tendency of teachers to lecture about the literature rather than to encourage students to work with writing issues;...prefer literary questions to writing questions;...and...fail to prepare students to write in the many other genres they will encounter

in college and in the workplace.” The exclusionists claim that allowing literature into composition studies will transform writing classes into thinly-disguised literature courses, with the instructor’s own predilections encouraging the “authoritarian voice” of literature to stifle the students’ own voices (278).

On the other side of this conflict are those who see the introduction of literary texts in the composition course as an effective means of offering students early exposure to the kinds of “critical thinking and interpretation” skills that they will continue to strengthen and hone throughout their college educations (Richardson 278). David Bartholomae advocates incorporating canonical literature in writing courses as a tool to empower students, to “highlight your [students’] relationship (as a writer) to the past and to the words of others (to history, literature, and culture)” (“Postscript” 291), to give them access to the academic discourse necessary to “invent the university...to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community” (“Inventing” 60). Similarly, Mariolina Salvatori and Patricia Donahue, who argue for the use of difficult texts in beginning courses to provoke student questions and interpretations, to stir “the reader’s incipient awareness of the particular ‘demands’ imposed by the language/structure/style/content of a text” (9), claim that “You improve as a writer by becoming a reflexive and engaged reader of difficult texts” (*Elements* 82). And Peter Elbow, while promoting the use of the students’ own writing as texts in his composition class, acknowledges the “transcendent or magical” quality of literature that is missing from the conventional texts of freshman English (535). Recent CCCC Chairs’ addresses (2004, 2005) have called on composition to “expand its reach, aggrandize and annex other ways of seeing and knowing (including those in imaginative

literature), and regain (or retain) its rightful place as the kernel of the undergraduate experience” (McCrimmon 122).

In thinking about how I might bring my experience as a teacher of literary prose to the standard mission of teaching standard academic writing, I begin by putting the controversies of modern literary theory and composition studies aside temporarily and embrace the usefulness, both for myself as a teacher and for my composition students, of taking a conventional approach to framing an understanding of the opposition of literary and explicitly content-based kinds of writing. Regardless of theoretical school or inclination, any investigation of the nature and soundness of literature’s claim to a distinct and privileged status must inevitably arrive at the question of how different kinds of writing may privilege, in different kinds of ways, the relations between what is said and how it is said, between content and form, matter and manner, between the shaping of meaning and its containment within a rhetorical structure.⁶

As I interpret the intentions and valorizations of my particular institution and my particular department, I take the mission of the composition course or, at least, its first priority, to be the creation of effective college writers. And it is here, at exactly this point of contact where techniques of effective expression must be brought to bear on the “real” content of college writing—“real” as prescribed by the conventions of the rhetoric of knowledge—that literary and academically purposeful writing find a common ground, here that non-realist literature can play an important role in helping student writers distinguish what is “real” from what is not.

The academic community certainly has an obligation to question and examine how the social and intellectual processes that shape what we mean by “college writing” are related to the structure of the writing conventions that we devise for containing this meaning. One of the best

ways of gently introducing these complex issues to students is by giving them hands-on experience in taking apart the rhetorical structure of their own ideas. I like to amuse myself with imagining the paradox of my freshman composition students someday sitting in a senior theory elective addressing weighty ideological and epistemological issues in the rhetoric of knowledge. I hope that some of them will be bold enough to question the very idea of the “reality” of knowledge. I will have done my part, as their composition teacher, in preparing these bold students for their task if I have provided them with a proper knowledge of the standard rhetorical techniques they will need to get the job done properly.

I do not doubt that there is an important place for the more conventional uses of literature in the freshman writing curriculum, but in the composition courses I teach at Brooklyn College, courses designed to give students the tools necessary to become competent academic writers, I have started to use literature in a different way. I have begun to experiment with using excerpts of rhetorically-challenging prose, models taken from the works of masterful writers, for both close reading and imitation. The present study detailing an experiment in assimilating Nabokov into this writing program is an extension, in what I hope will be a new direction, of my earlier exploration of the borderland between literature and composition. As I reported recently (in my study pointedly titled “In Search of Another Way”), I have been using the madeleine episode from Marcel Proust’s *Swann’s Way* for several years as an exercise in close reading that generates a series of ever more elaborated essays modeled on the reading. With an increasing attention to style and its relation to content, students analyzed the Proust piece, looking at rhetorical devices, language, sentence variety, pace and length and the ways in which these stylistic techniques helped convey Proust’s meaning. This careful analysis of the text gave

students practice in unpacking and unraveling prose and, in the process, learning something about the way good prose works.

The close reading and discussion were followed by progressively more extensive drafts of writing, as students used the Proust model to shape their own essays, describing and detailing memories provoked by sensory experiences. This combination of close reading, looking deeply at a text from multiple perspectives, figuring out just what an author is doing in his writing and how he does it, and then applying some of those same rhetorical strategies to their own writing, gave students the chance to play with prose, to sharpen their own analytical writing through immersion in the rhetorical devices that shape and sharpen the prose of acknowledged, skilled practitioners.

Using Nabokov

The choice of Nabokov as the model for a companion exercise to the Proust unit seemed a natural one. The thematic affinities, the shared sense of an “intricate engagement” (Wood 84) with what Nabokov calls “the texture of time” (*Ada* 536), the motif of resurrected memories that collapse linear time, made for a seamless transition from the analysis and imitation of Proust to the Nabokov exercise. The success of their previous contact with challenging prose gave students greater confidence in approaching our next author, for they had learned, I hoped, to distinguish their own difficulties in interpreting the text from the difficulties that are inherent in the text itself. For students who had recently managed, to some extent, to explicate and imitate Proust’s prose, the excerpts from *Speak, Memory* provided a second opportunity to apply analytical and imitative skills in a somewhat familiar context.

But the choice of Nabokov rested on more than the easy transition promised by the imaginative multiplicity and rhetorical density his writings share with Proust's. While, in our move from Proust to Nabokov, we were certainly going to continue our exercises in modeling complex thought by imitating our authors' shaping of their own intricate thematic concerns, gradually shifting our emphasis from the content of our authors' thought to the manner of its expression, our principle objective would be to exploit the ways in which Nabokov's rhetorical strategies differ from Proust's.

The work of both authors shares a style marked by the syntax of the long, sinuous sentence that mimics the movement of thought, the interruptions embedded with the accumulation of detail that delay the ending thought, the surprising pairings of words, the infusion and confusion of sensory memories, the recurrent alliteration and onomatopoeia that bring together disparate forms and contents. While no one would expect students to be able to reproduce Nabokovian or Proustian prose, I have found that students can, to a surprising extent, assimilate to their own composing practices some of the rhetorical devices our authors use to represent their sophisticated worlds of the imagination.

While students come to these Nabokov exercises with a facility gained from their imitations of Proust's prose, Nabokovian imitation presents different kinds of challenges. Proustian prose is itself a response in fiction to the scholarly, non-fiction writing of its time. Though the actual journey might be difficult, the route from Proust's fictional representations of the world to the conventions of academic writing can be relatively easy for the instructor to map. Nabokov, on the other hand, has little straightforward use for the standard academic rhetoric of the "real" world, representing, instead, the patterns of conventionally-structured thought as a web

of illusory constraints, impediments to his construction of a world of greater awareness. Clearly, Nabokov's style and that of Proust make contact in radically opposing ways with the standard techniques of representing reality.

At each stage of our work with Nabokov, we attempt to defragment his broken images, to unroll his convoluted twists, to undo his elaborate defamiliarizations of the "given world," our work taking on the character of playful Humpty-Dumpty exercises in gathering up the pieces that the author has used to fashion his world of the imagination and trying to put "everyday reality" together again. While his use of these distancing strategies is meant to be our central concern in our imitations of Nabokov, there are certainly other important stylistic aspects that students can imitate to their advantage in collateral exercises. There is an extraordinary virtuosity to Nabokov's prose, a virtuosity, of course, that no instructor could expect others to mimic. And there is a linguistic agility that dazzles, that seduces the reader, not easily transferred to student prose. Some of what I hope my students learn from Nabokov's writing is the careful attention to detail, to word choice, the playfulness that can help their academic writing escape from the predictable, the routine. According to Michael Wood, "Nabokov in particular teaches us about particulars, offers to define reality 'as a kind of gradual accumulation of information; and as specialization,'" and I want students to develop a sense of the importance of detail, of particulars. (Wood 10; *Strong Opinions* 10)

Scholarship of sentence-level rhetoric and imitation

But before we look closely at the excerpts from *Speak, Memory* that will serve as models for imitation (see Appendix for texts)—the author's memory of summers at his country home

with his mother (40-44) and “the beauty of intangible property, the unreal estate” (40); the description of his Uncle Ruka (68-73), who belonged to a “world of toys, gay picture books” (68); the closing image (302-310) of the “ungenuinely gigantic, the unrealistically real” funnel of the ship that would carry him to America (309)—we do a variation on an exercise that preceded the Proust unit: sentence-level practice that focuses on expanding sentences by accumulating details in clauses, in modifiers, in parenthetical statements, making stylistic choices that make for a more complicated, intricate, provocative sentence. While some may find this type of exercise outdated and formulaic, there is ample scholarship to support a reintroduction of this approach in the composition class.

Though my work arises from a somewhat different set of concerns and philosophies, it borrows some of the techniques and underlying rationales of the sentence-level practices popular in the 1960s and 1970s. According to Francis Christensen, the art of writing the cumulative sentence pushes students “to level after level, not just two or three, but four, five, or six, even more, as far as the students’ powers of observation will take them,” making them “sentence acrobats, to dazzle by their syntactic dexterity” (285). Practice in composing their own long, intricately-constructed sentences helps students “thread the syntactical mazes of much mature writing,” giving them “insight into that elusive thing we call style” (Christensen 286). The sentence-level exercises we do, largely taken from Williams’ *Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, are meant as complements to student reading and writing, not isolated drills in rhetorical technique. The gradual accumulation of detail that Williams prescribes, the graphic image he gives of the sentence extended through techniques of subordination, repetition, modifiers, help students approach the kinds of sentences we find in the Nabokov excerpts with a greater

awareness both of the multi-layered prose of writers like Proust and Nabokov and of their own prose.

We use the Nabokov excerpts as models for imitation—not as confining formulas for copying style, not as prescriptions for the slavish transcriptions of elements of elegant sentences, but rather as provocations to ways of thinking about the interconnectedness of form and content, as tools that can be manipulated to open up a topic, to make pedestrian prose more meaningful as well as more imaginative. Imitation as a teaching strategy has a long history in modern composition pedagogy. Corbett’s 1971 article, “The Theory and Practice of Imitation in Classical Rhetoric,” advances the argument that imitation allows students to “achieve an awareness of the variety of sentence structure of which the English language is capable” (249). Later, in *Copy and Compose* (1969) and *The New Strategy of Style* (1978), Winston Weathers and Otis Winchester second Corbett’s assertions, considering “originality and individuality” as “outgrowths of a familiarity with originality in the works of others” that “emerge from a knowledge of words, patterns, constructions and procedures that all writers use” (*Copy and Compose* 2). Imitation proponents argued that these techniques caused “students to internalize structures of the piece being imitated,” a process that Corbett regarded as “the key to imitation” (qtd. in Connors 252). In 1977, William Gruber argued that imitation provides students with “the ability to design,” to “shape effectively the thought of a sentence, a paragraph, or an essay (qtd. in Connors 252). Through imitation, through a familiarity with what others have done, students can “engage in the informed processes of choice, which are the wellspring of real creativity” (Connors 252). More recently, Gerald Graff, in *Clueless in Academe*, has advocated providing students with formulas in their writing as a means towards enabling “creativity and complication,” for “If you refuse to

provide such formulas on the grounds that they are too prescriptive or that everything has to come from the students themselves, we just end up hiding the tools of success” (40).

Pedagogic reports of the effectiveness of both sentence combining and imitation exercises in improving student writing have been supported by several studies. The principles behind Christensen’s generative rhetoric were upheld by Lester Faigley’s 1978 empirical research findings of “a measurable qualitative increase in writing skill” and in “syntactic maturity” (Connors 250). The claims of proponents of using classically-based imitation in the writing classroom have been supported by the results of Rosemary Hake and Joseph Williams’ 1977 experiment (Connors 252). Yet, despite these demonstrably positive results, with changing times came changing trends in composition scholarship: a survey by Connors traces the dramatic decline of books and articles about sentence rhetorics from the mid-1980s through the end of the century as, over time, anti-behaviorist, anti-empiricist and anti-formalist attacks weakened the appeal of these once popular, validated approaches (257).

In Class

To smooth the transition from Proust, we look at memory in passages from Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory*, a memoir with a prose style better suited to composition instruction than the style of his novels. Nabokov’s confession, “I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another” (*SM* 139), is not an unfamiliar way of looking at time for students who have read some Proust. Similarly, the resurrection of a long-buried memory, whether emerging from a Proustian cup of tea or a Nabokovian moonlit landscape, a “stereoscopic dreamland” experienced by a

“passportless spy...in his New England snowboots and stormcoat,” is a theme with which students are now acquainted. When Nabokov writes of the New England snow: “All is still, spellbound, enthralled by the moon, fancy’s rear-vision mirror. The snow is real, though, and as I bend to it and scoop up a handful, sixty years crumble to glittering frost-dust between my fingers” (*SM* 99-100), both the image and the theme, the slide from Russian snow to American snow, the dissolving of sixty years in one moment, resonate with students. Similarly evocative is the following excerpt, a memory from age five, when

mooning in my cot after lunch, I used to turn over on my stomach and, carefully, lovingly, hopelessly, in an artificially detailed fashion difficult to reconcile with the ridiculously small number of seasons that had gone to form the inexplicably nostalgic image of “home” (that I had not seen since September 1903), I would draw with my forefinger on my pillow the carriage road, sweeping up to our Vyra house, the stone steps on the right, the carved back of a bench on the left, the alley of oaklings beginning beyond the bushes of honeysuckle, and a newly shed horseshoe, a collector’s item (much bigger and brighter than the rusty ones I used to find on the seashore), shining in the reddish dust of the drive. The recollection of that recollection is sixty years older than the latter, but far less unusual. (*SM* 75-76)

This particular passage is rich ground for parallels to Proust for our discussion of memory and time, and leads neatly to a closer look at the particularities of Nabokov’s style. For when Nabokov writes reflexively of being “richly, serenely aware of [his] own manifold awareness,” he entices students to participate in this awareness, to investigate how he constructs the “manifold” layers of his imagery, how he fashions the multiple meanings of his words.

Following Nabokov's advice to his readers to "notice and fondle details," to revisit a text (an activity in which my students and I routinely engage), for "one cannot *read* a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader" ("Good Readers and Good Writers" 1, 3), we begin our explications of excerpts from *Speak, Memory*. The close attention to style, the "magic key" to literature that Nabokov insists on in his *Lectures on Literature*, to "the manner of the author, his mannerisms, various special tricks," "the kind of imagery, of description" he uses, the way he varies "the rhetorical devices of metaphor and simile and their combinations" (113) serves as a template for our own approach to our readings. Nabokov's scrutinizing attention to the construction of his prose, his "conspicuous construction," as one critic characterized it, has "much to do with the creation of reader-accomplices who will metamorphose through such exercise from being novices to being experts at the art of walking on water, that is, at the art of performing the miracle of language without sinking into this or that message" (Ermarth 335).

Students read the three Nabokov excerpts as homework, keeping a journal of what they find difficult in the texts (see Salvatori and Donahue). Telling students to keep a record of the problems they encounter in their reading conveys the expectation that everyone should have something troubling to report, lessening the sense among students that these texts present challenges for only a few classmates. Pedagogically, this journal-keeping assignment serves as a "reflexive strategy that eventually allows [students] to recognize that what they perceive as 'difficult' is a feature of the text demanding to be critically engaged rather than ignored" (Salvatori, "Conversations" 448). These journal entries, the source for the next class discussion, provoke a sympathetic sharing of reactions to the text.

While this activity certainly fosters a collegial atmosphere in class, for me these journal entries serve mainly as a means of tracking *what* students notice and *when* they notice it in the texts. At first, most students commented on the magic of the vocabulary, the use of unfamiliar words, the unfamiliar pairings of words, the evocative imagery. With more class discussion of the three excerpts, and a growing comfort with Nabokov's striking, sometimes distracting and disorienting verbal agility, students began to get a feel for how these linguistic acrobatics function as devices for privileging style over substance, for questioning the reality of appearances. In their reading journals, some students noted the code-switching between English and Russian in the description of the mother, and then among English, Russian and French in the description of Uncle Ruka, the shifting tenses that dislocate the memory in time, the satirical exaggerations in the description of Uncle Ruka, the parenthetical interruptions.

In class, over several meetings, we look closely at each of the three excerpts, first addressing its overall thematic patterns, then analyzing the way these patterns are represented. Nabokov declared that "All my stories are webs of style...For me "style" is matter. (*Selected Letters*, Oct. 24, 1945). We look at sentence length, variety and pace, at the use of figurative language, of repetition, of word order, of antithesis, of sensory appeal. We look closely at word choice, the way the vocabulary engages the reader with its surprises, inferences, allusions, archaisms, its connections to other parts of the excerpt, as in the author's memories of "the beauty of intangible property, unreal estate" that form his "inheritance," replacing the loss, through confiscation, of the family holdings at Vyra (40). This juxtaposition of words, creating a real, unreal world from an unreal, real world, exemplifies Nabokov's advice to "try to find new

combinations of words (not for the sake of their novelty, but because every person sees things in an individual way and must find his own words for them)” (*Selected Letters*).

In all three excerpts, we discuss the question of the “reality” of what is revealed or withheld, of what ways pairings can be symmetric or oppositional. In the passage describing Uncle Ruka, we look most particularly at distancing devices—what is satirized and how that satire is executed, the subtle hints, highlightings and omissions that structure the irony—paradoxically heightening our awareness of the idiosyncratic reality of this character. In this piece, we notice the antitheses that direct the reader’s attention to an uncle who “led an idle and oddly chaotic life,” to the incongruous pairing of clothes and activities—“pink-coated, he rode to the hounds in England, fur-coated, he attempted to motor from St. Petersburg to Paris, wearing an opera coat, he almost lost his life in an airplane crash on a beach near Bayonne”—the intermingling of French and Russian and English; the series of parenthetical asides providing points of view alternative to those implied in the framing narrative, the father reacting “with quizzical resignation,” “with disapproval,” “with curiosity,” the sweeping portrait of the gentlemen of Uncle Ruka’s father’s generation contained in the concise, parenthetical description: “bear hunting, a private theatre, a few fine Old Masters among a good deal of trash” (72).

In the episode that closes the autobiography, we examine the synaesthesia of the “sea-licked glass,” the alliteration that links the parts of the descriptions of the child kneeling on the beach, enveloped in “a quivering haze of sun against the scintillation of the sea,” contrasted with the “milky blur” that marks the photograph (308), and finally, the sudden sight of the ship’s funnel, noticed but not commented upon by the parents so as not to ruin the surprise of the son.

We closely analyze the last sentence of the book, tracing its development, the accretions and embeddings that act as distancing devices and give the sentence its particular shape and rhythm and sound. We take note of how the appearance of the ship's funnel is withheld until the end of this long, circuitous sentence, acquiring even more force by its delay. According to Boyd, in this closing scene we can find Nabokov's "whole artistic credo," how he "makes us gasp with wonder when we see how real things can be behind all that we take for granted; to impart a sense of the artful, deceptive munificence of life, concealing miracles of generosity behind the everyday" (7).

After close readings of the three excerpts, I asked students to choose one of the three pieces as a model for their own writing. However, the journal writing that accompanied the assignment made it clear that the instructions themselves needed some rethinking and reshaping. What students found particularly difficult, and what became evident upon revisiting the terms of the assignment, was the unnecessary and problematic instruction to limit the imitation exercise to one model. Certainly, the imitative resources in the three excerpts were interrelated as models, and, in the revised exercise, the freedom to merge, overlap and interconnect themes and rhetorical devices taken from all three excerpts helped produce student writing that displayed a broad range of Nabokovian influences.

I asked students to preface the first drafts of their essays with a paragraph specifying how their writing was influenced by their reading of Nabokov, what particular Nabokovian themes or rhetorical techniques they had incorporated into their work. This class meets in a "smart classroom," a room that has technology enabling us to project student work on a large screen. We shared these drafts in class, allowing the students anonymity and withholding their individual

Nabokovian explications. After each reading, the class would respond in both a general and then in a very directed way, focusing on what the audience perceived as Nabokovian characteristics in their classmate's writing. This exercise in critiquing a classmate's prose from the specific perspective of their shared close reading of Nabokov's writing gave students the authority to speak knowingly, to enter the academic discourse with a sense of rightful belonging.

Student Writing

The writing that was generated by this assignment was varied in theme, in tone, in structure and in the degree to which it successfully reflected the spirit of the models. The best of the student writing captured some of the playfulness, the precision, the agility, the distancing and the balance that we had noted in the excerpts. Some students imitated the overall structure of an excerpt, as in the description of Uncle Ruka (a popular choice), others elaborated on a particular detail in a portrait, while still others took more eclectic approaches. Student writing revealed a range of rhetorical devices to enliven prose: for example, the use of antitheses, alliteration and word play in the following sample:

Margot Lily was born and raised on the derelict streets of Brooklyn, and now has exiled herself to the Catskills where the altitude is high and her self-worth is low. She is a slender pale-skinned girl whose addiction to caffeine and cigarettes contributes to her rapid weight loss. When she is not cleaning tables or swallowing orders for the condescending White Russians or serving white russians to sophisticated customers, she spends time on the mountain in her wooden cabin that arches high above her head in a triangular pattern.

or the precise, playful attention to word choice in this description of a grandmother:

She was a Las Vegas luminary, inherent slots player, infomercial addict, game show enthusiast, and convertible-operating-bargain-hunting Kentucky Fried Chicken junkie.

She was hell on wheels and a party in stretch pants.

One student, mimicking Nabokov's close attention to detail, used the author's description of Uncle Ruka's odd gift for numbers as the basis for an essay about her own eccentricity:

I have an idiosyncratic and irrational partiality toward odd numbers. Sevens, elevens, and seventeens—perhaps even the occasional thirty-three. Along with this love of odd numbers comes a distinct dislike of even numbers. The number that is even is base and ordinary. There is a certain common smugness inherent in all of those twos and fours, and—even worse—twenty-fours.

Another adapted Nabokov's playful agility with words to his own writing:

I watched laconic men with loquacious wallets, loquacious men with laconic wallets, men with suits and fedoras marching to and from work with their leather briefcases, men with traffic cone colored vests and highlighter yellow hats lifting inanimate metal objects, men drinking from paper coffee cups, men living off the money placed in their paper coffee cups... and women—oh, don't get me started on the ladies—women who frolicked in their delicate linen frocks accompanied by designer handbags with frills...women who wore glasses, women who sipped fine wine from glasses outside fancy restaurants, women who confined their organically opulent hair in ponytails, and women who allowed their hair to fall upon their shoulders like a waterfall dousing a flawless collection of stones below.

And one student took a truly ambitious approach, adopting both a Nabokovian and a Proustian voice in analyzing the description of the mother in the excerpt:

Nabokov elegantly paints the seasons of his youth in Russia. From the dull spring day—alliteration of the “d” adds a drowsiness to his description—to the “heat lightning” of the summer nights, the maple leaves of the fall, the footprints in the snow. Each moment is forever captured from fleetingness in a picture; the spring day contrasts with the summer night, the brown sand with the fresh snow. If we look closer, we watch as Nabokov raises our heads to an ascending lark and then softly rests it in the footprint of a small bird. For Nabokov, the memories of his childhood were as vast as the sky, only to be squeezed into the “cuneate footprint” left by a bird in the winter’s cold snow. “Vot zapomni [now remember],” as his mother urged him to clasp onto every moment. He contrasts the “tangible part of her world” to “an extraordinary consciousness”—the part that after the Revolution would be lost forever. By linking the part that would “perish” so closely to that that would be “cultivated,” he expresses the tension between the material and immaterial, and how time, left by itself, destroys both. These antitheses are balanced structurally in the sentence as well which thus exemplifies that tension; but of course, the memories are all we have left, and preserving them is paramount.

Conclusion

The kind of writing generated by these close reading and model writing exercises will not, of course, be transferred whole to my students’ academic prose. But I do see in their work a lively engagement with meaning quite different from that encouraged by the sorts of academic

writing all too often valorized in composition courses. If all we ask for is routinely competent academic writing, then that is all we are going to get. At Brooklyn College, student writing for the compare and contrast final essay in the first semester of freshman composition and for the research paper that is the culminating activity in the second semester would normally be judged quite competent if it reproduced the predictable, formulaic compositions all of us have become accustomed to seeing in these introductory courses. However, the kinds of reading and writing that my composition students have practiced in this course, the repeated, careful attention to the interactions of form and content, to the relation of style to meaning, make them both more aware readers and more conscientious, ambitious writers of descriptive and analytic prose. What does emerge from their experience with Nabokovian writing, what most students seem to have picked up and seized on enthusiastically, is a way of representing in their work youth culture's characteristically "cool" attitude of detached self-awareness. Along with the acquisition of powerful tools for displaying an attitude of personal authority to their peers came the discovery that these new means of self-representation can be put to useful purposes as well—that by making the kinds of balanced observations that demonstrate their coolness, students can actually strengthen the persuasive power of their arguments. If an important goal of a course in academic writing is to teach students how to effectively represent themselves and their methods of observation as objective and even-handed, then, in this respect at least, our experiment has been a success.

In the playful spirit they adopt in their writing, in the flexibility with which they mold their sentences and shape their meanings, in the risks they take with words and images, I see my students responding to Nabokov's invitation to develop the "capacity not only of recombining

but of re-creating the given world” (SO 32). As Samuel Schumann has pointed out, the positive effects of mere exposure to Nabokov’s word-play are reason enough for including readings from the novelist’s works in composition instruction, for “it is impossible to read *Lolita* and not recognize when one writes poorly” (34)⁷. But there is “really” more at stake in his word-play than Nabokov would have us believe. Student writers can learn a great deal about the rules of the game of representing the “given world” by playing along with Nabokov as he bends these rules in order to fashion the world of his fictions. It may indeed be, as Schumann observes, that “we have only words to play with,” but it may also be that our writing students will someday have to play for keeps at representing in words a world where words “really” mean something.

Notes

¹For example, see Ermarth, “Conspicuous Construction; Or, Kristeva, Nabokov, and The Anti-Realist Critique.”

²For Nabokov and metafiction, see Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*.

³The special use of the term multiplicity in post-symbolist literary studies derives from its use by the philosopher Henri Bergson in discussing the metaphysical aspects of issues in the problem of “realism” closely related to the problems of representation that were being addressed in the literary writing of the period. For Nabokov and Bergson, see Michael Glynn. *Vladimir Nabokov: Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences in His Novels*. For a discussion and bibliography of Bergsonism, see Lawlor, Leonard and Moulard, Valentine “Henri Bergson.” *The Stanford*

Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2010 Edition), Ed. Edward and N. Zalta, forthcoming,

<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2010/entries/bergson/>

⁴See Peter Lubin’s discussion of phrasal tmesis, wherein “an expression...is ruptured by an alien verbal insertion” (194). Lubin offers several examples from *Ada*: “I’m all enchantment and ears;” “the Arctic no longer vicious Circle.”

⁵Distancing tactics can go by different names in different theory environments: satire, distortion, *différance*. Defamiliarization belongs to the terminology of Russian Formalism—a movement whose time, place and set of concerns Nabokov might not find entirely uncongenial. See, for example, Glynn, n. 3.

⁶For a discussion of shaping and containment see Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 83.

⁷Samuel Schuman, in “Only Words to Play With: Teaching *Lolita* in Introductory Reading and Writing Courses,” reflects on the overall practical value of reading Nabokov for student writing. The author observes nicely that “one learns about fine writing by reading it. To read *Lolita*...is to heighten one’s sense of the power of words...it is impossible to read *Lolita* and not recognize when one writes poorly. ...we have only words to play with. We might as well play with the best” (34).

Appendix

Excerpt 1 (p. 40)

To love with all one's soul and leave the rest to fate, was the simple rule she heeded. "*Vot zapomni* [now remember]," she would say in conspiratorial tones as she drew my attention to this or that loved thing in Vyra—a lark ascending the curds-and-whey sky of a dull spring day, heat lightning taking pictures of a distant line of trees in the night, the palette of maple leaves on brown sand, a small bird's cuneate footprints on new snow. As if feeling that in a few years the tangible part of her world would perish, she cultivated an extraordinary consciousness of the

various time marks distributed throughout our country place. She cherished her own past with the same retrospective fervor that I now do her image and my past. Thus, in a way, I inherited an exquisite simulacrum—the beauty of intangible property, unreal estate—and this proved a splendid training for the endurance of later losses. Her special tags and imprints became as dear and as sacred to me as they were to her. There was the room which in the past had been reserved for her mother's pet hobby, a chemical laboratory; there was the linden tree marking the spot, by the side of the road that sloped up toward the village of Gryazno (accented on the ultima), at the steepest bit where one preferred to take one's "bike by the horns" (*bi'ka za raga*) as my father, a dedicated cyclist, liked to say, and where he had proposed; and there was, in the so-called "old" park, the obsolete tennis court, now a region of moss, mole-heaps, and mushrooms, which had been the scene of gay rallies in the eighties and nineties (even her grim father would shed his coat and give the heaviest racket an appraisive shake) but which, by the time I was ten, nature had effaced with the thoroughness of a felt eraser wiping out a geometrical problem.

Excerpt 2 (pp. 68-73)

My mother's brother Vasiliy was in the diplomatic-service, which he treated, however, far more lightly than my uncle Konstantin did. For Vasiliy Ivanovich it was not a career, but a more or less plausible setting. French and Italian friends, being unable to pronounce his long Russian surname, had boiled it down to "Ruka" (with the accent on the last syllable), and this suited him far better than did his Christian name. Uncle Ruka appeared to me in my childhood to belong to a world of toys, gay picture books, and cherry trees laden with glossy black fruit: he had glass-housed a whole orchard in a corner of his country estate, which was separated from ours by the winding river. During the summer, almost every day at lunchtime his carriage might be seen crossing the bridge and then speeding toward our house along a hedge of young firs. When I was eight or nine, he would invariably take me upon his knee after lunch and (while two young footmen were clearing the table in the empty dining room) fondle me, with crooning sounds and fancy endearments, and I felt embarrassed for my uncle by the presence of the servants and relieved when my father called him from the veranda: "*Basile, on vous attend.*" Once, when I went to meet him at the station (I must have been eleven or twelve then) and watched him descend from the long international sleeping car, he gave me one look and said: "How sallow and plain [*jaune et laid*] you have become, my poor boy." On my fifteenth nameday, he took me aside and in his brusque, precise and somewhat old-fashioned French informed me that he was making me his heir. "And now you may go," he added, "*l'audience est finie. Je n'ai plus rien à vous dire.*"

I remember him as a slender, neat little man with a dusky complexion, gray-green eyes flecked with rust, a dark, bushy mustache, and a mobile Adam's apple bobbing conspicuously above the opal and gold snake ring that held the knot of his tie. He also wore opals on his fingers and in his cuff links. A gold chainlet encircled his frail hairy wrist, and there was usually a carnation in the buttonhole of his dove-gray, mouse-gray or silver-gray summer suit. It was only in summer that I used to see him. After a brief stay in Rozhestveno he would go back to France or Italy, to his chateau (called Perpigna) near Pau, to his villa (called Tamarindo) near Rome, or to his beloved

Egypt, from which he would send me picture postcards (palm trees and their reflections, sunsets, pharaohs with their hands on their knees) crossed by his thick scrawl. Then, in June again, when the fragrant *cheryomuha* (racemose old-world bird cherry or simply "racemosa" as I have baptized it in my work on "Onegin") was in foamy bloom, his private flag would be hoisted on his beautiful Rozhestveno house. He traveled with half-a-dozen enormous trunks, bribed the Nord-Express to make a special stop at our little country station, and with the promise of a marvelous present, on small, mincing feet in high-heeled white shoes would lead me mysteriously to the nearest tree and delicately pluck and proffer a leaf, saying, "*Pour mon neveu, la chose la plus belle au monde—une feuille verte.*"

Or he would solemnly bring me from America the *Foxy Grandpa* series, and *Buster Brown*—a forgotten boy in a reddish suit: if one looked closely, one could see that the color was really a mass of dense red dots. Every episode ended in a tremendous spanking for Buster, which was administered by his wasp-waisted but powerful Ma, who used a slipper, a hairbrush, a brittle umbrella, anything—even the bludgeon of a helpful policeman—and drew puffs of dust from the seat of Buster's pants. Since I had never been spanked, those pictures conveyed to me the impression of strange exotic torture not different from, say, the burying of a popeyed wretch up to his chin in the torrid sand of a desert, as represented in the frontispiece of a Mayne Reid book.

4

Uncle Ruka seems to have led an idle and oddly chaotic life. His diplomatic career was of the vaguest kind. He prided himself, however, on being an expert in decoding ciphered messages in any of the five languages he knew. We subjected him to a test one day, and in a twinkling he turned the sequence "5.13 24.11 13.16 9.13.5 5.13 24.11" into the opening words of a famous monologue in Shakespeare.

Pink-coated, he rode to hounds in England or Italy; fur-coated, he attempted to motor from St. Petersburg to Pau; wearing an opera cloak, he almost lost his life in an airplane crash on a beach near Bayonne. (When I asked him how did the pilot of the smashed Voisin take it, Uncle Ruka thought for a moment and then replied with complete assurance: "*Il sanglotait assis sur un rocher.*") He sang barcaroles and modish lyrics (*Ils se regardent tous deux, en se mangeant des yeux ...* "*Elle est morte en Février, pauvre Colinette!...*" "*Le soleil rayonnait encore, j'ai voulu revoir les grands bois...*" and dozens of others). He wrote music himself, of the sweet, rippling sort, and French verse, curiously scannable as English or Russian iambs, and marked by a princely disregard for the comforts of the mute *e*'s. He was extremely good at poker.

Because he stammered and had difficulty in pronouncing labials, he changed his coachman's name from Pyotr to Lev; and my father (who was always a little sharp with him) accused him of a slaveowner's mentality. Apart from this, his speech was a fastidious combination of French, English and Italian, all of which he spoke with vastly more ease than he did his native tongue. When he resorted to Russian, it was invariably to misuse or garble some extremely idiomatic or even folksy expression, as when he would say at table with a sudden sigh (for there was always something amiss—a spell of hay fever, the death of a peacock, a lost borzoi): "*Je suis triste et seul comme une bylinka v pole* [as lonesome as a 'grass blade in the field']."

He insisted that he had an incurable heart ailment and that, when the seizures came, he could obtain relief only by lying supine on the floor. Nobody took him seriously, and after he did die of

angina pectoris, all alone, in Paris, at the end of 1916, aged forty-five, it was with a quite special pang that one recalled those after-dinner incidents in the drawing room—the unprepared footman entering with the Turkish coffee, my father glancing (with quizzical resignation) at my mother, then (with disapproval) at his brother-in-law spreadeagled in the footman's path, then (with curiosity) at the funny vibration going on among the coffee things on the tray in the seemingly composed servant's cotton-gloved hands.

From other, stranger torments that beset him in the course of his short life, he sought relief—if I understand these matters rightly—in religion, first in certain Russian sectarian outlets, and eventually in the Roman Catholic Church. His was the kind of colorful neurosis that should have been accompanied by genius but in his case was not, hence the search for a traveling shadow. In his youth he had been intensely disliked by his father, a country gentleman of the old school (bear hunting, a private theatre, a few fine Old Masters among a good deal of trash), whose uncontrollable temper was rumored to have been a threat to the boy's very life. My mother told me later of the tension in the Vyra household of her girlhood, of the atrocious scenes that took place in Ivan Vasilievich's study, a gloomy corner room giving on an old well with a rusty pumping wheel under five Lombardy poplars. Nobody used that room except me. I kept my books and spreading boards on its black shelves, and subsequently induced my mother to have some of its furniture transferred into my own sunny little study on the garden side, and therein staggered, one morning, its tremendous desk with nothing upon its waste of dark leather but a huge curved paper knife, a veritable scimitar of yellow ivory carved from a mammoth's tusk.

When Uncle Ruka died, at the end of 1916, he left me what would amount nowadays to a couple of million dollars and his country estate, with its white-pillared mansion on a green, escarped hill and its two thousand acres of wildwood and peatbog. The house, I am told, still stood there in 1940, nationalized but aloof, a museum piece for any sightseeing traveler who might follow the St. Petersburg-Luga highway running below through the village Rozhestveno and across the branching river. Because of its floating islands of water lilies and algal brocade, the fair Oredezh had a festive air at that spot. Farther down its sinuous course, where the sand martins shot out of their holes in the steep red bank, it was deeply suffused with the reflections of great, romantic firs (the fringe of our Vyra); and still farther downstream, the endless tumultuous flow of a water mill gave the spectator (his elbows on the handrail) the sensation of receding endlessly, as if this were the stern of time itself.

Excerpt 3 (pp. 308-310)

Graded gardens on hillsides, a succession of terraces whose every stone step ejected a gaudy grasshopper, dropped from ledge to ledge seaward, with the olives and the oleander fairly toppling over each other in their haste to obtain a view of the beach. There our child kneeled motionless to be photographed in a quivering haze of sun against the scintillation of the sea, which is a milky blur in the snapshots we have preserved but was, in life, silvery blue, with great patches of purple-blue farther out, caused by warm currents in collaboration with and corroboration of (hear the pebbles rolled by the withdrawing wave?) eloquent old poets and their smiling similes. And among the candy-like blobs of sea-licked glass—lemon, cherry, peppermint—and the banded pebbles, and the little fluted shells with lustered insides, sometimes

small bits of pottery, still beautiful in glaze and color, turned up. They were brought to you or me for inspection, and if they had indigo chevrons, or bands of leaf ornament, or any kind of gay emblemata, and were judged precious, down they went with a click into the toy pail, and, if not, a plop and a flash marked their return to the sea. I do not doubt that among those slightly convex chips of majolica ware found by our child there was one whose border of scrollwork fitted exactly, and continued, the pattern of a fragment I had found in 1903 on the same shore, and that the two tallied with a third my mother had found on that Mentone beach in 1882, and with a fourth piece of the same pottery that had been found by *her* mother a hundred years ago—and so on, until this assortment of parts, if all had been preserved, might have been put together to make the complete, the absolutely complete, bowl, broken by some Italian child, God knows where and when, and now mended by *these* rivets of bronze.

In the fall of 1939, we returned to Paris, and around May 20 of the following year we were again near the sea, this time on the western coast of France, at St. Nazaire. There, one last little garden surrounded us, as you and I, and our child, by now six, between us, walked through it on our way to the docks, where, behind the buildings facing us, the liner *Champlain* was waiting to take us to New York. That garden was what the French call, phonetically, *skwarr* and the Russians *skver*, perhaps because it is the kind of thing usually found in or near public squares in England. Laid out on the last limit of the past and on the verge of the present, it remains in my memory merely as a geometrical design which no doubt I could easily fill in with the colors of plausible flowers, if I were careless enough to break the hush of pure memory that (except, perhaps, for some chance tinnitus due to the pressure of my own tired blood) I have left undisturbed, and humbly listened to, from the beginning. What I really remember about this neutrally blooming design, is its clever thematic connection with transatlantic gardens and parks; for suddenly, as we came to the end of its path, you and I saw something that we did not immediately point out to our child, so as to enjoy in full the blissful shock, the enchantment and glee he would experience on discovering ahead the ungenerously gigantic, the unrealistically real prototype of the various toy vessels he had doddled about in his bath. There, in front of us, where a broken row of houses stood between us and the harbor, and where the eye encountered all sorts of stratagems, such as pale-blue and pink underwear cakewalking on a clothesline, or a lady's bicycle and a striped cat oddly sharing a rudimentary balcony of cast iron, it was most satisfying to make out among the jumbled angles of roofs and walls, a splendid ship's funnel, showing from behind the clothesline as something in a scrambled picture—Find What the Sailor Has Hidden—that the finder cannot unsee once it has been seen.

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