Reading Nabokov

Comparisons of works of fiction, even ones with similar subjects or concerns, can obviously be unfair—at best, only the means to some fuller, separate consideration. But comparisons of works of critical analysis that have common objects of scrutiny seem fair enough. Above all, if these works analyze objects as verbally elaborate and epistemologically enigmatic as the writings of Vladimir Nabokov appear to be.

I say "appear" advisedly. For Douglas Fowler's *Reading Nabokov*,[1] as its rhetorically "modest" title implies, is a deliberate, direct, almost Orwellian act of demystification. It proposes not that the emperor has no clothes but that there is a real, all powerful, but clearly identifiable emperor inside the clothes, the Holy Father and Ruler of All Nabokovia. Fowler's "reading" of the lands and edicts of this emperor can be compared with two earlier ones: Page Stegner's *Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov*,[2] which is even more monographically compact than *Reading Nabokov;* and Andrew Field's *Nabokov: His Life in Art*,[3] a full-length "critical narrative."

After a brief introduction to "Nabokov's Constants," Fowler (like Stegner) deals mainly with five books, all first written in English: for Stegner from *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* to *Pale Fire*, for Fowler from *Bend Sinister* to *Ada*. Stegner has three introductory chapters that deal with similar "constants." Field, on the other hand, takes up Nabokov's complete *oeuvre*, in verse, essay, criticism, drama, autobiography, and fiction, in Russian, French, and English. Stegner and Fowler can be seen as projecting, through the lenses of their respective five Nabokov "novels" in English, an explicit structure upon the implicit, teeming totality of Nabokov's compete writings. Field makes this totality explicit, in great detail, but without sharp structural delimitation. Readers of Nabokov's fiction in English, for whom Stegner and Fowler tend to speak, will find much of Field's material mainly useful as context. Field's own comments on the novels in English that Stegner and Fowler also consider are contextual in yet another way, by force of the extensive discussion of Nabokov's other, non-English writings that surrounds and interrelates with them. Stegner and Fowler meet most of us on the familiar, more limited ground of our own reading of Nabokov; Field conducts us, accompanied by considerable but invaluable baggage, into the remotest regions of the empire.

All three critics state clearly their basic aim:

> This theme, the escape from the cruel jokes of reality into aesthetics, into the mirror land of the imagination, and the resulting problems created by an obsession with beauty and design, is central to Nabokov's fiction. (Stegner, p. 14)

> Nabokov is to me as interesting as any poet or writer in this century (or the last, for that matter), and thus to speak of not "getting" or "caring for" Nabokov, unless one cares for literature in only a very conditional way, is not for me an entirely reasonable statement. Second, it is quite clear to me that neither his Russian nor his English readers have ever "gotten" Nabokov in the sense of having access to everything he has written and to the full cultural tradition in which he writes. (Field, pp. 3-4)

> I hope to demonstrate that the fiction is organized about a set of thematic, moral, and narrative constants, and that if we read it with these constants in mind, we will understand it better and enjoy it more. (Fowler, p. 13)

In direction and in manner these statements exemplify three approaches to Nabokov's writings and even, perhaps, three basic modes of literary analysis: by theme, by context, by "constants."

Stegner, Field, and Fowler all deal with *Pnin* and *Lolita.* How do their "readings" of these works compare?

Of all Nabokov's writings in English *Pnin,* it is generally agreed, is the most accessible, comfortable, readable, and—if it comes to that—teachable. Some readers even take it (wrongly) as a kind of sport, New Yorker fare gathered loosely into a book, a work so casually wrought that Nabokov could outline, in an interview, one chapter he never got to write—"that still uninked chapter, which was beautifully clear in my mind down to the last curve."[4] And the apparent absence of many of Nabokov's determining (some would say overdetermining) virtuosities has left readers of *Pnin* in an uncertainty not—as often with Nabokov—of allusion or actuality but of attitude, a Polonian tragico-comico-satirico-ironico-pathetico muddle.

Stegner resolves this uncertainty by imposing his thesis upon it. Thus, "What is really important about Pnin is not that he is funny, or lovable, or pathetic, or sad. What is important is that he has style" (p. 98). This style provides the "escape into aesthetics" that Pnin, according to Stegner, has in common with Nabokov's other "heroes." But can we accept Stegner's too absolute version of what Pnin "escapes" from: "Pnin suffers for a *real* exile, for a *complete* loss of home and cultural ties, for a *total* absence of love" (p. 101, Stegner's italics), a condition Stegner sees, quite inaccurately I believe, epitomized at the end of Chapter Six, "the wreckage of his party and his life" (p. 95)? In spite of all Pnin's affirmative gestures in the last pages, Stegner will not allow that Pnin has gained a "redemptive response," to borrow Stegner's own phrase, one that goes far beyond "finding a style" (p. 98) or even "a legitimate and admirable refuge in . . . the aesthetics of art" (p. 101). At the last not Pnin refugee, surely, but Pnin redux.

Field puts *Pnin* in Nabokov's "minor line" of "more conventionally realistic art" and objects to "the habit of some English and American critics basically hostile to Nabokov's art to single out *Pnin* for praise as the best and, sometimes, lone novel of importance by Nabokov" (p. 150). But he does group *Pnin* among "minor but unquestionably original and striking works of art" even set against "the imposing row of Nabokov masterpieces in whose shadow they stand" (p. 151). Of our three critics Field is the most unstinting, persuasively so, in his honorifics: "In all of Russian literature there are really only two prose writers against whose work Nabokov's should be measured—Gogol and Tolstoy" (p. 252); *Pale Fire* is "one of the eight masterpieces of the novel in this century (Nabokov is the only author who has written *two* of them!)" (p. 322, Field's italics). In spite of *Pnin's* being a "novella" in "the minor line," the book, its hero, and its narrator get from Field an appreciative commentary against a helpful biographical and cultural background.

Fowler analyzes *Pnin*'s method more fully than Stegner or Field and with fuller attention to human and ethical "meaning," without Stegner's thematic distortions but also without quite conveying Field's enthusiastic accumulation of

detail and delight. (Am I wrong to hear in Fowler's tone a more continuing, perhaps unconscious, reservation about Nabokov's achievement that is ever voiced aloud?) For Fowler, Nabokov pays a price for his triumphs. It can be measured by "what we usually *fail* to find in Nabokov: indications of any interest in moral development, in change, choice, in the process of learning" (p. 126). As Fowler says of Nabokov's handling of his "favorite" characters, "Nabokov mars his mimicry in the pursuit of his 'own advantage,' and characterization and plausibility are sacrificed" (p. 130). In spite of his thorough, sympathetic analysis, therefore, Fowler ends on a critical note: "The facts can *never* be faced by any of Nabokov's favorites. Perhaps that is why Nabokov preserves the bowl: he has nothing else to offer Pnin" (p. 146). But in the final pages Nabokov does offer Pnin something else, even including "a little white dog," and Pnin vigorously and even triumphantly accepts the choice. He even reappears three years later, as Field helpfully reminds us (p. 139), in the "Commentary" of *Pale Fire* as "Head of the bloated Russian Department" at Wordsmith College, "a regular martinet in regard to his underlings"[5]—unless both fact and opinion be yet another Kinbotean folly. Or is Field wrong, and does this other Pnin merely attest to the literality of a remark to Laurence Clements by Professor Entwhistle of "Goldwin University" (another of Nabokov's Cornellian avatars) that "We even have a Professor Pnin our our staff"?[6]

Stegner, Field, and Fowler agree that *Lolita* is Nabokov's "great" or "greatest" work (pp. 103, 323, and 173 respectively). Nor, allowing for their separate approaches, do they disagree on such concerns as the brilliant use of American detail and language or the various functions of Clare Quilty and other characters who surround the two "lovers." They also agree on the profound ambiguity of Humbert Humbert's moral and psychological being, their interpretations of which, although not identical, are still complementary: Stegner's "hunger[er] after an ideal state that nymphets represent" (p. 110), who "makes an art out of a perversion" (p. 114); Field's Proustian hero of "a subterranean sexual myth . . . very closely to homosexuality" (p. 339) which is at the same time "the tragic story of a man's passion and love" (p. 345); and Fowler's "Nabokovian fantast" (p. 161), whose "humanity if not his unequivocal innocence" (p. 148) and "vision, and the voice in which he expresses this vision" (p. 171) illustrate his author's "willingness to preserve the moral integrity of his favorites at the expense of almost all other factors in his work . . . a prejudice that limits the plot activity in his novels" (p. 150).

There is much less agreement, however, on Nabokov's attitude toward American life. Stegner's use of the epithet "American" in his few comments on the world Humbert moves in and reacts to may imply a dimension of social criticism, but it is one that is subsumed by Stegner's dominating thesis of the "aesthetic vision" by which Humbert "removes himself from the combined reality that is the source of art" (p. 115). Field does not even take up the issue during his chapter on *Lolita*, apparently considering it of marginal importance. But much earlier, in a brief discussion of Nabokov's "literary citizenship," he draws evidence from various sources to prove "Nabokov's very strong affection for the real America," insists that "the Philistine vulgarity which is described with such cheerful derision in *Lolita* is understood by Nabokov—he has said so in several different contexts—as a universal phenomenon which knows no particular nationality or social class," and quotes from Nabokov: " 'But I am annoyed when the glad news is spread that I am ridiculing America' " (all, p. 65).

Fowler's own answer to his question parallels and engages Martin Green's discussion of similar material.[7] For Fowler, "the very sounds, scenes, and

details of the fantasy-milieu, mid-century America, generate in Americans the deepest sort of interest in themselves, for here the terms of our society and life style are brilliantly observed and recorded" (p. 163). These things have, however, another function within *Lolita,* and "an affirmation of life in America is present only in Humbert's quite specialized, quite monstrous voice" (p. 163). Moreover, there are two sides to this vision of America: "Whereas the novel's comedy depends on Humbert's ensnaring himself in the meretricious foolishness of Lolita and mid-century America, the novel's pathos, or tragedy, depends on Humbert's awareness of the authentic beauty of his mistress and of America . . ." (p. 150). And if "neither Lolita nor America is presented to Humbert as a real possibility" (p. 166), it does not seem to matter to Fowler's brilliant reading of the novel and of its hero's end. For "his moral achievement, which forms the novel's final vision, his ultimate recognition of Lolita's humanity and his ultimate recognition of the violence and evil for which he is responsible by the theft of Lolita's childhood, has little to do with the mores and morals of mid-century America" (p. 158).

These few comparisons suggest something of the significant place Douglas Fowler's *Reading Nabokov* holds among recent studies. In years to come it may take on another role. Authors as complex and elaborate in their art as Dickens, Melville, Faulkner, or Nabokov bring into being—quite legitimately—a body of critical analysis and interpretation equally complex and elaborate. When this happens, as it already has for the first three and is happening for the fourth, at times we turn back from our embarrassment of critical riches to certain books, short, sensible, and central, and remind ourselves of those home truths and basic issues on which all critical speculation, even the most brilliantly conjectural, must be founded. For criticism of Nabokov, *Reading Nabokov* may well turn out to be such a book.

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NOTES

[1]Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974.

[2]New York: The Dial Press, 1966.

[3]Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1967.

[4]Alfred Appel, Jr., "An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature,* 8 (Spring 1967), 146.

[5]Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: Lancer Books, 1963), p. 112.

[6]*Pnin* (New York: Atheneum, 1964), p. 37.

[7]"The Morality of *Lolita,*" *Kenyon Review,* 28 (June 1966), 352-77.