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The Web of Sense
Patterns of Involution in Selected Works of Virginia Woolf and Vladimir Nabokov

EXTRACT
Introduction

An overview of criticism

Although practically no work has been done along the lines of comparison, the biographical materials and critical sources are more than abundant. Woolf’s diaries, letters and holographs of her manuscripts have been long available to scholars and provide wonderful insight into her creative process. Even in the absence of a complete edition of Nabokov’s correspondence and diaries, still unpublished to date,13 Brian Boyd’s excellent biography of Nabokov provides all kinds of biographical detail. Unfortunately, the access to Nabokov’s archives in the Library of Congress, the Berg Collection and in Montreux is still restricted.14 A collection of interviews prepared and published by Nabokov under the self-explanatory title Strong Opinions provides us with a glimpse into the private notions of the writer.

However, the public figure that is created through these interviews is quite obviously a fictional character, only remotely related to the “real” Nabokov – as Nabokov puts it, what we see is that “person I usually impersonate in Montreux,”15 or “an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me.”16 As a writer whose favourite device was deception, someone who hated pigeon-holing in literature and in life, and who insisted on receiving the questions and preparing his written answers well in advance before the interview could take place, Nabokov proves an elusive subject, throwing a shadow larger than life only to hide underneath it. His sharp and witty answers project a brilliant, snobbish and at times flippant character. This persona does not quite match with the very precise, infinitively careful, clear-sighted yet never didactic composer of finely nuanced and many-layered fictions. A comment such as “I have no social purpose, no moral message; I’ve no general ideas to exploit, I just like composing riddles with elegant solutions”17 seems to very deliberately understate the immense effort that must have gone into the creation of Nabokov’s fictional world – and a comment like this cannot be taken seriously. Therefore, while we cannot afford to ignore the statements of the master,

14 The Nabokov files at the Library of Congress are due to be opened for public access shortly (23 June 2009); however, the other archives are still strictly controlled by the Nabokov Estate.
15 SO, p. 298.
17 SO, p. 16.
we will do well to approach the Nabokov of the *Strong Opinions* the same way we
treat his characters.

Woolf’s notions and views seem less problematic by contrast – deception of
her readers is obviously not her main concern. Yet, her relationship with the
audience is always fraught with contradictions. At one time Woolf did toy with the
idea of publishing excerpts from her diaries; she also famously wrote: “I dont [sic]
keep or destroy but collect miscellaneous bundles of odds and ends, and let
posterity, if there is one, burn or not.” Although there is an obvious irony in her
statement about the posterity, there is little doubt that even in her private writings
Woolf continued to be haunted by the image of the audience, with all the
ambivalence this notion always held for her. At the same time, she wrote that “I
must be private, secret, as anonymous and submerged as possible in order to
write.”\textsuperscript{18} We therefore have every reason to suspect that in her personal
correspondence or diary entries she remained secretive about what mattered most to
her, perhaps coding or simply omitting the information. We must therefore tread
carefully, avoiding automatic acceptance of every statement in the diaries or letters.

The body of criticism on both authors is impressive and increases every year.
After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Nabokov was heralded by Russian
scholars as the “‘missing link’ between nineteenth century Russian classics, Russian émigré
literature, European modernism and early Soviet postmodernism”.\textsuperscript{19} Since the seventies, he remains firmly in the focus of American
studies abroad. Woolf studies have been steadily developing ever since the fifties.
The recent boost of popular attention to Woolf, due to the Academy Award
winning film *The Hours*, also benefited the literary studies.

This current state of affairs in the field of Nabokov studies can be easily
observed in both content and volume of the internet discussion forum Nabokov-L, a
dynamic and often provocative source of information on everything related to
Nabokov. There exists a similar electronic discussion list for all those interested in
Virginia Woolf’s life and work - the Virginia Woolf (VWOOLF) Listserv.\textsuperscript{20} Even
though the volume of postings is relatively small, the participants include most of
the important scholars in the field, and discussions often function as gateways to
published sources or work-in-progress.

There are several collections of critical essays, which strive to provide a
well-rounded view. Most notably, there are the monumental *Garland Companion
to Vladimir Nabokov*, and the two-volume *Nabokov’s World*, presenting papers

\textsuperscript{18} Letter from V. Woolf to E. Smyth dated 17 September 1938, V. Woolf, *The Letters of
1975-80), vol. 6, p. 272.


\textsuperscript{20} Nabokov-L <http://listserv.ucsb.edu/archives/nabokv-l.html>; VWOOLF Listserv,
<listproc@lists.acs.ohio-state.edu>.
from the two conferences held in 1999.\textsuperscript{21} Essays collected in these publications discuss almost every possible aspect of Nabokov’s work, both from the point of view of Russian literary tradition and American studies, including a variety of methodological approaches. Other collections, which present more detailed textual studies of Nabokov’s writings include \textit{A Book of Things About Vladimir Nabokov}, \textit{Nabokov – The Man and His Work}, \textit{Nabokov’s Fifth Arc}, and the most recent \textit{Nabokov at the Limits}.\textsuperscript{22}

In Woolf studies, the influential collections of essays include the regular publications of the International Conference on Virginia Woolf; the most recent one entitled \textit{Virginia Woolf and the Natural World}.\textsuperscript{23} In addition, the \textit{Woolf Studies Annual} published at the Pace University since 1995 and edited by Mark Hussey maps the changing trends in the critical approaches to Virginia Woolf. The two periodicals published by the two Virginia Woolf Societies provide a forum for Woolf scholars and common readers and make her previously unpublished writings available.\textsuperscript{24} The two periodicals dedicated to Vladimir Nabokov (\textit{Nabokov Studies} and \textit{The Nabokovian}), recently supplemented by a multilingual, multidisciplinary \textit{Nabokov Online Journal}, jointly follow the latest developments in the field, encouraging dialogue among scholars and common readers.

Among the works that provided inspiration and guidance for this research is the structurist study by Pekka Tammi \textit{Problems of Nabokov’s Poetics: A Narratological Analysis}, discussing Nabokov’s works in exhaustive detail, providing tables and diagrams that at times remind one of chemical records of molecular structure or algebraic formulas. The whole study is based upon the premise which the author of this book shares - that Nabokov’s opus is a unified whole. As the common denominator of the writer’s works Tammi construes a \textit{thematic dominant}, fusing together the Russian Formalist idea of the “focusing component of a work of art” and Bakhtin’s definition of “theme” as an organizing principle in the structure of a literary work. This dominant consists of three themes: the theme of correlation in human life, the theme of the text and the theme of the


\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Virginia Woolf Miscellany} (published by the International Virginia Woolf Society) and \textit{The Virginia Woolf Bulletin} (by the Virginia Woolf Society of Great Britain).
unseen world intuited by one behind the pattern of ordinary reality, which Tammi identifies as the dimension of art.  

Less strictly narratological study, but nonetheless a very informative one is the seminal work of Don Barton Johnson, *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov.* Discussing such issues as Nabokov’s implementation of games, mazes, anagrams, puns and so forth, Johnson brings out the purpose that the writer fulfils with the help of such ploys, proving that analysis of such issues is essential for the study of Nabokov’s poetics. Leona Toker’s book-length study of Nabokov’s writings, with her carefully argued textual analysis of his major novels, has also proved helpful and stimulating for the somewhat different readings proposed in present book.

Among many critical sources that helped to shape this work are the two books by Mark Hussey, his monumental *Virginia Woolf A to Z,* an encyclopaedia of all things Woolfian, and *The Singing of the Real World,* a critical appraisal that considers the recurrent themes in Woolf’s fiction and her very idiosyncratic philosophy. Pamela Caughie’s indigenous *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* provided the initial impulse for studying Woolf’s textual strategies in the light of postmodernist practices. Finally, the very title of this dissertation testifies to its indebtedness to Alfred Appel’s works, specifically *The Annotated Lolita* and Nabokov’s *Dark Cinema,* in which the critic discusses involution as an important artistic device in Nabokov’s fiction.

One of the most interesting features of the fictional universes created by Woolf and Nabokov is their sustained continuity. Critics have already pointed out the retour-de-personnage ploy in Woolf’s works, that is, minor characters from one novel continuing their existence in another. Nabokov also seems reluctant to dismiss his characters, letting them make their appearance time and again in short stories and novels, though at times somewhat disfiguring them through the change

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27 Toker, Nabokov...
29 Caughie, Virginia Woolf...
31 Clarissa and Richard Dalloways’ appearance in *The Voyage Out* and a series of short stories written before and after *Mrs. Dalloway* is just one obvious example of this practice.
of the point of view. In Problems of Nabokov’s Poetics, Pekka Tammi interprets such instances as markers of the authorial presence in the fictional world, a prominent feature of Nabokov’s novels. And though in Woolf’s works the authorial presence in the discourse is far less obvious, we may point out that her use of recurring characters serves the same function, linking her fictions together in a common universe.

Besides the reappearance of characters, Nabokov also uses his various signatures to connect his works – from themes that became unmistakable pointers to his public persona, such as chess and butterflies, to anagrams of his name and his Russian pseudonym “V. Sirin”. This feature, deliberately drawing attention to the author who remains outside of the text and therefore a cipher to the reader, is developed almost to an excess in his later works, such as Look at the Harlequins! In the early novels and short stories such authorial markers are arguably even more significant, since in the twenties and thirties Nabokov was a far less recognizable figure to his audience and, therefore, such self-references required a greater effort to decode. Perhaps even more interesting are the instances when Nabokov introduces himself into his texts as a character, not in the autobiographical sense, but in the role of a detached observer, clearly possessing a certain power over the discourse. Such postmodernist techniques were employed by him as early as 1928, in the novel King, Queen, Knave, where two Russian-speaking strangers, clearly recognizable as Nabokov and his wife, appear at the crucial moment in the plot, and without interacting with any characters, somehow cause them to feel haunted, manipulated.

Though the instances of self-references or authorial markers are less conspicuous in Woolf’s fiction, they can nevertheless be easily spotted once the issue comes into focus. McLaurin noted that “Virginia Woolf’s novels are linked to each other by various strands of imagery,” Among Woolf’s self-referential themes are the motifs of water and moths, though it is less obvious that she uses them as pointers outside of the text, to its creator. Even though she is less inclined to employ in her works anagrams and authorial intrusions into the text in the guise of a character, contrasting her methods with Nabokov’s self-flaunting brings out

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32 For instance, the adorable, harmless Russian professor Timofey Pnin of Pnin is misrepresented by the narrator of Pale Fire as “a regular martinet in regard to his underlings” (PF, p. 549).
33 Tammi, Problems..., p. 346-349.
34 KQK, pp. 232, 239, 254.
36 There are, however at least several of such self-references well familiar to Woolffian scholars: for instance, the reference to “Time Passes” in Orlando, p. 69; an image of the woman writer in The Waves (discussed in Chapter Three) that can be read as Woolf’s direct self-projection.
instances of deliberate self-projection into the discourse, which are meant to be recognized by the reader, though the decoding does require an additional effort.