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# NABOKOV AND THE DETECTIVE NOVEL

Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, Ann Whitney Olin Professor of Russian Literature and Culture, Barnard College, and former director of the Harriman Institute, died on March 21 of this year. (An obituary is printed at the end of the magazine.) Cathy first taught the Nabokov survey at Columbia in the fall of 2007 (I remember because I taught the second class), and the following year she published her first article on Nabokov, “King, Queen, Sui-mate: Nabokov’s Defense Against Freud’s Uncanny” (*Intertexts*, Spring 2008), the first brick of what was planned to be “Nabokov and His Enemies,” which unfortunately

was left unfinished at her death. Cathy proposed to investigate more thoroughly and inventively Nabokov’s enemies (Freud, Pasternak, the detective novel) to see whether his blistering invective obfuscated a deeper engagement with said enemies. Although we can only guess at the work’s final shape, conference papers from 2010 onwards offer glimpses of a potential table of contents: Nabokov and Pasternak; *Pale Fire* and *Doctor Zhivago*: A Case of Intertextual Envy; *Ada* and *Bleak House*; Nabokov and Austen; Nabokov and the Art of Attack.

The essay that follows is what we have of the second brick of Cathy’s



## INTRODUCTION BY RONALD MEYER

work-in-progress, “Revising Nabokov Revising the Detective Novel: Vladimir, Agatha, and the Terms of Engagement,” which Cathy presented at the 2010 International Nabokov Conference, sponsored by the Nabokov Society of Japan and the Japan Foundation, Kyoto. The detective novel was a natural point of departure and comparison for Cathy (as was Pasternak, one of the authors she wrote about in her dissertation and a figure to whom she would return regularly throughout her career). An avid reader of detective novels both classic and contemporary, Cathy had once taught a first-year seminar on detective fiction at Barnard. The reader

needs to keep in mind that what follows is a conference presentation and that Cathy was writing within the constraints of time and length, but one cannot but regret its preliminary state and wonder what was to come in a fully expanded version.

The essay appears in the volume *Revising Nabokov Revising. The Proceedings of the International Nabokov Conference, March 24–27, 2010, Kyoto, Japan*, edited by Mitsuyoshi Numano and Tadashi Wakashima, and published by the Nabokov Society of Japan. We gratefully thank the editors and James Theimer, Cathy’s brother, for permission to reprint this essay.

Véra and Vladimir Nabokov play chess on the balcony of the Montreux Palace Hotel (1966)

# Revising Nabokov Revising the Detective Novel: Vladimir, Agatha, and the Terms of Engagement

By Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy



Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy

*There are some varieties of fiction that I never touch—mystery stories, for instance, which I abhor...<sup>1</sup>*

The present paper forms part of a larger project, now in its early stages, which I have tentatively titled “Nabokov and His Enemies.” As we all know, Nabokov was far from reticent about expressing his evaluations of other writers, many of them distinctly and repeatedly negative. In this context we may concede that even professional critics and literary theorists when they broach the issue of influence or intertextuality tend to presuppose that texts “interact” with works their authors like—or at least profess to like. Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” most readily comes to mind. In contrast, I contend that we can learn a great deal about Nabokov specifically and about the complicated interactions among texts in general by studying the terms in which Nabokov engages in his fictions the writings of authors he claims vehemently to detest. (In this context, you will hardly find it surprising that my first chapter is devoted to the “Viennese witchdoctor” Freud.) The book will ultimately be made up of a series of case studies, based on which I argue that Nabokov, acutely aware that the sophisticated pleasures he ascribed to literature were threatened by the fabric of twentieth-century culture, confronted in his writings precisely those cultural products for which he expressed the most profound contempt in order to

reclaim literature from them. The “terms of engagement” were far from superficial or frivolous, but complex “combinations” through which Nabokov worked out in his own terms the question of what literature is. In this installment I will test this hypothesis against a writer, as the foremost representative of a genre, whom, as my epigraph reads, Nabokov professed to “abhor”—Agatha Christie.

While Nabokov may have claimed that he “never touch[ed]” mystery stories, attentive readers of *Lolita* (or of Alfred Apfel’s *Annotated Lolita*) will have remarked that one of the few books listed among the holdings of the library of the prison in which Humbert Humbert is incarcerated is Agatha Christie’s *A Murder Is Announced*. This detail has been noted among the many “clues” Nabokov plants in the early pages of the novel to what is to come, bait for readers and delectation for rereaders who delight in catching the hints missed on a first read. Yet upon due consideration there is every reason to believe that, despite his denial, Nabokov did in fact read Christie’s Miss Marple novel, which came out in 1950 as Nabokov was working on *Lolita*. In the simplest terms, *A Murder Is Announced* rests on a clever deception, a confusion of identities that, when unraveled at the end, reveals that the victim is in fact the murderer. What then if we go past the sly joke of planting “a murder is announced” toward the beginning of *Lolita*, announcing that a murder will take

place, and assume that Nabokov's own plot, in which the identities of murderer and victim are confounded, resonates significantly with Christie's?

Before attempting to answer this question, let us look at yet another instance in which Nabokov clearly incorporates a Christie plot into his own text—belying his claim never to touch the stuff. In Nabokov's first novel composed directly in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov not only toys with the basic mechanisms of the detective novel, but again appears to invoke a specific Christie text (or even texts). Here let me repeat with judicious cuts the narrator's paraphrase of Sebastian Knight's first novel, *The Prismatic Bezels*:

Twelve persons are staying at a boarding house; the house is very carefully depicted but in order to stress the "island" note, ... One of the lodgers,

a certain G. Abeson, artdealer, is found murdered in his room. The local police officer ... rings up a London detective, asking him to come at once ... In the meantime the inhabitants of the boarding house plus a chance passer-by, old Nosebag, who happened to be in the lobby when the crime was committed, are thoroughly examined. All of them except the last-named, a mild old gentleman with a white beard yellowish about the mouth, and a harmless passion for collecting snuffboxes, are more or less open to suspicion; [...] Then, with a quick sliding motion, something in the story begins to shift (the detective, it must be remembered, is still on the way and G. Abeson's stiff corpse lying on the carpet). It gradually transpires that all the lodgers are in various ways connected with one another. [...] then the numbers on the doors are

gradually wiped out and the boarding house motif is painlessly and smoothly replaced by that of a country-house, with all its natural implications. And here the tale takes on a strange beauty. [...] Here the lives of the characters shine forth with a real and human significance and G. Abeson's sealed door is but that of a forgotten lumber-room. A new plot, a new drama utterly unconnected with the opening of the story, which is thus thrust back into the region of dreams, seems to struggle for existence and break into light. But at the very moment when the reader feels quite safe in an atmosphere of pleasurable reality and the grace and glory of the author's prose seems to indicate some lofty and rich intention, there is a grotesque knocking on the door and the detective enters. [...] The lodgers are examined afresh. [...] Old Nosebag





*Left to right: Louis Hayward, C. Aubrey Smith, Barry Fitzgerald, Richard Haydn, Mischa Auer and Walter Huston in the film *And Then There Were None* (1945), based on the novel by Agatha Christie*

potters about [...]. The old gag of making the most innocent looking person turn out to be the master-villain seems to be on the point of being exploited. The sleuth suddenly gets interested in snuffboxes. [...] There was a moment of ridiculous suspense. "I think," said Old Nosebag quietly, "that I can explain." Slowly and very carefully he removes his beard, his gray wig, his dark spectacles, and the face of G. Abeson is disclosed. "You see," says Mr. Abeson, with a self-deprecating smile, "one dislikes being murdered."<sup>2</sup>

While, as I will presently discuss, Sebastian Knight's novel takes a hackneyed (hence generally used) device of the detective novel as its frame, it nonetheless seems to invoke two of the most famous examples of the genre: Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* and *And Then There Were None*.<sup>3</sup> In his preface to his summary of the

novel, the narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, V., observes that *The Prismatic Bezel* conflates "a rollicking parody of the setting of a detective tale" with the modern novel's "fashionable trick of grouping a medley of people in a limited space (a hotel, an island, a street)."<sup>4</sup> In his remarks following his summary, the narrator concludes that his half-brother's novel is a "new" book rather than a "nice book," that "the heroes of the book are what can be loosely called 'methods of composition.' [...] By putting to the *ad absurdum* test this or that literary manner and then dismissing them one after the other, he deduced his own manner [...]."<sup>5</sup> Whether or not we imagine that this is, in some sense, a gloss on Nabokov's own process of creation in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the following comments by the narrator, again from the text preceding his retelling of *The Prismatic Bezel*, are salient to my larger argument (and cer-

tainly reflect "strong opinions" worthy of the author himself):

With something akin to fanatical hate Sebastian Knight was ever hunting out the things which had once been fresh and bright but which were now worn to a thread, dead things among living ones; dead things shamming life, painted and repainted, continuing to be accepted by lazy minds serenely unaware of the fraud. The decayed idea might in itself be quite innocent and it may be argued that there is not much sin in continually exploiting this or that thoroughly worn subject or style if it still pleases and amuses. But for Sebastian Knight, the merest trifle, as, say, the adopted method of a detective story, became a bloated and malodorous corpse. He did not mind in the least "penny dreadfuls" because he wasn't concerned with ordinary morals; what annoyed him invariably was the



Nabokov in 1939, the year he finished *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*

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second rate, not the third or N-th rate, because here, at the readable stage, the shamming began, and this was, in an artistic sense, immoral.<sup>6</sup>

The “bloated and malodorous corpse,” which Sebastian Knight resurfaces in *The Prismatic Bezels* (dare I say in Old Nosebag’s transformation into G. Abeson), becomes essential to the author’s self-discovery, so, just as Nabokov deploys conventions of the detective novel in his masterwork *Lolita* in order to transfigure them, so also does Nabokov incorporate motifs of that genre into the very structure of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, which is likewise a pursuit of the true perpetrator which begins (and ends) with a corpse. Like *Lolita* and *The Prismatic Bezels*, moreover, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* employs the “methods of composition” of a Christie novel in a sort of parodic inversion, glossed by the anagram of Nosebag as G. Abeson written backwards, in a “through the looking glass” fashion. Just as Humbert the Hunter becomes Humbert the Hunted, the murderer who murders the detective who pursues him (and who is, in a sense, his double), so the narrator seeks his half-brother’s identity and finds only himself.

This leads me inevitably to the third work I wish to adduce here, the Nabokov novel that most obviously and centrally plays on the convention of the detective novel in general and, I believe, on a well-known Agatha Christie novel in particular—*Despair*. (Here I would note in passing that the three novels I find most relevant to my topic are all pivotal to Nabokov’s transformation into an English-language writer—*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* as the first novel Nabokov wrote in English, *Despair* as the first of his novels he himself translated into English, and *Lolita*, of course, as his breakthrough American

novel. I will return to this point apace.) *Despair*’s opening scene, in tried and true detective novel fashion, invokes precisely the finding of the corpse that sets the conventional plot in motion, for, when Hermann first spies Felix lying on the hill outside of Prague, he takes him for a corpse and it is precisely because of his death-like immobility that Hermann professes to recognize in Felix his double: “That man, especially when he slept, when his features were motionless, showed me my own face, my mask, the flawlessly pure image of my corpse—I use the latter term merely because I wish to express with the utmost clarity—express what? Namely this: that we had identical features, and that, in a state of perfect repose, this resemblance was strikingly evident, and what is death, if not a face at peace—its artistic perfection?”<sup>7</sup> As we learn in due course, Hermann equates the perfect crime with the exemplary work of fiction he is creating, and he situates this equation in the tradition of the mystery:

Let us discuss crime, crime as an art; and card tricks. I am greatly worked up just at present. Oh, Conan Doyle! How marvelously you could have crowned your creation when your two heroes began boring you! What an opportunity, what a subject you missed! For you could have written one last tale concluding the whole Sherlock Holmes epic; one last episode beautifully setting off the rest; the murderer in that tale should have turned out to be not the one-legged bookkeeper, not the Chinaman Ching and not the woman in crimson, but the very chronicler of the crime stories, Dr. Watson himself—Watson, who, so to speak, knew what was Watson. A staggering surprise for the reader.<sup>8</sup>

While Hermann gives his fiction a more respectable genealogy,<sup>9</sup> invoking the Sherlock Holmes stories which so appealed to Nabokov himself in childhood, there would seem to be a more obvious contemporary source here: Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.<sup>10</sup> Of course, as a number of critics have pointed out, Hermann has a complex literary genealogy in Russian literature as well, ranging from Pushkin's protagonist of the same name in "The Queen of Spades" to Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov.<sup>11</sup> Yet we should bear in mind that Christie's 1926 novel enjoyed enormous popular success and was, in its own right, something of a literary event. Moreover, Nabokov's *tour de force* in *Despair* lies in no small measure in the fact that he takes as his narrator a bad writer whose own plot cannot escape the conventions of the trashy fiction which his wife Lydia reads and for which Hermann expresses the utmost contempt. And yet Lydia clearly recognizes tired conventions of the fiction she reads in Hermann's murder plot: "Oh, stop saying such horrors," cried Lydia, scrambling up from the carpet. 'I've just been reading a story like that. Oh, do please stop—."<sup>12</sup>

In 1944 Edmund Wilson published the article, "Why Do People Read Detective Stories?" in the *New Yorker*. He opens the article with the lament, "For years I have been hearing about detective stories. Almost everybody I know seems to read them, and they have long conversations about them in which I am unable to take part."<sup>13</sup> After expressing his own lack of attraction to the genre, Wilson gives his motivation for writing the article: "In my present line of duty, however, I have decided that I ought to take a look at some specimens of this school of writing, which has grown so prodigiously popular and of which the output is now so immense that this

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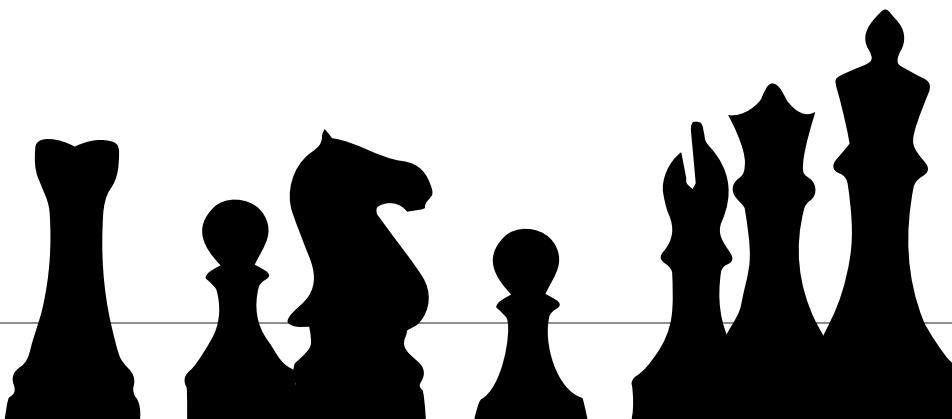
department has to have a special editor to deal with its weekly production."<sup>14</sup> Surveying what he deems to be among the better recent works of detective fiction, Wilson is "surprised and disappointed" to find "simply the old Sherlock Holmes formula reproduced." He concludes the article with an explanation of the genre's growing popularity:

Yet the detective story has kept its hold; had even, in the two decades between the great wars, become more popular than ever before; and there is, I believe, reason for this. The world during those years was ridden by an all-pervasive feeling of guilt and by a fear of impending disaster which it seemed hopeless to try to avert because it never seemed conclusively possible to pin down the responsibility. Who had committed the original crime and who was going to commit the next one?—that murder which always, in the novels, occurs at an unexpected moment, when the investigation is well under way, which may happen, as in one of the Nero Wolfe stories, right in the great detective's office. Everybody is

suspected in turn, and the streets are full of lurking agents whose allegiances we cannot know. Nobody seems guiltless, nobody seems safe; and then, suddenly, the murderer is spotted, and—relief!—he is not, after all, a person like you or me. He is a villain—known to the trade as George Gruesome—and he has been caught by an infallible Power, the supercilious and omniscient detective, who knows exactly how to fix the guilt.<sup>15</sup>

In an October 11, 1944, letter to Wilson, Nabokov gave his own, positive response to the article:

I liked very much your article on detective stories. Of course, Agatha is unreadable—but Sayers, whom you do not mention, writes well. Try *Crime Advertises*. Your attitude towards detective writing is curiously like my attitude towards Soviet literature, so that you are on the whole absolutely right. I hope that one day you will tackle the quarter of a century-old literature *sovetskovo molodnyaka*—and then I shall have the exquisite pleasure of seeing you reel and vomit—instead





Agatha Christie, best known for her 66 detective novels

of the slight nausea you experienced with [here follows a list of hackneyed phrases drawn from detective fiction].<sup>16</sup>

As Wilson's article and Nabokov's response to it indicate, the detective story was such a popular genre that it was impossible to ignore. In fact, I would argue, it is precisely its popularity that made the genre a fair and necessary target for both Wilson and Nabokov. Here we should note the analogy Nabokov tacitly posits between Soviet literature and the detective novel—how are we to understand that? I would suggest here a variation on the old adage “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.” In this case, we might modify it to read, “imitation is the sincerest form of

rivalry.” While Nabokov might not have shared Wilson's explanation of the reasons for the genre's popularity, he certainly recognized that the immense success of the detective novel made it a force to reckon with—especially as he was making his transition to writing in English, a language in which the detective novel particularly flourished. Judging by the examples I have adduced briefly in this paper, it would seem that Nabokov did not merely view the detective novel as a hackneyed genre for lazy readers, but perhaps as a source of potentially powerful devices which had become automatized, but—renovated along the lines outlined in the description of Sebastian Knight's *Prismatic Bezel*—might yet serve as a rich impetus to the Nabokovian text. □

<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 43.

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: New Directions, 2008), 92–95.

<sup>3</sup> There is a difficulty here in that Christie's novel, originally published under the title *Ten Little Niggers*, first appeared in November 1939, while Nabokov claimed to have completed *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* by the end of January of the same year in time to submit the manuscript for a literary prize. Still, since *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* was not published until 1941, the possibility that Nabokov was responding to that Christie novel in particular is not precluded.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 91–92.

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Despair* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 15.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 121–22.

<sup>9</sup> The passage following this begins: “But what are they—Doyle, Dostoevsky, Leblanc, Wallace—what are all the great novelists who wrote of nimble criminals, [...]” (122).

<sup>10</sup> Helen Oakley compares *Despair* with Christie's novel at some length in her “Disturbing Designs: Nabokov's Manipulation of the Detective Fiction Genre in *Pale Fire* and *Despair*,” *Journal of Popular Culture* (Winter 2003), 480–96. While

I would view *Pale Fire* as invoking the thriller rather than the classical British detective novel, I certainly agree with her assertion that, “The difference between the classic detective story and Nabokov's inversion of it can be linked to Barthes' contrast between the ‘text of pleasure,’ which is identified with ‘a comfortable practice of reading,’ and the text of ‘bliss’ which ‘unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions [...] brings to a crisis his relation with language’” (493).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Julian W. Connolly, “The Function of Literary Allusion in Nabokov's *Despair*,” *Slavic and East European Journal* (Madison, MD), 26, 1982, 302–13; and Alexander Dolinin, “Nabokov, Dostoevsky, and ‘Dostoevskiness’,” *Russian Studies in Literature: A Journal of Translations* (Fall 1999), vol. 35, no. 4: 42–60.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>13</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Why Do People Read Detective Stories?” *New Yorker* (October 14, 1944).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Simon Karlinsky, ed., *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters 1940–1971* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 144. The title of Sayers's novel is *Murder Must Advertise* [RM].