History and Denial in Nabokov’s “Conversation Piece, 1945”

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If Nabokov’s numerous short stories have received less critical attention than his novels – and this is very demonstrably the case – it may be in part because they do not always conform to the pattern or blueprint recognized in the novels, what Michael Wood calls Nabokov’s “signature” (23-7). Certainly, Nabokov’s novels regularly include elements which readers may well come to expect: the butterflies and the chess pieces, the gun which goes off by the end with Chekhovian reliability, the nod to Lewis Carroll and the jab at Freud. Yet the identification of such a composite recipe as the definition of “Nabokovian” turns out to be improvident and misleading in the same way that, for example, the popular use of the adjective “Orwellian” represents a narrow (in this case, typically one novel) and arguably poor understanding of the author’s writings. Although Nabokov himself would likely convulse at the notion of the comparison, the case of Orwell is insightful here, since it is primarily assumptions about the specifically political underpinnings of privileged (i.e., most republished, taught, and cited) works like Nineteen Eighty-Four and Animal Farm that enable the value-designation, regardless of how apt these assumptions may be. A similarly established set of values discerned in novels like Lolita, Pale Fire, and Ada form the Nabokovian “signature,” though the typical assumption about any political underpinnings of these books is that they more or less do not exist.

That the author’s claim that “nothing bores me more than political novels and the literature of social intent” (Strong Opinions 3) enjoys more notoriety than any of his short stories points to how imbalanced the political critique of his texts has remained, and a reader faced with the neglected story “Conversation Piece, 1945” is startled to discover a pointed engagement with history as a stylized, inherently problematic narrative and a complex analysis of exactly what “the literature of social intent” means.

Originally published as “Double Talk” in The New Yorker and retitled in Nabokov's Dozen (1958), “Conversation Piece, 1945” does have some “signature” traits, such as the émigré narrator and the fascination with doubles, but, fascinatingly, it is exactly these customary
“Nabokovian” features which the story both expects will be taken for granted and employs to subvert, even contradict the narrative itself. The story concerns a gathering in Boston one evening in –as the new title insists in a manner that is markedly anomalous within Nabokov’s fiction– the last year of the second world war. The narrator, who begins by saying he has “a disreputable namesake” (587) but refrains from giving this name, accepts an invitation to one “Mrs. Hall’s apartment house” (the author’s amusement at this word-arrangement is detectable), where he discovers a dozen middle-class people (mostly women) calmly despairing the fate of Nazi Germany in a “bourgeois salon” (588). When the guest speaker, a professor whom the narrator calls Dr. Shoe when he “did not catch his name” (589), finally proposes to play “The Star-Spangled Banner,” the narrator confesses to being overcome with physical nausea and leaves, not without expressing his scorn to Mrs. Hall on his way out. He takes the wrong hat, however, and the next morning Dr. Shoe materializes at his door and returns the narrator’s larger hat. The narrator only finds Shoe’s hat (Nabokov chuckling again there) when the man has left, but he tosses the hat four storeys down to him.

The story’s last three paragraphs compel the reader to re-examine these events, particularly because of the offhand manner of the narrator and the seeming disconnectedness between what they describe and the preceding events. Here the narrator mentions receiving a letter of extortion from what must be the unnamed double, a man who lists ordeals he has suffered for being misidentified as “the author of those depraved, decadent writings” (597), writings which he attributes to the narrator. The letter also accuses the narrator of having appeared “in a drunken condition at the house of a highly respected person” (597), and it is this detail which gives the reader pause.

Calling the story “unusually topical” –an understatement, as I will explain below– Brian Boyd provides a strangely limp reading by taking the narrator, “a liberal Russian émigré” (85; emphasis added), at his word. The narrator is for Boyd little more than a cipher with which Nabokov may “explain his own ideological position” (85). This interpretation leaves several questions unanswered. Is Nabokov simply lying in interviews when he says that ideology and ideas have no place in (his) art? What “depraved, decadent writings” has this quasi-Nabokov written (note that the infamy of Lolita is still ten years away)? Why does the story conclude with the matter-of-fact judgement that “the sum he demanded was really a most modest one” (597), from which the reader may infer that sum was paid? Why pay off a blackmailer?

The narrative of history, as “Conversation Piece, 1945” demonstrates, paradoxically assumes its cruellest and most subjective shape when it denies or occludes its own cruel subjectivity. If “the house of a highly respected person” may be read to mean that of Mrs. Hall, recalling Dr. Shoe’s characterization of her as “a very well-known society lady” (596), the narrator’s version of events and, more chillingly, his political position within the loathsome discussion at Mrs. Hall’s assume a completely different complexion – the shoe is now on the other foot, as it were. Nabokov’s narrator complains in the story’s second paragraph that he has been arrested for drunken and disorderly behaviour, though he instances this as another case of mistaken identity. He also explains his being at the “little meeting” (588) as another such doppelganger difficulty: “Mrs. Hall’s Mrs. Sharp was as totally distinct from my Mrs. Sharp as I was from my namesake” (590). This is a telling phrase worth returning to, but it is important to consider first the “misadventure, which had nothing to do with the subject of the present account” which the narrator says caused him to be late, and about which he does not elaborate (588).
the reader speculates, based on the working assumption that perhaps the narrator was indeed “in a drunken condition” at Mrs. Hall’s, that the “misadventure” represents drinking, the integrity of the narrator falls away in rapid and illuminating stages. He does not dissent from the views of Dr. Shoe and company not because of “morbid curiosity” or a stammer (590), and his “beginning to feel physically sick” (595) is not a symptom of moral revulsion but of mere inebriation. His exit line about those in attendance being “murderers or fools” seems nothing but a fabrication in light of these considerations as well as his remark about the statement’s not having “come out as smooth as it is on paper” (595). Dr. Shoe later refers to it ambiguously as “the strange remark” (596), hardly a fitting description of the alleged condemnation.

7 It thus becomes all too easy to understand why the narrator takes the wrong hat, and the reader may perceive that the so-called mistakes of the tale’s telling are actually its subliminal corrections. A premonitory shudder is felt at the use of the word “mistake” when Dr. Shoe refers to the invasion of Russia as Hitler’s “mistake” (590), implying that his other acts and schemes, including the implementation of the Final Solution, were right-minded. Beginning with the opening anecdote about the overdue copy of the Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion, the narrator’s account attempts to conceal himself, to deny that he is “the bastard” (588), the drinker, antisemite, and “author of those depraved, decadent writings.” This is Hyde ascribing his own monstrous crimes to Jekyll, with the exact nature of those crimes obscured and the names removed.

8 These inversions may be Nabokovian games, but they are being played with dangerously high stakes. The turns of the narratological screw in “Conversation Piece, 1945” do more than reveal the narrator’s abhorrent character in the manner that the surplus and substance of endnotes to Shade’s poem reveal Kinbote’s monomania in Pale Fire. If, on the one hand, the narrator is what Boyd claims, the political thrust of the story becomes an affirmation of platitudes—the Nazis committed atrocities, Stalin is a monster, and those who deny such truths are wretches—despite Nabokov’s repeated execrations of authors who use literature as this sort of platform. In “Ultima Thule,” another story collected in Nabokov’s Dozen, a character who has apparently struck upon a universal, holistic, yet fatally inexpressible “Truth,” defines “any truism” as “the corpse of a relative truth” (515). Human beings, the man named Falter admits, experience a “recoil” at the “electric discharge of reality, relative reality, no doubt, for you, humans, possess no other” (514-5). For readers to accept the role of the narrator in “Conversation Piece, 1945” as a morally benign reporter of the banality of evil, they must also accept that Nabokov is capable of writing a fiction which offers unmediated and (literally) self-evident truth, besides the unsettling contradictions I have pointed out within the story itself. On the other hand, in detecting contradictions within the “liberal” facade of the narrator and finding reason to doubt his series of denials and negations (he is not the “vulgar personality” [587], he is not at the party by choice, he is not in agreement with the notions expressed there, and so on), the reader is confronted with stark questions about the relation of political ideology to historical truth.

9 Boyd is correct in saying that Nabokov “mimics superbly the fluent nonsense of ideas he detests” (86) and the company and conversation at Mrs. Hall’s are, accordingly, exceptionally vile. It is worth considering, however, that this sense of repugnance is strongest when the characters’ sentiments are couched in sympathetic, even “liberal”-sounding language. One woman, for example, protests talk of punishing the Germans:
They, too, are human beings. And any sensitive person will agree with what you [Dr. Shoe] say about their not being responsible for those so-called atrocities, most of which have probably been invented by the Jews. I get mad when I hear people still jabbering about furnaces and torture houses which, if they existed at all, were operated by only a few men as insane as Hitler. (593)

10 Classic Holocaust denial: it did not happen, and even if it did, it was just a few rotten apples at work. It is probably impossible to isolate the most objectionable word or phrase in this passage, but that “any sensitive person” should be able to use the word “still” in 1945 shows an impatience with history’s inability to accommodate either every person’s viewpoint or ignorance. Of note here is how the appeals to “principles of mercy and common sense” (590) signal the presence of their opposites in exactly the same fashion that the ascription of mistakes and denials of involvement indicate intent and complicity.

11 There is a pregnant convolution of these reversals in Mrs. Hall’s comparison of the fallen Third Reich to Prometheus, “who once stole fire and was blinded by the angry gods” (590). Prometheus is of course a favourite touchstone of Romanticism, and Mrs. Hall is trying to paint a romantic picture of the Nazis (the monstrous “Modern Prometheus” of Frankenstein evidently notwithstanding), but she has muddled her Greek mythology. Mrs. Hall’s conflation of the stories of Prometheus, who was bound to a rock and regularly pecked at by an eagle sent by Zeus, and Oedipus, who put out his own eyes in horror and shame, displays more than ignorance lurking behind her pretensions. Nabokov’s sly reference to Oedipus—curiously unaccompanied by an authorial sneer at psychoanalysis—acts as an accusation very like that offered in Milan Kundera’s novel, The Unbearable Lightness of Being. Tomas, a doctor in Czechoslovakia, publishes an attack on the Communist leaders which compares them to Oedipus:

When Tomas heard Communists shouting in defense of their inner purity, he said to himself, As a result of your “not knowing,” this country has lost its freedom, lost it for centuries, perhaps, and you shout that you feel no guilt? How can you stand the sight of what you’ve done? How is it you aren’t horrified? How can you stand the sight of what you’ve done? How is it you aren’t horrified? Have you no eyes to see? If you had eyes, you would have to put them out and wander away from Thebes!

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12 Hana Píchová has explored how Nabokov and Kundera both relate “problems of cultural preservation, memory, understanding, and appropriation” (87), and I would add to those words one more: responsibility. Mrs. Hall’s transition from the active voice (“stole fire”) to the passive (“was blinded”) is symptomatic of her refusal to accept both German responsibility for crimes against humanity and her own responsibility, as the intellectual she wants to be seen as, to get her facts straight. Tomas recognizes the Communists as far less noble and less tragic than Oedipus, whose self-inflicted blindness is poetic justice: he cannot permit himself to look upon the horror he did not see before. Mrs. Hall’s Prometheus-Oedipus feels no guilt for his transgression and suffers unjust punishment at the hands of others who are more powerful than he is.

13 This distinction is crucial. Dr. Shoe, Mrs. Hall, and the other grotesques of “Conversation Piece, 1945” claim victim status for themselves: Mrs. Hall calls “very true” the poorly named “paradox” of Dr. Shoe, which states that “the soldiers slaughtered in Europe” were “at least spared the terrible misgivings which we civilians must suffer in silence” (591-2). More ironies can be unpacked here. The phrase “terrible misgivings” again sounds the note of the vaguely conscience-stricken liberal, while the only genuine silence is the narrator’s, himself (he repeatedly insists) a victim of circumstance: in the story’s first words, he says he only “happen[s] to have” the unfortunate name (587).
Punishments aside, the role of blameless victim claimed by the Czech Communists in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and by the Nazi sympathizers in Nabokov's story depends upon the assertion of “not knowing.” Here again Mrs. Hall's invocation of Prometheus is revealing, since the very name “Prometheus” means “foresight” or “forethought.” Nabokov doubles this point by giving his “well-known society lady” the name Sybil, marking her as a farcical oracle who offers not accurate insights into the future but distorted visions of the past. In this capacity she complements the dishonest though respectable-seeming narrator.

By noting that Nabokov's later changing of the title from “Double Talk” to “Conversation Piece, 1945” was to highlight the “unusually topical” nature of the story, Boyd seems to imply that Nabokov had grown less pleased with the story and in rechristening it labeled it as something of a trifle (85), though I feel that, given the more complex reading of the story I have outlined here, more and deeper questions can be posed to the title(s). Both titles centralize speech, in part cuing the reader to mind the nuances of the voice relating this story, but whereas “Double Talk” is clever, “Conversation Piece, 1945” brings more sharply into focus the sometimes puzzling relationship between history and fiction. With the latter title, Nabokov heaps more pronounced disgust upon those stalwarts of the middle class who can reduce atrocities to polite and ignorant chat and treat as novelty acts and ideas which are less than human. The term “conversation piece” also refers to a “type of genre painting involving a portrait group posed in a landscape or domestic setting” (*OED*), and this definition highlights the falsely idyllic setting and the banality of the characters painted within the story while it draws attention to the fact of the frame, the prejudice of the unseen painter's eye. The additional detail of “1945,” which I have already discussed, assures the reader that despite the generic abstractions, this picture is of a moment in time when people “still” talked about these appalling things in this appalling way.

Nabokov makes a significant separation between revisionism and relativism: in fact, he equates this separation with that between a lie and a fiction. Fiction, or more generally a work of art, may contain a lie (the Holocaust did not take place) and re-situate it, re-frame it, invite the reader to view it relative to other information in the narrative. History is a different matter, split as the word is into meaning both what happened and what is said to have happened but incapable of meaning both simultaneously (i.e., what is said to have happened can never exactly be what happened). Nabokov's dislike of truisms –those “corpses of relative truths”– and his doubts about any absolute “Truth” extend to a principled suspicion of history, often the self-declared voice of truth and enemy of invention. “History is what hurts,” Fredric Jameson has written (and these are possibly the only lines by Jameson with which Vladimir Nabokov might agree): “it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its ‘ruses’ turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention. But this History can be apprehended only through its effects, and never directly as some reified force” (102). From this vantage point we can better appreciate Nabokov’s contempt for “the literature of social intent” as a rejection of the purity of any ideology or intention –liberalism included– which necessarily reifies “History” or “Truth.” In “Conversation Piece, 1945,” we as readers are witness to such “grisly and ironic reversals” as leave us without an ideological viewpoint that we can call innocent.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. Wood offers an example of this trend when he begins his study of Nabokov by noting that the author “wrote poems, plays and novels, but above all novels” (1).

2. “More or less” because a picture of Nabokov as a kind of apolitical liberal (he once said “I do not mind being labeled an old-fashioned liberal” [Strong Opinions 96], which is not quite the same thing as saying “I am a liberal”) has most recently been presented to the public in Azar Nafisi’s bestseller, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Nafisi’s historicization of novels (and again, the neglect of the shorter works goes unexamined) like *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Lolita* are in my view highly selective, just as her representation of the democratic West, and the United States in particular, is surprisingly uncritical. See Conley 43-44.

3. For reasons I do not pretend to understand, the text of the letter is italicized in the Vintage edition of *The Stories*, though not in *Nabokov’s Dozen*, where the story has a compositional date at its end: “Boston, 1945” (140).

4. This chilling use of the word “mistake” is repeated when Dr. Shoe proceeds to explain the “propaganda” about atrocities, which he compares to the so-called German atrocities in the First World War – those horrible legends about Belgian women being seduced, and so on. Well, immediately after the war, in the summer of 1920, *if I am not mistaken*, a special committee of
German democrats thoroughly investigated the whole matter, and we all know how pedantically thorough and precise German experts can be. (592, emphasis added)
The ironies here are nothing less than brutal, for the pedantic Shoe is himself of “Teutonic origin” (589) and the fact that the Third Reich’s genocidal program was notoriously documented with cool thoroughness and precision by its engineers also represents the decisive decimation of the rhetoric of Holocaust denial.

5. The politically and ethically venturesome scheme of doubling in this story bears resemblance to Philip Roth’s in Operation Shylock. I know of no substantial comparison of these two writers, but recommend the effort.

6. “Ultima Thule” is a translated fragment salvaged from an abandoned novel of the same name. Bearing in mind Maxim D. Shrayber’s tantalizing suggestion that the puzzling framework of an early story, “Terra Incognita,” may be the result of its “horrific otherworld” being “too indeterminate to write” (52; italics in original), one could argue that Nabokov could not complete a novel with an absolute “Truth” (or even the potential thereof) because its presence would be too determinate to write.

7. Outside of his fiction Nabokov is himself capable of double standards when it comes to acknowledging atrocities. When we read a pronouncement like “[l]isting in one breath Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Vietnam is seditious poshlost” (Strong Opinions 101), we might argue that Nabokov refuses to have the distinctive horrors of one historical nightmare interchanged – perhaps even compared – with another, were it not for the firm use of “seditive.” Nabokov can ridicule the scoundrel’s use of American patriotism as a refuge (as he does in “Conversation Piece, 1945”), but he evidently does not see patriotism itself as poshlost.

ABSTRACTS

D’une manière significative, Nabokov a, plus d’une fois, détaché ses écrits de la littérature dite sociale ou engagée. Ce qui est d’ailleurs reconnu par l’ensemble des critiques qui privilégient l’étude de ses romans à celle de ses nouvelles. Dérangeante, la recherche du sens du mot « Histoire » dans « Conversation Piece, 1945 » présente cette nouvelle, peu étudiée, comme une exception significative à la règle ou bien nous permet d’y voir un démenti aux déclarations de l’auteur. Thème favori de Nabokov, le double invite ici le lecteur à examiner de près la position « libérale » adoptée par le narrateur pour rapporter la conversation d’une rencontre, apparentement fortuite, avec des révisionnistes. A présente étude de “Conversation Piece, 1945” réexamine les connotations idéologiques et politiques de ce qu’on appelle « une histoire nabokovienne » pour, éventuellement, redresser certains critères de sa définition.

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