Parody, Pastiche, and Periodization: Nabokov/Jameson

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1.

Parody, pastiche, and the shift from modernism to postmodernism are all terminological minefields. But the idea of confronting Nabokov with Fredric Jameson will probably arouse the most resistance from Nabokov's readers. Jameson is the best-known Marxist critic in the United States today: but this reputation would not have impressed Nabokov, who would have relished the parallel between Jameson's first name and that of Fradrik Skotoma, the invented ideologue in *Bend Sinister* .[1] However, Jameson's Marxism has post-structuralist flourishes that are hard to square with the Soviet orthodoxies that Nabokov detested. Over two decades ago, in fact, Jameson responded favorably to Russian formalism, a marginalized Soviet movement with affinities to Nabokov.[2]

More generally, Jameson's criticism displays an intellectual restlessness that can dazzle and confuse, yet its very breadth opens up stimulating issues at the edge of his main project. This is especially true with problems of historical context and periodization, most notably the very crossroads which this issue of *Cycnos* proposes to study with regard to Nabokov. Thus Jameson's recent major book on postmodernism[3] advances an ambitious but debatable thesis about the shift from modernism to postmodernism that needs to be tested against Nabokov's career.

According to Jameson, a major change in intertextual practices occurred in the 1950s. Instead of parody, with its nuanced evaluations of past styles which still function as benchmarks even when the styles are rejected or transformed, we get pastiche. In this practice, the ingrained awareness of cultural history which marks parody has vanished. Instead, Jameson contends, we get "a neutral practice of such mimicry" (17), which undertakes "the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past" (18). These contrasting categories then allow him to identify a larger change in literary period, in the manner of Wölfflin's *Principles of Art History* (1915). Thus the dramatic erosion of cultural self-consciousness in pastiche can be correlated with the advent of postmodernism. Our age, unlike early twentieth-century modernism, willfully ignores both history and memory, producing a massive detemporalization of experience.

History in this diagnosis means Marxist shifts in economic paradigms, from market capitalism to imperialism, then on to contemporary multinational capitalism (35). The decline of memory, however, may be witnessed in post-structuralist critiques of individualism; or, as Jameson colorfully puts it, "we are sick and tired of the subjective as such in its older classical forms (which include deep time and memory)" (151). As a result, unlike Joseph Frank in "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," Jameson sees modernism as still temporal in orientation. Only with postmodernism does spatialization triumph, thus explaining why his own criticism downplays fiction in favor of visual artifacts like architecture, film, and experimental video.

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[1] Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (1947; rpt. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), pp. 74-79.

[2] Fredric Jameson, *The Prison House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 43-98.

[3] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1991), which won the prestigious Lowell Prize from the Modern Language Association. Further references are given in parentheses. The book reprints a much-cited essay with same title from the *New Left Review*, n° 146 (July-August 1984), 59-92.

Thus for Jameson the big issue is not separating modernist parody from postmodern pastiche; it is linking cultural and economic history. But as already noted, the main trend of his criticism can be less thought-provoking than what occurs at the margins. In this spirit, though the postmodernism book never mentions Nabokov, it does include three scattered passages with intense relevance to his career. One turns on Viktor Shklovsky's "knight's move" metaphor for artistic innovation; another emerges from Jameson's discomfort with intertextuality as a wayward form of historical awareness; and a third involves his little-noticed reliance on Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* to define pastiche. Let us consider these items one by one.

2.

Jameson invokes Shklovsky in a discussion of "modernist history," a phrase Jameson cautiously puts in quotes but then describes with gusto. Modernist history "in its most authentic, least stupid and caricatural, form" proposes a temporal series "in which each genuinely new work unexpectedly but logically outtrumped its predecessor (not 'linear history' this, but rather Shklovsky's 'knight's gambit,' the action at a distance, the quantum leap to the undeveloped or underdeveloped square)" (xi). This passage stands out for two reasons. By praising Russian formalist approaches to history, it places an element of Nabokov's youthful literary world at the heart of modernism's theoretical self-consciousness. As a result, far from seeming an outsider or latecomer in English-language fiction, Nabokov proves closer than his Anglo-American contemporaries to what Jameson calls the "most authentic" impetus of modernism. Such a view usefully questions recent efforts to class Nabokov as neither postmodernist nor modernist, but as *late* modernist.[4] How can a writer in direct contact with the basic thrust of modernism be "late"?

In addition, Shklovsky's metaphor resonates with great power in Nabokov's fiction. Thus the writer-hero of *The Gift* at once echoes Shklovsky and parallels Jameson when he remarks that "any genuinely new trend is a knight's move."[5] The same metaphor of non-linear progress marks the very name of another fictitious writer, Sebastian Knight in Nabokov's first novel in English, whose genius is said to embody "that special 'Knightian twist.'"[6] Within the author's imagined career, this trait can imply a penchant for contrived plots, a love of playing with characters' names, or an uncanny permeability between levels of reality. But one key meaning is parody, which for Knight, in a famous phrase, becomes a "springboard for leaping into the highest region of serious emotion."[7]

On reflection, this formula points up a *double* twist in Knight's writing. For beyond his skill in parodically distorting an original text — which is the term's traditional meaning[8] — Knight also turns the ridicule usually associated with parody into serious emotion. This sense of the possible seriousness of parody was of course a hallmark of Russian formalism, whether in Shklovsky's celebration of *Tristram Shandy* as a parodic novel, in Tynianov's emphasis on Dostoevsky's parodic link to Gogol, or — moving beyond Formalism — in Bakhtin's idea of parody as one variant of the dialogic principle.

The fact that all these critics were active in the twenties at the height of modernism may explain why Jameson considers parody an explicitly modernist practice. For if he accepts the

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[4] This issue arose at a 1994 meeting of the International Nabokov Society. See *The Nabokovian* 34 (Spring 1995), 4.

[5] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*, trans. Michael Scammell with the collaboration of the author (New York: Putnam's, 1963), p. 239.

[6] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: New Directions, 1941), p. 158.

[7] *Real Life*, p. 91.

[8] See Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1982), p. 17. Genette's term for Knight's serious parody is "transposition" (35).

"knight's move" as a primary metaphor for literary modernism, then the Russian view of parody as creative manipulation of the past could be seen as giving that metaphor a specific stylistic content. Granted, parody was around long before modernism, as formalist criticism of Sterne and Dostoevsky shows. But its capacity to undermine and rework previous literature, thereby preparing for Jamesonian "quantum leaps" and the "outtrumping of predecessors," does suggest how parody can support projects of modernist innovation. The Russian formalists — and Nabokov after them — demonstrate the force of this conjunction, which Jameson warmly endorses even though none of the Russians actually argues that parody is exclusively modernist.

The knight's-move metaphor thus points up a startling convergence between two figures on very different wavelengths. But no sooner does Jameson acknowledge parody's role as a demolition agent than he pulls up short. Such a role is only cultural, not social; and hence, though parody can open up historical vistas, it does so only in the limited way signalled by the quotes around "modernist history." To be more specific, the parodic strategy of advancing through negation appeals to Jameson because to Marxist eyes it follows the same dialectical logic as real history — except parody stays within an aesthetic realm of illusion. Thus, in commenting further on the knight's move, Jameson states that "dialectical history, to be sure, affirmed that all history worked this way, on its left foot, as it were […] but fewer ears heard that than believed the modernist aesthetic paradigm" (xi). This gap between modernism and true history marks the spot where intertextuality will enter the discussion. When it does, it will waken such anxieties that the distinction between parody and pastiche dissolves, thus threatening the stylistic test for the shift to postmodernism.

3.

The vehicle for this terminological confusion, which bears out my opening remark about minefields, is the American film *Body Heat*, supposedly a classic example of postmodern pastiche. Quite like *Despair* and the early twentieth-century Dostoievskyians analyzed by Alexander Dolinin, but without the novel's critical bite, *Body Heat* is an echo-chamber of film-noir classics. Jameson acknowledges such interplay by calling the film "a distant 'affluent society' remake of James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity*" (20). But then he stresses the skill with which *Body Heat* edits out "the object world of the present day — artifacts and appliances, whose styling would at once serve to date the image"; hence the viewer receives "the narrative as though it were set in some eternal thirties, beyond real historical time" (21). In this spirit Jameson notes the lack of ocean-front high rises in a Florida movie, to which I would add the oddity of characters who repeatedly mention the oppressive heat, as if most Floridians were not shielded by air conditioning. The film presents a 1980s Florida with the climate technology of 1930s California, the setting of so many films-noirs.

Jameson has helpfully uncovered a willful lack of historical precision in *Body Heat* that indeed suggests detemporalization, making the film seem ideal for studying pastiche as a postmodern practice. Yet when Jameson makes this point, something odd happens: his language jumps to a level of generality where pastiche merges with parody. In *Body Heat*, he states, "the preexistence of other versions […] is now a constitutive and essential part of the film's structure: we are now, in other words, in 'intertextuality' as a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect and as the operator of a new connotation of 'pastness' and pseudo-historical depth, in which the history of aesthetic style displaces 'real' history" (20). Notice that as this key passage sums up the postmodern aesthetic, it evokes a parodic revaluation of previous styles more than the random cannibalization of pastiche. Indeed, since pastiche conveys both a "connotation of 'pastness'" and a "history of aesthetic style," it now has the same modicum of historical awareness as parody. The reason for this confusion is clear. Whatever the difference between parody and pastiche, they are both intertextual practices; and

Jameson has turned from determining which one is marginally more historical to defending "real," Marxist history from an all-consuming intertextuality, which pretends to be adequate to history in its own right.

Nabokov, of course, rejects this emphasis on one particular brand of historical consciousness. Nor does he try to split parody off from pastiche, for if Humbert Humbert claims to write pastiches of T. S. Eliot, their overall impact is strongly satirical and hence parodic.[9] What is more, as a virtuoso of intertextuality, Nabokov seems to take the very stance that bothers Jameson. But in fact Nabokov allows for nuances, as shown by his preface to *Bend Sinister*, a notably searching discussion of intertextuality and its relation to history.

This preface opens with a characteristic denial of history, attacking "literature of social comment" as a misguided detour into "general ideas."[10] Nabokov then explicates some of his devices, many of which are intertextual and often parodic in either the satiric or serious sense. Though conceding that most readers are deaf to this aspect of literature, he still insists on its primacy for his creative process: "what pleases me most is the wayside murmur of this or that hidden theme" (xii) The word "hidden" in this capsule statement is especially rich. It evokes not just the understated surface of Nabokov's intertextual art but also the desire to challenge the reader's interpretive powers and the analogies with a metaphysics of mysteriously elusive meaning. Above all, it registers the insight that once parody becomes a springboard for innovation, one's writing will no longer necessarily carry any clear trace of the source text. Reflecting this inescapable process of distortion, the preface later refers to intertextual passages as "delicate markers whose very nature requires that they not be too conspicuous" (xi).

By calling these passages "themes," Nabokov uses a word that is almost as rich as "hidden." On one level it means interwoven motifs, as with musical "themes." At the same time, despite Nabokov's strictures against ideas in literature, it also means significant content; thus he remarks that his novel's "main theme" is not the exposure of dictatorship but a particular serious emotion — "the beating of Krug's loving heart" (viii). This dual potential in any intertextual theme can be illustrated by the dictator's name in Bend Sinister. On the pattern-making level "Paduk the Toad" chimes with "paddock," a Shakespearean word for toad. But more is involved than clever word-play, since the witches in Macbeth put a poisoned toad into their cauldron just before the hero appears in Act IV, asks their advice, and orders the murder of Macduff's family.[11] Since Krug's son meets a similar fate, this intertexual reference has acted parodically; it springs the reader into the region of Krug's "loving heart," thus becoming thematic in the sense of serious content.

Moreover, this play of references cannot be kept apart from historical issues, as Nabokov himself admits. Thus he claims that the story of Krug's son has exposed a new trend among dictators, their use of the "lever of love" to control rebellious subjects (vii). Just as important, the resonances with *Macbeth* confront Renaissance England with the recent Germano-Slavic world of *Bend Sinister*. Though the confrontation resists easy summary, it does encourage historical reflection, especially on the analogy between David's death (in a ghastly experiment that recalls both the Holocaust and the Gulags) and Macduff's image of "hell-kite" tyrants who destroy families in "one fell swoop."[12] Nabokov's intertextual "themes" are not always this historical, but in their often hidden pursuit of significance neither are they resolutely unhistorical, as Jameson contends and Nabokov likes to think. Or to rephrase the point with an eye to American debates on cultural theory, the webs of connection set up in Nabokov's

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[9] See especially the devastating take-off on "Ash Wednesday" when Humbert confronts Quilty. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (1958; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1989), pp. 16, 299-300.

[10] *Bend Sinister*, p. vi. Further references to the preface, which Nabokov wrote in 1963, are given in parentheses.

[11] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act IV, scene i.

[12] *Ibid*., Act IV, scene iii.

writing are less resistant to Bakhtinian approaches, which highlight the complex historical residues in language and how authors manipulate them, than they are to Marxist ones, with their emphasis on grand socio-economic narratives.

4.

No one to my knowledge has considered Thomas Mann's role in shaping the opposition between modernist parody and postmodern pastiche. But the Australian scholar Margaret Rose has raised the key issue in another context. Arguing that Jameson's definition of pastiche contains a hidden debt to Baudrillard, she points out "a set of category errors" whereby Jameson labels as postmodern a group of traits that were called modern in his source.[13] Rose overlooks the fact that in the United States Baudrillard has become a guru of the postmodern, but a similar slippage is even more striking with Mann. Thus, though critics of postmodernism hardly ever mention Mann, it is his 1947 novel *Doctor Faustus* that Jameson *openly* credits with influencing his concept of pastiche (16).

Here the student of Nabokov's career gets interested. For like *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Mann's novel tells the fictitious life-story of an artist, in this case a composer who flourished from about 1905 to 1930. Even more than with Knight, whose works appeared from 1925 to 1936, this time-frame suggests modernism. Also, it is hard to see how *Doctor Faustus* might have aided Jameson's thinking about pastiche, since the term "parody" gets all the attention. Thus the hero sees it as crucial for his gift, asserting that "all the methods and conventions of art today *are good for parody only*."[14] Such strong emphasis suggests that Mann surpasses even Nabokov in making parody central to modern art. But there is a key difference: for Mann, in contrast to the rousing leap of Sebastian Knight's springboard, parody is a melancholy necessity in a world without artistic originality.

Given Nabokov's view of Mann's *Death in Venice* as a supreme example of *poshlust*,[15] comparisons between the writers have not flourished. Elsewhere I have suggested that one reason for Nabokov's dislike was probably the story's status as a modernist icon.[16] Written at a major turning point for Mann, it initiated his breakthrough into myth, which in turn anticipated Eliot's equation of modernism with the "mythical method" in his review of *Ulysses*.[17] As Astradur Eysteinsson has just reaffirmed, this doctrine soon became paradigmatic for Anglo-American modernism.[18] But for Nabokov on entering the Anglo-American scene in the 1940s, this conjuncture was far from propitious; he detested myth wherever he found it, not just in Mann and Eliot, but even in James Joyce. Thus he could condemn the Homeric material in *Ulysses*: "there is nothing more tedious than a protracted and sustained allegory based on a well-worn myth."[19]

As the epithet "well-worn" indicates, myths are close to stereotypes in Nabokov's mind. They therefore lack parody's power to intervene in some cultural corpus and creatively rework it. Still, despite the sharp contrast Nabokov draws, parody and myth both operate by referring

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[13] Margaret A. Rose, "Post-Modern Pastiche." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 31, 1 (Jan. 1991), 29. Similarly, Jameson does not explain why Proust, who was surely a paragon of modernist "deep time and memory," should have written the famous pastiches collected in *Pastiches et mélanges*.

[14] Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Knopf, 1948), p. 134. The italics are Mann's.

[15] Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 101.

[16] John Burt Foster, Jr., "Nabokov and Kafka," *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), pp. 446-447.

[17] T. S. Eliot, "*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth." *The Dial* 75 (Nov. 1923), 480-83. Kenneth Burke's influential translation of *Death in Venice* appeared in the same journal in March, April, and May 1924.

[18] Astradur Eysteinsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 9-12.

[19] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers, introd. John Updike (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 288.

systematically to bodies of extratextual material. Nabokov touches on this parallel at one point in his *Ulysses* lecture, where instead of using Eliot's language of myth he calls the Homeric analogies "a close parody."[20] The distinction between the two methods perhaps lies in the cultural authority of the material to which they refer; even a literary classic does not solicit the religious veneration once given to myths, and many targets of parody are not classics at all. If this observation is correct, then Nabokov's insight here may have been keener than Eliot's, who arguably misread the Homeric intertext in *Ulysses* due to his own work with explicitly religious materials in *The Waste Land*.

In any case, if Nabokov could have seen Mann as a Joycean parodist, instead of rejecting him as an Eliotic mythmaker, he might have better appreciated his work. Perhaps *Felix Krull*, begun just before *Death in Venice* but finished after *Doctor Faustus* and published in the fifties like *Lolita*, would have provided common ground. For if *Lolita*, the "Confession of a White Widowed Male," parodies Nabokov's just completed *Speak, Memory* as well as other forms of life-writing like the Freudian case-history, then he might have admired Mann's self-styled "Confessions of a Confidence Man," with its own parodies of Goethe's autobiography. In the context of Nabokov's career, then, Mann does not authorize a Jamesonian division between modernist parody and postmodern pastiche. Instead, he suggests a different distinction between intertextual practices — a fissure within modernism itself between parody and myth.

5.

Thus, despite Jameson's claim to have a stylistic test for separating modernism and postmodernism, he does little to clarify Nabokov's position at the crossroads of these movements. The definitions of parody and pastiche prove on examination to be too problematic. Still, confronting this novelist with this critic does support inquiry into Nabokov's place in twentieth-century literature; and ironically, given the title of Jameson's book, it yields insights into modernism.

Students of Nabokov's cultural situation should not be misled by his quarrels with historical doctrines like Marxism. There is an historical dimension to his work, even though the ingenuity of his intertextual games can make it difficult to analyze. In fact, given the cross-cultural range of Nabokov's contacts, a full elucidation of his historical place may well prove unusually instructive. Thus, despite the difficulties both with the modernism-postmodernism distinction and with locating Nabokov within it, the topic is worth pursuing.

As for modernism, the vicissitudes of the knight's-move metaphor show that definitions of the term must allow for Nabokov's Russian background. Assertions about his postmodernism (or even his late modernism) which gloss over the three decades of fiction before *Lolita* drastically oversimplify his position within twentieth-century literature. In addition, Nabokov's critiques of Mann and Eliot should make us wary of formerly dominant definitions of modernism. If modernism means myth, and postmodernism opposes modernism, then Nabokov's dislike of *Death in Venice* and *The Waste Land* makes it easy to prove him a postmodernist. But what if all that is at stake is Eliot's *version* of modernism, or even the New Critics' version of Eliot? Not only Nabokov but also Mann, we have seen, wrote imagined narratives of modernism which stressed parody rather than myth.

Most important of all, however, is the basic assumption of this paper. To set Nabokov beside a critic like Jameson reveals that Nabokov's practice as a fiction-writer has major theoretical implications in its own right. These implications are well worth teasing out despite his hostility to theory. For though the theory boom has slackened, to leave theory to the theorists

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 288.

would be a mistake, especially with a writer like Nabokov. After all, as Frank Kermode once remarked, here is a modern novelist with a "really overpowering intelligence."[21]

[21] Frank Kermode, "*Bend Sinister*," *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Norman Page (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 76.