



## “Reading with the spine” or Reading Nabokov with Huck Finn

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### Pour citer cet article

Kuzmanovich Zoran, « “Reading with the spine” or Reading Nabokov with Huck Finn », *Cycnos*, vol. 24.1 (Vladimir Nabokov, Annotating vs Interpreting Nabokov), 2006, mis en ligne en mars 2008.

<http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/592>

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### *Cycnos, études anglophones*

*revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice*

ISSN 1765-3118

ISSN papier 0992-1893

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# EPI-REVEL

Revue électronique de l'Université Côte d'Azur

"Reading with the spine" or Reading Nabokov with Huck Finn

Zoran Kuzmanovich

Nabokov studies is now a sufficiently mature scholarly field that it can withstand much more critically informed disagreement than it has borne so far. I would like to propose and examine certain forms of unforced communal critical practice, forms that avoid ad hominem attacks yet presume neither the common ground of some ideal starting point nor the desirability of an agreement or even consensus. Since I like having and keeping friends, to tease out the potential advantages and pitfalls of such critical practices, I'll start with unflattering descriptions of my own work: "Kuzmanovich's reading could be used in this respect as a test case of Nabokov's 'creating wit in others'-like Falstaff-in an area of proxemics and unvoiced intuition. Kuzmanovich's (work) shows that this critic is subliminally aware of their importance, although that awareness never rises to the surface of critical discussion in explicit theoretical formulation." I do not intend to use my time to answer this or any other critic of my work. I do intend, however, to start from the proposition that Nabokov's creating wit in others may have been both a boon for and a brake on Nabokov studies. I then wish to treat a set of critical statements, culled from Nabokov and others, as nodes in a network of more heterogeneous possibilities for reading Nabokov.

Davidson College

"Joyce's mistake in those otherwise marvelous mental soliloquies of his consists in that he gives too much verbal body to thoughts"

Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 30

My paper has three parts, a sinful prologue, a self-pitying confessional middle, and a penance-filled epilogue. A reader of psychoanalytic bent would be justified dividing it into trauma, symptom, and therapy. There is of course no part devoted to either forgiveness or cure. Here

in Nice, where desire comes to know itself, usually at a considerable cost, either forgiveness or cure would be very much out of place.

I interpret the mandate for this conference to be the scrutiny of our own hermeneutical habits, and I am sad to report that for me both annotation and interpretation, to the degree that they are distinguishable, are activities fraught with professional dangers and even psychic terrors. Emboldened by Nabokov's vision of "footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page so as to leave only the gleam of one eternal line between commentary and eternity" ("Problems of Translation," 143). I had aimed for that annotative gleam in an essay for Prof. Julian Connolly's *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov* volume. Not only had I gotten less gleam than muddy light but in a recent review of that volume Sam Schuman good-naturedly pointed out that my annotations of Nabokov's poem "Restoration" did not quite evade "the risk of a kind of Kinbotean disconnect" (217). No matter your convictions about those who speak through Kinbote or those for whom he speaks, let me tell you that when it comes to reviews of your own work, the sensation of finding yourself in the same sentence with Charles Kinbote is still not a good thing. So I will think twice before annotating any other Nabokov poem, I can promise you that. But making that promise is not tantamount to endorsing wholeheartedly any single interpretive approach. Interpretation has its price too. While we can blame I.A. Richards for making interpretation of poetry a testable subject for the Cambridge tripos and thus unleashing hordes of heartless interpreters on unsuspecting centuries of poetry, we can thank Susan Sontag, still somehow the "public scold and portable conscience of our time" (*Time magazine*), for pointing out that interpretation, especially of the compulsory and often joyless kind, is not a much better alternative to proliferating annotation. With her own penchant for strong opinions, Sontag decreed that interpretation in our culture is "reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, stifling," "a befouling poison[ous] effusion" and "the revenge of the intellect upon art" ("Against Interpretation"). Faced with such a decree, do you really want to admit to having already practiced interpretation over the last three days or do you wish to deny doing it even now as I labor here to publicly accept my role as the Polonius of Nabokov studies? I am not sensing any poisonous effusions yet, but the day is still young and the

revenge motive always unpredictable. A warning, though. If you must interpret, please have the good sense and good taste to engage in acts of hermeneutics only with consenting adults. Even in Nice.

But if Sontag had gotten her way and some Homeland Security-like office declared an end to interpretation, what would happen? I cannot tell you, but Ernest Gellner can. I quote: "Hermeneutic speakeasies would spring up all over the place, smuggled Thick Descriptions would be brought in by the lorry-load from Canada by the Mafia, blood and thick meaning would clot in the gutter as rival gangs of semiotic bootleggers slugged it out in a series of bloody shoot-outs and ambushes. Addicts would be subject to blackmail. Consumption of deep meanings and its attendant psychic consequences would in no way diminish, but the criminal world would benefit, and the whole fabric of civil society would be put under severe strain." (20-21).

Before I put you under severe strain of figuring out the true topic of my talk, I need to issue a couple caveats. First of all, if you have not guessed already, this is not really the paper I promised Professor Couturier. Most of my promising self thought that pondering the topic of the conference meant asking questions such as the following: Does meaning inhere in Nabokov's creative acts or in his readers and his critics? Is such meaning objectively already there, the iridescent thing-in-itself glowing through the commonplace as the uninterpreted given; is it subjectively constructed or created; or is it a product of cooperation between writer and reader? Will interpretations of the same texts necessarily vary from Amherst to Auckland and Santa Barbara to St. Petersburg? Why? Will such interpretations change over time? How do we know when it is time for change? Can principles that guide interpretation of Nabokov's main works be established? Are there critical norms that transcend our particular acts of interpretation so that, in a reverse of Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's approach to hardcore pornography, we may not always agree on examples of a good interpretation but we still may shake our heads in inter-subjectively verifiable ways to rule out implausible interpretations when we see them? How does one adjudicate between interpretations of *Lolita* as a love affair with the English language and a manual for surviving incest? My answers were: "both, all of the above, yes, just because, yes, ask Brian Boyd, no, probably," and "very gingerly." But I was not happy with those answers. As a result

of that unhappiness, my paper just cannot pass itself off as a report on the lessons learned from revisiting critical disagreements. The simple fact is that we as a group seem predisposed to agree. Of the 23 abstracts for this conference only one suggests that expression of disagreement is part of the author's planned paper. With a dearth of disagreement, my own paper quickly deteriorated into an extended anecdote about reading Nabokov criticism, more specifically, an anecdote about the role of irony and sympathy in the act of my interpreting someone else's *da nukes* interpretation of my decades old interpretation of Nabokov's short story, "A Christmas Story." I chose the anecdotal format because I think conferences of this sort ought to have frequent moments of ruminative self-annotation and at least two or three candid self-lacerations. If conference papers are acts of performing our understanding, our performances ought on some level to dramatize our understanding of the relation between understanding and self-understanding. In other words, while I contemplated Maurice Couturier's question for the conference, my own version of the question somehow became less "How (and whether) should some hypothetical ideal reader read, annotate, or interpret Nabokov?" and more "What happens to my conception of my self-generated and emotion-suffused intellectual horizon when another actual reader of the same work finds neither my approach nor my findings internally persuasive?"

Long before I started asking this question, in fact thirteen years before Nabokov's birth, Edward Dowden's essay "The interpretation of Literature" (1886), defined interpretation as "finding the author's secret" (701). I would modify and update that statement to define interpretation as the act of publishing one's formalized belief that one has found the author's secret. We are ready to publish our beliefs when we are convinced that our hermeneutic hamster has stopped his wheel at a point where our intuitions of a text's whole are informed by our belief that we understand the role the text's parts play in generating the whole. Thus reading at this level is akin to an error correcting procedure, a synecdochic oscillation between mutually-modifying activities of divination and discovery. When our intellectual curiosity is fully formalized, and we are satisfied that our beliefs regarding the author's or the text's secret are inter-subjectively verifiable, we ignore the fact that the author and the text are never

identical and we publish our satisfactions, presumably out of our fidelity to the discovered secret as well as the missionary desire to lead all other readers back to the original text. At least that is how it is supposed to work. Yet how very different that final outcome, a text acquiring its originality through our interpretive labors, is from the product of reading Nabokov described for his students whom he asked to read for "one impression of unified and unique radiance, since the magic of art may be present in the very bones of the story, in the very marrow of thought. There are masterpieces of dry, limpid, organized thought which provoke in us an artistic quiver... In order to bask in that magic a wise reader reads the book of genius not with his heart, not so much with his brain, but with his spine." ("Good Readers and Good Writers," *Lectures on Literature* 6)

If I knew how to study them, I suspect I'd find that my own mind's exegetic exertions are less like methodical trots toward valid single meanings that I propose to serve up as maps for re-readers and more like Huck Finn's sensation (in Chapter One of that wonderful book) of being "in a sweat to find out all about Moses and the Bullrushers." That is, of course, until Widow Douglas commits a readerly sin: "[B]y and by she let it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn't care no more about him; because I don't take stock in dead people," says Huck letting all of us know that when the annotator such as Widow Douglas imports the outside world (and thereby inadvertently brings death into the world of the story), the reader's preferred state of story-generated quiver and perspiration dries up, the basking in magic stops, the story becomes more of an object and an object lesson and less a game, less a state of tingling immersion that fuels one's desire to read on.

If there is a lesson to be learned from Huck's reaction (other than the young think that youth is a sufficient foundation for an aesthetic and political vision), it is that there is something texture-reducing about interpretations. Interpretations aim for making art transparent, and that inevitably reduces art's alterity. When we sense ourselves to be the agents of such reduction we often compensate by pushing the envelope of inter-subjective validation and thus find ourselves in the unenviable situation where "The most powerful approaches to interpretation... owe the depth of their insight to the radical one-sidedness of their beliefs" (Armstrong 344) And while Nabokv-L has

had no shortage of examples where one-sidedness has exploded into outright virulence and even threats to prohibit something or other, there has been relatively little effort to legitimize one's own one-sidedness by posts that detail the solitary experience of reading Nabokov, however ecstatic or infuriating such experience may have been. Yet that is where all interpretation starts. Or ought to. I am not making a plea here for either theory-free impressionism or for giving in to grim ideological promptings and ripping-off all masks in the name of teaching the conflicts that covet and consume us. Instead, I am proposing that the body not be squeezed out by the mind when we contemplate why and how we read Nabokov. Before you rule out the body as an organ of interpretation, think of the number of people whose bodies prevented or almost prevented them from being here. Maybe here in Nice we already have the erotics of the text but still need its geriatrics.

Nabokov had referred to his readers as “the most varied and gifted in the world” (Boyd, *Magic* 12), which I think means that he gave us the right to expect a lot from ourselves. But in *Strong Opinions* Nabokov had also complained that some of his readers construct imaginary worlds far less plausible than his own and demanded that they become major readers by re-reading (263). Yet that demand strikes me and my five hermeneutic hamsters, named Friedrich, Wilhelm, Martin, Hans-Georg, and Jürgen as naive. The hermeneutic circle makes re-reading the same text impossible. The text is and always remains a moving target. The best we can do is remember that one possible subtitle of “Good Readers and Good Writers,” Nabokov's most sustained essay on reading, was “Kindness to Authors” but we should not confuse kindness with internalizing Nabokov's real or imaginary authority to veto particular interpretations and then request the checking in of those interpretation at the entrance to the text.

By the way, that was all prologue. The rest is confession.

Professor José Angel Garcia Landa (University of Zaragoza) finds in my first published essay evidence of just such self-censorship. Briefly the charge is that one graduate student Zoran Kuzmanovich, in the game of reading Nabokov's early short story prose had made only those moves that Nabokov's authorial joystick allowed. In Appendix A, you will find a generous excerpt from Prof. Landa's essay to remind you of the story and to make it possible for you to access his

critical voice without having to filter all of it through my own. Prof. Landa argues that far from being a “bottom of the barrel” story as Nabokov graded it, “A Christmas Story” is, to quote Landa “structurally as loose as a Swiss watch,” but to reach that corrective conclusion he takes an approach that involves “going beyond the consciously designed aspects of the story as an aesthetic construct, in order to relocate the intended aesthetic effect within a wider interpretive frame” (31). Half of me intended to cross my Beardsley index finger over my Wimsatt one and shout “Get thee behind me, Angel, ” but the other half told me to check my jejune histrionics and consider the possibility that the way Landa structured his argument already calls into question the possibility of a successful discovery or recovery of authorial intent. While not shying away from ascribing intentions, even deep intentions, to Nabokov or to me, Landa differentiates between the story Nabokov wrote (the one Landa read) and the story Nabokov wanted readers like me read. What does that mean? Let’s let Prof. Landa tell us:

“Overall, Kuzmanovich stays within the bounds of 'friendly criticism', mostly following the interpretive moves of the implied reader inscribed by the author in the story... His [ZK’s] subliminal treatment of the proxemics in the story [...] is symptomatic of the limits of his reading” (32). I proved Prof. Landa's diagnosis of my symptom correct by having to look up proxemics. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as:” The study of the spaces that people feel it necessary to set between themselves and others as they vary in different social settings, or between different social groups or cultures.” Since I did not know what proxemics is, my reading of “A Christmas Story” failed to note and account for the way proxemics operates through the “unconscious kinesics of the body”<sup>1</sup> in the following sentences from Nabokov’s story: “The critic lit a cigarette. Goli'y, without raising his eyes, was stuffing his manuscript into his

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<sup>1</sup> The exact phrasing is: “Thus proxemics are a linguistically objectifiable element in the story, and they contribute to the effect and successful structure of the same, but, unlike the consciously designed intentional elements, they are not conceptually available in an immediate way. *We read them with the body, with the brain behind our conscious mind. Similarly, Nabokov may be said to have written them with his brain and body, beyond the epiphenomenal control of consciousness.*” (46) [my emphasis, ZK]



briefcase. But their host kept his silence ...” (*The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, 222). In Landa’s view Nabokov’s use of the conjunction 'but' does not join two propositions as well-behaved conjunctions have been known to do; “instead, it joins two proxemic descriptions which, thanks to the conjunction, are made to stand for the unstated propositions the reader is then forced to construct.” And while I was still struggling to construct, with Prof. Landa’s help, those unstated propositions, the following two sentence came around the curve with a lethal one-two punch: “Kuzmanovich's reading could be used in this respect as a test case of Nabokov's 'creating wit in others' – like Falstaff – in the area of proxemics and unvoiced intuitions. Kuzmanovich's accounts of Nabokov's proxemic and paralinguistic notations show that this critic is subliminally aware of their importance, although that awareness never rises to the surface of the critical discussion in an explicit theoretical formulation.” When the Latinate trundle of that sleepy syntax transformed itself into a dazzling hermeneutic spectacle by the sheer mention of my name in proximity to Falstaff’s, I confess I did not know how to feel. For some reason I kept thinking of an unusual case reported by the British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips. His patient, a five-year-old girl, initiated every session by walking into his consulting room, closing her eyes, and urging Phillips to find her (39). Upon reading Prof. Landa’s explanation of the shortcomings of my interpretation, I fancied that I knew exactly how that little girl felt. But the therapy had to begin somewhere. The first order of business was to get through my denials by letting go of the desire to evoke only tangentially connected psychoanalytic literature. Though my own proxemic sense tells me that more than merely the film of my flesh resembles Falstaff’s, in Landa’s reading, first Nabokov and then Landa is my Falstaff which leaves me at best a role as a snickering page reduced to making feeble jokes about Falstaff’s girth. The hermeneutic circle seemed to be closing in on me. Being so worded by Prof. Landa, my poor essay, written at least 22 years ago on the then still untranslated story now struck even me as an experience tantamount to a public premature ejaculation, for that proxemic “but“ was there in plain sight for me to interpret. And it was not just Nabokov to whom I had been a false friend. My imagination had failed despite Nabokov’s fussiest efforts, and I felt oppressed by my sense of having betrayed not just

Nabokov the author, Professors Barabtarlo and Nicol who had so kindly published my essay but even the sainted Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Here, in Landa's laboratory, I was the prize exhibit of a Nabokov-created spineless minor reader whose soul had failed to bring all parts of itself into wholesome purposeful activity, all because of my lack of attention to proxemics. My dearest beliefs about my readerly acumen were in the process of being not just questioned peripherally but discredited utterly by Prof. Landa's lofty decision to withhold complete condemnation and credit me with subliminal awareness.

Had I allowed Nabokov to finish creating wit in me and thus obviate the need for Landa to do so, I would have also seen that the tree in Novodvortsev's story is not just another image in the drawer of Novodvortsev's memory but his "censored" and "repressed" memory which "returns – dulled and camouflaged after a process of displacement" because "[w]riting his story is for Novodvortsev an ambivalent move: partly a symptom of the illness, partly a pathetically inadequate attempt at a cure through indirect symbolic action" (40). Because of the process Landa calls "mirror logic," I would not blame you one bit folks if you see that last statement as a fairly accurate summing up of what you have heard from me so far. In fact, if you have followed Landa's script for me, that is exactly what you are supposed to do.

The only consolation I could draw at this point came from Prof. Landa's insistence that Nabokov was not any better than I or Novodvortsev at getting outside our respective symptoms: "At this level of writing, Nabokov is no longer in full conscious control, the way he was as long as we remained within the story he (deliberately) wanted us to read. Instead, he shows us the underside of his constructed authorial persona, half pointing to the things he cannot tell, half turning away from them" (42)

That unwitting revelation by Nabokov suggests to Landa that Nabokov can picture Novodvortsev, the mind and life of the Other," only "with elements extracted from the bad conscience of the self." (44) While I cannot help admiring Landa's hermeneutic voracity, I also wonder if his own picture of me as the 'friendly critic' could be said to have been extracted from similar materials as Nabokov's portrait of Novodvortsev... But that is a topic for a different

conference. In Vienna perhaps. Having stepped outside Nabokov's consciously-controlled story. Landa leaves us with the image of that story as bound together by the following chain of figures linked by their isolation, loss and grief:

- “the worker cut off from the Christmas tree by the shop window,
- the worker's author (Novodvortsev) cut off from his past hopes by the thicker glass of time and bad faith,
- the author's author, Nabokov, cut off from Russia and from his childhood by exile (as well as by time and the nature of things).
- the readers who experience in a half-subliminal way the figural relationship between these elements, and respond emotionally to Nabokov's story, finding in it a vehicle for any feelings of loss and grief they may entertain, [I am not certain if this category includes me, but if it does, please note that having granted himself access to my subliminal mind, Prof. Landa has now either demoted or promoted my mind's reading posture to only half-subliminal. May you be just as generous, ZK]
- the critic (e.g. me) who responds to this element in the story and tries to give an explicit, discursive account of the figural and subliminal elements in the story” (46).

And now to the sad epilogue:

What my former countryman, Slavoj Žižek, has taught us, over and over, is that the figural and the subliminal in the post-Lacanian world must always be posited as exterior to the current self, as a part and origin of some "other scene" that emerges suddenly, as a disruption in the patterns of neurological activity. The experience is disruptive because the figure of the subliminal symptom must necessarily be structured like a language and still serve as an instrument for measuring the “othering” distance between the figured subliminal (in this case, Nabokov's “low-intensity trauma” [40]) and that non-conjunctive “but” which he in the story made linguistically accessible to the conscious mind but asked proxemically that it be read with the body. The idea of language as the imperfect but still the only means of inter-subjective access to the way we experience our emotions seems

to be a thought that has left its traumatic traces across many a poet's mind:

Heavenly          hurt          it          gives          us;  
We          can          find          no          scar,  
But          internal          difference  
Where the meanings are.

Emily Dickinson, "There's a certain Slant of light"

Once conceived as being available to language, the "internal difference" – making scars must be understood to afflict not only hysterics and psychotics but everyone, including Nabokov. Hence it seems little more than critical common sense when Landa reasons in this way: "Insofar as Nabokov 'is' Novodvortsev, he is also imagining a future self, in which professional achievements do not redeem the loss, and art is only a partially successful sublimation of frustrated desire." (42) And by making it clear that when read with the body, "A Christmas Story" dramatizes Nabokov's contemplation of failure of and in art, Landa leaves me only with the intellectual "othering" distance to use as a method of tabulating the lessons of having Kuzmanovich read Landa's reading of Kuzmanovich's reading of Nabokov's story.

Here then are those lessons:

Ordinarily when the interpreter approaches a text out of a conviction that the text is repressive, self-contradicted, or ignorant of something, and that it has spent all its time holding its duplicitous breath waiting for just this particular interpreter, I tend to lose interest. Why must the role of mastery—of interpreting the symptom—be reserved for the last and therefore demystifying critic? Landa's focus on proxemics, his ignoring of Nabokov's stated intentions regarding the assessment of the story, his positing of intentions so deep that even Nabokov was unaware of them, his insistence on the structural logic of writing as a symptom, the indiscriminate submitting of my, Novodvortsev's, and Nabokov's prose to that logic's explanatory grid, all that I found methodologically troublesome and at times unconvincing. Surely, writers of fiction are not But, you know what folks, in the end I just could not hold any of that against Prof. Landa.

In my own reading of Nabokov's story I had emphasized the differences between Nabokov and Novodvortsev and interpreted the story as a political satire of Soviet art, a satire offered as a consolatory Christmas gift by Nabokov to his émigré readers, a gift wrapped in

irony, a trope that seems almost second nature to Nabokov. By refusing to absolve Nabokov of the sins Nabokov's own story catalogs against Soviet writers, Prof. Landa, for all the wobbliness of his methodology, reads the story's body language as Huck Finn would have and thus concentrates on the more private, subliminal reflections on time and loss through Nabokov's engagement with writing on the Other. In so doing Landa seems to rescue Nabokov from his own irony in order to replace it with what the narrator of Joyce's *The Dead* calls "a strange friendly pity" (58) Even though I do not cherish or even recognize some of the positions Landa assigns to me, his chain of available subject positions within the drama of reading Nabokov, positions not separated by irony but united by pity, seems to me in the end preferable to the author's secret I perhaps only half-subliminally but in complete kindness stumbled upon at least 22 years ago.

## Appendix A

### "A Christmas Story" (in Landa's Summary):

The setting is the Soviet Union, some years after the 1917 revolution. Novodvortsev, a third-rank writer and would-be pride of Soviet letters, receives in his room an aspiring proletarian writer, Anton Goli'y, who is being introduced to him by a Communist critic. Goli'y, like Novodvortsev, writes run-of-the-mill socialist realism, that is, politically correct Communist Party propaganda. Novodvortsev scarcely pays any attention to the beginner, being completely engrossed in a self-aggrandising view of his oeuvre, which he feels lacks adequate recognition. The critic, far from acknowledging Novodvortsev's significance, taunts him with a reference to the Christmas stories he and other writers would have been writing on a day like this before the Revolution. Novodvortsev rejects the critic's insinuation that he is a turncoat, but once he is alone he abjectly clings to the critic's suggestion that he should write a 'new-style' Christmas story depicting the class struggle—he fantasises to the effect that such a story might consolidate his literary reputation (and his political one too, one gathers). As he faces the blank page struggling with several Christmas motifs, his concentration is interrupted by his neighbour, a card-holding Communist, who drops in to ask for a pen. Alone again, Novodvortsev is distracted by an involuntary flash of memory as he

played with the idea of Christmas trees (a motif first mentioned by Goli'y): he remembers one particular Christmas long ago, and the woman he loved in those days, and all of the tree's lights reflected as a crystal quiver in her wide-open eyes when she plucked a tangerine from a high branch. It had been twenty years ago or more - how certain details stuck in one's memory (p. 226)

The memory flash has an epiphanic vividness...[b]ut Novodvortsev rejects this memory and tries again to concentrate on his story. As he hits upon an adequate [socialist realist] theme involving Christmas trees, Nabokov's story is brought to a conclusion:

With triumphal agitation, sensing that he had found the necessary, one-and-only key, that he would write something exquisite, depict as no one had before the collision of two classes, of two worlds, he commenced writing. He wrote about the opulent tree in the shamelessly illuminated window and about the hungry worker, victim of a lockout, peering at that tree with a severe and somber gaze. "*The insolent Christmas tree,*" wrote Novodvortsev, "*was afire with every hue of the rainbow.*" (pp. 226)

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