

“The Precision of Poetry and the Exactness of Pure Science”: Nabokov, Stravinsky, and the Reader as Listener.

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Parallel Lives

In his meticulously prepared compendium of interviews, *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov, reprinted a 1970 response to a question posed by Alfred Appel about whether he knew Igor Stravinsky, “another outspoken émigré.” Nabokov replied, “I know Mr. Stravinsky very slightly and have never seen any genuine sample of his outspokenness in print.”¹ Nabokov’s revealed an uncanny but not unexpected doubt about Stravinsky’s role in the authorship of the (by then) extensive accumulation of Stravinsky-Craft volumes of opinions. The questions of who was responsible for what appeared in print, and what Robert Craft’s role actually was, remain a matter of controversy.² Craft’s contribution was, if not decisive, then certainly substantial. Craft confessed to Stephen Walsh, with pride, that one reviewer of the 1959 *Conversations* expressed the opinion that “the two finest writers of English prose” were Russians: Nabokov and Stravinsky.³ It was the idea that Stravinsky was considered a “fine writer” that irritated Nabokov.

This sort of judgment revealed the worst of philistinism and stupidity, well beyond the evils of *poshlost*.⁴ Nabokov’s subtly worded skepticism about the authorship of the volumes anticipated what has remained for scholars a source of ambiguity with respect to understanding Stravinsky, particularly in his American years. It seems that everything Stravinsky published, from his *An Autobiography* of 1935 and 1936 to the 1939 Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, was, if not ghost-written, then the work of close collaboration.⁵ This does not disqualify the utility of what was published by Stravinsky as sources for understanding Stravinsky. But there are no grounds for elevating the composer to the stature of Nabokov as a writer of English.

Nabokov’s aside about Stravinsky needs to be read as well within the context of Nabokov’s persistent comments regarding his own weak relationship to music. Even if we accept Nabokov’s humorous descriptions of his imperviousness to music, the contact between these two prominent émigrés from prerevolutionary St. Petersburg was, as many have noted, nonetheless unexpectedly minimal in the American exile they shared.⁶ They appear to have barely known one another. Stravinsky seems not to have read Nabokov, either during the 1930s, in Russian, or in English in the 1950s and 1960s. After 1940 Nabokov took pains to protest his lack of musicality, even though his only son became an opera singer: “I have no ear for music—a shortcoming I deplore bitterly,” he confessed in a 1964 *Playboy* interview.⁷ Nabokov admitted to retaining a memory of unwanted attendance at operas during his childhood and having once translated Schubert song texts into Russian, but the art of music, officially, was foreign to him. “Music, I am afraid to say, affects me merely as an arbitrary succession of more or less irritating sounds,” he wrote in *Speak, Memory*. In 1969 he quipped, in order to underscore his distance from most modern

poetry: "I know as little about today's poetry as about new music."⁸ Nonetheless, Appel, one of the first and most respected of Nabokov scholars, suggested in 1967 the idea (now increasingly supported in the critical literature) that true to his sly and devious nature, Nabokov was perhaps protesting too much about his lack of connection to music.⁹ In fact, as Appel argued, Nabokov's obsessions with memory, consciousness, time, and the structure of the novel all took on explicit musical metaphors and analogies, suggesting that Nabokov, by dismissing his connection to music, was following a time-honored tradition of intentionally throwing his would-be interpreters off, if only to separate fools from knaves in search of a single knight.

Since Stravinsky was, by all accounts, an avid reader, the absence of any real contact between Stravinsky and Nabokov, who arrived in America from France within two years of one another and who shared common cultural and historical origins, is remarkable, given the interconnections (so vividly described in *Pnin*) within Russian émigré circles. The two men even had a significant friend in common, perhaps the only person to attend the funerals of Stravinsky and Nabokov, Nicolas Nabokov, the composer and controversial cultural impresario. Nicolas was a first cousin of the writer, whose help to Nabokov extended to arranging lodgings (his ex-wife provided Vladimir and Vera with their first home in America in 1940), and with whom Vladimir was in intermittent social contact until his death.¹⁰ Nicolas, whom Stravinsky knew from his Paris years, was among those closest to Stravinsky throughout the American years. Therefore bringing Nabokov and Stravinsky together would have been easy. It appears that they may actually have avoided one another.¹¹

By the mere fact of shared birthplace and common exile—first in Europe and then America—the act of considering them together possesses a basic historical logic. There are parallels in their lives, as well as key divergences below any surface similarities. These differences help explain the absence of contact. Yet when one compares their careers and work, striking connections emerge between Stravinsky's music and Nabokov's prose, and parallels in their views on art and their place in the history of modernism.

The contrasts in biography stand out. The writer was seventeen years younger. Furthermore, Nabokov was born into a family of high aristocracy and great wealth. Stravinsky descended from petty aristocracy.¹² He did his best to assert his aristocratic origins and prized his provenance of privilege and exclusivity, but the social gulf between them was marked. In their American years, Nabokov seems never to have complained about his loss of status and wealth and did not try to impress Americans with his past. Stravinsky, in contrast, exaggerated his vanished social distinction and was notoriously obsessed about money. Both men had famous fathers, but Vladimir Nabokov idealized and idolized his father whereas Igor Stravinsky seems only to have harbored resentment against his distinguished father, Russia's finest bass operatic singer before Feodor Chaliapin.¹³ Nabokov's parents, music lovers, were in the patron class. Chaliapin and Serge Koussevitzky performed in the Nabokov home, and perhaps so too did Igor's father.¹⁴

Both the writer and the composer spent the interwar years in exile in Europe. Both had a lifelong fondness for Switzerland. Stravinsky spent most of the years between 1917 and 1939 in France, whereas Nabokov chose Berlin. In Berlin Nabokov kept close to the Russian émigré community. Stravinsky had many Russian friends and colleagues in France, but he became a French citizen and emerged by the 1930s as the leading and most influential composer among the French. Ironically, Stravinsky's best foreign language was German, despite his many years in France and in French-speaking Switzerland. Nabokov preferred French, his years in Berlin notwithstanding, even though he wrote most of his early novels in Germany. He read German and spoke it, but never used it as a language of writing. Stravinsky shifted from an initial hostility to the German cultural tradition in music to an increasing admiration and emulation of it as normative. By the mid-1930s he was most eager, despite the Nazi seizure of power, to gain acceptance in Germany. Nabokov never much liked things German, except for scientific works. His novels—particularly the last from that period, *The Gift*—are peppered with contempt and parody of German habits and culture. The German came to be emblematic of the worst of pseudo-culture. They were the prime purveyors of *poshlost*.

Nabokov, like his father, was an ardent foe of anti-Semitism. He despised not only the Nazi variety, but also the anti-Semitism so commonplace within the Russian intelligentsia. Nabokov hated the fascists, and indeed all tyranny. The same cannot be said of Stravinsky. Stravinsky admired Mussolini. The text of Stravinsky's 1939 Norton Lectures, *The Poetics of Music*, is marked by an obsessive assertion of the centrality of "the stern auspices of order and discipline" in modern life and art. Stravinsky declared, "Modern man is progressively losing his understanding of values and his sense of proportion." This was "serious" since it challenged the "fundamental laws of human equilibrium." Stravinsky adopted a familiar historical justification of degeneracy common to fascist ideology; the errors of contemporary culture unmasked the fact that "the mind itself is ailing." Much of the music of the time, Stravinsky told his audience, "carries within it the symptoms of a pathologic blemish and the germs of a new original sin."¹⁵ The rhetoric has an uncanny family resemblance to the aesthetics of fascist regimes and the Stalinist dogma of the mid- and late 1930s that ostracized Dimitri Shostakovich and Gavril Popov. Not surprisingly, Stravinsky pointedly developed, in exile, an overt commitment to religion, in particular Russian Orthodoxy. And by the mid-1930s he assumed a stark anti-modernist stance under the guise of Neoclassicism.

Nabokov shared none of this. Organized traditional religion remained foreign to him. He maintained the same strict and unwavering contempt for post-revolutionary Russia, the Soviets, as he did for the fascists. His views on human history and progress were rather closely linked to his own lifelong encounter with the detailed scientific observation of nature. Endangered by the politics and culture of modern times were individuality and freedom. In 1937 Nabokov wrote, "the symmetry in the structure of live bodies is a consequence of the rotation of worlds ...and that in our straining toward asymmetry, toward inequality, I can detect a howl

for genuine freedom, an urge to break out of the circle."¹⁶ For all his snobbery about writers past and present, Nabokov never strayed away from the modernism he came to admire early in his career, that of Andrey Bely, Franz Kafka, the Proust of *Swann's Way*, and the Joyce of *Ulysses*.¹⁷

Although both men were firmly anti-communist, Nabokov's pessimism about modernity never led him down the more reactionary path taken by Stravinsky in the years between 1922 and the mid-1950s. Nabokov feared the populist embrace of the despotic imposition of order and discipline in political life from below—including the sort of uniform assertion of a "healthy" social utilitarian aesthetic promoted by Hitler and Stalin. The trap Nabokov's protagonist in *Bend Sinister*, Adam Krug, faces is the futility and self-destructiveness of any struggle to hold on to any shred of individuality, genuine refinement, originality, and morality, particularly through the engagement with language, thought, literature, and culture, in the context of modern dictatorship.

The pretense of value on behalf culture and the making of art itself are complicit. The cult of self-improving culture displayed by Dolores Haze in *Lolita* (consider the meaning of the name itself), and the sort of bad art associated with middle-class, semi-educated taste for the sentimental and the emotionally illustrative provide absolutely no protection against barbarism and violence. Humbert Humbert's highly cultivated and persuasive tastes in literature, music, and art, his evident superiority in terms of learning over the Americans he meets seduces the reader; his aesthetic sensibility, even his capacity for poetic eloquence, render his case for his own defense hard to resist. Connoisseurship does not prevent his crimes. It merely softens the cruelty and deepens the plausibility of rationalization. Whether delivered by would-be individualists like Humbert or bureaucrats and dictators who create concentration camps, aesthetic gifts and cultural sensibilities fail, in modern life, for Nabokov, as antidotes to evil.¹⁸

When Humbert Humbert chases Clare Quilty, attempting to shoot him, his victim "sat down before the piano and played several atrociously vigorous, fundamentally hysterical plangent chords, his jowls quivering, his spread hands tensely plunging, and his nostrils emitting the soundtrack snorts which had been absent from our fight. Still singing those impossible sonorities, he made a futile attempt to open with his foot a kind of seaman's chest near the piano."¹⁹ Nabokov could not have evoked a more effective caricature of the pretensions of the modern piano virtuoso and the cheap, illustrative romanticism of precisely the kind Stravinsky despised, and the futility of a tradition of the consumption of culture as means of escape (the seaman's chest) from a fatal barbarism that threatens the survival of morality, civility, and the humane, much less talent, originality, beauty, and learning.

For Nabokov, the Russia of his youth vanished and lived only in his memory. In his adult life Nabokov remained resistant to all organized causes and ideologies, including patriotism and cultural chauvinism. Although Russian was his primary language, the Russia that continued to occupy him was his invention and bore little,

if any relation to the Russia that existed after 1917. Stravinsky, no friend of communism either, nonetheless held on to the idea of an ongoing residual solidarity. He subordinated his distaste and joined with other émigrés in taking pride in the Soviet war effort in the 1940s. Stravinsky was eager to return in triumph. He embraced the Russia he encountered in 1962; it evoked not only nostalgia but a renewed sense of connection. Nabokov never sought to return or to maneuver to gain access to readers in Soviet Russia.

Stravinsky rose to fame in 1913 with *The Rite of Spring* not as an exile, but as a Russian composer on a voluntary temporary sojourn from Russia, the sort of visit to the West commonplace in the history of Russian music and literature, an experience shared by Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Nikolai Gogol, and Ivan Turgenev. In contrast, Nabokov's great fame occurred in the context of involuntary exile. He always resented comparison with Joseph Conrad. Conrad was not an exile. He had no career as a Polish writer. Nabokov, a respected writer of Russian poetry and prose, became later in life a writer in English and an American. Like Conrad, Nabokov achieved worldwide fame as a writer in English. But Nabokov did so while maintaining an explicit commitment to a particular tradition of Russian literature. His harsh loyalty to the virtue of literal translation (and skepticism about any other sort) was rooted in a view of the indivisible uniqueness of language. In the end however, Nabokov's origins as a Russian did not define him in America, despite his teaching of Russian language and literature in a manner that suggested an indisputable superior knowledge and authority. *Lolita*, *Pnin*, and *Pale Fire* made him famous—all novels located in America. In Stravinsky's case, the explicitly Russian aspects of his music, no matter how subtly altered and camouflaged, never disappeared and actually helped shape his finest music written in America. Indeed, the role Stravinsky, already a lionized personality, played in French musical life—he influenced decisively the direction of French music between the early 1920s and 1940—was analogous to the place Nabokov came to occupy as writer in America from the late 1950s until his death.

Nabokov's 1913 occurred in 1956 with the publication of *Lolita*. Both artists experienced—at different stages of their careers—a sudden burst of worldwide fame through scandal associated with a single work. Stravinsky became world famous at age 31. He arrived in America a well-known, influential, and admired figure, invited to give the prestigious Norton Lectures at Harvard. Stravinsky complained constantly about money, but he came to America without any of the sort of dire financial worries common among émigrés (consider the fate of Alexander Zemlinsky who died in penury and obscurity in 1941 in Larchmont New York). When Nabokov arrived in 1940, he brought with him at best an obscure reputation limited to émigré circles. He was in desperate straits. Among those prepared to help him were Serge Rachmaninoff, and Serge Koussevitzky, who provided the affidavit. Nabokov's rise to the status of a superstar came when he was in his late 50s. As with Stravinsky and *The Rite*, what made Nabokov famous was more the surface of a single work rather than what the critical consensus would ultimately identify as the work's greatness and importance. In the case of *The Rite*, it was the choreography

and the spectacular orchestral sonorities and effects that generated the scandal. The predictably reductive account of the plot, the overt subject of *Lolita*—the sexual passion for a “nymphet”—and not the novel’s language and structure or its many tantalizing asides made the writer rich and famous.

Stravinsky came to America famous as a Russian composer known for his prominence in French musical life, and in part through the proselytizing of Nadia Boulanger, with whom Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson (among others) had studied. These identities he retained. Nevertheless, Stravinsky, like Nabokov, faced the problem of how to establish himself in America. Robert Craft was central to this process and helped reinvent the composer’s image and propel him into the American scene of music and letters as an icon. Stravinsky’s disappointment at the reception in 1951 of the opera *The Rake’s Progress*, a work that many have regarded the culmination of the composer’s romance with the “order and discipline” of Neoclassicism—understood strictly as evocative of eighteenth-century practices—motivated him to explore serialism, with Craft’s help and Ernst Krenek’s guidance. Stravinsky was always keenly attuned to the winds of fashion and the reception of his own music. The major works of Stravinsky’s final serial period, along with Craft’s deft handling of the composer as a personality, helped place the composer into the center of American classical musical life. Craft’s role made the output of new music possible. Yet even in the face of a remarkable late period, it was the music written before the American years that defined the composer’s public persona to the end of his life.

Nabokov did have a past visible to his new public. And he did not require a Craft to assist him. Yet, as Nabokov freely admitted, without Edmund Wilson, his entry into the American literary world would certainly have been even more difficult than it turned out to be. However, Nabokov achieved his own carefully crafted iconic status as an American writer in the end through the works he wrote in English. The Russian novels gained a wide reading public only in retrospect—a pattern between old and new work that was the exact reverse of Stravinsky.

Nabokov used his American success to withdraw, albeit only in part, from America. Living in Montreux, he continued to assert his affection and allegiance to America; he maintained his prominence in the world of letters from afar and continued to write in English. His move was only in a minor way a move “back.” It ought not be compared to the return to Europe of Thomas Mann, Theodor W. Adorno, or Paul Hindemith—none of whom ever considered America a plausible second home. Although Stravinsky also toyed with the notion of moving back to Switzerland after he decided to leave the West Coast in the 1960s, he managed, like Nabokov, to balance his own construct of a lost homeland with affection for his new American home.

Method and Influence

Richard Taruskin, in his magisterial two-volume account of Stravinsky's career through to the composition of *Mavra* in 1922—with its epilogue on the composer's final masterpiece, the 1964 *Requiem Canticles*—has painstakingly and persuasively described the defining early phases of the composer's career.²⁰ These phases, with their engagement with Russian traditions and contemporaries shaped the composer's method and aesthetic. Stravinsky's music reveals a lasting debt to Russian sources, to the Russian context in which he came of age and the manner in which he transformed Russian elements in the first years of exile in Switzerland.

Fireworks and *The Firebird* display the young composer's initial debt to a late nineteenth-century aesthetic, an older romantic nationalism, in which folklore was adapted into music for the stage and domestic use—the “kuchist” heritage of the so-called Mighty Five. Stravinsky (as his comments later in his career on Tchaikovsky suggest) also sought to prove himself within the Rimsky circle based on his command of the craft of composition defined in the German centered “Western European” terms of Glazunov's more conservative formalist achievement. That craft involved the display of symphonic thinking, in which a dynamic, if not a self-declared organic logic drives the use and transformation of harmony and melody. Harmony serves a functional purpose in shaping musical time and structure, providing a process of thematic transformation, development, and recapitulation. These generate audience expectations and the mechanisms by which instrumental music mimics narrative patterns in prose; these strategies made it possible for composers to successfully occupy duration and recalibrate long stretches of time.

With its nationalist colorings, the Russian music of the 1880s and 1890s—Stravinsky's initial formative aesthetic environment—can be taken as the musical equivalents of the literary realism that dominated Russian literature, if not into the early 1900s, then, at a minimum, until the mid-1880s, shortly after the death of Alexander II. Social and political content and plainness in narrative and plot structure dominated. Matters of style, the self-conscious awareness of form, or any pretense to rendering prose closer to the poetic were subordinated. Literature, notably in the case of Dostoevsky and the later Tolstoy, became a prose forum for ideas—mostly on behalf of social and political changes that could elevate the moral significance and worth of all human beings. The spiritual betterment of the reader became a goal. Ideas were rendered through action, description, and dialogue. The reader was drawn in by the writer's manipulation of the illusions of sequential time and pictorial realism. Not surprisingly, then, among Nabokov's father's favorite novelists was none other than Charles Dickens.

Although Nabokov was considerably younger than Stravinsky, they both confronted these qualities, colored by nationalist sentiment, as the dominant aesthetic ambition of their parental generation, of the late nineteenth century. Whether in prose or in music, the objective was to master the suggestion and evocation, through aesthetic conventions, of realism. Stravinsky, even when he abandoned the Rimsky model, sustained a nationalist impetus by drawing on more ethnographically authentic sources of Russian folk music. He located new formal possibilities for music and at

the same time developed the means to articulate a less domesticated nationalism at once more novel and authentic. His means were influenced by the ideas of contemporaries, several who were linked to the “World of Art” circle—Sergei Diaghilev, Léon Bakst, and Alexandre Benois in particular. The last two were themselves part of the circle of artists around the Nabokov family. The vogue for symbolism and synesthesia, particularly the work of Andrey Bely and Alexander Skryabin, also played a role in shaping the path Stravinsky took.

In *The Rite*, Stravinsky used abstraction of the archaic Russian materials he appropriated to achieve an “architectural” rather than “anecdotal” use of musical time. Repetition in the form of sustained rhythmic pulsation was juxtaposed with abrupt harmonic shifts and changes in sonority at odds with the tradition of the symphony. The combinatorial ingenuity Stravinsky revealed employed the octatonic scale and intervallic cells derived from it. With that as a base he pursued intentional “simplification”—all abstractions of genuine folk melodic and rhythmic usage. This led Stravinsky to achieve what Taruskin describes as “a hard nosed esthetic modernism.”²¹ Harmony was no longer directional and dynamic, but static. The effect was not unlike the visual aesthetic pursued Nicholas Roerich, the designer of the first *Rite* production. Roerich, working from the suggestion of authentic national antique sources, produced flat, static, frozen imagery further abstracted from any form of realism by the stark uninflected use of color and the reduction of perspective in which juxtaposed geometric patterns in the visual frame undercut the nominal suggestion of narrative meaning in favor of formal properties of color and line.²²

Stravinsky, by *The Rite* and certainly by the early 1920s, had shifted the relationship of the listener to the musical work away from any analogy to that of a reader, distancing the experience of musical time from being analogous to the act of reading. The plausibility of an imagined past, present and future, occurring in a logical sequence as in the realist novel, opera, and romantic symphony had been enhanced by the realist plainness (or naturalistic resemblance) of prose style (including dialogue) and the manipulation of the narrative voice in these genres. These expectations of readers had been amply met by the techniques of musical usage in the orchestral and operatic output of both sides of the apparent divide between the circles around Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. But with *The Rite*, anticipation and release as well recollection during the act of listening were subordinated to the intensity of the momentary encounter with sound and the unprepared contrasts in the sequence of events. Music intensified the experience of time in the immediacy of its encounter, emancipating it from any dependence on recapitulation. Abstraction led the listener away from the narrative conventions in the use of music derived from the literary characteristic of opera and late nineteenth-century symphonic writing. Stravinsky’s *Rite* appeared in direct conflict with musical realism’s most skilled practitioner of the fin de siècle, Richard Strauss, notably his two last symphonic works, the *Sinfonia domestica* and the *Alpine Symphony*.

However fierce the antipathy may have been between the “kuchists” and their opponents, as can be said of the tension between Wagnerians and anti-Wagnerians (acolytes of Brahms), the advent of modernism circa 1913 in Stravinsky unmasked what these separate camps actually held in common in terms of the function of harmony and the character of form, and therefore the construct of musical time. Whether formalist (in the sense of Eduard Hanslick and later Stravinsky himself, who in his autobiography never tired of underscoring the idea that music expressed nothing except itself), or blatantly illustrative, as in Wagner, Liszt, and Strauss, time had been, by convention, controlled so as to confirm the apparent reality of a past and present moment, and the existence of a causal nexus analogous to the empirical experience of events. Art sought to engender either a remembered, imagined, or implied narrative.

Stravinsky’s achievement in the 1913 *Rite* and more strikingly in 1917 in *Les Noces*—his distillation of a modernist aesthetic out of neo-nationalist material using simplification and abstraction that recalibrated the experience of time and defined a style—can be compared with the project that Nabokov undertook as a novelist in his 20s, after his years at Cambridge, and his move to Berlin. Nabokov shared sources of inspiration with his older composer compatriot, notably the “World of Art” movement that argued the autonomy of the aesthetic, and the primacy of matters of style, and form, all against the inherited utilitarian aesthetics of realism. Both symbolism and the “World of Art” motivated Stravinsky and Nabokov to question the claim of a correspondence between the aesthetic experience and the quotidian encounter with experienced time, both measured and remembered. This challenge to the traditional logic of art extended to a critique of the late Tolstoy’s insistence that there be an evident moral and, by implication, redemptive justification beyond the aesthetic. Stravinsky and Nabokov experimented not only in terms of their engagement with their respective traditions in Russian music and literature, but in terms of the fundamental character of the work of art and its relationship to its audience, the link between literature and reader and music and listener.

The Gift, Nabokov’s last novel from his Berlin years (and for some his finest) is in part framed by two exchanges between the two most sympathetic figures in the book: Fyodor, the nominal protagonist, who writes a satirical, almost Gogol-like biography of Nikolai Chernyshevsky (the arch realist of the nineteenth century and a favorite of Lenin and the Soviets), and Koncheyev, the poet. In the first exchange Fyodor asserts, quoting Koncheyev, “Yes, some day I’m going to produce prose in which ‘thought and music are conjoined as are the folds of life in sleep.’”²³ Thinking in words is idealized by language’s musical properties—its sounds and rhythms—not meanings that might be detached from form. For the young Nabokov, the writing of literature was framed by language that revealed a temporal logic outside of ordinary time, comparable to the distortion of time in dreams, yet possessed of a precision reminiscent of the exactness of science.

In the second exchange Fyodor picks up this theme (one which Nabokov would return to explicitly at the end of *Ada*):

It would be a good thing in general to put an end to our barbaric perception of time. . . . Our mistaken feeling of time as a kind of growth is a consequence of our finiteness which, being always on the level of the present, implies a constant rise between the watery abyss of the past and the aerial abyss of the future. Existence is thus an eternal transformation of the future into the past—an essentially phantom process—a mere reflection of the material metamorphoses taking place within us. . . . The theory I find most tempting—that there is no time, that everything is the present situated like a radiance outside our blindness—is just as hopeless a finite hypothesis as all the others.²⁴

Nabokov's attraction to finding the "radiance outside our blindness" was located in his attempt, as a writer of prose that treated language as music—in the service of a poetic prose—to shatter the inherited narrative and structural conventions of the novelistic form developed during the heyday of realism and to locate an alternate sensibility that transcended the mundane. This project—despite the evident contrasts—took shape in a manner comparable to Stravinsky's evolution from the 1907 *Symphony in E-flat* to the 1917 *Les Noces*. Nabokov experimented not only with language at every point in a novel (or short story) each unit of which was ultimately contained on index cards, but the overall structure, routinely divorced each novel from following an inherited model as a sequential narrative marked by character development. By rejecting the symphonic model—the conventions of late nineteenth-century musical continuity—Stravinsky formed what Edward T. Cone identified as a "method," an alternative to shaping musical time. Cone described the method in three parts: stratification, interlock, and synthesis.²⁵ These three terms could be applied to Nabokov's novels from the 1930s, particularly *The Gift* and *Invitation to a Beheading*, and those from the 1950s, particularly *Lolita* and *Invitation to a Beheading*.

The privileging of the aesthetic pioneered by the "World of Art" movement and the symbolists of the Silver Age in Russia offered both Stravinsky and Nabokov the ideological bases for shifting the criteria of an artwork from matters of content to those of form. Within formal criteria, style and method were foregrounded. Cone identified the use of successive "time fragments" in the 1920 *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*.²⁶ Each of these is suspended, creating opportunities for their employment in contrapuntal usage. The synthesis comes not in a climax, but in the reduction or the assimilation of one element into another. Bridges and divergences are common. Stratification using discrete musical variables defines Stravinsky's compositional procedure well into the music of the 1940s; it describes the strong tonal components of the 1930 *Symphony of Psalms*. Another way of imagining Stravinsky's method in the Wind Symphonies is, as Louis Andriessen and Elmar Schönberger have argued, to apply the metaphors of montage and collage in which the structural relationship and identity of disparate fragments is altered and manipulated, generating an overarching unified framework in which the discrete elements remain visible.²⁷ Taruskin has perhaps the most elaborate and persuasive

way of characterizing Stravinsky's novel approach to form through the use of the Russian term *drobnost'* to describe it.²⁸

The parallels in Nabokov to such procedures are found in the fragmentation of time, the subtly arranged but sudden shifts in voice and in the inconsistent presence of the narrator. Nabokov's "time fragments" are deployed so as to create ambiguities between the real and imagined. The reader is continually alert to the persistent shedding of the illusions of realist narration; just as the listener to Stravinsky is struck by the distinct substance of each musical moment apart from any functional implication backward or forward, Nabokov's reader is forced to confront sentences and paragraphs as stylistic entities with significance apart from any overarching narrative frame. Literature, insofar as it is part of "the forces of imagination" is a "force[s] of good" Nabokov observed in 1965. Translating *The Eye* more than three decades after its publication, Nabokov confessed he was in search of the "reader who catches on at first"; this reader will derive "genuine satisfaction," but from more than a story.²⁹ Nabokov's ideal reader is asked to jettison the common sense notion of language as representational or corresponding to an external reality. A different sort of precision is required. Stylistic self-awareness of observation alters the perception of elapsed time and preserves it in memory. The more detailed, the more unusual and poetic, the more vivid. Through writing fired by the poetic imagination a new reality comes into being more real than the so-called "real" itself.

The frames of the novels—visible in the cloaked identity of the narrator in *Pnin*, the construction of *Pale Fire* out of segments of commentary that follow a text and scramble past, present and future and the multiple identities of its protagonist Kinbote, the form of *Lolita* as an account by a man awaiting trial, or the uncertain connection to dream life and everyday existence in *Despair*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, and *Bend Sinister*—suggest parallels to Stravinsky's procedures of stratifying elements that have been abstracted from otherwise familiar patterns. In music, pitch and rhythm are the elements in play; in prose they are words, plot, time, and character. It is in the dimension of the use of time that collage and montage most easily fit Nabokov's method, his layering of perspectives using fragments of memory and distortions of sequential time. Nabokov's syntactic inventiveness, his virtuosic use and invention of words, his nearly Shakespearean synthesis of word use and thought, as well as his assemblage of the novel by the ordering of completed units (his beloved index cards) render Nabokov's method not dissimilar from musical composition as practiced by Stravinsky. Stravinsky's meticulous habits in the process of composition, evident in the manuscripts of *The Rake's Progress* and the *Requiem Canticles* and as understood by theorists, support metaphors that suggest an innovative combinatorial ingenuity shared by Nabokov and Stravinsky.

Consider, for example, the elegance, variety and ingenuity in the disposition of intervals and sonorities in the *Requiem Canticles* as analogous to the illusory simplicity of the relationship of poem to commentary in *Pale Fire*. Kinbote, with knowing irony, speaks early of that one line that "would have completed the

symmetry” of Shade’s poem. Nabokov has him end this thought by writing “damn that music. Knowing Shade’s combinatorial turn of mind and subtle sense of harmonic balance, I cannot imagine that he intended to deform the faces of his crystal by meddling with its predicable growth.”³⁰ Deformation precisely describes what he as a novelist and Stravinsky as composer, in their relationship to the traditions in their respective arenas, actually accomplished. The deformation and meddling was directed at the narrative conventions of form and continuity.

Nabokov was fabled for his visual acuity. His love of Sherlock Holmes rested less in the detective’s deductive powers than his eye for detail. Nabokov’s meticulous work on butterflies, his fanatical concern for the accuracy of descriptive detail, his poetic response to landscape in his novels all attest to the primacy of observation of and attention to the smallest detail in a work of art and the imagination. “I discovered in nature the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception.”³¹ No wonder he derided novelists of “general” ideas who penned prosaic sentences filled with the vocabulary of abstraction. In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov pointed to the moment of intense sight as the means by which the finest in the human can stake its claim:

It is certainly not then—not in dreams—but when one is wide awake, at moments of robust joy and achievement, on the highest terrace of consciousness, that mortality has a chance to peer beyond its own limits, from the mast, from the past and its castle tower.³²

In Nabokov’s writing, the aural experience in the present moment, not only the visual, mirrors the heightened state of consciousness that can be set to words. At stake is not a talent for synesthesia (as with Mikalojus Čiurlionis) or its ideology (as with Skryabin).³³ Nabokov did, however, recall that the imagining of the outline of a single letter of the alphabet produced a “fine case of colored hearing.”³⁴ But Nabokov’s memories were framed by sounds—a “throbbing tambourine,” “trilling” nightingales, the sounds of village musicians, the rhythm of Mademoiselle’s speech.³⁵ King Charles in *Pale Fire* was a musician. Nabokov routinely praised poetry in terms of music (its “contrapuntal pyrotechnics”), and for its music, (“that dim distant music”).³⁶ Cincinnatus C. recalls the world being “hacked” into “great gleaming blocks” by the “music that once used to be extracted from a monstrous pianoforte.”³⁷

Indeed, for Nabokov, the power of music and of sound—for all the links to memory—was that it intensified the ordinary consciousness of time understood as a continuum along the lines of the quotidian.³⁸ The short story “Music” revolves around the perception that music easily links present with past.³⁹ At the same time Nabokov grasped the need to deviate from a sense of time located in nature. Music as an art, like poetry, could expand time. Kinbote, defending his friendship with Shade, credited his short friendship with the capacity to defy the calendar, creating “inner duration,” “eons of transparent time” independent of “rotating malicious music.”⁴⁰ Nabokov’s view is not entirely dissimilar to Stravinsky’s. The composer

wrote in his autobiography, "Music is the sole domain in which man realizes the present." Music's sole purpose was to establish "an order among things" and especially "the coordination of man and time." Music redefines time in the present and gives "substance" and "stability" to "the category of the present."⁴¹

Despite the surface of divergence between the two—Nabokov's struggle against the tyranny of a seemingly objective and uniform construct of time, and Stravinsky's ambition to deepen the sense of the present through musical construction—both shared an obsession with how the aesthetic realm might influence the phenomenon of time perception. Nostalgia and memory for both were tied to the experience of time. And both drew, in their various speculations, on two common sources: Henri Bergson and Andrey Bely. Writing about Stravinsky in 1949, Craft mentions Stravinsky's having read Bergson.⁴² Whether he actually did so or learned of Bergson's ideas from Pierre Souvchinsky in the 1920s, the philosophical connection Bergson forged between the experience of time in the present and the expression of the human creative force left a lasting impression on the composer's beliefs about the character and function of music.⁴³ Music, by framing and in fact stopping the ordinary experience of time so that it appeared always in the present, rendered music "petrified" architecture and deepened the consciousness of human creativity.

Nabokov had a more complex understanding of time. He was also influenced by Bergson, whom he admitted reading avidly in the interwar years.⁴⁴ But the issue of time, always present in the novels, took center stage in the 1960s, in *Ada*. In Stravinsky, musical time as defined as the extension and construction of the present moment, reappears as well in the late work, mostly as a result of his encounter with the music of Anton von Webern, in which silence as a component of music structure and the ascetic economic manipulation of sonority, mostly in units of short duration, predominates, thereby heightening and intensifying the sense of time. The overlap between Stravinsky and Nabokov rests in their respective struggles to come to terms with the link between past and present. The "flowering of the present," as Nabokov put it, demanded the awareness that time is "vaguely connected to hearing"; the apprehension of time requires "the utmost purity of consciousness," which is not spatial and visual but aural.⁴⁵

The key fact is that the "still fresh past" defines the present. The "present" slips in when we inspect "shadow sounds." The "dim" intervals between the "dark" beats of the authentic rhythm of time offer merely the "feel" of the texture of time. Nabokov concluded: "Our modest present is, then the time span that one is directly and actually aware of, with the lingering freshness of the Past still perceived as part of the newness."⁴⁶ The synchronized flow of time as measured by clocks was itself an illusion, since the boundaries between past and present were if not fluid, interdependent, with the selective consciousness of the past defining the present and then subsequently, the reverse, in which the past becomes circumscribed by the sense of the present moment.⁴⁷ This fluidity reveals itself in the movement back and forth in time in Nabokov's narrative voice. His characters take the same journey — often so deftly from the reader's perspective that the shifts become noticeable only

after the act of reading, rendering the author's challenge to a reductive realism regarding time evident to the reader in his or her own time experience, not merely within the artificial time frame of the novel.

For both Nabokov and Stravinsky, the issue of time and its perception was more than an aesthetic problem. The experience of exile forced a many-sided dilemma with regard to memory and anticipation. First was the challenge of how one might come to terms with the artistic heritage, public, and tradition of which the exile once expected to be part, and from which he was separated. Second was the need to grapple with the tyrannies of memory—the lacunae, the willful and inadvertent distortions, and the fragments all heightened by discontinuity and distance, the forced separation from the familiar and the illusions of a continuity that non-exiles take for granted. Third was the danger posed by the allure of nostalgia, the sentimental distortion of memory, and the exaggerated fear of forgetfulness. To forget was in fact to destroy the possibilities of the present and not merely the past. Memory, the driving force of the present and essential to the artist, was constantly at risk in exile, since it became a purely mental property, unaided by sight and sound.

The last dilemma was the resultant difficulty among exiles to find an alternative to the tacit assumption of continuity—an effective means to forge an ongoing connection between past and present despite dislocation. Something thoughtlessly possible for those not displaced became a struggle. Indeed, the definition of the present—the temporal frame for the making and experience of art—became more complex since the significant past was ever harder to keep “still fresh” and its capacity to “slip” into the present to define it was weakened. At risk was the capacity to grasp the present, to intuit the texture of time sufficiently to allow the imagination to take flight in the act of writing and composing.

Nabokov's approach to the issue of time may have influenced by Bergson, but it was the thought of Andrey Bely that most directly shaped the way Nabokov considered his craft and vocation as a writer and his approach to aesthetic questions.⁴⁸ Writing in 1907, Bely argued (despite his early admiration for Wagner) against a “synthesis” of art forms. Rather, the purpose of art reflected an underlying unity in the arts. “Is it simply so that we may transform a few hours into a dream, only to have the dream destroyed again by the intrusion of reality,” Bely asked. His answer was that the creative act was, in Kantian terms, “cognition for its own sake,” an intuitive form of engaging time without any purpose or object. The “method of creation” becomes “an object in for itself.” The result was the “extreme form of individualization.” The process of artistic creation demanded that each artist “must become his own artistic form.” The categories of time, as artificial subjective conventions for framing reality must be rethought. Bely termed new art as “the past that is reborn,” where “we find ourselves at the mercy of the cherished dead.” In a manner reminiscent of Nabokov's own speculations Bely argued, “We must forget the present. We must recreate everything and in order to do this we must create ourselves.”⁴⁹

The interconnection of a construct of the past—the task of reassembling the past, or in Bely’s terms, recreating it—requires that conventions about understanding the “present” be set aside. Forgetfulness is a prelude to the restoration of memory. The sense of time is not connected to a cognitive correspondence between external reality and consciousness, but a function of a highly individualized creative act, using the aesthetic medium—the musical, the poetic, and the visual—to redefine consciousness and time. These claims connect directly to the innovations of both Nabokov and Stravinsky.

For Bely—as well as Nabokov and the mature Stravinsky—the key to escaping the notion that art was a mere illusory respite from an objective reality was the recognition that the form in which the creative act expressed itself generated an alternate reality, an experience of time located in the human possibility of individuality that vindicated life. In moral terms, the most significantly true reality came into being through the forms of art in a manner that transcended, with considerable precision, the mundane understanding of real time and experience. These were themselves the result of an impoverished use of language. Placing art before any notion of “life” Bely concluded, “In art, in life, things are more serious than we think.”⁵⁰

The most “serious” realization—one crucial to Stravinsky and Nabokov—was Bely’s idea that “if words did not exist than neither would the world itself.” Bely put forward a notion of “living speech,” which was the “very condition of existence of mankind itself.” And since “mankind’s purpose lies in the living creation of life,” by hearing speech that is “imagined” and “living” we are led to new words and word constructions that in turn lead to “the acquisition of new acts of cognition.”⁵¹ The next step was from words to music.

Bely’s privileging of language as the mother of thought, as his contemporary Karl Kraus put it, was not novel. But there was a metaphysical premise in Bely, one that justified a scientific precision to language particularly dear to Nabokov. Language, especially in poetry, created the reality we define as “living” relationships, including the future creation of language. Within the linguistic realm, and within art, for example, the coincidence of vocabulary (as in the case of Kant and Hanslick) suggested that in this ever-expandable universe of linguistic invention, there were scientific criteria of truth, a “real dimension.”⁵² Nabokov’s distaste for conceptual language, the vocabulary of ideologies—in Marx and Freud—derives from Bely’s skepticism that there is false language, language that is wholly unreal—detached from the “direct expression of life.”⁵³ Naming becomes crucial since it creates that which would otherwise not exist. “The word is the sole real vessel on which we sail from one unknown to another—amidst unknown spaces (called “earth” “heaven” “ether” and so forth) and amidst unknown temporalities.” The “firework” displays of words “fill the void surrounding me.”⁵⁴ Bely’s vision veers close to a method of musical composition using intervals and sonorities in a novel fashion, much like Stravinsky’s procedures.

Poetry for Bely and Nabokov is the highest form of word usage; it is the source of the creation of language and is the purely “imaginal combination of words.” Indeed, in historical moments of decay, poetry’s importance is at its highest for it let us “recognize the meaning of new magical words” by which to “conjure the gloom of night hanging over us.” In moments of despair, “we are still alive, but we are alive because we hold on to words”⁵⁵ For Nabokov, this succinctly described his commitment to his vocation as a writer, particularly considering his keen sense of the darkness of the era in which he lived. For Nabokov, Bely’s observation that “mankind is alive, so long as the poetry of language exists,” was a genuine article of faith.⁵⁶

All this, according to Bely, was contingent on a belief in the necessity of form and the capacity to locate objective criteria in the understanding of aesthetic form, within all the arts. Formalism was not, for Bely, derivative of tradition or a distillation of historical practice—a deduction resulting from the imposition of norms of judgment onto an empirical base of past practice—something akin to the manner in which theorists establish norms of sonata form, for example. Bely, an accomplished mathematician, was in search of a priori axioms. And his source was, predictably, mathematics and physics. Bely’s translation of scientific modes of thought into aesthetics was distinctive and may have provided the young Nabokov a suggestive model of how to link his fascination with nature and own work with butterflies to his ambitions as a writer.

The way in which the concrete materials of art are considered constitutes the subject of form; there was no division between content and form. Form, for Bely, was the “governing” principle in all art that protected art from descending into meaningless chaos and “tendentious encroachments.”⁵⁷ Bely’s principles were framed in terms of Newtonian laws. First came a hierarchy of the arts. He posited an “inverse proportion” between space and time in the ranking of the arts. This made music the highest of the arts, since in it all spatial and visual elements were abstracted. Music possessed no spatial dimension. It was the means by which pure temporality was expressed. Only through “vague” analogies could “visual and spatial” meanings be attributed to music. The subordination of the spatial and visual to the temporal, as an attribute of aesthetic judgment, was crucial to Nabokov, as it was to Stravinsky, for it strengthened the idea that art was autonomous and ought not be tied to a vulgar sense of the real, to any illusionism or pictorial realism. Music was the art of time, understood as the “art of pure motion,” with a precise truth-value akin to science.⁵⁸

Poetry came next after music for Bely. “Poetry views the visible world musically, like a veil over an unspoken mystery of the soul. . . . Music is the skeleton of poetry. If music is the common trunk of all creation, poetry is its leafy crown.”⁵⁹ Although Nabokov derided his own connection to music, his notion of poetry and the nature of his prose, when considered in light of Bely’s premium on word creation and the novel combinations of words, seems precisely the sort of musical rendering of the

visual world. Painting, predictably, occupied the lowest rung of Bely's ordering of the arts.⁶⁰

Formalism was further understood in terms of the natural law of conservation, defined as the conservation of creative energy. In a proper artistic form that energy needed to be expended in proportional manner to overcome "stasis" in the material of creation. The aesthetics of form possessed its own "law of equivalents" by which the creative energy of the result matched that of its creation. Bely's effort to establish a non-arbitrary parallel between the laws governing energy with those governing art led him to assert that aesthetics could be an "exact science" with unlimited competence in the sense of the natural sciences.⁶¹ Once again, the sources of the conceits of Stravinsky and Nabokov can be found in Bely.

Using a single-minded emphasis on form, Bely formulated his own answer to the question of the connection between truth and beauty. Following the normative the philosophical discourse of the eighteenth century, the link was not between aesthetics and ethics but a direct, unmediated link between descriptive science and aesthetics. Stravinsky's turn to the ideal of Neoclassicism reveals a debt to Bely.

In Nabokov's case the connection is even more striking. Using elaborate diagrammatic schemes Bely argued that one could measure and describe the harmonious balance between content and form in a lyric poem; one needed a theory of rhythm and "instrumentation" so as to study word choices. Bely dissected a poem by Nikolai Nekrasov, separating its "experiential" content from its "ideational" content.⁶² Bely compared the rhythmic complexity of early and late Pushkin in order to grasp the "how" of words and sounds. An intensely descriptive science, including a taxonomy, was required to grasp the beauty of poetry; hence

Every lyric work demands a basic commentary. In commenting on a poem we are decomposing it, as it were, into its constituent and looking carefully at the means of representation, at the choice of epithets, similes and metaphors in order to characterize the content. We feel the words and look for their rhythmic and sonorous relations. In thus reorganizing the analyzed material into a new whole, we often can no longer recognize a familiar poem at all. Like the phoenix, it arises anew out of itself in a more beautiful form, or, conversely, it withers away. In this way we come to recognize that a comparative anatomy of poetic style is truly necessary, that it is the ultimate stage in the development of a theory of literature and lyric poetry, and finally that it represents a *rapprochement* between these two disciplines and the various fields of scientific knowledge.⁶³

There could be no more persuasive source for Nabokov's *Onegin* project, his structural choices in *Pale Fire*, or his suspicion of anything but literal translation. The purpose for this analytical exact science rested first in the precision in the variables of art—words, colors, and pitches—and second in the inherent objective logic of their use and elaboration. The pure aesthetic that such analysis could reveal

was an authentic realism and truth beyond realism and the visible within spatial dimensions. "Reality is not how it appears to us . . . reality as we know it is different from reality as it truly is," Bely concluded.⁶⁴

In Bely's terms, Nabokov the writer, by first approaching language as poetry, aspired to the state of music. Since all the art shares features with music, and music "unites and generalizes" all art, owing to its status as purely about time, "the profundity and intensity of musical works give us a hint" that through the aesthetic imagination, composer and listener, writer and reader can begin to "remove the deceptive veil" that covers the "visible world," and demolish the "deceptive picture" with which we live.⁶⁵ Nabokov's intensity of visual and oral observation, shorn from a conventional narrative or obvious temporal context, cast in rich and original poetic language, invited his reader to lift the veil and penetrate beyond the deceptive picture.

Stravinsky's connection to Bely was far less direct. Rather the influence of his notions of form and his views on music—and indeed the centrality of art—were communicated through the "World of Art" movement, by the painters and poets who were his contemporaries. But the link to Stravinsky's mature positions on the nature of music was profound. Perhaps the most oft cited claim Stravinsky made can be found in his autobiography:

For I consider that music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to express anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, a psychological mood and phenomenon of nature. . . . Expression has never been an inherent property of music. That is by no means the purpose of its existence. If, as is always the case, music appears to express something, it is only an illusion, and not a reality.⁶⁶

A corollary of this formalist claim is the assumption that the formal character of a piece of music has an objective character that can be exactly described and rendered. Bely's synthesis of natural science and aesthetics was a source of Stravinsky's intense disparagement of the practice and justification of subjective interpretation by performers and his personal affinity for first the pianola and subsequently for recording technology, through which exact and objective representations of a musical work could be transmitted.

Art and Consequences

Stravinsky shared with Nabokov the belief that the work of art—in contrast to the conceits of the literary and musical practices of the late nineteenth century (notably those who followed Chernyshevsky, Dostoevsky, Liszt, and Wagner)—held its value in its formal character. The power of art rested in its formal properties and the extent to which it contested commonsensical notions of the real and categories of space, time, and causality. Nabokov and Stravinsky held on to a belief in valid norms of aesthetic value that allowed for individuality while at the same time revealed a mistrust of a view of art as mere subjectivity, a field of endeavor without objective

criteria of judgment. Precision and exactness were indispensable attributes. In the end, however, what separated them can be located in Stravinsky's concession that "as is always the case," there is the appearance that even in music, the least "realistic" of the arts "something other than itself seems to be expressed."⁶⁷ Stravinsky was not unaware that the actual social function of music—its reception—derived from the assignment of meaning on the part of the listener, whether intended or not. The listener ascribed to music meanings both symbolic and literal that, strictly speaking, did not reside in the work itself.

For Stravinsky, this was a convenient error, one with which, for practical reasons, he could readily reconcile himself. At best, the proper reaction to art, a truly informed aesthetic response, permitted the ideal listener to make contact with a religious sensibility—a communion with a generalized notion of humanity and a "supreme being," a quasi-mystical religious feeling, not dissimilar from Romain Rolland's "oceanic" feeling so derided by Nabokov's least favorite theorist, Sigmund Freud. Nabokov's hostility to Freud rested in the writer's mistrust and contempt for a reductive causality about creativity, his denial of a deeper reality beyond the visible empirical world unmediated by the individual imagination, and therefore the freedom of the individual imagination. But Freud's criticism of Rolland did not redeem either Freud or Rolland for Nabokov.

For Nabokov, the formal virtues of art, properly grasped by the reader, did more than lead the reader into Stravinsky's moment of spiritual awareness. Literature, particularly poetry and prose written in a modernist style defined by the attributes of poetry (as in Bely's *St. Petersburg* and Joyce's *Ulysses*)—successfully prevented the reader from implicitly, in the act of reading, to deny the power of art by responding to the utterly mundane so that art merely conformed to the ordinary experience of reality. Indeed, the artwork, by its formal greatness, could stop readers in their tracks. True art in the form of literature provided writer and reader an escape from the tyranny of deception that emanated from everyday life into experience transfigured by the imagination, a reality consciously protected from barbarism and vulgarity. The making of art and its proper appreciation, at its best, was for Nabokov a moral act of rescue, a route for individuals to confront freedom, and the paradox that human decency, culture notwithstanding, is endangered. Nabokov undermines the act of reading as a passive experience just as Stravinsky demands the concentration of the listener. The recollection of details, the passage back and forth in the narrative, forcing the reader to reflect and piece fragments together, and to reconsider and remember created the allure of a complex interpretation within the present moment of reading. Nabokov and Stravinsky found comparable ways by which the link between an aesthetically generated deformation of elapsed time defines present experience.

The structure of a Nabokov novel can then be said to share musical traits, formal aspects that resemble how music, particularly in Stravinsky, is put together. Repetition, abrupt transitions, modulations, fragmentation, inversions, cross-references abound, as do excursions into intense counterpoint with multiple

subjects placed in discrete units. Nabokov's methods resemble Stravinsky's insofar as the elements of the composition are not present or utilized as placeholders for other meanings or expressive of something other than themselves. Even when words are set to music, as in Stravinsky's settings of texts in the *Three Japanese Lyrics* (1912) to *The Rake's Progress*, words are used as sound elements. Syllables are manipulated as musical elements.⁶⁸ The attempt to "set" the meaning of the words or illustrate them in a Wagnerian manner reliant on ordinary diction is subordinated. Stravinsky's procedure bears comparison already in 1912 with the purpose and method of the relationship between text and music articulated by Arnold Schoenberg that same year in the essay "The Relationship to the Text."⁶⁹ Even when presumed linguistic meaning is presumed—as in song or opera—the text is used musically and the music proceeds independently of any "meaning." The parallel in Nabokov is when the narrative object of the novel, its presumed reality—its setting and character—is mediated by the defiance of a single familiar perspective. The argument or plot of the novel is displaced from the reader's attention. Rather, the act of writing, the craft of writing, and the predicament of the writer—within the text itself—take center stage.

This elevates Nabokov's prose to the status of music. Nabokov, like Stravinsky, calls explicit attention to the craft and method of his compositions. In order to foreground the act of writing Nabokov calls for a reader who is actually more akin to the listener imagined by Stravinsky—a person who can follow the musical logic, and can smile, when necessary, at the elegance with which past tradition becomes part of the present moment, as in the 1924 *Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments*. Nabokov's writing is often about other writing, just as Stravinsky's music, particularly in the 1920s, has as its premise music from the past. Both Nabokov and Stravinsky, as exiles, used the aesthetic tradition in which they worked, albeit respectfully, against itself, so as to cloak the new in the past.

It is not surprising that from their shared heritage both artists foregrounded Pushkin. They skipped over the tastes of the previous generation. The tradition they drew was in that sense premodern, at the intersection of eighteenth-century Classicism and early Romanticism. Furthermore, Pushkin, like Tchaikovsky later in the century, represented an ideal synthesis of the Russian and the Western. Yet his star began to fade already at the end of his life. Those who regarded themselves part of the intelligentsia were, to quote D. S. Mirsky, "indifferent" or "hostile" after 1860; whatever surviving cult of Pushkin remained became "the religion of a paradise lost."⁷⁰ Nabokov idealized the poet who was neglected in the literary age of realism and social utility. He and Stravinsky identified with the very quality in Pushkin that outraged the older Tolstoy of the 1890s—the focus on an elite readership and the absence of a moralizing agenda. Yet Pushkin, owing to his use of language, defined what was distinctive about Russian poetry and the musical and expressive possibilities of Russian speech. Yet Pushkin found their expression in Western forms. Stravinsky lamented that for "foreigners" Pushkin was little more than "a name in an encyclopedia." Yet for these two exiles of an aristocratic sensibility and inclination, Pushkin's "nature" "mentality" and "ideology" was "the most perfect

representative of that wonderful line which began with Peter the Great . . . and has united the most characteristically Russian elements with the spiritual riches of the West.”⁷¹

Stravinsky turned to Pushkin, first during the composition of *Les noces* and then explicitly with *Mavra* in 1922. ⁷²Stravinsky sought to signal an explicit turn away from the patterns of late nineteenth-century Russian musical nationalism. He reinvented a lineage for himself located in Glinka and Tchaikovsky—a lightness, economy, and elegance reminiscent of Mozart and explicitly defiant of Wagnerism and post-Wagnerian German modernism. Following Pushkin—and Tchaikovsky—he would attempt a synthesis of the Russian with the refined Western sensibilities derived from the era during which aristocratic patronage dominated musical culture, the age before the death of Beethoven. Stravinsky recalled:

this poem of Pushkin led me straight to Glinka and Tchaikovsky and I resolutely took my position beside them. I thus clearly defined my tastes and predilections, my opposition to the contrary aesthetic, and assumed once more the good tradition established by these masters. Moreover I dedicated my work to the memory of Pushkin, Glinka, and Tchaikovsky.⁷³

Nabokov’s disdain for Tchaikovsky’s operatic version of *Onegin* for what he regarded as its mawkish sentimentality, “cloying banalities,” and its bowdlerization of the text, rested in the recognition, extensively argued by Bely, that in Pushkin the full power of Russian rhythm and usage was exploited and that “the poetical and emotional value of every word is put to its fullest use” in the streamlined elegance of Pushkin’s verse.⁷⁴ By being tied to the West but yet the greatest exponent of the distinctive qualities of the Russian language, Pushkin (whose work was well known well before Nabokov to resist proper translation) emerged as matter of some obsession for the exiled Nabokov and as a powerful anchor for the exiled Stravinsky.
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As Stravinsky observed, “the national element occupies a prominent place with Pushkin as well as with Glinka and Tchaikovsky.”⁷⁶ Pushkin mirrored precisely the dual condition of Nabokov and Stravinsky as exiles—in possession of a uniquely Russian instrument (language for Nabokov, source material and harmonic usage for Stravinsky) but trapped in a Western context. That “fortunate alloy,”⁷⁷ as Stravinsky termed Pushkin’s synthesis, remained present in the work of both men to the end. It is visible in Nabokov’s American novels and in his translations of his earlier works into English. The synthesis of the Russian and the Western is audible in Stravinsky’s *Canticum sacrum*, *Babel*, and the *Requiem canticles*.⁷⁸

Nabokov and Stravinsky called on their respective publics to confront the method and materials of their work—the self-conscious distinctive style they developed in the making of art. The listener to Stravinsky’s music, from *The Rite of Spring* and *Les noces* through to the finest of the late works, was confronted with intense moments and abrupt changes in sonority without conventional preparation, complex but

unified contrapuntal combinatorial elaborations, all independent of a late-romantic reliance on duration and structural devices based on habitual expectations derived from practices dependent on easily located thematic expositions, repetitions, variations, recapitulations, and transitions.

Stravinsky's and Nabokov's sources were Russian but their audiences—certainly after 1940—were not. In their styles they embedded that which was for them distinctly and irreducibly Russian—not the Russian of the late nineteenth century but of Pushkin and, in terms of humor, Gogol. By recasting that aspect of tradition they engaged in their own distinctive manner of nostalgia. That nostalgia evoked a highly conservative imaginary past, inherently critical of aspects of modernity and modernism fashionable during the mid-twentieth century. Stravinsky may have employed his own version of serialism but after 1939 kept his distance from the radical experimentalism of John Cage, just as Nabokov dismissed most if not all of his contemporary “modern poets” (T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, for example). At the same time they shunned populists, particularly the writers and composers in the Soviet Union. Stravinsky's appreciation for Schoenberg and Webern derived from his recognition that they drew from an idealized pre-Romantic tradition located in Viennese Classicism. Nabokov had contempt for the books sent to him in the 1950s and 1960s and resisted the academic enthusiasm and literary emulation of Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*.

The legacy Stravinsky and Nabokov shared produced a body of work tied to a mythical past kept fresh in their minds in exile and yet stylistically modernist in an individualist manner. They remained independent of dominant modernist trends such as the derision of style per se, the devaluation of ornament, and the suspicion of complexity. Their distinctive modernism stood apart from any reactionary embrace of the strategies of narrative realism and romanticism. Their appropriation of sources from a vanished past permitted them to render the reader into the listener. The temporal frame of the encounter with music defined the aesthetic experience of reading. Stravinsky was never a literary composer in the Wagnerian sense. And Nabokov, his protestations to the contrary, turned the encounter with prose into an act of intense musical listening in which meaning derived from the formal properties and use of words that framed the reader's encounter, her perception of time, memory, and her construct of meaning—all sealed within the framework of a work of art, an imagined abstraction from the shared encounter with ordinary reality.

Yet, for all the common ground between them, the differences remain located in the ethical substance implicit in their work, in how they, as artists, construed modernity. At stake were not merely the predicament of the artist but the proper character of the response. The experience of exile, and the distance it created from any semblance of home rendered ordinary history and even the fragments of biography—for both based in Russia—as fanciful as Kinbote's Zembla. For Nabokov, that uprooted existential circumstance turned out to be the most reasonable vantage point from which to observe human nature and to write within the most

noble and beautiful traditions of his craft. By moving back to Montreux, he secured vis-à-vis America, his new home, once again the necessary distance forced upon him in 1917 vis-à-vis Russia. That distance secured the possibility that, at its best, he could sustain in his writing the “precision of poetry and the exactness of science.”⁷⁹ The precision and exactness were understood as located in the use of words, the acuity of observation, and the penetration through art beneath the surface to confront the moral circumstance of the individual.

Stravinsky shared Nabokov’s allegiance to an art of precision and exactness and to an art located in a Russian tradition mediated through Western European practice. But he was rather impervious to the moral crisis represented by fascism and communism, by the terror, barbarism, and slaughter they inspired.⁸⁰ Nabokov (as he never tired of asserting in the face of the scandal surrounding *Lolita*) remained a moralist with eighteenth-century values located in the love of individual freedom, art, and science.⁸¹ He sought to engage his best readers in confronting, albeit indirectly, the threat evident in the course of twentieth-century history. What is deftly woven in all his novels is the nearly irresistible pressure, practical and psychological, and therefore the powerlessness of individuals to resist, escape, and reject the allure of entrapment and collaboration. Only in the temporal realm of the imagination could the human possibility of decency be given voice.

This aspect of Nabokov helps illuminate the link between his writing and his work with butterflies. The butterfly, much like the nymphet, has a brief moment of detailed beauty that emerges from the uncanny camouflage of the ordinary. The temporal frame of that beauty is brief, comparable to the act of writing, the act of listening, and the act of reading. It is a revealing coincidence that in concentration camps that held children, the children spontaneously drew on the walls pictures of butterflies as emblems of hope.⁸² Reading Nabokov and perhaps listening to Stravinsky—despite the absence of any comparable admirable intentions on the part of the composer—permits us the same fleeting sense of hope and beauty expressed by the children as their own past was obliterated and the present brought them only nearer to their death.

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*. I wish to acknowledge the achievement which is Brian Boyd’s two volume biography of VN,..... a necessary and valued source. The subjects in this essay have been treated provocatively by Daniel Albright in the chapter on Nabokov in *Representation and the Imagination*, the discussion of Stravinsky in *The Twisted Serpent* (?)

² Walsh’s account in Vol. 2

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- ³ Stephen Walsh,
- ⁴ Strong Opinions see Davydov on poshlost' in Alexandrov The Garland Companion
- ⁵ French essay on Souvchinsky, Walsh
- ⁶ On Nabokov on music, see in SO; see also essays by Balestrini and Nicol in Lisa Zunshine, ed.
- ⁷ Playboy
- ⁸ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. ; and
- ⁹ The New Republic review of *Speak, Memory*, of which Nabokov approved
- ¹⁰ Boyd Vol 1
- ¹¹ Vincent Giroux, unpublished drafts of biography of NN; references to Nabokov and Stravinsky in Nabokov's German and English memoirs
- ¹² Boyd and Taruskin Vol. 1
- ¹³ Nabokov, Boyd and SM p. 71
- ¹⁴ Boyd and Speak Memory
- ¹⁵ Igor Stravinsky, *The Poetics of Music* (
- ¹⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, 1937
- ¹⁷ Nabokov SO
- ¹⁸ See Will Norman's discussion in his book.
- ¹⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (), pp.
- ²⁰ This essay is indebted to Taruskin's brilliant and detailed analysis of Stravinsky. His portrait of the history, his analytical accounts of the music and the biographical claims form an indispensable basis for anyone writing on Stravinsky.
- ²¹ Richard Taruskin, Stravinsky..
- ²² See Roerich, two volume set and Taruskin, on the Painters in Pasler
- ²³ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift* (), pp
- ²⁴ Ibid., pp
- ²⁵ Edward T. Cone
- ²⁶ Cone
- ²⁷ Louis Andriessen and Elmar Schönberger
- ²⁸ Taruskin on dobnost'
- ²⁹ Nabokov, 1956, and *The Eye*
- ³⁰ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, pp.
- ³¹ Nabokov
- ³² Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, pp
- ³³ On Ciurlonis and synaesthesia
- ³⁴ Nabokov
- ³⁵ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, pp
- ³⁶ Nabokov
- ³⁷ Nabokov
- ³⁸ In *Pale Fire*, for example the use of musical metaphors, references and analogies abound. See pages 10,12,13,20,21,86-88,100,103,105,150-151,153-155,159,165,172,188,204,219-220,226.
- ³⁹ In *Collected Short Stories*
- ⁴⁰ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*,
- ⁴¹ Stravinsky, *Autobiography*,

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- ⁴² Craft
- ⁴³ Taruskin and French volume on Stravinsky's friends;
- ⁴⁴ Leona Toker in Garland
- ⁴⁵ Nabokov
- ⁴⁶ Nabokov, *Ada*
- ⁴⁷ See Natalie Reitano "Our Marvelous Mortality" in *Criticism* Vol. 49 2007
- ⁴⁸ See Alexandrov Nabokov and Bely in Garland;
- ⁴⁹ Andrey Bely,
- ⁵⁰ Bely
- ⁵¹ Bely
- ⁵² On Art and Science in Nabokov see Leland de la Durantaye in Will Norman and Duncan White
- ⁵³ Bely
- ⁵⁴ Bely
- ⁵⁵ Bely?
- ⁵⁶ Nabokov
- ⁵⁷ Bely
- ⁵⁸ Bely? Nabokov?
- ⁵⁹ Bely
- ⁶⁰ Bely's writing on Pushkin, and on rhythm in Pushkin's poetry appear to have been influential. See "Lyric Poetry and Experiment in Cassedy and, Bely Ritm kak dialektika I miedni sadnik , (Moscow 1929). This book makes a cameo appearance in *The Gift*.
- ⁶¹ Bely
- ⁶² Bely
- ⁶³ Bely
- ⁶⁴ Bely
- ⁶⁵ Bely? Nabokov?
- ⁶⁶ Stravinsky, *Autobiography*,
- ⁶⁷ Stravinsky
- ⁶⁸ See the discussion in Taruskin
- ⁶⁹ Schoenberg in *Style and Idea* ed. L. Stein
- ⁷⁰ Mirsky
- ⁷¹ Stravinsky?
- ⁷² Kararlinsky in Pasler, p. 5, Hyde in Cross p. 107-109, Taruskin
- ⁷³ Stravinsky, *Autobiography*,
- ⁷⁴ Nabokov
- ⁷⁵ See Yuri Leving in *Transitional Nabokov*
- ⁷⁶ Stravinsky
- ⁷⁷ Stravinsky
- ⁷⁸ Karlinsky p. 15
- ⁷⁹ Nabokov interview on tape
- ⁸⁰ See the nostalgic aside in *Pale Fire* p. 188
- ⁸¹ See Will Norman Nabojov, *History and the texture of time* esp 118-129
- ⁸² Elisabeth Kubler Ross Lecture at U of Zurich tape in film by Sefan Haupt