Vulnerability, Discipline, Perseverance, Mercy: On Teaching Nabokov’s Short Stories

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Nabokov is a magnet. No matter how fast the lathe of academia turns, in what direction it moves, and how alluring or pointless students think Literature is as a major, there are always undergraduates willing to read his books and professors willing to teach them. At Bard College, where I have been a member of the Languages and Literatures division for eleven years, three or four faculty list Nabokov’s works on their syllabi each semester. A couple of short stories assigned in a creative writing course. *Speak, Memory*, appearing in a seminar on autobiography and the poetics of selfhood. *Bend Sinister*, offered in a class that explores dystopian narratives. The commentary to *Eugene Onegin* and “The Art of Translation” discussed in a translation workshop. The complexity of Nabokov’s storytelling, the idiosyncrasy of his metaphysical ideas, the themes of pedophilia and incest around which *Lolita* and *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* coagulate, and his professed lack of interest in politics do not impede the magnetism. There is the sheer force of talent to consider, the pull of the author whose style, as Michael Wood explains, “is so subtle that it reflects not a meticulous control of a fictional world but a disciplined vulnerability to the shocks of a historical one.”1 I would add to this, “not only a meticulous control,” for in the Nabokovian pairing of discipline and vulnerability the former definitely prevails. It is Nabokov’s self-discipline—and the
disciplining reading strategies embedded in his texts—that promise the figure of authority both to confront and venerate to those who read much less fiction than their parents and grandparents did, who condemn sexual taboo as a literary subject, and who embrace political activism as a new way of life. They start a Nabokov class to “check him out” and leave smitten, deeply engaged. As one of my students recently said, “If we do cancel the canon, I want this ‘dead white male’ to stay alive.”

Cultivating this reluctance to throw Nabokov off the steamboat of modernity is one of the joys and privileges of my job. Every other year I teach “Nabokov’s Shorts: The Art of Conclusive Writing,” in which students are invited to learn not only about Nabokov but also from him. The course offers an introduction to upper-college level of literary criticism through the exploration of narrative structures in Nabokov’s short stories and the works he initially wrote for magazines in chapter-length installments, called “stories” at the time of publication, specifically, Speak, Memory and Pnin. The first page of my syllabus features the famous 1975 photograph by Horst Tappe, in which the writer-lepidopterist, clad in shorts, marches through an Alpine landscape in search of a rare and, if he is lucky, yet unnamed butterfly. Although the pun is intended, the premise of the course has little to do with elusive lepidoptera and Nabokov’s choice of outfits for hunting expeditions. At its core lies the idea that short stories were, for him, a magic portal to two successive—and successful—professional careers: first, the career of an émigré Russian writer finding his footing in prose in the 1920s and ’30s, and then the “American” career culminating in the conquest of the global literary market. The latter began in the 1940s with Nabokov’s publication of concise works of fiction in the English language in The Atlantic and The New Yorker. “[T]he short story as genre is the ultimate test of a writer’s perfection,” Maxim Shrayer writes in his seminal The World of Nabokov Stories, and it is the Nabokovian version of this excellence that we explore in the course.2 The only reason why I refrain from citing the “art of perfection” in its title is because my main goal as a teacher is to translate Nabokov’s short-prose writing—the structural soundness, thematic intensity, and deep psychological saturation of his “shorts”—into an inspiration for Bard undergraduates’ own convincing and lucid (critical) prose.

I offer “Nabokov Shorts” as a Junior Seminar and, therefore, gear it to the needs of Literature majors committed to writing their qualifying theses—“senior projects,” in Bard’s parlance—on a particular author, literary
movement, or series of novels or plays. We meet for two hours and twenty
minutes once a week and read two dozen critical essays in addition to twenty-
two stories, the autobiography, and Pnin. Due to more than a hundred pages
of concentrated reading assigned per session, the class has earned a degree
of notoriety among Bard’s already overwhelmed juniors and seniors, who
pick up this load with a heavy sigh. Nevertheless, the interest in “Nabokov’s
Shorts” has been steady. I credit it, first and foremost, to the literary works
themselves: their energy and verbal plasticity, their puzzles and revelations,
their exquisite craftsmanship—all the qualities, which Edgar Allan Poe, whom
Nabokov so exuberantly parodied in Lolita, once pronounced the “deliber-
ate care” of composition capable of leaving the reader with “a sense of the
fullest satisfaction.”

But there is another draw as well: the reading method which Nabokov
taught his students at Wellesley and Cornell and which I encourage my
students to embrace. We start with the introductory essay to Lectures on
Literature, with its requirement that “a good reader, a major reader, an
active and creative reader is a re-
re-reader” and from there move on to other
Nabokov’s “strong opinions”:

“Art is difficult.”

The intricacy of individual fate is way more complex and thought-
provoking than a cultural cliché or political platitude.

And accumulating the recurring motifs in a story is just as important as
remembering where they come from, how they connect to other thematic
arrangements, and what greater artistic function they perform.

“All communication is a code, poetry being simply the most complex, inte-
grated ordering of encoded elements,” Robert Alter says apropos Pale Fire.
My decision to structure every class around close reading assignments origi-
nates from the poetic density and semiotic intricacy of the stories we read
Berlin,” “A Nursery Tale,” “The Potato Elf,” “The Aurelian,” “The Visit to the
Museum,” “Lips to Lips,” “Terra Incognita,” “Perfection,” “The Leonardo,”
“Breaking the News,” “Recruiting,” “Spring in Fialta,” “Cloud, Castle, Lake,”
“Vasiliy Shishkov,” “Ultima Thule,” “Solus Rex,” “Signs and Symbols,” “The
Vane Sisters,” and “Lance.” The students’ admiration for Nabokovian plots,
with their speedy plunge into narrative action and provocative endings, set-
tles in right away, and almost everyone becomes captivated by Nabokov’s
rhetorical prowess and stylistic virtuosity. That said, becoming a Nabokophile
does not immediately turn one into a Nabokovian, namely, the commentator
who can decode Nabokov’s texts without donning, willingly or unwittingly, the mantle of King Kinbote. To teach my students how to decipher both the “main” and “semitransparent” layers of Nabokov’s short stories, another bit of advice from the author himself comes in handy: the teacher’s job is to demonstrate “how a writer continually builds up his story by packing in detail, detail, detail.”

Following this recommendation, I impel the class to move through the narrative landscape slowly, one image, word, letter, and, sometimes, grapheme at a time. Nabokov insisted that a “good reader” collects “sunny trifles” of the story before indulging in the “moonshine of generalizations,” but, unavoidably, the moonshine beckons, while the tiny particulars—“a smear on the platform, a cherry stone, a cigarette butt”—are easy to overlook. In the beginning of “Nabokov’s Shorts,” students tend to switch from the work of sleuthing for narrative clues to discussing the issues of class and gender, race, and power, as well as Nabokov’s politics, philosophy, and poetics, without backing up their conclusions with much textual evidence. These broad conversations endow each class with vigor and sparkle, but I encourage them on the condition that every sweeping statement sweeps in the direction of Nabokovian precision. Instead of judging the author from his biography (which, in the beginning of the course, Bard juniors and seniors are not likely to know in detail anyway), I recommend that they address the works themselves. For example, it might be tempting for high-minded beginners to slate Nabokov as an aristocrat and a snob after reading Speak, Memory, unless they are able to trace the motif of genteel poverty in “A Guide to Berlin,” “Perfection,” and “Recruiting”; discover exile-provoked patterns of grief and anxiety in “The Visit to the Museum,” “Breaking the News,” “Vasily Shishkov,” and “Signs and Symbols”; or notice emblematic details of this “elitist’s” stubborn advocacy for the underdogs of history and fortune in “Leonardo,” “Cloud, Castle, Lake,” “The Vane Sisters,” and Pnin.

“He comes across as this snorting wizard of hauteur, but he is the dream host, always giving us on our visits his best chair and his best wine,” Martin Amis writes. After learning how to recognize the persistent theme of compassion in Nabokov’s oeuvre, my class begins to feel more at home in this fictional world. In their conversations and papers, the Nabokovian dictum, “Beauty plus pity...is the closest we can get to a definition of art,” starts coming to the fore. Such research topics as “From the Rags of Exile to Artistic Riches: The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man in ‘A Guide to Berlin’ and
‘Vasiliy Shishkov’ or ‘The Motif of Benevolence in Nabokov’s Short Stories’ begin taking precedence over the view of Nabokov as an elitist writer prone to snobbery that less attentive readers might embrace.

Our discussion of the dystopian “Cloud, Castle, Lake” illustrates how close reading helps define the ethical and aesthetic nucleus of this course. The failed attempt of the protagonist, a Russian émigré in Berlin, to flee a cohort of monstrous tourists ends in his losing “strength to belong to mankind any longer.” Students immediately grasp the anti-totalitarian point of the story and express sympathy for Vasily Ivanovich’s self-elimination by eagerly drawing parallels between the hero’s plight and that of countless victims of the Nazi regime. But what they need help with realizing is the broader scope of Nabokov’s indictment of totalitarianism as well as the potency of the escape narrative built into “Cloud, Castle, Lake” by means of several subtle allusions. The realization happens after we start investigating the dactylic rhythm of the story, reiterated in the tripartite list of the seemingly accidental objects observed by Vasily Ivanovich from a train car window. As Alexander Dolinin points out, both the humble catalogue (“a smear on the platform, a cherry stone, a cigarette butt”) and Vasily Ivanovich’s parting words addressed to his torturers (“We can’t travel together any longer [Mne bol’she s vami ne po puti]”) contain a reference to Yuri Olesha, who was labeled a “fellow traveler [poputchik]” due to his refusal to fully embrace the Communist ideology. The narrator of Olesha’s short story, “The Cherry Stone,” contemplates planting a cherry tree in the middle of a bare place, where a giant Soviet building is to be erected, in order to avoid a commitment both to the bourgeois past (the vacant lot) and the Communist future (the new edifice). He is a writer, unlike Vasily Ivanovich, but like Nabokov’s hero, he cannot belong to a coterie of ideological conformists tottering on the brink of becoming political fanatics. For Olesha, the cherry tree seems to metonymically represent the Chekhovian cherry orchard—the place of nostalgia as well as the realm of artistic freedom.

Whereas Vasily Ivanovich tries to abscond from the brainwashing trip to a rented room above the lake graced with a castle and a cloud—that epitome of the Nabokovian “otherworld” with its “help, promise, and consolation”—the goal of Olesha’s narrator is to find a “third way” for a captive Soviet artist to follow. The path leads to an “invisible land in the land of observation and imagination,” where he may, “in spite of everything, contrary to all established order and the society, create within [himself] a world emancipated of all laws
except the transparent laws of [his] own personal impressions.” Nabokov, who taught “The Cherry Stone” at Wellesley, finds “a magnificently illustrated idea of a real true writer’s temperament” as well as an ingenious alternative to Soviet “party literature” in this short work of fiction. Throughout our discussion of this subtext, students begin to see that, due to the translocation of Olesha’s “invisible land” to “Cloud, Castle, Lake,” the totalitarian context of the short story expands from Nazi Germany to the Stalinist Soviet Union and beyond, while Vasiliiy Ivanovich’s liberation acquires a creative dimension and thus, a meaning that complements the notion of transcendence embedded in the story’s last line: “Of course, I let him go.” In other words, the method of approaching one text through the other teaches students how to add depth and complexity to their interpretations of the Nabokovian oeuvre. While the history Nabokov references in “Cloud, Castle, Lake” is tragic, the “artistic reality” he shapes out of these grim circumstances does not fail to surprise and satisfy.

To make the class realize that a meaningful act of literary scrutiny is a precondition for a lively dialogue with an inspiring outcome, I preface the study of each work of fiction with questions that both reveal a fragment of Nabokov’s pattern and stimulate students’ interest in character arcs, psychological nuances of the story’s conflict, and the role of the narrator in controlling our response to it. This kind of guidance helps advance their comprehension of the “shorts,” such as “The Potato Elf,” assigned early in the course. After discussing the fabula of the story and the circumstances of its title character’s existence, I alert my critics-in-training to Nora’s emotional reaction to the tiny, injured Fred Dobson, who arrives in the house in the arms of her conjuror husband (“Child. Lost. Found. Her dark eyes grew moist”) and invite them to think about how the image of a hurt foundling echoes the heroine’s destiny—getting pregnant by the dwarf, becoming a mother to a long-desired child, and then losing her boy to an illness. Is Nora cold-hearted and licentious or a victim of Shock’s endless joking around? Is the death of the child one of Nabokov’s brutal catastrophes of the kind Zoran Kuzmanovich suggests “cannot make sense in the world,” or does it serve as authorial punishment for Nora’s solipsism—the unwillingness to comprehend her husband’s rare talent as well as Fred’s loneliness, neediness, and naiveté? And, conversely, why does Fred, who reminds Nora of her son, die at the moment of supreme bliss, after having learned that he fathered a healthy and handsome human being, but before finding out that the boy is dead? Although
Nabokov confessed that “The Potato Elf” was, “all in all” not his “favorite piece,” he also found its “artificial brightness...none too displeasing.” The questions and reading prompts send the students zigzagging through the text to eventually discover that, whereas Fred’s existence appears to be brightly lit, the predicament of Nora lingers in the story’s shadows. By juxtaposing the life trajectories of the two characters, they are able to follow the Nabokovian themes of “tenderness and pain,” “horror and pity,” as well as the trope of conjuring as psychological and fatidic manipulation.

The chronological trajectory of the course makes us sharply turn from reading Nabokov’s stories in translation to exploring his fiction written in English. Our comparison of “Breaking the News” and “Signs and Symbols” opens a passageway for the discussion of Nabokov’s Russian works as a backdrop for his American “shorts.” Nabokov himself pointed out the affinity in “milieu and the theme” between the two in a remark included in A Russian Beauty and Other Stories. Both narratives pivot around the yet unannounced demises of young men who are the sole meaning of their parents’ existence. In both of them, Nabokov keeps the elderly characters in the state of anxious suspense about the fate of their doomed sons, thus never actually destroying them with the devastating news. Instead, the task of collecting warning signals about the tragedies falls to the reader. In “Signs and Symbols,” our registering every detail of the Jewish couple’s journey to their son’s mental hospital and back, as well as the labels of jelly jars in their undelivered gift basket, increasing in astringency from apricot to quince, transforms the reading experience into a prolonged, excruciating, catharsis. Nevertheless, it is essential to read “Signs and Symbols” as the story that delivers the promise of survival after death both to the young man and to his kin: the mother and father, still alive, along with Aunt Rosa and other relatives who perished in the Holocaust. Ingrained in the story’s imagery, the metaphysical hope turns the readers’ search for auspicious clues—communications from the otherworld—into a mission to absolve Nabokov’s characters of their pain. As Dolinin writes, “Having broken the code, we can be certain that in the fictional universe where Nabokov is God, they too will be allowed to pass through and meet the sender of the secret message.”

Written thirteen years prior to “Signs and Symbols,” “Breaking the News” challenges the reader in the same way. Although we learn at once about the death of Misha, the only son of the old and almost entirely deaf Evgenia Isakovna Mintz, the “complex, integrated ordering of encoded elements” in
the story forces us to collect subtle warnings of disaster and impending grief, which someone—the author, but also possibly the boy’s solicitous ghost—sends to the Russian-Jewish émigré as she runs chores in preparation for a small gathering in her apartment later that day. One of these signs is the postcard slipped under her door that morning. It contains Misha’s words, “I literally fall off my feet” (in fact, he fell into an elevator shaft of a factory office in Paris). Another sign is the resemblance between an accidental passerby in the street and one Vladimir Markovich Vilner, who, as Mrs. Mintz remembers, “died alone.” The sad association is echoed by a chance encounter with another miserable person. Likewise, the words of a watchmaker who is supposed to fix Misha’s watch “jumped at her with a crash,” while a meeting with a Madame Shuf by a clothing store and the latter’s question about news from Paris interrupts Evgenia Isakovna’s contemplation of “a display of men’s shirts,” none of which will be of any use to her son any longer. These spectral messages are both portents of the disaster and markers of the possibility of transcendence. Whereas the friends of Mrs. Mintz believe that the news will kill her and, therefore, fumble for the words with which to approach the poor woman, the warning signs that surround Nabokov’s heroine alert the reader to the “gradual preparation” that has already started on a less grotesque wavelength, and not only for the pronouncement about death, but for death itself. It is not accidental that the names of two central characters in the story, Chernobylski (from chernobyl’nik, also known in Russian as polyn’) and Mintz (partially homophonous with German “Minze”), refer to potent herbs, mugwort and mint. In folklore and poetry, they symbolize passing, mourning, Lethean obliviousness, and the non-finite nature of death.

The argument that emerges when I encourage my students to place “Breaking the News” and “Signs and Symbols” side by side takes us to the problem of “cruelty” of Nabokov’s narrative choices and, from there, to pondering the writer’s responsibility in portraying loss and grief, pain and injustice, individual suffering and mass atrocities. Joanna Trzeciak convincingly suggests that our attention in reading both stories should be directed toward the parents, rather than the young protagonists, and argues that the “emotional content of silence” in them is comparable as well as fundamental. Nevertheless, two questions about “Breaking the News” and the artistic rendering of its themes in “Signs and Symbols” would remain open unless we probe Nabokov’s narrative structures with further emphasis on textual details. One of them has to do with the stories’ response to history. Trzeciak
calls “Signs and Symbols” a “post-Holocaust reprise of ‘Breaking the News,’” but the latter story, published on April 8, 1934, and later marked by the author as written in 1935, may already contain a denouncement of the brutality of Hitler’s regime, such as the 1933–35 laws banning Jewish citizens from working in their professions. By asking the class why Boris Lvoich Chernobylski has to help Misha Mintz find a job in Paris, or, rather, why Misha leaves Berlin where his “darling Moolik” lives, I attempt to re-actualize this historical context. Eventually we reach the conclusion that the deprivation of Jewish professionals of their rightful employment in Germany and Misha’s diminishing chances to attain success in life in spite of his being “plunged up to the neck in work” intimates his dying by suicide. The words of the Chernobylskis’ lodger emphasize this tragic plot twist: “I must say, incidentally, that I don’t understand how he could fall. You understand how?” Since the hero’s implied death in “Signs and Symbols” is definitely by suicide, Nabokov’s admission that the story shares the “milieu and the theme” with “Breaking the News” reinforces the possibility of Misha’s taking his own life. From there, my students find it much easier to make the connection between the deaths of these two young protagonists and the Nabokovian theme of “endless waves of pain” that afflicted the Jewish people before and after the war. The close reading also gets the class prepared for reading Pnin. Its hero’s own expression of the Holocaust theme initially seems deeply buried under the surface of the novel but becomes all-pervasive after several re-readings.

The watershed of World War II separates “Breaking the News” and “Signs and Symbols,” and yet it is not history alone that Nabokov rescues his sufferers from. Another question that emerges from the comparison between the two stories has to do with his benevolence as a creator of fictional worlds that echo the pain of the world outside and beyond fiction, the “reality” of here and now. I tell the class how Harold Ross, editor-in-chief of The New Yorker, once spoke of “Signs and Symbols” as “a very good picture of hopeless misery,” and they agree that human misery is one of Nabokov’s most essential thematic foci. Our goal, then, is to establish that hopelessness, on the contrary, is not what the writer professed. We discuss how the intimation of transcendenence with which Nabokov surrounds the elder heroes of “Breaking the News” and “Signs and Symbols” warrants what Leona Toker calls “the survival of conscience in the postcataclysmic world,” and we also look into the manifestation of authorial benevolence through the motif of nonverbal or “silent” communication. Nabokov welcomed silence or, rather,
noiselessness; when once asked by a journalist, “What do you detest most in
the world,” he responded: “Brutality, stupidity, noise.” It becomes a revela-
tion for my students that Evgenia Isakovna’s blissful deafness and the endless
pause after the last phone call granted to the mental patient’s parents may
thus be seen as acts of mercy. They who reluctantly remove their earbuds and
plug them back in right after class eagerly discuss how silence equals benevo-
ience in “Breaking the News” as well as in “Signs and Symbols,” because the
real news is not in the message but in its being sent and delivered: “He who
has ears, let him hear.”

In her otherwise very compelling analysis of “Breaking the News” and
“Signs and Symbols,” Trzeciak connects Nabokov’s “silentology” to “the path
of signs and symbols” which “leads nowhere” and is, therefore, “an act of
cruelty toward the reader.” The reading strategy I introduce in my course
negates this interpretation. Our textual, biographical, and historical scru-
tiny of both tales allows students to understand that the trope of silence
in them not only indicates the writer’s concern for his characters but also
demonstrates the generosity and trust with which he treats his audience. By
inviting the readers to decode his complex textual and contextual puzzles,
Nabokov teaches them how to fuse aesthetic appreciation and compassion.
He also makes the readers privy to the mystery central to his oeuvre in gen-
eral, summarized by Vladimir Alexandrov as the “faith in the apparent exis-
tence of a transcendent, nonmaterial, timeless, and beneficial ordering and
ordered realm of being that seems to provide for personal immortality and
that affects everything that exists in the mundane world.” One semester is
not enough for my cohort of Nabokovians to experience the functioning of
these two principles in many other works by Nabokov, such as Glory, Bend
Sinister, Lolita, and Pale Fire. We do, nevertheless, get to solve a number of
narrative riddles and trace patterns of individual fate in Speak, Memory as well
as discuss how these patterns, along with the narrator’s obliviousness to the
importance of personal (and textual) detail, leads to the catastrophic disso-
nance between the life lived and the story told in Pnin. Most importantly, the
reading of the autobiography and the novel after the scrupulous investigation
of Nabokov’s “shorts” allows us to concentrate on the specifically Nabokovian
figure of transcendent space-time—the otherworldly chronotope that, when
the author deems it necessary, can provide an asylum for victims of predeter-
mined violence and accidental doom.

Whereas the first half of “Nabokov’s Shorts” is dedicated to the explora-
tion of short stories with the help of Nabokov’s own reading method (we read
three stories per class, in a seven-week marathon) and culminates in a mid-term paper of five to seven pages dedicated to one of the tales, the second half of the course allows the students to make their way through Speak, Memory (three weeks, five chapters at a time) and Pnin (four weeks, two chapters per class, and one session that is dedicated to Chapter 7 and a re-reading) while working on the draft and revisions of their final papers, the focus of which is not only on an individual text but also on the broader questions of Nabokov’s poetics, aesthetics, ethics, and metaphysics. In between these two halves of the course, we hold a writing workshop, prior to which every class participant is given two papers by other students to read and review. When we come together to share the essays and deliberate on writing strategies for further critical exploration of Nabokov’s works, I ask students to present their argument in a two-minute report, which is then followed by one main reviewer’s in-depth analysis and two secondary reviewers’ remarks. Needless to say, I also read the papers and provide copious written commentary on them. The workshop, coupled with my written feedback, motivates course participants to complete their second essay of twelve to fifteen pages. They submit the paper draft in the eleventh week of class and expand it into a fifteen-to-twenty-page final version by the end of its fifteenth week. All in all, in addition to being a bootcamp in close reading and meticulous literary analysis, “Nabokov’s Shorts” also serves as a structured introduction to intensive writing on the author whose works are famous for their thematic intricacy and narrative impenetrability. It succeeds, because our conversations about Nabokov’s welcoming “good readers” and opening his codes and puzzles to them endows my students with the agency of “confronting” him as literary critics.

Bard juniors are a dynamic cohort trained to combine classroom learning with hands-on exploration of their subject in science labs, art and film studios, concert halls, and through engagement with local businesses and NGOs. For them, literary criticism is not only a way of in-depth reading or a rewarding genre of writing but also a potential future profession, the institutional, technical, and legal features of which they are eager to absorb. Since I conduct my own research on Nabokov in the archives at the New York Public Library and the Library of Congress, sharing this aspect of my work with the class seems not only natural but also pedagogically rewarding. This is why several sessions of “Nabokov’s Shorts” are dedicated to our perusal of copies of his manuscripts, which, to avoid copyright violation, I share with the class on a large screen—one densely crossed-out
and scribbled-all-over page at a time. During these sessions I explain how one approaches an archive with a research request, in what manner to handle rare books and manuscripts, and why organizing one’s archival copies and notes is a researcher’s most essential skill. After class, students often stay behind to tell me that they find our “practicums” most useful. Having never before drawn a happy parallel between modern literary studies and the concept of an archive, they begin to find archival sleuthing a worthy and fascinating occupation.

Both in personal conversations and during group discussions, some course participants also indicate that our examinations allow them to comprehend the notion of Nabokov’s “disciplined vulnerability” identified by Wood.\textsuperscript{47} The writer’s correspondence with editors, in particular, helps undergraduates understand the challenges of Nabokov’s transition from Europe, where his Russian works were appreciated by a small but intellectually and culturally cohesive group of émigré readers, to the United States, where the new literary market, the more diverse audience, and the different idiom and diction required a dramatic and often painful literary makeover. My students are taken aback by the fact that Nabokov went through a period of intensive, albeit grudging, linguistic apprenticeship and that his interactions with \textit{The Atlantic}’s Edward Weeks and \textit{The New Yorker}’s Katharine White included not only praise given and received but also exhaustive editorial back-and-forth, including the editors’ corrections of his word choices, syntax, and intonation. We look at his reluctant acceptance or adroit dodging of demands for structural revisions from his editors by studying their correspondence.\textsuperscript{48} We also marvel at how Nabokov, who went to Cambridge and claimed that he grew up as a “perfectly normal trilingual child” in a family of Anglophiles, accepted stylistic feedback from Weeks and White.\textsuperscript{49} Students find it hard to believe that the English of the author of \textit{Lolita} and \textit{Pale Fire} required polishing during Nabokov’s first ten years in America, but the galley proofs of “Signs and Symbols,” “The Vane Sisters,” “Lance,” \textit{Speak, Memory}, and \textit{Pnin} reveal this well-hidden side of his artistic personality. Even the staunchest of my rebels find it inspiring. As reported in course evaluations, the lessons they learn are not only that reading has to be close and literary analysis, meticulous, text-oriented, and sometimes supported with archival research but also that perfection in writing is a process and editorial guidance, a boon.
Notes


7 Ibid., 3–5.


17 The cited translation is Nabokov’s own. It is included in his lecture “Soviet Short Story,” currently in the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature of the New York Public Library. Vladimir Nabokov Papers, 1918–1987, n.d., ms. box. I am grateful to Andrei Babikov for a copy of the English text of the manuscript, from which this and other citations derive.


20 This reading goes against Dolinin’s suggestion that Olesha’s “creative death” prompted Nabokov to write “Cloud, Castle, Lake.” Dolinin, *Istinnaiia Zhizn’,* 193.
Referring to Olesha’s speech at the First Congress of Soviet Writers (1934), in which he sees an admission of defeat before “forces of history,” Dolinin writes: “According to Nabokov, the capitulation of an artist before history, his giving up his own ‘invisible land,’ and the attempt to find a compromise with the ‘Bureau of Pleasantries’ are tantamount to ‘an invitation to a beheading’ and can lead only to the loss of creative powers, self-destruction, and death.” Dolinin, Istinnaia zhizn’, 194. Nabokov’s own lecture on Olesha contradicts this statement. It focuses on the writer’s ability to resist the regime’s infringement on his creative freedom and asserts that “The Cherry Stone” is “the description of an artist’s exploration of an invisible land which is the free personal region where the Five year’s plan has no sway.” “Soviet Short Story,” cited, in Russian, in Babikov, Prochteniia, 276. The English original is in the Berg Collection; see note 18.

21 Nabokov, Stories, 232.
23 Nabokov, Stories, 672.
24 Nabokov, Stories, 240.
27 Nabokov, Stories, 601.
29 Nabokov, Stories, 391; Joanna Trzeciak, “‘Breaking the News’ and ‘Signs and Symbols’: Silentology,” in Anatomy of a Short Story, 218.
30 Nabokov, Stories, 392.
31 Nabokov, Stories, 392–393; Trzeciak, “‘Breaking the News,’” 218.
32 Polyn’ (mugwort) as an herb associated with bitterness, obliviousness, and death appears in Russian folklore and poetry, from Konstantin Batiushkov (“Bez smerti zhizn’ ne zhizn’. I chto ona? / Sosud, gde kaplia miodu sred’ polyni...” 1883) to Maximilian Voloshin (“Polyn’,” 1907). Mint is linked to death through the myth of Demeter and Persephone. The former had to partake of a mixture of mint, barley flour, and water to survive in the otherworld, and the latter transformed the lover of her husband Hades, the nymph Mentha, into a mint plant. See Philip Mayerson, Classical Mythology in Literature, Art, and Music (Newburyport, MA: Focus, 2001), 108–110, 230.
33 I assign an excerpt from Richard Rorty’s seminal study of the theme of cruelty in Nabokov’s oeuvre as well Michael Wood’s essay on this subject before this class. See Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (New York: Cambridge UP, 1989), 141–168; Wood, Magician’s Doubts, 55–82.
34 Trzeciak, “‘Breaking the News,’” 216–217.
Dmitri Nabokov inserted “1935” in the text of his translation of “Breaking the News,” most likely with his father’s direct approval. Thus, in English, the story is set in March 1935. See Nabokov, Stories, 390.

In 1933, the legislation to force Jewish citizens out of German workforce was introduced. 1934, the year of publication of “Breaking the News,” was the time of “barring non-Aryans from a rather broad range of occupational areas…. Young non-Aryans can no longer able to pursue their vocations in these fields.” Wolfgang Gruner, Jewish Forced Labor under the Nazis: Economic Needs and Racial Aims (1938–1944) (New York: Cambridge UP, 2008), 340; see also Konrad H. Jarausch, “The Conundrum of Complicity: German Professionals and the Final Solution,” in The Law in Nazi Germany. Ideology, Opportunism, and Perversion of Justice, ed. Alan E. Steinweis and Robert D. Rachlin (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 22.

The notorious Nuremberg laws of 1935, to which Trzeciak alludes, were adopted in September of 1935, i.e., several months after the death of Misha Mintz even in the corrected, English, version of the story. Nevertheless, the emphasis on Chernobylski’s effort to provide an employment recommendation for Misha (“it was I who helped him, found him a job”) and the repeated references to Paris in the story place Nabokov’s hero among Jewish professionals who desperately fled to France in 1933, “at a rate of 1,500 per month between April and August,” or in 1934, when the immigration became less numerous, but remained steady. Nabokov, Stories, 391; Walter F. Peterson, The Berlin Liberal Press in Exile: A History of the Parizer Tagesblatt – Parizer Tageszeitung, 1933–1940 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1987), 54–55.

Nabokov, Stories, 391.

Ibid.

Ibid., 601.


Olga Voronina, “Vladimir Nabokov’s Correspondence with the New Yorker regarding ‘Signs and Symbols,’ 1946–8,” in Anatomy of a Short Story, 53.


Nabokov, Think, Write, Speak, 502.

Matthew 13:43.

Trzeciak, “‘Breaking the News,’” 223.


Wood, Magician’s Doubts, 3.

I feel lucky to be able to share with my students excerpts of Nabokov’s correspondence with White and Weeks, which exists in manuscript form at the Berg Collection, the NYPL, but even when these materials are not available, Nabokov’s already