



Discourse and Ideology in Nabokov's Prose

EDITED BY DAVID H. J. LARMOUR

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DISCOURSE AND IDEOLOGY IN NABOKOV'S PROSE

"The book will be highly controversial and widely read. I admire its audacity. It may well inaugurate a new era in Nabokov Studies . . . The field needs this book and the arguments it will provoke."

Eric Naiman, *University of California, Berkeley*

"These essays finally quash the naive view that Nabokov's writings – especially *Lolita*, *Pale Fire* and the bewitching short stories – are free ideological zones, neutral and vacant. Students of the Nabokovian text, as well as Russian literature in the twentieth century, will want to consult this anthology before they ponder their next Nabokovian tactic."

George Sebastian Rousseau, *Oxford, England*

The prose writings of Vladimir Nabokov form one of the most intriguing oeuvres of the twentieth century. His novels, which include *Despair*, *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, have been celebrated for their stylistic artistry, their formal complexity, and their unique treatment of themes of memory, exile, loss, and desire.

This collection of essays offers readings of several novels as well as discussions of Nabokov's exchange of views about literature with Edmund Wilson, and his place in 1960s and contemporary popular culture.

The volume brings together a diverse group of Nabokovian readers, of widely divergent scholarly backgrounds, interests, and approaches. Together they shift the focus from the manipulative games of author and text to the restless and sometimes resistant reader, and suggest new ways of enjoying these endlessly fascinating texts.

David H. J. Larmour is Professor of Classics and Comparative Literature at Texas Tech University. He co-edited *Russian Literature and the Classics* (1996) and since 1997 has been one of the editors of the journal *INTER-TEXTS*.

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DISCOURSE AND IDEOLOGY IN NABOKOV'S PROSE

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At the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies in Honolulu in 1994, I participated in a panel on Nabokov. After the discussion at the end of the presentations, I decided it was time for a conference which would focus on the ideological underpinnings of the Nabokovian text and authorized modes of interpretation. On-the-spot encouragement came from one of my fellow-panelists, Galya Diment, and from Peter I. Barta, who was then my colleague and Director of Russian Language and Area Studies at Texas Tech University. I am grateful to both of them for their enthusiastic support of this undertaking.

In 1995 a conference on Discourse and Ideology in Nabokov's Prose took place at Texas Tech University. Several of my colleagues in the Department of Classical and Modern Languages and Literatures – Paul Allen Miller, Sharon Nell, Susan Stein, and Lewis Tracy – provided invaluable assistance throughout the event, as did a number of undergraduates studying Russian. In planning the conference, I received helpful advice from Donald Barton Johnson, who continued to give me the benefit of his knowledge in later years as I prepared the papers for publication. To all of these individuals, I would like to express my most sincere gratitude.

I thank the editors of the series *Studies in Russian and European Literature*, Peter I. Barta, now at the University of Surrey, and David Shepherd, at the University of Sheffield, for inviting me to publish *Discourse and Ideology in Nabokov's Prose*. Thanks are due also to those who read and evaluated the manuscript along the way: Stephen Hutchings, Eric Naiman, David Rampton, and George Rousseau. Michael Wells helped me compile the index. At Routledge, I have been ably assisted by Liz Thompson.

Last but not least, now that this volume is finally emerging, I wish to thank all the contributors for their co-operation and, especially, their patience. It has been a pleasure to work with such a diverse and interesting group of scholars, each with a unique perspective on Nabokov's oeuvre.

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INTRODUCTION

Collusion and collision

David H. J. Larmour

This volume arises from a conference held at Texas Tech University in 1995 on the topic of “Discourse and Ideology in Vladimir Nabokov’s Prose.” That event was motivated by a belief that the ideological underpinnings of Nabokov’s novels are a suitable area of investigation from a perspective which holds that all such texts both embody and promulgate a certain view of the world and how we organize our understanding of it.¹ The theme of the conference was underpinned by two interpretative positions: first, that ideology is a web of discursive effects in the real world of the reader’s lived experience, and second, that these effects are brought about by the operations of power. Discourse and ideology are linked here through the phenomenon of power, but not without an awareness of the complex nature of the interaction between the two terms. The complexity arises in part from the definitional fluidity of each, charted in recent studies by Sara Mills (1997) in the case of discourse and by Terry Eagleton (1991) for ideology. Significantly, both Chapter 2 of Mills’s study and Chapter 7 of Eagleton’s are entitled “Discourse and Ideology,” a conjunction which bears eloquent testimony to the close association between the two terms and the interpretive strategies they have engendered. Nonetheless, such combinations remain problematic. For some practitioners and theorists of discourse analysis, for instance, discourse and discursively-based criticism are to be differentiated from ideology and ideologically-based methodologies by styling ideology as essentially a matter of “false consciousness,” that is to say, false ideas which strive to legitimize the interests of a dominant social class or political power structure. Thus, it is possible for Roger Fowler to describe discourse as “speech or writing seen from the point of view of the beliefs, values and categories which it embodies; these beliefs etc. constitute a way of looking at the world, an organization or presentation of experience – ‘ideology’ in the *neutral, non-pejorative sense*” (Fowler 1990, 54; Hawthorn 1992, 48; emphasis added). Such a definition of discourse relies heavily on several elements that are

integral to some of the more nuanced understandings of ideology in contemporary theory, but then seeks to distance itself by reducing ideology to the basic Marxist formulation of false consciousness. Mills works within a broadly similar paradigm, as we can see from her discussion of the differences between ideological critics and discourse theorists in their approaches to sexism in language:

within an ideological view, sexism would be seen as a form of false consciousness, a way that subjects were, in Althusserian terms, interpellated, that is called upon to recognise themselves as certain types of gendered subjects ... whilst this is a useful first stage in analysing sexism, one which enables us to recognise the process whereby sexism comes to feel “natural” or dominant within a culture, it does not allow us any real sense of how it would be possible to intervene and change that process.

(Mills 1997, 44–45)

The key to such intervention and change, she suggests, lies in the recognition, predicated upon Foucault’s rejection of the “repressive hypothesis,” that power is not simply an infringement of the rights of one individual or group by another, but something which is to be held or taken away, fought for or relinquished, struggled against or submitted to. If we conceive of discourse in this Foucauldian mode, the analysis of discursive practices is inevitably an act of contestation because, as Foucault puts it:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.

(Foucault 1978, 100–101; Mills 1997, 42–45)

And yet, it is difficult to insist that ideologically-based criticism cannot be as effectively interventionist or challenging as that which arises from discourse analysis, especially if we consider ideology as a fundamentally discursive phenomenon. This is the point of Eagleton’s proposition that ideology may be viewed “less as a particular set of discourses, than as a particular set of effects *within* discourses” (Eagleton 1991, 194) and that it “represents the points where power impacts upon certain utterances and inscribes itself tacitly within them” (p. 223). In seeking to analyze discourse and ideology in Nabokov’s prose, then, this volume posits an

encounter between the reader and a set of ideological structures which are manifest in the discursive utterances and practices in and around the novels and short stories under discussion. The purpose is not to offer an exhaustive examination of Nabokovian Discourse or Nabokovian Ideology – which would, of course, have to be situated within their larger cultural contexts in order to be properly delineated and understood – but rather to suggest some lines of enquiry by which their exclusionary, naturalizing, and manipulative devices may be comprehended.

The title, *Discourse and Ideology in Nabokov's Prose* draws attention to the system of power relations in which the author, text, and reader are enmeshed, and to its constitution as an arena of negotiation and contestation. It also seeks to shift the emphasis away from author-based criticism to a form of critical practice in which the author is no longer – either explicitly or implicitly – the validator of meaning in the text, but is instead an author-function, a “principle of grouping of discourses, conceived as the unity and origin of their meaning” (Foucault 1981, 58; cf. Barthes 1986). It may be difficult for some to accept, in Barthes's terms, the death of an author as determinedly present as Nabokov has proved to be, but this would seem to be a necessary first step if as readers we are to liberate ourselves from discursive constraints and the threatened imposition of ideological unities. Nabokovian discourse needs to be understood in this context not only as the aggregate of statements or individualizable groups of statements in the texts arranged around the author-function, but also as the regulated practices that account for a number of statements, both in these texts and in the commentaries written upon them by Nabokovian critics and scholars.²

The call for papers for this conference was an attempt to solicit readings which would discuss and expose the operations of Nabokovian discourse and its ideological resonances, with special reference to gender and sexuality, politics and history, and social and cultural structures. The fact that Nabokov's novels have generally been treated as works of self-conscious artifice which are somehow ideologically neutral makes the case for such readings even more compelling. For many readers, it is clear that terms like “smokescreen” and “distortion” are just as meaningful as the talismans of traditional Nabokov criticism, “play” and “artifice.” Such reactions are symptomatic of the broader issue of how to map the operations of Nabokovian discourse and, in particular, its representation of men and women, socio-economic classes, nationalities (especially Russian, German, and American), sexualities, and political views (those either congenial or inimical to those of the authorial organizing consciousness). The task necessitates a shift of emphasis from language as signification and play to the scrutiny of the inscription of ideological and discursive strategies in language, in other words from a reading position of collusion with the text to one of collision.

The Latin verb *colludo* (*cum* + *ludo*) means to “play with” and “have a secret understanding with (often to the detriment of a third party),” giving us our English “collude”; the similar sounding verb *collido* (*cum* + *lido*) means to “strike against” or “bring into conflict with.”³ Both words have judicial overtones: they are connected with the discovery of truth, who did what to whom, where, when, and why. The Roman rhetorician Quintilian remarks in his *Institutes of Oratory* that there is often a collision between written testimony (*testatio*) and that of witnesses actually present (*testes*): *saepe inter se collidi solent inde testatio, hic testes* (5.7.32); the former is liable to be perceived as clever manipulation of the facts, while the word of the latter can be questioned on several grounds. In the act of reading, there is a similar encounter, between the text’s testimony about the world and the reader’s own witnessing of experience. We read with a mixture of collusion and collision with the ideology of any text: if the reader were to collude all the time, reading would be a self-satisfying, but presumably unstimulating, way of spending time; if the reader were to collide all the time, reading, for all the enlightenment it might produce, would become an exhausting and ultimately unpleasant activity.

Collusion-based and collision-based readings are of course productive of different types of scholarship and interpretation. The dominant discourse of the Nabokovian text clearly invites collusion rather than collision, created as it is by one of the master game-players of our era. There is a widespread interpretative tendency, grounded partly in the author’s own prescriptions about art, life, and literary criticism, to regard Nabokov’s novels as self-reflexive linguistic games, which have only a tangential or nebulous association with the phenomenal world.⁴ This leads us to chase down allusions, follow up references, and celebrate the *jouissance* of a supposedly pure artifice. The pleasure afforded by these pursuits has produced a whole troop of Enchanted Hunters, who have demonstrated not only Nabokov’s but also their own considerable learning and detective powers.⁵ And there is no doubt that the Nabokovian text works very hard to ensure that the reader “plays the game,” guided more often than not by an authorial – and “authorizing” – Introduction.

What exactly is a game, however? A game depends on rules and conventions, established by an authority, which the players consent to follow. A game can also be an exercise in dominating or defeating an opponent.⁶ Nancy Morrow demonstrates that the nineteenth-century realist novel is a genre which emphasizes the games of characters (i.e. plot games) and suppresses two other games: those between the reader and the text and between the narrator and the characters (Morrow 1988, 22). Nabokov, in common with other twentieth-century writers like Borges and Joyce, does not suppress these latter two forms of the game, but actually flaunts them.⁷ The result of this, however, is not only that the games of the characters are

correspondingly “played down”; the effect is also to conceal something about the text itself: its ideological assumptions and discursive operations. Thus, when David Rampton distinguishes between criticism which “ranges over” Nabokov’s writing and that which attempts to “pierce” it, he asks the following questions about these texts: “What kind of reality do they depict? What kind of meaning do they posit? What kind of truth do they tell about Nabokov and the world?” (Rampton 1984, Pref. vii). A critical approach which centers upon discourse and ideology will seek to question the unquestionable, and to say the unsayable, by interrogating the naturalization of the discursive structures within which these texts speak and are spoken about. Rather than focussing on words and sentences in isolation, and assuming that these have stable meanings by themselves, it will examine them from a relational perspective, and, in particular, in relation to the larger discursive structures, or framing discourses, within which we interpret these texts.

When we talk about ideology and discourse, we are inevitably also talking about the conditions of material existence beyond the text.⁸ The recognition that literature is a form of social discourse makes it impossible to divorce texts from social forces, institutions and practices, and from the dialectic interactions of history. Moreover, the varieties of language we encounter in literary texts, as in other forms of discourse, both embody and engender different interpretations of the world, a world in which all readers must function.⁹ Given the intense interest shown by scholars and critics in Nabokov’s linguistic pyrotechnics, his oeuvre is ripe for discourse analysis of the kind described by Roger Fowler, M. K. Halliday and others.¹⁰ This might concentrate on the formal and stylistic structure of the Nabokovian text,¹¹ or the ideological structures which are also encoded in its linguistic patterns. The latter offers a particular challenge in the case of Nabokov. If we really want to get to grips with the ideological matrices which uphold the Nabokovian narrative, it is necessary to refuse to “play the game,” at least according to the rules presented to the reader. When the Nabokovian novel makes aggressive claims that it is fictional not factual, it is just as aggressively seeking to veil its connections with the real world. For some readers in particular, this veil is all too transparent. If we assert the right of the reader to object to, and engage with, the ideological discourse of texts which seek to marginalize or trivialize her or his experiences and anxieties, we should also examine, or at least speculate upon, the concretization of, say, *Mary* or *King, Queen, Knave* by women readers; of *Lolita* by victims of childhood or spousal abuse; of *Pale Fire* by gay and lesbian readers; and of *Bend Sinister* by political and social dissidents in various eras and systems. We might term such readings oppositional, in that they often collide rather than collude with the dominant belief-system the texts purport to uphold. But this collision is productive rather than destructive. It can open up new dimensions of polyphony and

reveal inner tensions and contradictions which not only promote multifarious readings, but also expand our understanding of the dialectical relationship between communication and society. Such collisions are, then, an alternative way of celebrating these endlessly fascinating texts.

This volume brings together a varied set of encounters with Nabokov's prose, under the broad concerns of discourse and ideology in and around Nabokovian narrative. The contributors are all, to varying degrees, players of the game, but here they have been invited to use their skills to examine the connections between the Nabokovian text and the extra-textual reality of the world of actual experience. Using a variety of critical methods, and treating several different texts, some scrutinize ideological polarities and hierarchies (including those implied by the claim "art for art's sake"), revealing their fundamental instability; others focus on variant readings of, and competing discourses within, novels like *Lolita*, *Pale Fire* and *Bend Sinister*; while others link Nabokov and his oeuvre with issues and changes in surrounding cultural structures, including the 1960s in America. As the chapters in this volume show, readers can and do move freely along the continuum between collusion and collision as they encounter Nabokov's novels and short stories. The collection presents a dynamic struggle over meaning, in which dialogism displaces monologism, and there is a healthy incredulity towards all meta- and master-narratives. Paradoxically almost, the linguistic facility which makes Nabokov such an excellent game-player also encourages these readers, through its defamiliarizing effects, to think anew about artistry and reality, subjectivity and alterity, authority and autonomy.

Galya Diment's article "The Nabokov–Wilson Debate: Art versus Social and Moral Responsibility" examines the fraught relationship between Nabokov and Edmund Wilson, and between their perceived critical positions, and, in the process, deconstructs some cherished oppositions and hierarchies. While granting that Wilson has not fared well in Nabokov criticism, Diment argues that there may be another side to the story, and begins by rejecting the facile notion that Wilson was simply envious of Nabokov's success and talent. She proposes that we evaluate their divergent political and artistic ideologies by contrasting Nabokov's "ultimate Russianness" and Wilson's "ultimate Americanness." Rorty's antithesis of Nabokov and Orwell is refined by positioning Wilson in the middle ground, between the broadly termed camps of "art for art's sake" and "social intent." She engages with those Nabokovian critics who blithely put Wilson into the social intent camp and suggests that Nabokov is actually the more limited critic of the two. The chapter concludes with the famous debate over *Eugene Onegin* and Wilson's likening of Nabokov to Marx, suggesting that the distinction between Marxists and anti-Marxists threatens to dissolve, if both parties are absolutists.

Any claim for the non-referential, ideologically neutral, nature of the

Nabokovian text, or for its essentially apolitical import, is always going to be at least partially vitiated by the existence of *Bend Sinister*, often described as the author's only political, or overtly political, novel. Brian Walter's "Two Organ-Grinders: Duality and Discontent in *Bend Sinister*" examines this anomalous document which interrupts Nabokov's supposedly apolitical corpus. The Introduction, with its admission of the historical references of the novel which follows, ironically fulfills the responsibility of the Marxist critic, while the distancing of the author from the story results in a narrative counterpart of Brecht's alienation effect. Walter detects a distinct personal animus on the part of the author towards Paduk and a corresponding sympathy for Krug, as well as a general distancing of characters from the reader which alienates the story itself from its audience. Following on Frank Kermode's observation that Nabokov is fundamentally hostile to readers, he argues that there are nonetheless some rewards for those who are patient enough to persevere. As with the Afterword to *Lolita*, the Introduction to *Bend Sinister* attempts to shield the text from misreadings and from itself.

The role of the Introduction is also a major concern in David H. J. Larmour's "Getting One Past the Goalkeeper: Sports and Games in *Glory*," which discusses the implications of Nabokovian discourse about men and women, and the nature of Martin Edelweiss's fractured and fragile identity. The article focusses on three sporting scenes in the novel as pivotal moments in the hero's quest for self-definition. The text associates Martin's quest for glory on the sports field with his attempts to construct a sexual, social, and political identity for himself. Departing from the authorized interpretation suggested by the Introduction, Larmour offers a reading of Martin's interaction with the female and male characters around him informed by Freudian analysis of male identity and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's neo-Girardian paradigm of homosocial bonding between men. He suggests that Martin's "heroic" identity is fragile and contradictory, and that the tensions can only be resolved by a return to a simpler time and self: the maternal homeland. This chronotope, however, is no longer available, leaving only death at the end of the winding path which disappears into the dark forest.

Galina Rylkova discusses another of Nabokov's early novels with homoerotic themes, *The Eye*, in "Okrylonnyy Soglydatay – The Winged Eavesdropper: Nabokov and Kuzmin." Examining possible sources of *The Eye* first, she posits Kuzmin's *Wings* as one of the texts which influenced Nabokov. Following up on references to Kuzmin in the short story "Lips to Lips" pointed out by Barnstead, Rylkova turns to *The Eye*, whose protagonist Smurov and his beloved Vanya take their names from the Vanya Smurov of *Wings*. Kuzmin's novel was influenced by Symbolist notions of spiritual rebirth through homoerotic love; Nabokov's Smurov also seeks a rebirth, but one devoid of philosophical and symbolic implications.