HINDSIGHT, INTERTEXTUALITY, AND INTERPRETATION: A SYMBOL IN NABOKOV'S "CHRISTMAS"

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This essay examines the significance of the butterfly symbolism in Nabokov's story "Christmas" (1925) in the light of an interactional theory of interpretation. Intertextual elements are shown to emerge through a process of critical debate, rereading and discursive interaction, as the cultural significance of a text is gradually established. The critical approach in this paper tries to combine the insights of discourse analysis, narrative hermeneutics, and literary pragmatics.

In retrospection, I see I came to realise the importance of hindsight in narrative analysis through the reading of Jonathan Culler's "Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative," Michael André Bernstein's *Foregone Conclusions,* and Gary Saul Morson's *Narrative and Freedom.*[1]

These are key works for any discussion of the hindsight bias, which is one of the main engines of narrative dynamics – a perspectival phenomenon so intrinsic to narrative representation

[1] Jonathan Culler, "Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative," in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (2nd ed.; London: Routledge, 2001) 188-208; Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994); Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994).

as to deserve the name of "the narrative fallacy."[2] These works provide a cautionary critique of the hindsight bias (although they do not actually use this term, nor that of "narrative fallacy"). Culler leaves the issue in a state of balance between the narratological equivalents of philosophical realism (a preexisting story is articulated or expressed through a narrative discourse) and idealism (it is the hindsight at work in the production of the discourse that generates the story in the first place). Morson and Bernstein more explicitly mistrust the insights resulting from hindsight. They argue in favor of a "prosaics" of representation which would defuse the hindsight bias and its attendant fallacies, in favor of "sideshadowing" – a perspectival self-discipline aimed at recognizing the fullness of the present and the indeterminacy of the future. This emphasis on presentness would apply, too, when analyzing the past (the past-as-present). Morson and Bernstein argue therefore against the pervasive tendency to "backshadowing" which makes us see the past as a foreshadowing of the present, creating the illusions of destiny, omens, foregone conclusions.

These perspectives are both illuminating and stimulating, and I highly recommend the books by Morson and Bernstein, not to mention Culler.[3] Still, I want here to argue further in favor of the

[2] Trust Aristotle to provide the first account of the hindsight bias, and an approving one characteristically: "effects of this kind [fear and pity] are heightened when things happen unexpectedly as well as logically, for then they will be more remarkable than if they seem merely mechanical or accidental. Indeed, even chance occurrences seem most remarkable when they have the appearance of having been brought about by design – when, for example, the statue of Mitys at Argos killed the man who had caused Mitys's death by falling down on him at a public entertainment. Things like this do not seem mere chance occurrences. Thus plots of this type are necessarily better than others" – Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry,* trans. T. S. Dorsch, in *Classical Literary Criticism,* ed. T. S. Dorsch. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) 45 (ch. 9).

[3] An insistent footnote. I *do* recommend them, meaning that if my readers are not acquainted with these works, there are some wrong priorities here – they would be well advised to drop this article and try to get hold of them pronto.

legitimacy of hindsight, in order to moderate to some extent the "pro-prosaic" claims of Bernstein and Morson.[4] Many modes of action, both real and symbolic, rely on hindsight, and hindsight does provide insight ("after all").[5] Hindsight is not merely a bias; it is the harvest of time's productivity, as we might say in Paul Ricoeur's vein.[6] Reader-response criticism provides a rich field for this inquiry. The time which passes between the writing of a work and its reading is productive in a number of ways, and only hindsight allows us to recognize the transformations a work has undergone through the hidden influence of other texts and events on what was (apparently) fixed in writing on the page. If hindsight is an illusion, it is a necessary illusion, then – one more instance of the kind of illusionism which sustains, Atlas-like, the theater of the human world.

[4] A preliminary approach to this position, and a complementary analysis of hindsight, can be found in my chapter "Catastrophism and Hindsight: Narrative Hermeneutics in Biology and in Historiography," in *Beyond Borders: Redefining Generic and Ontological Boundaries,* ed. Ramón Plo-Alastrué and María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro (Heidelberg: Winter, 2002) 105-119. A classic study of the effects of hindsight upon perception and judgement is B. Fischhoff's "Hindsight / Foresight: The Effect of Outcome Knowledge on Judgement under Uncertainty," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance* 1 (1975): 288-299. The hindsight bias has been the subject of numerous studies in recent years, especially in the fields of cognitive psychology, medical diagnosis and management analysis. See for instance the bibliography in the University of Mannheim's interdisciplinary research project "Sonderforschungbereich 504", on nonstandard explanations of behaviour and decision-making in business. http://www.sfb504.uni-mannheim.de/glossary/

[5] William Edmiston's *Hindsight and Insight* (University Park [PA]: Pennsylvania UP, 1991), a study of focalization in eighteenth-century French novels, differentiates between the insight produced by hindsight – the "logical" knowledge of the first-person narrator – and the additional "insight" produced by the author's breach of the realistic motivation of first-person narration, giving his narrator the privilege of omniscience through an infraction of the mimetic rules.

[6] Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* (3 vols; Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984, 1986, 1988).

In this essay I will look into some interactive consequences of hindsight, especially when it comes to the intertextual expansion of a text. Intertextuality is a key dimension to be taken into account in the study of textuality, so much so that, according to Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler, "the whole notion of textuality may depend upon exploring the influence of intertextuality as a procedural control upon communicative activities at large."[7] Still, intertextual relationships are so varied that they seem to defy systematization. Moreover, a closer look into intertextual processes often unearths complexities which escape a more cursory approach. I intend here to examine some of these complex intertextual dynamics in the field of literary hermeneutics.

In some intertextual processes, intertextual traces are established retrospectively, through an interpretive act which involves a reinterpretation of the texts being connected by a critic through a postulated link. Borges and T. S. Eliot already noted as much in developing new definitions of "precursors" and of "tradition," respectively. Borges, perhaps recognizing in Kafka one of his precursors, writes as follows:

> Yo premedité alguna vez un examen de los precursores de Kafka. A éste, al principio, lo pensé tan singular como el fénix de las alabanzas retóricas; a poco de frecuentarlo, creí reconocer su voz, o sus hábitos, en textos de diversas literaturas y de diversas épocas. [...]
> En cada uno de esos textos está la idiosincrasia de Kafka, en grado mayor o menor, pero si Kafka no hubiera escrito, no la percibiríamos; vale decir, no existiría. . . . El hecho es que cada escritor *crea* a sus precursores. Su labor modifica nuestra concepción

[7] Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler, *Introduction to Text Linguistics* (London: Longman, 1986) 206.

> del pasado, como ha de modificar el futuro.[8]

Let us recall that for T. S. Eliot (to whom Borges alludes as well), cultural tradition causes history to be retroactively altered, instead of simply move forwards:

> The existing monuments [that is, great literary works – a curiously funerary conception of literature on Eliot's part is apparent here] form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered. [... The past is] altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.[9]

[8] Jorge Luis Borges, "Kafka y sus precursores" (1951), in Borges, *Otras inquisiciones* (Madrid: Alianza, 1985) 107-9. "I once intended to embark upon a study of Kafka's precursors. At first I thought him as unique as the phoenix of rhetorical praise; yet, as I became more familiar with his work, I seemed to recognise his voice or his manner in writings from various literatures and from various periods. . . . / Kafka's idiosyncrasy is to be found in each of those writings to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had not written, we would not perceive it, which amounts to say that it would not exist. . . . The fact is that every writer *creates* his precursors. His labour modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future" (translation mine).

[9] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1917), in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951) 15. Compare Ricœur's concept of tradition, which is also an "interactive" one: "a tradition is constitued by the interplay of innovation and sedimentation" (*Time and Narrative* 1.68). In my paper "Understanding Misreading: A Hermeneutic / Deconstructive Approach," I study the role of interpretive retroaction in deconstruction and hermeneutic criticism, using the Borges and Eliot examples as well. (In *The Pragmatics of Understanding and Misunderstanding*, ed. Beatriz Penas [Zaragoza: Universidad de Zaragoza, 1998] 57-72).

Playing with this idea, David Lodge makes one of the characters in his novel *Small World* write a thesis on "the influence of T. S. Eliot on Shakespeare."[10] As these examples suggest, there is a wide spectrum of such retroactive intertextual effects. Some are unintended, and may fall under the general characterization given by C. S. Lewis: "Every work of art that lasts long in the world is continually taking on these new colours which the artist neither foresaw nor intended."[11] My main concern here, though, is with those retroactive effects which may clarify a deep intention,[12] a symbolic design which is not fully available to the original readers of the work, perhaps not even to the author himself, but which may emerge through intertextual interaction as the work of reading and critical interpretation unfolds. The study of intertextuality in the light of narratological accounts of retrospection underscores the fact that intertextuality is an interactive *process* of discourse production, not a pre-defined network of static textual relationships. In this sense, my analysis ties in with de Beaugrande's and Dressler's proposal for a procedural approach to the study of texts in communication.[13] This view of intertextuality is a further consequence of conceptualizing discourse as process as opposed to text as structure.[14] The study of the effect of hindsight on the discourse of criticism follows, therefore, from a more general shift towards the study of the processual nature of discourse, being an analysis of specific processual qualities of written discourse in a specific interactional situation. In *Strategies of Discourse*

[10] David Lodge, *Small World: An Academic Romance.* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) 51.

[11] E. W. M Tillyard and C. S. Lewis, *The Personal Heresy: A Controversy* (1939; London: Oxford UP, 1965) 16.

[12] Cf. my discussion of intentionality in *Reading "The Monster": The Interpretation of Authorial Intention in the Criticism of Narrative Fiction* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1997) 30 passim.

[13] De Beaugrande and Dressler, *Text Linguistics* (1986, 33).

[14] A dichotomy I discussed in *Acción, Relato, Discurso: Estructura de la ficción narrativa* (Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca,1998) 212ff.

Comprehension van Dijk and Kintsch note that from the 1970s onwards, there was a recognition among many linguists that "actual language use in social contexts," rather than "abstract or ideal language systems [. . .] should be the empirical object of linguistic theories."[15] This led to the development of discourse analysis as an interdisciplinary field with contributions from linguists, psychologists and other students of communicative processes. Van Dijk and Kintsch's "interactionist assumption" is that discourse analysis must take into account the whole interaction process among speech participants, including "verbal and nonverbal interaction." The "situational assumption" is that this communicative interaction is "part of a social situation" in which interactants may have specific "functions or roles," and special "strategies" and "conventions" may apply.[16] The tradition of critical commentary of literary works is one among such discourse situations, but it constitutes a discursive continuum with other situations – with literature-as-discourse, and in the last analysis with the authors' own communicative and experiential processes.

In order to illustrate the interactional articulation of intertextuality and the specific role of hindsight in this process I will focus, as a test case, on a short story by Vladimir Nabokov and the ways it has been read – yielding a number of interpretations which are always intertextually mediated.

Nabokov is well known as a literary trickster, an author who delights in setting interpretive puzzles for his readers to solve – arguably for the readers' complicit delight, or, many suspect, solely for the author's Olympian satisfaction as the readers are left at sea. Nabokov's text is heavily overdetermined. Several intentional layers of meaning may underlie apparently innocent passages, and many more may underlie obviously puzzling ones.

[15] Teun A. van Dijk and Walter Kintsch. *Strategies of Discourse Comprehension* (New York: Academic Press, 1983) 1f, ix. I follow Robert de Beaugrande's account in *Linguistic Theory: The Discourse of Fundamental Works* (Online edition, 2002 http://www.beaugrande.com/)

[16] Van Dijk and Kinsch, *Strategies* (1983, 7f).

Intertextuality is, understandably, one of the primary means used to produce this textual plurisignification. Maurice Couturier masterfully analyzed the inner logic of Nabokov's poetics as a bid for dominance in the game of narrative interaction. Writing is compared by Nabokov to the devising of chess problems: both require a "sublime insincerity." As in chess problems, Couturier notes, the conflict in creative writing is not played between the black and white pieces, but between the author and the readers. The problem is devised and solved by the author, and the ideal reader's role is well defined – the real reader's role is almost superfluous. Readers undergo a process of apprenticeship, learning to become artists by following the writer's footsteps. The writer is the ideal reader, and good readers fight as best they can with the text. Writing appears thus as the interactive projection of narcissistic self-love. The author constructs an ideal textual self, and this is felt as an exclusion by the real reader, who perceives in an imperfect way the author's desires and claims through the poetic veil. Readers are provoked into trying to discover the real author, but their reading and analysis will only allow them access to the ideal author. All the while, though, readers will be constructing themselves as ideal readers through their confrontation with the text. The real author constructs an ideal reader, and the real reader constructs an ideal author. Nabokov thus blurs, according to Couturier, the frontiers between the outside and the inside of the text, and forces his reader to do the same. These identity projections are the precondition for the intense poetical effect of his text: the reader experiences the impression of producing the text together with the author.[17]

And, to some extent, we could argue that readers *do* produce the authors' text. Puzzle-solving tends to become infectious, and new puzzles are created by the readers for the readers to solve where the author intended none; faced with a problematic passage, the critics' ingenuity devises elegant solutions which

[17] For the full argument, see Maurice Couturier, *Nabokov, ou la tyrannie de l'auteur* (Paris: Seuil, 1993).

may improve on those intended by the author – provided the latter are available at all, since for the most part both the puzzle and the solution can be retrieved only through interpretation. Thus, Nabokov cranks a hermeneutic engine which keeps semiosis circulating and prevents puzzles from ever being finally solved (which might be the danger of a writing with "solutions" to it). A practical example, in the field of intertextuality, is afforded by the kind of analysis provided in John Burt Foster's *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism,*[18] a critical study in which lines of intertextual connection between Nabokov and other modernist writers range from clear allusions to the kind of speculation which is *non vera, sebbene ben trovata* – all of them being the product of the same intertextual logic. If a classic may be defined as a work in which the meaning of the text is inseparable from the tradition of critical interpretation it generates, Nabokov devises a built-in mechanism to weave texts and interpretations into a seamless continuum – a self-begetting classic.

Like many authors, Nabokov develops his own patterns of favorite images, motifs and stylistic patterns which serve, beyond their immediate aesthetic function in the context, as authorial watermarks. These become part of the author's hide-and-seek game of identity. Arguably, Nabokov is more conscious than most authors about such patterns: they are lovingly tended and skillfully varied. Therefore, these patterns tend to become self-reflexive. A variation on a motif harks back to an earlier use of a similar motif; authorial watermarks become the occasion for the author's intertextual play behind the scenes. The author thus adds to the solidity and coherence of his œuvre, by reworking and bringing to a satisfactory level of aesthetic performance some elements which were there from the start – or rather only partly so, as quite often such patterns become visible only when fully developed in later works. Their presence in the early works may be already meaningful, but it becomes more meaningful in

[18] John Burt Foster, *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993).

retrospection, perhaps even in retroaction: part of the aesthetic performance of those patterns in their latter-day versions is retroactively communicated to their early avatars. The embryonic significance of the early motif develops thus not only in later works but in the early work itself as it is reread by the later works (and by critics). The hindsight bias is thus exploited artistically by making earlier works reverberate with the echo of later ones. Thus, for example, Nabokov's metafictional comments on the use of autobiographical motifs in "Mademoiselle O" add a new dimension of reading to the works in which those autobiographical motifs were used (e.g., the governess, the colored glass in the veranda, the pavilion in the garden in *The Defense* and other works). The autobiography *Speak, Memory* and the interviews in *Strong Opinions* open up the autobiographical dimension of the earlier works, intimating levels of reading which disclose the author's more diffident revelations about his own experience in the overtly autobiographical writings. The works thus communicate, between the lines, elements of experience which acquire their full meaning when they are read as projections and transformations of the author's personal experience, and not merely as the experience transmitted by an "intrinsic" reading of the work, aesthetically satisfactory as that reading may be. "Reading the novels as autobiographies," as Anatole France might put it,[19] is at least as interesting as that reading of an autobiography which reveals it to be, compositionally, a novel – a reading one must always try on autobiographies. What is at issue here, though, is not a matter of curiosity or of "extrinsic" scholarly interest in the author's personal life, but an interest in his poetics: his experiential poetics at its fullest reach, beyond the more immediately available aesthetic design of the work as a perfectly controlled mechanism – the latter being a level at which Nabokov's writings strike some critics as perhaps a trifle too

[19] Anatole France, "The Adventures of the Soul" (trans. from *La vie littéraire* [1883-93] by Ludwig Lewissohn), in *Critical Theory since Plato,* ed. Hazard Adams (San Diego: Harcourt, 1971) 671.

perfect indeed. Beyond the conjurer's tricks and the cleverly dissimulated traps set for the reader, Nabokov's works also move in a dimension in which the author communicates with himself, tentatively, perhaps not always consciously; a dialogue which in any case takes place behind both the narrator's and the implied author's backs.[20] There may be no sense in drawing any sharp distinction between "biography" and "fiction" in Nabokov, as memory and fiction interact in his work in a way he was fully aware of. "He always claimed that 'using' something or someone in his fiction effectively made it fictional in his memory."[21] And in some of his works he explored the aesthetic possibilities of this confrontation between the author's actual life and his "other lives" in fiction – a road also taken by Joyce, Proust, Gide, and more recently by Paul Theroux and Javier Marías.

This confrontation with the author's extraliterary self is conscious in some works, but it reaches that point only after a preliminary hatching at a more inchoate level, in which the author's use of autobiograpical material is not controlled by a deliberate plan; it is significant, but it is not part of the author's design for public communication. Communication takes place here at a more private level, and it has to be interpreted as non-verbal communication or "body language" accompanying the articulate language of the work's conscious design.[22] We can, then, speak of a double level of communication in Nabokov's

[20] Several levels of implied authorial voice should thus be distinguished, as noted by Michael Wood in *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994) 22.

[21] Andrew Field, *VN: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Crown, 1986; London: Macdonald Queen Anne Press, 1987) 98.

[22] I attempt a more detailed analysis of proxemic elements and subliminal perception with reference to another Nabokov short story with a Christmas theme, "Rozhdestvenskii rasskaz," in my article "The Poetics of Subliminal Awareness: Re-reading Intention and Narrative Structure in Nabokov's 'Christmas Story'," *EJES* ("Beyond Narratology", ed. Roy Sommer, forthcoming). As pointed out above, the relevance of this dimension of analysis for discourse studies is underlined in van Dijk and Kintsch's program in *Strategies* (1983).

poetics: bodily versus controlled communication; or private versus public communication – although these terms are not always coincident, or equally adequate to all instances, as descriptions of this additional dimension of reading.

I will here focus on the interpretation of a symbol of rebirth and on the reuse of autobiographical elements in Nabokov's story "Christmas," with particular attention to the intertextual dimension of Nabokov's poetics of self-communication.[23]

To begin with, the story is set in pre-Revolutionary Russia. Priscilla Meyer provides a convenient account of the role of such Russian scenes in Nabokov's imaginary:

> Nabokov's Russia, as he describes it in *Speak, Memory,* is the site of an ideal past. Nabokov associates it with colored glass, rainbows, butterflies, and the pavilion where his first love poem began, the space-time of a perfect childhod rooted in the love he shared with his parents. The loss of all this is presented in Nabokov's work as a kind of echo or parody of the separation from that ideal realm which we leave when we are born and which we regain when we die, casting our splendid earthly abode as a pale reflection of the eternal one – a two-world cosmology in which we die into life.[24]

[23] Vladimir Nabokov, "Christmas," in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996) 131-36. The Russian original, "Rozhdestvo," was written in 1924 and published in *Rul'* (Berlin) on 6 and 8 January 1925 (Note: in the Julian calendar used by the Russian émigrés, Christmas 1924= Gregorian 7 Jan. 1925). The Russian text was reprinted in Nabokov's collections *Vozvrashchenie Chorba* and the English translation by Dmitri and Vladimir Nabokov appeared in the *New Yorker* and in Nabokov's *Details of a Sunset and Other Stories* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976).

[24] Priscilla Meyer, "The German Theme in Nabokov's Work of the 1920s," in *A Small Alpine Form: Studies in Nabokov's Short Fiction,* ed. Charles Nicol and Gennady Barabtarlo (New York: Garland, 1993) 3–4.

The recurrent symbols mentioned here – colored glass, rainbows, butterflies – operate as windows to the otherworld, symbols which allow a glimpse of transcendental perfection. This dimension of Nabokov's personal mythology has been studied by Alexandrov, and more recently, with reference to the stories, and more specifically to "Christmas," by Shrayer.[25] Our reading requires a focus on both the story and on previous critical readings by Naumann, Boyd, Shrayer and other critics as an intertextual continuum.[26] Here follows an account of the story's central symbolism by Boyd:

> A father decides to commit suicide after his son's death, rather than face a life "humiliatingly pointless, sterile, devoid of miracles" – when at that very moment an *Attacus* moth his son had cherished, now warmed by the nearby furnace, cracks out of its cocoon and walks up the wall, its wings swelling and breathing.[...] For all its pain, the world overflows with joys.[27]

And Naumann summarises the plot of the story as follows:

> In Part I, in the evening, Sleptsov, blind with grief, looks at the funeral wax on his fingers. In Part II, the following morning, he goes outside and recalls his child, whom he has just buried. In Part III, he visits his child's grave, only to be further saddened. In the evening he goes to the child's room and breaks down in tears. He gathers a few of the boy's belongings into a drawer. In the final section, the father brings

[25] Vladimir E. Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991); Maxim D. Shrayer, *The World of Nabokov's Stories* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1999).

[26] Marina Turkevich Naumann, *Blue Evenings in Berlin: Nabokov's Short Stories of the 1920s* (New York: New York UP, 1978); Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990).

[27] Boyd, *Russian Years* (1990, 236).

> these treasures into the heated wing of the house and examines them. The poignancy of these momentoes [*sic*: moments+mementos, perhaps?] causes him to reject life altogether. At that instant, someting snaps and the father opens his eyes. In the warmth of the room, a beautiful butterfly has broken out of his son's treasured cocoon.[28]

The butterfly symbolism in Nabokov's writings has been studied by a number of scholars, including Boyd himself in his biography (esp. ch. 4, "Butterflies," of *The Russian Years*) and in *Nabokov's Butterflies*.[29] A butterfly is, of course, a natural symbol of rebirth, or rather of life after death, because of the similarity of its life cycle (larva, cocoon, butterfly) to the soul's transmigration from the body through the tomb into the otherworldly life.[30] In his nonfiction Nabokov uses the image to refer to his own afterlife (perhaps suggesting too a literary

[28] Naumann, *Blue Evenings* (1978, 193).

[29] Brian Boyd, "Nabokov, Literature, Lepidoptera," in *Nabokov's Butterflies: Unpublished and Uncollected Writings,* ed. Brian Boyd and Robert Michael Pyle (London: Allen Lane / Penguin Press, 2000) 1–31. See also Charles Lee Remington, "Lepidoptera Studies," in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov,* ed. Vladimir Alexandrov. (New York: Garland, 1995) 274-83.

[30] Gennady Barabtarlo (*Aerial View: Essays on Nabokov's Art and Metaphysics,* Bern: Peter Lang, 1993, 29) refers to the classical locus of this symbol in Dante (*Purgatorio* X 121-29). Incidentally, Barabtarlo misreads the sequence of events in "Christmas", arguing that the hero Sleptsov is "unable to recognize in the newly-born *Attacus* moth a telling sign that his son 'somewhere is alive'" (*Aerial View* 1993, 31). Shrayer (*World,* 1999, 37) argues that the ending is indeterminate, but then contends that having watched the metamorphosis Sleptsov "is able to resist the temptation of suicide." As Naumann observes, "a reversal in Sleptsov's mood is implied" (*Blue Evenings* 194) – at least in the experience of most readers. The root "slep" does mean 'blind' in Russian (as noted by Nataliia Tolstaia and Mikhail Meilakh ("Russian Short Stories," in *Garland Companion,* ed. Alexandrov, 1995, 644-660), but the ending of the story suggests that the character partakes of the achieved vision or epiphany.

afterlife) when he speaks of the butterfly hunts he wants to carry out "before I pupate."[31]

A genetic reading of Nabokov's story "Christmas" opens up additional dimensions of symbolic meaning in the butterfly symbol, a less public side of Nabokov's symbolism. "Public" is related here to "intrinsic": an aesthetic reading of the story (the reading the story invites) keeps the more personal symbolic associations secret, or at least dormant – before they hatch. A genetic reading thus violates an aspect of the story's construction (its intended reading) in order to open up additional dimensions of meaning. But the symbolism on which an immanent reading of the story rests is not destroyed; instead, it acquires further resonances as a more complex network of symbolic associations is woven.

In order to introduce this genetic reading of "Christmas," let us juxtapose now to the story a text drawn from Brian Boyd's biography. The moment is a crucial one. V. D. Nabokov, V. V. Nabokov's father, was the leader of one of the main democratic parties supporting the Kerenski government. As a result of the October revolution and the Communist takeover, V. D. Nabokov sends his family away from home, on what was to prove (with hindsight) a permanent exile. A memorable event at the time, then, and one whose momentousness was only to grow in retrospect. Observe the intense play of foreshadowing and anticipated retrospection in the first paragraph of Boyd's account:

> On November 2/15, his last day in Petrograd, Vladimir wrote his last poem in northern Russia, dedicated to his mother and mourning the fact that she might never wander among the birches of her beloved Vyra again. At the Nikolaevski station, V. D. Nabokov saw his sons off, filling the moments of waiting by writing busily at the station buffet – an editorial for *Rech'* or an emergency proclamation,

[31] Quoted in Boyd, "Nabokov, Literature, Lepidoptera"(2000, 29).

> another desperate volley in an increasingly hopeless battle. After making a sign of the cross over his sons, he added casually that he might never see them again, turned round, and strode off into the steam and fog. [32]
>
> The boys traveled first class on the Simferopol sleeper. Vladimir had with him the little manuscript albums of his verse, recent and current, and a pile of his white booklets of Symbolist poets. The heat was still humming on the train, and a hawkmoth pupa he had kept in a box for seven years hatched in the unaccustomed warmth.[33][34]

Nabokov alluded to this episode in a lecture manuscript only recently published:

> This pupal stage [of butterflies] lasts from a few days to a few years. I remember as a boy keeping a hawkmoth's pupa in a box for something like seven years, so that I actually finished high school while the thing was asleep – and then finally it hatched – unfortunately it happened during a journey on the train, – a nice case of misjudgment after all those years.[35]

Exile, the moth's metamorphosis and the father's farewell (a farewell he would not be able to say when death actually and

[32] [Note by William Boyd] VN album *Stikhotvoreniya 1917,* 24, VNA; *SM,* 242.

[33] [Note by William Boyd] *DB,* 210; *SM,* 242; lecture notes on Kafka, VNA.

[34] Boyd, *Russian Years* (1990, 134-35, 549). In the preceding notes by Boyd, VN = Vladimir Nabokov; VNA = Vladimir Nabokov Archives, Montreux; *SM = Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited,* by V. V. Nabokov (New York: Putnam, 1966); *DB = Drugie berega,* by V. V. Nabokov (New York: Chekhov Publishing House, 1954).

[35] From Nabokov's Cornell lectures, March 1951, in *Nabokov's Butterflies* (2000, 473).

unforeseeably came at last) are associated in a crucial experiential moment which is reworked in creative writing in later years – as the full significance of this moment becomes apparent only retrospectively. Similarly, it is only in the introduction to *Nabokov's Butterflies* that Brian Boyd notes the (previously unmentioned) connection between the autobiographical motif and the story:

> At the end of 1924 his first story about Lepidoptera, "Christmas," drew on his early and very late memories of northern Russia: the collection he had been forced to forsake at Vyra, and the one exception, the Hawkmoth pupa that he had kept in a box for seven years and that hatched in the overheated railway carriage taking him from Petrograd down to Simferopol. Nabokov knew he could not overload and unbalance his fiction with entomological detail, but in "Christmas," the Atlas moth that unexpectedly emerges crowns a very human story. A father, presumably a widower, cannot cope with the death of his only child, a son, the little lepidopterist who yearned to see that moth emerge. Just as the father decides life is no longer worth living, the glorious moth cracks open its cocoon, and its huge wings dilate in a sign of hope, perhaps even of resurrection.[36]

The reading of the ending of the story as a symbol of hope, immortality of the soul, or resurrection is of course widespread[37] – being (as I take it to be) the intended symbolic meaning necessary to construct the story as an artistic composition – the

[36] Boyd, "Nabokov, Literature, Lepidoptera" (2000, 5–6).

[37] See also Field, *VN* (1986/87, 86); Alexandrov, *Otherworld* (1991, 244 n. 9); Barabtarlo, *Aerial View* (1993, 28); Shrayer, *World* (1999, 37); R. H. W. Dillard, "Nabokov's Christmas Stories," in *Torpid Smoke: The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov,* ed. Steven Kellman and Irving Malin (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000) 46.

communicative level of the story insofar as it is a text belonging to the short-story genre. However, the text can also be read symptomatically, and this level of reading the meaning of the symbol is somewhat modified and expanded. The interpretations alluded to restrict themselves to the communicative/intrinsic meaning of the story, with no suggestion that the 'hope' alluded to might refer to any situation beyond the fictional world of the story. That is, these critics, perhaps as a belated effect of the modernist ukase against the personal heresy, do not attempt to extract any further significance from a biographical interpretation of the story. Only the displacement of autobiographical motifs is noted by critics, perhaps in order to signal the process of distantiation and objectification undergone in making art out of autobiographical materials.[38] The distancing exists, but it also involves also a bringing together of elements which may be analyzed intertextually, and which contributes its own share of significance under different protocols of reading.

The story's source as a displacement of autobiographical elements is recognized by some critics, for example, Kuzmanovich:

> Similarly, in writing his first Christmas story, shortly after his father had been killed, Nabokov chooses to focus on the father's rather than the son's grief, choosing the death of a child as the enabling event.[39]

For Meyer, too,

[38] In keeping with C. S. Lewis's refutation of the "personal heresy" in poetry: "It is, in fact, quite impossible that the character represented in the poem should be identically the same with that of the poet. The character presented is that of a man in the grip of this or that emotion: the real poet is a man who has already escaped from that emotion sufficiently to see it objectively – I had almost said see it dramatically – and to make poetry of it." (*Personal Heresy* 9).

[39] Zoran Kuzmanovich, "'A Christmas Story': A Polemic with Ghosts," in *A Small Alpine Form,* ed. Nicol and Barabtarlo (1993, 95 n. 11). Cf. also Jean Blot, *Nabokov* (Paris: Seuil, 1995) 94, Shrayer, *World* (1999, 33).

> The stories written in the 1920s may also be read as transpositions of Nabokov's thought about his father. [. . .] The stories present variations on the pain of loss of a beloved person, with an indirect allusion to the original loss that generated them.[40]

This kind of symbolic reading rests on a global interpretation of Nabokovian strategies, made possible only after the author had written a number of works and critical appraisals of them had been circulated. As a reading of "Christmas," therefore, it is inherently intertextual (in the sense of relying on comparison), as shown by the "similarly" I have kept in the quotation from Kuzmanovich.[41] More recent readings of the story, however, have not chosen to explore the autobiographical connection. Dillard's reading, in his paper on "Nabokov's Christmas Stories" is largely intrinsic, drawing on the (for him deliberate) Christian symbolism of the story – a "friendly reading," therefore, which remains within the bounds of the story's compositional and communicative intentionality.[42] In other words (and going back to Lewis's formulation in *The Personal Heresy),* it is true that Nabokov, as the "poet," "is not a man who asks me to look at *him;* he is a man who says 'look at that' and points; the more I follow the pointing of his finger the less I can possibly see of *him"* [43] – but insofar as critics are literary pragmaticists they may

[40] Meyer, "German Theme" (1993, 5).

[41] There are still other intertextual dimensions in the story, as noted by Shrayer. One which makes the story "read" itself is the intertextual connections between the English and Russian texts of the story. As Shrayer notes, the English text of Nabokov's translated stories is "frequently a fine test of the author's being fully conscious of his designs in the original" (*World* 1999, 73). And there are, as well, intertextual links between Nabokov's story and other stories about grief, such as Anton Chekhov's "Longing" and "The Enemies," and Ivan Bunin's "Snow Bull" (Shrayer, *World* 1999, 192, 258).

[42] Dillard does note, though, that "both stories were written when Nabokov was in his twenties in the years immediately following his father's death" ("Christmas Stories," 2000, 35).

[43] Lewis, *Personal Heresy* (1965, 11).

well be interested in the pointing as a semiotic action, and not merely in the object being pointed at. A critical reading, while not necessarily 'unfriendly,' cannot accept the work's reading of itself as a guideline to the critic's analytic project. The dichotomies established by Paul Ricœur between a "hermeneutics of the retrieval of meaning" and a "hermeneutics of suspicion," and by Judith Fetterley between "assenting" and "resisting" readers, are other ways of addressing the same basic issue in interpretive theory I am concerned with here.[44] We need to go, therefore, beyond the consciously articulated meaning of the symbol in the story, to examine its significance in wider contexts and interpretive frames.

Besides the general spiritual symbolism of butterflies alluded to above, a fully contextualized interpretation of the butterfly symbol in "Christmas" must take into account the personal symbolic value of butterflies as a symbol of personal development and paternal identification in Nabokov. As a child, his father had been a keen butterfly hunter and collector, and V.V. Nabokov often used butterflies as an symbolic identity theme which, among other functions, connects him to his father through, as it were, a metamorphosed symbolic continuum.[45] In the 1920s Nabokov wrote poems about his father's death in which the butterfly is the sign of symbolic resurrection (Field, *VN*

[44] Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation,* trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970); Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

[45] See, e.g., this passage from the early pages of *Speak, Memory,* again concerning a hawkmoth: "the Chemin du Pendu, where I found on that June day in 1907 a hawkmoth rarely met with so far west, and where a quarter of a century earlier, my father had netted a Peacock butterfly very scarce in our northern woodlands" (rpt. in *Nabokov's Butterflies* 627). The passage should be read in its context, which connects the transformations effected by memory and rewriting with the metamorphoses of butterflies. The hawkmoth, incidentally, already made its appearance in Nabokov's first "publication," a poem he distributed among friends and family at fourteen ("Nabokov, Literature, Lepidoptera" 2000, 4).

86) – here poetry may be seen as a more direct expression of the personal grief, using the image in closer relationship with lived experience, a relationship which is further displaced in the story.

The butterfly motif is multifunctional: it connects Nabokov to his father, but it performs many other functions as well. And the function of connecting Nabokov and his father is also performed by other means – for instance, in the novel *The Gift,* one of Nabokov's autobiographical fantasies, the Nabokov-figure Fyodor writes a biography of his father, a famous lepidopterist and naturalist who had disappeared during one of his expeditions in Central Asia, "and in recounting the expeditions gradually includes himself in the party, at last even taking over his father's voice" (Boyd, "Nabokov, Literature, Lepidoptera" 7). The butterfly/paternal connection was to be retaken in a projected continuation of *The Gift,* of which an existing chapter was left unpublished by Nabokov.[46]

In retrospection, additional significance may be detected in Nabokov's use of the butterfly symbol together with the displaced context of mourning in "Christmas."[47] Death is often an intrusive guest, and the murder of Nabokov's father was in a way doubly unexpected, as he was not even the intended victim of the Fascist killers who shot him. But the death of the father had been imagined before, and that experience is reworked in a number of stories and autobiographical episodes.[48] In one sense, the father's farewell at the station took on a symbolic significance, by coinciding the way it did with the moment of exile. Butterflies, too, acquire an additional significance as the

[46] Vladimir Nabokov, "Father's Butterflies," written c. 1939, translated by Dmitri Nabokov, *Nabokov's Butterflies* (2000, 198-234).

[47] Always in retrospection, because such specific instances of symbolic convergence need to be explained only after contingency or overdetermination give rise to them.

[48] E.g. the duel episodes in *Speak, Memory* and in "Orache" (*Stories* 1996, 325–31). In *Glory,* on the other hand, Zilanov, a figure inspired by V. D. Nabokov, lives on at the end as an activist in exile, while V. V. Nabokov's self-projection, Martin, dissolves into a mysterious "glory" as he tries to get back to the dream Russia of his past.

possibility of life in exile, the continuing possibility of life in a metamorphosed shape, which may lead to higher spiritual insight. Nabokov had to abandon his beloved butterfly collections twice because of exile, first in Vyra and then in Yalta, which is another reason why the motif of the pupa left behind by the dead son in the story may be connected with the experience of exile.[49] A Russian poem, "Moths," written some years before "Christmas," provides a more directly autobiographical treatment of this topic.[50] The poet recollects his nocturnal moth-hunting expeditions in Russia. Then he addresses his collections left behind in Russia:

> [. . .] Years upon years have gone by
> and you have thawed with the warmth and flared up again.
> I have experienced an inexplicable love,
> dreamily bending over your rows
> in fragant, dry glass drawers,
> like the thin leaves of big, faded Bibles
> with faded flowers placed inside . . .
> I don't know, moths, maybe you have perished,
> mould or larvae have got in, small worms have nibbled at you,
> your little wings and feet and antennae have broken,
> or rough hands the sacred cupboard opened
> and crunched the glass – and you have turned into
> a colored handful of sweet-smelling dust.
>
> I don't know, tender ones – but from another land
> I look into the depth of a melancholy garden;

[49] The motif of exile as "emerging from the cocoon" is analyzed by David M. Bethea in a comparative study of Nabokov and Brodski, "Izgnanie kak ukhod v kokon: Obraz babochki u Nabokova i Brodskogo," *Russkaia literatura* 3 (1991): 167-75.

[50] Vladimir Nabokov, "Moths" ("Nochnye babochki"). Published in *Rul'*, March 15, 1922. The reprinted text from Nabokov's poetry collection *Grozd'* was translated by Dmitri Nabokov – I quote from *Nabokov's Butterflies* (2000, 107).

> I remember evenings at the start of fall,
> and my oak on the meadow, and the honey smell,
> and the yellow moon over black branches –
> and I cry, and I fly, and in the twilight with you
> I soar and breathe beneath the gentle foliage.

Here, exile, memory, writing and the spiritual "afterlife" symbolized by the butterfly are inextricably linked. The butterflies have already been aesthetically reworked and have acquired a symbolic dimension, although the autobiographical experience is mediated to a lesser extent than in "Christmas." In another poem, written after his father's death, Nabokov likens hunger for earthly life to a caterpillar's preparing a fuller life as a butterfly:

> No, life is no quivering quandary!
> Here under the moon things are bright and dewy.
> We are the caterpillars of angels; and sweet
> It is to eat from the edge into the tender leaf.
>
> Dress yourself up in thorns, crawl, bend,
> grow strong – and the greedier was your
> green track,
> the more velvety and splendid
> the tails of your liberated wings.[51]

In this way, butterflies function throughout Nabokov's life and work as a multimodal symbol, whose manifestations exceed the boundaries of "intertextuality" as conventionally described, and even those of a revamped "interdiscursivity." If we absolutely need to coin a term, or to recoin one, "intersemioticity" or just "semiotic chain" would do nicely – but

[51] Vladimir Nabokov, "Net, bytiyo – ne zybkaya zagadka." Poem in Russian, written in1923. The reprinted text from *Stikhi* was translated by Brian Boyd and Dmitri Nabokov as "No, life is no quivering quandary!" in *Nabokov's Butterflies* (2000, 109).

I prefer to stick to "intertextuality" with the proviso that the "texts" here are semiotic constructs whose manifestations may range from the behavioral text or the memory trace to deliberate artistic symbolism and literary allusion.[52] That is, at a given level of analysis (in life or literature) it is irrelevant whether the signs or "texts" being connected through interpretation are written or not, verbal or not, and intertextuality is best understood as a local variant of more general semiotic processes involving sign-making and interpretation. There is a tendency for successful analytic concepts, like "politeness" or "relevance" in linguistic pragmatics, or "intertextuality" in literary semiotics, to develop a kind of disciplinary esprit de corps, and to lose their moorings in general semiotics – whereas what makes the study of "intertextuality" interesting in any given case may also be equally well served by focusing on semiotic phenomena which are contextually related to intertextual phenomena, and interact situationally with them, but should not themselves be described as "intertextual."

A similar web of multimodal connections radiates from another biographical motif in the story, this time involving the title. The story's title "Christmas" is of course justified in keeping with the subject matter – a Christmas story published on (the Russian orthodox) Christmas day. But there is a further meaningful echo in the name which makes sense only through a genetic reading – a double allusion to Nabokov's luxury villa of Rozhdestvenno and to its church of the Nativity (although here it is the Virgin's, not Christ's nativity that is being referred to). The name of "Rozhdestvenno" is also connected to the Russian word for Christmas ("Rozhdestvo"), the title too of the story in Russian. The vault of the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin at Rozhdestvenno, where his maternal uncle Vladimir, dead young

[52] A similar approach is taken by Beatriz Penas in an article on Nabokov's autobiography, "Signs of Memory, Signs of Writing: Nabokov's Narrative Integration of World/Word Images," in *Memory, Imagination, and Desire,* ed. Constanza del Río and Luis Miguel García Mainar (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 2003).

from consumption, was also buried, is described in the story, reused by Nabokov as the burial place of Sleptsov's son. Nabokov had just inherited Rozhdestvenno from an uncle; it was associated in his mind to his discovery of love (the "Tamara" motif in *Speak, Memory*) a connection which surfaces in Christmas" in the form of the son's first love discovered by Sleptsov as he reads his diary. The villa, that is, suggested in an especially forceful way to Nabokov the unrealized possibilities of the past, the 'what might have been' which is such a harrowing motif in "Christmas" – a possibility forever buried in the past, the way his cousin and namesake Vladimir, dead young, was buried in the manor's vault. Through the name of his cousin, Vladimir, shared by Nabokov and his father as well, a subtle connection between father and son and the Rozhdestvenno tomb described in "Christmas" is established.

One of the functions of our Nabokovian test case was to illustrate the relationship between hindsight and intertextuality. I have already pointed out a few possible variations played on this relationship. In some cases, the interpretive work of critics gives an explicit expression or brings to consciousness what was a subliminal or unconscious influence. Critical readings, especially New Critical readings and later aesthetic readings influenced by the New Critical attention to close reading and image patterns, underline the coherence of textual patterns and help establish a stronger semantic coherence by linking through an interpretive metatext a number of elements in the literary text whose initial connection was too tenuous to be significant for most readers. Note that this activity of critics is to some extent continuous with the author's own self-reading, the revisionary exploitation of characteristic motifs and stylistic patterns described above. As there is a metatextual element in the author's own text, it is perhaps only natural that later texts will evolve towards explicit metatextuality (as in Nabokov's own comments on his work in *Speak, Memory*) or towards highly self-conscious metafiction, of which Nabokov's last novel *Look at the Harlequins!* is a prime

example.[53] In this novel, Nabokov presents a parodic alternative version of his own life – the life of the novelist he might have been, or the one some people think he is. The novel begins with an alternative-world list of the author's works, and consists of playful and hilarious variations on situations which appear in Nabokov's earlier novels, playing them off precisely against a fictional autobiographical reading – a strategy which can be seen as one more episode in the author's project of simultaneous self-concealment and self-revelation (Couturier's analysis is, as always, highly relevant in this case). *Look at the Harlequins!* is a delight to read – for those readers who grasp the author's game and are willing to play. Many readers have found the novel infuriatingly narcissistic and themselves at sea, which is again not surprising. *Look at the Harlequins!* is indeed a new type of confrontation with "sister-texts" as Couturier calls them, that special subspecies of intertextual relationships displayed within an author's œuvre, but it works on a strand in Nabokov's poetics whose potential significance can now be more clearly appreciated in the earlier writings.

Intertextuality has an interactional value, as different modes of intertextual relationship are activated through later texts in order to recontextualize elements and bring out a clearer significance, or (there is a continuum here, not a clear-cut frontier) to rewrite the past in order to bring it closer to present desires and make it usable again. Relevant contexts in literature/criticism – slash-joined, for literature and criticism are a symbiotic pair – are not defined in advance. In part we create a relevant context through the juxtaposition of texts, making them act on one another. Admittedly, critics read meanings into the author's texts, and as we watch later interpreters reread and sift the interpretations of earlier critics we may find that once the bathwater has been thrown away, the baby kept by the interpreter has swallowed part of the bathwater, as babies are wont to do. But that is part of the paradoxical relationship between criticism and literature. The text

[53] Vladimir Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974).

of literature is not woven once and for all. There is a visible pattern in the carpet, but every time we look new patterns emerge, and others may fade – not least because the critical look on a literary work requires that the work pass throught the intertextual loom once again.[54] I am not sure whether critics would be justified in applying for a percentage of authors' revenues, but they should at least be exempt from paying copyright fees – for literary communication is not a one-way street; rather, it is interactional through and through.

[54] Cf. the following tendency noted by de Beaugrande and Dressler in their examination of the effect of intertextuality on readers' processing and memory of texts: *"Additions, modifications, and changes performed via spreading activation or inferencing become indistinguishable from text-presented knowledge"* (*Text Linguistics* 1986, 204; emphasis in the original).