On Chapter One: V-XX

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In note to One: V: 7, Nabokov uses as many as 3 pages to examine the word "pedant," and what makes this longish note so singular is the very first line: "One variety of pedant is the person who likes to perorate, to air, if not to preach, his opinions, with great thoroughness and precision of detail" (46). After making such a definition first of all as if it were an introduction, Nabokov launches on a study of the word, referring to such diverse sources as *OED*, works of Montaigne, Mathurin Régnier, Joseph Addison, etc. In a word, Nabokov's first definition of "one variety of pedant" curiously prefigures Nabokov himself who "perorates" in this note, discussing one term "with great thoroughness and precision of detail."

"Pedant," naturally, has no favorable implication and Nabokov in this commentary presents the term likewise; as for "superficially educated" Onegin's pedantry, he applies Addison's definition that pedant is the person "who has been brought up among Books, and is able to talk of nothing else" and "does not know how to think out of his Profession and particular way of Life" (47). In spite of the word's negative connotation, Nabokov represents himself as one variety of pedant. Nabokov's such a peculiar approach seems to reveal his another intention of this commentary.

Besides those definitions of "pedant" shown in excerpts from various works, Nabokov scatters his own definitions, or at least, definitions spelled out in his own words. One of those is the first line quoted at the top. Another example reads: "Scholarship without humility or humor is a basic type of pedantry" (46). Through those of his "opinions" about pedant, Nabokov seems to delineate types, from acceptable to unacceptable, of commentator.

If his first definition applies to Nabokov the commentator, the following describes an undesirable type of commentator: "Yet another variety of pedant is one who deceives people with samples of 'scholarship.' The scholiast who is overabundant and overexact in his references may be absurd; but he who, in his anxiety to impress with sheer number, neither bothers to verify the items he copies out . . . nor cares if his source, or his science, errs is a fraud" (47-8). In short, at the same time that our scholiast clarifies general meanings of "pedant," he, in a magic swiftness replacing "pedant" with "scholiast," attempts classifying "scholiasts" (of, especially, *Eugene Onegin*).

According to his definition, one type of pedant/scholiast is inclined to be absurd and fraud; it's noteworthy that Nabokov's own commentary seems always liable to be on the verge of this risk. Also his expression "in a grotesque way" (46) is grotesquely suggestive of his own way of discussion.

We can detect an ideal variation of pedant in Foreword Nabokov composed in 1959 for the English version of *Invitation to a Beheading*. In reference to the problem of translation, he says, "fidelity to one's author comes first, no matter how bizarre the result. *Vive le pédant*, and down with the simpletons who think that all is well if the 'spirit' is rendered" (8). Here, "pedant" is a person/translator who is almost obstinately faithful to the author. Judging also from Pierre's remark that "I am certainly no pedant" (151), "pedant" in *IB* is one who sticks to formalities, or pursues literalism. Nabokov, on the occasion of translating *Eugene Onegin*, seems to try being a representative of this type of pedant.

In connection with this argument over desirable and undesirable stance of scholarship, let us focus on the following line in note to XVII: 12: "Prevented as I am by a barbarous regime from traveling to Leningrad to examine old playbills in its libraries, I cannot say for sure what 'Cleopatra' Pushkin had in view" (79). This reminds us

of Kinbote in *Pale Fire* who is not "able, owing to some psychological block or the fear of a second *G*, of traveling to a city only sixty or seventy miles distant, where he would certainly have found a good library" (243). Though the intonation is similar, Kinbote's scholarship itself is far from Nabokov's ideal. Kinbote's following remark well reveals his being a specimen of the type of scholiast/pedant Nabokov criticizes in the note in question: "Having no library in the desolate log cabin where I live . . . , I am compelled for the purpose of quick citation to retranslate this passage into English prose from a Zemblan poetical version of *Timon* which, I hope, sufficiently approximates the text, or is at least faithful to its spirit" (66). Similarly, the following line shows that Kinbote's approach seems to conflict with Nabokov's: "Anybody having access to a good library could, no doubt, easily trace that story to its source and find the name of the lady; but such humdrum potterings are beneath true scholarship" (202). Though both Kinbote and Nabokov belong to "pedant," Nabokov classifies Kinbote as an undesirable type and himself as an ideal one.

Note to One: XX: 5-14 is also worth noticing. In this long (more than 4 pages) comment on Istomina, a ballerina, we glimpse one of Nabokov's pet theories which govern this work. When mentioning "the Cherkes girl" in *The Caucasian Captive* played by Istomina, Nabokov becomes slightly critical about "prototypists" who try to detect a "model" of a character in "real life." Elsewhere he attacks prototypists' tendency to "concentrate on one lady in the Mystery of the Feet" and asserts that model's "presumable or possible existence in 'real life' is of no interest whatsoever" (140). And it transpires that this is a very fantastic note where Nabokov's pen creates around Istomina a world where curiously blends "real" life with fictitious one. Nabokov, outstripping Onegin and even Pushkin (who "outstrips" his hero), pictures here in advance Onegin of Chapter Eight who reads various magazines which were to be

published in real life; by doing this, Nabokov seems to underscore the connection between real publications and Onegin, a fictitious character, in order to strengthen the image of merging two worlds in this commentary. Also by introducing Griboedov, Nabokov produces a curious occasion where a duel in real life in which Istomina and Griboedov were involved blends with fictitious world in which Onegin and other characters live. Most noticeable is his remark: "a Dr. Yon (John) and Onegin's friend Kaverin were the seconds"(89). Our scholiast here stops viewing Kaverin as Pushkin's friend (cf. note to One: XVI: 5-6) and recognizes him as Onegin's friend. Nabokov's text here does not so much equalize art and reality as allows fictitious world to be substantial enough to invade "real" life.

Works Cited

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Invitation to a Beheading*. Translated by Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration of the author, 1959; reprint: Penguin, 2001.

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