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Nabokov's Typographic Poetics: *Transparent Things*

Vladimir Nabokov's prose style is famously dense thanks to its simultaneous integration of a wide range of devices into the text: theme, plot, motif, device. Each level resonates and inter-echoes with the others. All are cunningly interwoven so as to have maximum aesthetic impact. Most criticism focuses on character, plot, and theme; some, however, explore motif and device—pointing to their systematic use to express and reinforce the former. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, Nabokov sometimes drew heavily on the chromesthetic and iconic properties of letters which are, after all, the building blocks of written language. (1) But there remains at least one more level to plumb — typographic suprasegmentals such as punctuation and typefaces, those formal marks that variously pause, stop, emphasize, isolate, and, one hopes, clarify the sense of the text flow. They are, to be sure, only very imperfect instruments meant to signal intonational features that are so often missing or mangled in the transition from speech to print. The language of printed texts is often far more complex than that of living speech. Nabokov's punctuation and other typographical symbols have gradually acquired a wide range of meanings, far beyond various sorts of pauses.

Punctuation has a deservedly bad reputation. There is perhaps even something faintly humorous about the idea of examining the artistic role of punctuation in literary works. The very topic seems to inspire whimsical titles. The august Oxford University Press has published a scholarly tome by John Lennard devoted to the use of parentheses in the poetry of Marvell,

Coleridge, and Eliot (with side glances at other worthies, including Elvis Costello). Lennard entitles his 1991 study *But I Digress: the Exploitation of Parentheses in English Printed Verse*. The doyen of the field seems to be Malcolm Parks, an Oxford professor, who calls his erudite and beautifully illustrated study *Pause and Effect*, while the irrepressible Eric Partridge offers us his short book *You Have a Point There*.

Thanks to the vagaries and exigencies of history Nabokov had prolonged tutelage in three and a half languages: his native Russian; British English; French; and, lastly, American English. (We omit the vexed question of his German.) He was presumably taught the rules of punctuation in each but showed some carry-over in his linguistic migrations. Then too, there is a career that stretched over sixty years with attendant changes in punctuation styles in his different languages. Nicholson Baker, one of the few writers to take a learned interest in matters punctuational, observes that Nabokov's "first and quite Edwardian English-language novel," *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, employs over sixty comma-dash pairings, e.g. "A title, said Clare, must convey the colour of the book,—not its subject." *Lolita*, on the other hand, contains a mere one, and *Speak, Memory*—none. (2) Baker conjectures that *The New Yorker* editorial staff served as Nabokov's American English finishing school.

The punctuation patterns of Russian and English are radically different—thanks, in part, to their syntax and morphology. Literary Russian goes in for long sentences with lots of subordinate (and, sometimes, insubordinate) clauses. The Russian translation of *Lolita* is nearly a third longer than the English original (387 KB vs. 282 KB), although Russian lacks the definite article, the most frequent word in English. One might also note that Russian punctuation tends to be syntactically based, i.e., mechanical, while English relies more on semantic and emotional factors. (3) All in all, Nabokov is a heavily punctuated writer.

Nabokov thought punctuation important as a part of the design of the work of art. In *Transparent Things*, we may assume that Mr. R. speaks for Mr. N. in saying that “[. . .] though perhaps not a master of the very first rank, [he] was at least a true artist who fought on his own ground with his own weapons for the right to use an unorthodox punctuation corresponding to singular thought” (504). (4) More direct testimony comes in a 1966 letter written by Vera Nabokov in connection with the clandestine edition of *Priglasenie na kazn'* (Invitation to a Beheading). Complaining of the numerous misprints in the galleys, she writes: “In order to avoid new misprints, my husband reluctantly accepts the substitution of dots for dashes, and dashes for inverted commas, although this substitution is unfortunate in view of the fact that dots, dashes and inverted commas all had their carefully assigned meaning in the original.” (5) We shall see that this is not an idle statement nor is it restricted to *Priglasenie na kazn'*.

One further comment is in order. We shall restrict our observations to only selected punctuation and include type fonts under this heading. We must also forewarn of one ever-present hazard: the need to differentiate between/among marks that are employed in their normal uses and those utilized in more artistic or even iconic ways—as in this example from *Transparent Things*. Hugh's modest claim to literary fame is a poem in a college magazine, a long rambling piece that began rather auspiciously:

Blest are suspension dots . . . The sun was setting
a heavenly example to the lake . . . (502).

The poem's “suspension dots,” the British term for “ellipses,” are signaled by the three spaced dots that iconically illustrate the sequence of tiny reflected images of the setting sun in the shiny

water. Here the iconic visualization is direct. In the following examples from “Ultima Thule,” Nabokov gives only the name of the punctuation mark, leaving it to the reader to visualize its physical shape and the resemblance of that shape to the situation described:

Kstatischejskaja mysl': voobrazim novejsij pis'movnik. K bezrukomu: krepko zhmu vashu (mnogotochie) (113). (6)

Here, Nabokov chooses to replace the missing hand with the term *mnogotochie* [“ellipsis,” literally “multi-dots”] rather than the more graphic triad of dots it specifies (. . .). Since the actual dots of omission have been replaced by their parenthesized name, the iconic aspect is once removed. Nabokov's own English version extends the gruesome imagery still further:

Let us imagine—just a “prepositional” thought—some totally new handbook of epistolary samples. To a lady who has lost her right hand: I kiss your ellipsis. (7)

The English translation replaces the aborted handshake with a kiss. The missing member is replaced by “ellipsis” which does not graphically spell out the dots, but gains the undeserved bonus of substituting the “lips” of “ellipsis” for the missing hand. Most, if not all, of the punctuation marks and typographical signs of Russian and English are, on occasion, employed by Nabokov in unorthodox ways. In *The Defense* we find parentheses (usually a device used to indicate the incidental) unobtrusively used to lay bare the structural elements of the plot: “With vague admiration and vague horror [Luzhin] observed how awesomely, how elegantly and how flexibly, move by move, the images of his childhood had been repeated (county house . . . town .

. school . . . aunt), but he still did not quite understand why this combinational repetition inspired his soul with such dread” (214). *Lolita* offers a very famous, if less obvious, example: “My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (before picnic, lightning) when I was three [...].” The parenthesized words iconically encapsulate an entire death scene, artistically conflating the photoflash of a camera with the fatal lightning flash—as well as humorously trivializing the event.

Parentheses often specify incidental comment. *Ada* provides an exquisite example of an iconic parenthesis: Van, Ada, and Lucette have returned to his apartment after a night on the town. After sex with Ada, Van falls into a drunken, dream-filled sleep: “Tropes are the dreams of speech [...]. When he reopened his eyes it was nine A.M. She lay curved away from him, with nothing beyond the opened parenthesis, its contents not yet ready to be enclosed, and the beloved, beautiful, treacherous, blue-black-bronze hair smelt of Ardis, but also of Lucette's ‘Oh-de-grace’” (334). Ada has apparently brought Lucette to their bed after Van has fallen asleep. Strangely, later that morning, the trio find themselves back in bed with Van filling the void between the two halves of the sister parentheses. The open parenthesis has been closed.

Ada also provides an elaborate example of an iconic exclamation point. Ada, closely followed by Van, scrambles up a tree. She slips and both tumble :

[...] the two panting youngsters tangled ignominiously among the branches, in a shower of drupes and leaves [. . .], and the next moment, as they regained a semblance of balance, his expressionless face and cropped head were between her legs and a last fruit fell with a thud – the dropped dot of an inverted exclamation point (77).

The exclamation point of shock and surprise marks the end of their innocence and iconically enacts the circumstances. The tree trunk is likened to the inverted stem of the exclamation mark while the dot depicts the fallen fruit.

The preceding examples amply illustrate Nabokov's utilization of typographic devices as icons. These illustrations are, however, random and sporadic.

At least one Nabokov novel features iconic play with typographic figures in a systemic, thematic role. *Transparent Things* is an especially promising focus for our examination of punctuation and typographics. Hugh Person is, after all, an editor/proofreader—a profession he regards as somewhat demeaning. As we know, Mr. R., as a true artist, has very strong feelings about his right to “unorthodox” punctuation (as well as his arcane, uncommercial book titles). Proofreading prickly Mr.'s galleys is a tricky business. Cautious Hugh “permitted himself to query, with the utmost diffidence [. . .] certain idiosyncrasies of style and spelling, hoping the great man would understand that not genius but grammar was being questioned” (540). The reader should be no less attentive.

Hugh's fatal pilgrimage to Switzerland and his attempt to commune with Armande's spirit leads the narrator to a curious two-part meditation on the rules governing the relationship between the living and the quasi-dead. Rule One is:

Direct interference in a person's life does not enter our scope of activity, nor, on the other, tralatitiously speaking, hand, is his destiny a chain of predeterminate links: some “future” events may be more likely than others, O.K., but all are chimeric, and every cause-and-effect sequence is always a hit-and-miss affair, even if the lunette has actually

closed around your neck, and the cretinous crowd holds its breath. [. . .] The most we can do when steering a favorite in the best direction [. . .] is to act as a breath of wind and to apply the lightest, the most indirect pressure such as *trying* to induce a dream that we *hope* our favorite will recall as prophetic if a likely event does actually happen. On the printed page, the words “likely” and “actually” should be italicized too, at least slightly to indicate a slight breath of wind inclining those characters (in the sense of signs and personae) (553).

Examination of the entire text shows that, in addition to their mundane uses to mark emphasis, foreign words, or book titles, italics (often in retrospect) evoke another world, one that we view as the world of death. Indeed, on the first page the mysterious narrator remarks “When *we* concentrate on a material object, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntary sinking into the history of that object.” Only later can the reader recognize the significance of the italicized *we* – the dead versus the living. The link is also evoked in Hugh’s “avalanche” nightmares in which he finds himself “trying to stop or divert a trickle of grain or fine gravel from a rift in the texture of space and being hampered in every conceivable respect [. . .]. He was finally blocked by masses of rubbish, and *that* was death” (530). On the book’s last page as Hugh is about to die in the flames: “This is, I believe, *it*: not the crude anguish of physical death but the incomparable pangs of the mysterious mental maneuver needed to pass from one state of being to another” (562). On the evening of Armande’s death, Hugh is working on Mr. R’s proofs. Although he reads with concentration, “he still was correcting proof as some of us try to do—mending a broken letter here, indicating italics there . . .” (541). Note that the narrator’s voice is singled out just before the reference to “italics,” i.e., “as some of us try to do.” The “us” signals the world of Mr. R. and their messages. And again the ubiquitous “we”: “In fact, we

depend upon italics to an even greater degree than do, in their arch quaintness, writers of children's books" (553).

Transparent Things is not the only novel in which a breeze from another dimension is correlated with italics. In *Lolita*, Humbert describes his cautious approach to the drugged Lolita:

A breeze from wonderland had begun to affect my thoughts, and now they seemed couched in italics, as if the surface reflecting them were wrinkled by the phantasm of that breeze. Time and again my consciousness folded the wrong way, my shuffling body entered the sphere of sleep, shuffled out again, and once or twice I caught myself drifting into a melancholy snore. Mists of tenderness enfolded mountains of longing. Now and then it seemed to me that the enchanted prey was about to meet halfway the enchanted hunter [. . .] (55).

The import of italics is underlined in another passage from *Lolita*. During their road trip, Humbert becomes ever more paranoid:

I now warn the reader not to mock me and my mental daze. It is easy for him and me to decipher now a past destiny; but a destiny in the making is, believe me, not one of those honest mystery stories where all you have to do is keep an eye on the clues. In my youth I once read a French detective tale where the clues were actually in italics; but that is not McFate's way – even if one does learn to recognize certain obscure indications (87).

Nabokov's character Van also expresses his creator's derision for tritely used italics: "More fiercely than ever he execrated all sham art, from the crude banalities of junk sculpture to

the italicized passage meant by a pretentious novelist to convey his fellow hero's cloudbursts of thought" (458).

The second rule also has typographic equivalent— quotation marks. (8) Ghosts are not supposed to explain the inexplicable:

Men have learned to live with a black burden [...]: the supposition that "reality" may be only a "dream." How much more dreadful it would be if the very awareness of your being aware of reality's dreamlike nature were also a dream, a built-in hallucination! One should bear in mind, however, that there is no mirage without a vanishing point. We have shown our need for quotation marks ("reality," "dream"). Decidedly, the signs with which Hugh Person still peppers the margins of galleys have a metaphysical or zodiacal import! "Dust to dust" (the dead are good mixers, that's quite certain, at least) (553-540).

The passage goes on to describe a fellow-patient in one of Hugh's mental hospitals: "[. . .] a bad man but a good philosopher, who was terminally ill (a hideous phrase that no quotes can cure)."

Much of the plot of *Transparent Things* centers on Hugh's (relative) inability to distinguish between "dream" and "reality." His inadvertent strangulation of his wife, Armande, in a dream comes about precisely because of this failure. And so does his own death. Hugh has returned to Switzerland to relive his romance with Armande. He has arranged for the hotel receptionist (who resembles his late wife) to come to his room. Drifting in and out of an erotic doze, he thinks of that last, fatal evening in bed with Armande. Unable to sleep, he mentally continues the proofreading he had been working on during the evening. The proofreading theme now recurs: "Person, *this* person, was on the imagined brink of imagined bliss when Armande's

footfalls approached striking out both ‘imagined’ in the proof’s margin (never too wide for corrections and queries!). This is where the orgasm of art courses through the whole spine with incomparably more force than sexual ecstasy or metaphysical panic” (560). A few dream-muddled moments later, he is suffocated by smoke in the burning hotel room. By deleting “imagined,” Hugh has erased the boundary between “dream” and “reality” – once again with fatal consequence.

Nabokov's use of italics to suggest ghostly intimations is not restricted to *Transparent Things*. Nor is his use of quotation marks. In *Ada*, Van meditates on what exalts his intercourse with Ada to:

a level higher than even that of the most exact arts or the wildest flights of pure science. It would not be sufficient to say that in his love-making with Ada he discovered the pang, the *ogon*, the agony of supreme “reality.” Reality, better say, lost the quotes it wore like claws – in a world where independent and original minds must cling to things or pull things apart in order to ward off madness or death [. . .] (174-5).

The same point is made in *Strong Opinions*:

I tend more and more to regard the objective existence of all events as a form of impure imagination—hence my inverted commas around “reality.” Whatever the mind grasps, it does so with the assistance of creative fancy. (8)

Note the persistent linkage of “curly quotes” with those claws clutching at an ever-shifting reality. Note as well that it is those incurved quote marks whose iconic claws segregate and define the infinite layers of reality.

Dreams and madness form an ill-defined transition zone between worlds. Here too, quotation marks are brought into play. A distracted Van lies in the Ardis library reading a tome on the speculative existence of a parallel world (Terra). Nearby stands a large globe. As it grows dark, a servant, Bout, enters with a message for Van. In passing, he places a finger on the globe and mutters that Blanche, the incompetent maid, has failed to dust it. Van drifts into a doze from which he awakens a few minutes late. Still half-asleep he dimly seems to recall that Blanche had just been there with a message and wiped off the globe. This image remains strong even as he recalls that it was not Blanche but Bout (184-5). The superimposed memories, “real” and false, lead Van to ponder "the sad fact that (as he knew well from his studies) the confusion of two realities, one in single, the other in double, quotes was a symptom of impending insanity" (183).

The two rules governing the relationship of the living and the dead thus have their unique typographic representations. The breath of wind from the other world slightly slants, i.e., italicizes words in the land of the living. They add emphasis by calling attention to certain messages. In his essay “On a Book entitled Lolita,” Nabokov famously remarked that the word “reality” is “one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes.” (9) For the dead, reality and dream are distinct categories. The living are doomed to a series of relative “realities” embedded in ever expanding, infinite sets of quote marks that can be deleted only by a master editor at the moment of death. In short, the faint intimations from the omniscient dead are italicized, while the living can only distinguish “reality” and “dream,” provisionally, i.e., in quotes.

Previous studies have demonstrated Nabokov’s usage of alphabetic letter shapes as iconic literary devices fulfilling both minor decorative and, very occasionally, thematic functions. Both

functions are prominent in *Priglasenie na kazn'*. That this technique has been extended to other sorts of typographic symbols is not surprising. What is noteworthy is that in *Transparent Things*, the technique has been elevated beyond the incidental ornament to a central thematic mechanism. It is not by chance that Hugh Person, the novel's bumbling "hero," is a proofreader. (10) His attention to typographic detail is thematically motivated. But it is Mr. R. (whose name-initial is an inverted Russian "Б," meaning "I") who narrates and who is no less intimate with typographic niceties. Hugh is Mr.'s galley slave just as Mr. R. is, like all of Nabokov characters, his galley slave.

Nabokov use of iconic typography in prose dates back to at least 1924. In his story "Pis'mo v Rossiju" ("A Letter that Never Reached Russia"), the emigre narrator visits a Russian cemetery in Berlin where, the night before, an elderly widow had hung herself on the tomb of her recently deceased husband. He continues:

Óòðí ì ÿ ñëó÷àéí í ï áú ààè òàì , è ñòì ðí æ . . . ï í èàçàè ì í á ááëú é í áâú ñ èè é êðàñò, í à êí òí ðí ì ñòàðóø èà ï í áâñèèàñü, è ï ðèñòàáø èá æáèòú á í èòí ÷èè òàì , ääá í àòàðèà ááðáâèà ("í í áâí üèàÿ",—ñèàçàè í í ì ÿèêí). Í í òàèí ñòááí í áá è ï ðáèáñòí áá áñáâí áú èè ñáðí í àèáí ú á ñèááú, í ñòàáèáí í ú á áá ì àèáí üèè ì è, ñèí áí í áàðñèè è, èááéó÷èàì è á ñú ðí é çàì èá ó í í áí í æüÿ. "Í í ðí ï òàèàñü ì àèáí üèí, à òàè, - ÷èñòí ", çàì áðèè ñí í êí éí í ñòì ðí æ, -è, áçäèÿí óá í à í èòí ÷èè, í à ÿì èè, ÿ ááðóá í í í ÿè, ÷òí áñòü áàðñèàÿ óèú áèà ñí áððè. (11)

[The watchman] showed me the white cross on which she hanged herself, and the yellow strands still adhering where the rope [. . .] had chafed. Most mysterious and enchanting of all, though, were the crescent-shaped footprints left by her heels, tiny as a child's on the

damp soil by the plinth. “She trampled the ground a bit, poor thing, but apart from that there's no mess at all,” observed the watchman calmly, and glancing at those yellow strands and at those little depressions, I suddenly understood that one can distinguish a naive smile even in death. (12)

The story is a fragment from an unfinished novel called "Schastie" ("Happiness"). The narrator describes his solitary happiness in the routine sights of the rainy, nocturnal streets of Berlin. Our interest focuses on those “Ñđĩ î âèáí û â Cëääû, î Ñòàâèáí í û â ââ ì àèáí üèè ì è, Ñëî áí î äâÑèèè è, èàáéó÷èàè è â Ñû ðí é çâì ëâ [. . .].” (“crescent-shaped footprints [. . .] soil”). The Cyrillic Cs not merely depicted the shape of the heel prints, but also evokes the initial “Ñ” of the Cyrillic Cì äðöü (smert', death). Beyond this, “C” turned ninety degrees to the left provides the “äâñèèÿ óëü áêà,” (“childish smile”) of a child's outline drawing of a smiling moon face.

Some forty five years later Nabokov countered an interviewer's question as to how he ranked himself among living and recently deceased writers: “I often think there should exist a special typographical sign for a smile—some sort of concave mark, a supine round bracket, which I would now like to trace in reply to your question.” (13) Nabokov's practice and articulation of the concept anticipates the “emoticon,” also known as the Internet's ubiquitous “smiley face” or “smiley”: i.e., before the :-). (14) On the twentieth anniversary of the emoticon in 2002, its inventor (who had just recovered his long lost original message) recapitulated its history and ended with a nod to Nabokov for his prescience. (15) Nabokov's pioneering proto-smiley has, like his fiction, returned home. Russian glossaries of computer terminology list an Ýî î ãðàè ì à [< emotion + gram], a ñî ýéèèè [a little smile] or an

Óëù áàþ ù àÿñÿ ðí æèöà [a smiling little mug] for the humble :-) which, in embryo, had long been a part of Nabokov's typographic arsenal of artistic devices.

Notes

(1) See my *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ardis: Ann Arbor, 1985), particularly chapters I ("Nabokov as Man of Letters"), and II ("Nabokov as Anagrammist").

(2) "The History of Punctuation" in *The Size of Thoughts* (Vintage: New York, 1997), p. 85.

(3) Olga Alexandrova, "Problems of Russian Syntax" (MGU: 1984) cited in T. Nazarova, "Linguistics and Literary Semiotics" in *Applied Semiotics*, 1, at URL:

<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/french/as-sa/ASSA-No1/TN1.html>.

(4) Unless otherwise stated, all references to the English novels are to the 1996 Library of America edition; for the Russian novels—to the 2000 Symposium edition.

(5) Quoted from a letter of July 9, 1966 from Vera Nabokov to Merrill Cody. Partially reproduced by Brian Boyd in his "'Welcome to the Block': *Priglasenie na kazn'* / *Invitation to a Beheading, A Documentary Record.*" in *Nabokov's Invitation to a Beheading: A Critical Companion*, ed. Julian W. Connolly (Northwestern University Press: Evanston, 1997), 171. My thanks to Lisa Wakamiya for pointing this out to me.

(6) A literal translation might be "An apropos thought: let us imagine the latest correspondence manual. To a hand-less person: I firmly grasp your (ellipsis)." It's a play on a common Russian letter closing.

(7) "Ultima Thule" in Vladimir Nabokov, *A Russian Beauty and other stories* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 149.

(8) Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 154.

(9) It should be noted that the term "quotation marks" is being used here in a somewhat specialized sense, i.e., not to designate a quotation, but suggest the item is being employed in a restricted, qualified sense.

(10) In fact, he is an editor, for whom proofreading is an incidental task. That Nabokov foregrounds this aspect of his work is testimony of its role in the book.

(11) Vol. I, p. 162.

(12) Vladimir Nabokov, *Details of a Sunset and other stories* (McGraw-Hill: New York, 1976), 87.

(13) *Strong Opinions* 133-134.

(14) Katie Hafner, "Typographical Milestones: Happy Birthday :-) to You, A Smiley Turns 20" in *The New York Times*, September 19, 2002.

(15) Ibid.