

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

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Charles Stanley Ross,
"Nabokov and World Literature"
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Abstract: In his paper "Nabokov and World Literature" Charles Stanley Ross thinks through the relationship between comparative literature and cultural studies by considering the absence of Nabokov's work in *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*. The problem seems to be that Nabokov's works are not susceptible to the kind of varying interpretations favored by the Norton's editors, although in practice, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, for example, shows that even Nabokov's tightly controlled fiction can generate diverse responses. The more complex modes of reading that form the basis of David Damrosch's *What is World Literature?* are used to interrogate just how certain texts enter the canon of world literature. According to Ross, a survey of websites suggests that cultural studies is almost anything at all while at the same time there is general agreement, which perhaps needs challenging, that what defines the field is that it expands the horizon of academic analysis beyond high culture. In sum, Ross argues that were cultural studies enriched with some of the established practices of comparative literature, cultural studies would indeed develop into a formidable discipline.

Charles Stanley ROSS

Nabokov and World Literature

The question at a recent panel on *Comparative Literature, Cultural Studies, and Comparative Cultural Studies* organized by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek at the 2005 ACLA: American Comparative Literature Association meeting at Pennsylvania State University was whether it would make sense to combine comparative literature, which is allegedly under intellectual as well as institutional pressure, with the field of cultural studies, which flourishes. I have proposed to answer this question not so much from my own perspective as a Renaissance comparatist but as the current chair of the Program in Comparative Literature at Purdue University and, more immediately, as a result of my experience team-teaching a graduate seminar titled "Twentieth-Century World Fiction" during the fall semester of 2004. I am particularly interested in where Vladimir Nabokov would fit in a program in comparative literature and culture. Although too often overlooked, Nabokov fits very well, and we do not need to go very much further than Azar Nafisi's best seller *Reading Lolita in Tehran* to see that Steven Tötösy's conjunction of comparative literature with cultural studies is right on the mark. But to understand why and to understand the institutional problems with such a conjunction we need to start with some basic definitions. A survey of websites suggests that cultural studies is almost anything at all, but I think there is general agreement, which perhaps needs challenging, that what defines the field is that it expands the horizon of academic analysis beyond high culture. It flattens out all texts, refusing to discriminate high from low. It also treats the world as a text. By that I mean something akin to what Phyllis Rose calls the razzle-dazzle of clever readings. Whether by New Critics like Reuben Brower in *Fields of Light* or skilled deconstructionists -- two schools that move from opposite premises, that the text does or does not exist -- razzle-dazzle readings begin with a superficial understanding of a text and then magically make it say whatever the critic wants, usually the opposite of what the text seems to say. I admire the old razzle-dazzle as much as anyone, in part because I am not very good at it myself, but also because it is part of an old hermeneutical and allegorical tradition. If, as Plato thought, the copulation of Jupiter and Hera on a mountain top was not fit for youth to read, why not explain away their misbehavior as a cosmological allegory representing the meteorological formation of a thunderstorm (Murrin 9)? Cannot make any sense out of the six days of creation at the beginning of the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh? Then do what the Oxford reformers did in late fifteenth century England and explain that Moses, the supposed author of *Genesis*, had to tailor his words to fit the understanding of the unlettered Hebrew shepherds and ex-slaves who comprised his audience. Attached to literature in this way, cultural studies, by which I now mean "coming at" a literary text from every possible contextual direction, makes sense, if not perfect sense. One only has to look at the work of Fredric Jameson to see how well the conjunction can work. Nonetheless, some objections have been raised. One is that although theoretically open to all cultures, cultural studies practitioners remain resolutely confined to English (on this and other objections to cultural studies, see, e.g. Hartley 1-5; Lee). In part this is, I think, because so many cultural studies people are involved in English composition programs. A combination of comparative literature and cultural studies would seem to be a natural corrective, but without a serious change in academic climate, it is hard to see teachers of English composition trading in their theories of audience for work in a foreign language. They should, since arguably the best way to understand English is to compare it to another language -- double translation was the main tool of composition practice in the Renaissance (see Ascham) -- but they will not. Another objection is that cultural studies focus exclusively on discussions of race, class, and gender: issues of power. Many in humanities programs today see discussions of power as the provenance of Women's Studies programs, an area of interest for many comparatists too.

The issue of power raises an objection that has been leveled against New Historicism, that analyses of medical discourse or cereal boxes or political systems do not provide convincing analogies to what is happening in literary texts. David Quint argues eloquently that although theoretically, in this kind of structuralist anthropology, a "literary text is one of an array of cultural

products that share a single deep structure or mentality," in practice the "text is juxtaposed with some other manifestation -- text, object, or event -- of the culture, often from its popular or exotic margins, in order to disclose through their homology a common habit of mind" (*Epic and Empire* 14). What Quint calls the element of surprise of this kind of analysis, what Rose called the razzle-dazzle, loses force because any text can be connected to any event: "there appears to be no control to determine the juxtaposition." Genre conventions are often conservative and therefore not faithful records of contemporary conditions. Quint therefore prefers to look not at analogies but at allusions in the epics he analyses, because allusions are evidence of a "literary and cultural memory" (14). I would add that seemingly contemporary political concerns in literary works are often out of date too. Nabokov points out that the social conditions Dickens railed against in *Bleak House* were thirty years out of date when he wrote the novel (*Lectures on Literature* 64) and critics today have realized that despite Tony Kushner's insistence on the political relevance of art, *Angels in America* was, politically, ten years out of date when it appeared in the 1990s as an attack on Reagan's policies of the 1980s. Kushner's 2001 work on Kabul suffered a different fate when its polemical attack on the West for allowing Afghanistan society to veil its women was eviscerated by the US-American invasion of Afghanistan, an event promoted by none other than Kushner's *bête noire*, George Bush. The play is currently in rewriting, one hears, even as Kushner has made a welcome contribution (if I read the script correctly) to Steven Spielberg's work in his recent film *Munich*. So what is comparative literature? Quint's objections point us to the great redefinition of comparative literature in the last thirty years, away from René Wellek and Austin Warren's institutional defense of European civilization in their *Theory of Literature* to the more global reach that may be summed up by the title of David Damrosch's book *What is World Literature?* That redefinition finds an institutional home, at least at Purdue, in a comparative literature program that institutionalizes interdisciplinary connections between a catch-all Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures and the Department of English. Many students use English as a second language to study twentieth-century poetry or fiction and then look for a job teaching their native language. The program was originally set up to provide visibility and prestige to Margaret Church, who founded the journal *Modern Fiction Studies* and specialized in the Continental novel. Her last book before she died in an accident had chapters on *Don Quixote*, *Tom Jones*, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Crime and Punishment*, Kafka's *The Trial*, *Ulysses*, and *Mrs. Dalloway*. In the early 1990s literary fields were expanded and formalized but then pretty much went out the window, and students began to take prelims on almost any branch of theory or form of art. Today we stress breadth at the M.A. level, based on the six-volume *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, which is still the basis of undergraduate world literature courses at the smaller schools that typically hire our students. At the Ph.D. level we direct students to what looks important, whether theory or cultural studies. Some current students are writing what can only be called cultural studies dissertations, since they are not based on the work of major authors. At the same time, there is renewed interest in literature *per se*, and not just among the cohort of highly educated students from China at Purdue who are writing comparative dissertations on Chinese and US-American authors of the twentieth century. It is these dissertations that really call into question the old notion of comparative literature as the following of allusions and common genres, since so often the Chinese writers are widely separated from any viable connection to the West outside of a common global inheritance.

I want to continue pursuing the nature of the global inheritance as it defines comparative literature by looking first at how the *Norton Anthology* grapples with the problem of canon formation and then at how Damrosch answers the question, what is world literature? Both works were part of my recent seminar on twentieth-century world literature, which raised the threshold question, how does one select texts for such a course? My solution was to take advantage of the diverse enrollment and ask each student over the summer to recommend a novel based in his or her own culture. The resulting reading list included works from France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Turkey, Egypt, Greece via Cyprus, China, Ireland, India, and Bosnia. The *Norton Anthology* and others like it work in a somewhat similar way, choosing works by geographical representation, adding to the usual European works books from the Caribbean, Japan, China, India, the Middle

East (Turkey, Israel, and Egypt), and Africa. But the result is World Lit with a capital W and a capital L, purposely de-emphasizing writers like Hemingway and Nabokov or anybody from Australia (oversights, in my opinion). The *Norton* makes no reference to the romance, the campus novel, the mystery story, the epic, the historical novel, or the detective story. Style and invention are not categories of selection. Nabokov is conspicuously omitted. Instead of the kind of mastery of language and what Nabokov calls the magic of art, two principles govern selection in the *Norton Anthology*. The first principle is universality and the second is political setting or timing. As a synthesis, a work is deemed to be universal if it can be interpreted in different ways by different people and also if it reflects an important time and place. This approach, which I am still pondering, looks for the consummate artistry of a work, its ability to express complex signifying structures that give access to multiple dimensions of meaning, meanings that are always rooted in a specific setting and cultural tradition but that further constitute, upon comparison, a thought-provoking set of perspectives on the varieties of human experience. I have not yet reconciled this with Nabokov's insistence on correct reading.

The expression of experience common to everyone is a literary principle. The *Norton* introduction's second principle, being "always rooted in a specific setting" (vol. A xv) might seem to be a literary virtue, the accurate representation of a culture, but in fact becomes political as the introduction proceeds. For one of the selections in the anthology, El Saadawi's *In Camera*, for example, shifting narrative viewpoints are said to be not important in themselves but in service to "the harsh realities of twentieth-century torture and repression" (vol. A xvii). The editors suggest that this method of reading depends on comparison and contrast (xix), comparisons that emphasize biography and culture, especially the role of women, rather than individual works of art. Since there are so many individual works of art, why not tell, in the semester devoted to up to half of world literature, a rather simple story of cruelty and oppression that the mind can hold onto? Love stories, therefore, are about the societies in which they take place, as in Zhang Ailang's novel *Love in a Fallen City*, about the "decline of traditional Chinese society" that includes the Japanese bombing of Hong Kong. Anita Desai portrays the struggles of a single woman in Delhi to make a career, and Richard Wright describes an adolescent crisis in terms of social image of manliness in the *A Man Who Was Almost a Man*. Inclusion in the *Norton* depends not just on artistry but being where changes are taking place. Thus the point of Japanese novels is to tell us about a "mutating society" (vol. F 1590) and Aimé Césaire's linguistic play has meaning because it "displayed a dynamic new vision of black identity and Caribbean culture" (vol. F 1589). By this token Nabokov would disqualify himself since he used to complain that history stole a writer's individual autonomy, except that his own *Bend Sinister* is a brilliant send-up of both Stalin and Hitler and readers of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* will recall how often Nafisi refers to Nabokov's Kafkesque attack on political thought police in *Invitation to a Beheading*. It may well be the task of literary studies, or the currently perceived task, is to introduce us to the range of the world and to diverse societies. Literature, after all, avoids what Sir Philip Sidney in *The Defense of Poetry* called the dry dust of history and the abstractness of philosophy. But this is not exactly why Nafisi read *Lolita* in Tehran. She did so because of the *Norton's* literary reason: she and her students, living in a repressive regime, identified as women with what they took to be a symbolic construct of female oppression that they saw informing Nabokov's swanky and brutal pedophile Humbert Humbert. Still, there is no indication that Nafisi was looking to understand *Lolita's* oppression in terms of US-American society; rather, she regarded the story as a fairy tale of escape, a story that allowed her and her students to imagine a world where their own Islamic oppressors did not exist. That world, according to Nabokov, in a thought repeated throughout his *Lectures on Literature* and his Afterword to *Lolita*, is a place of beauty and tenderness entered through the gates of art, in this case a literary art of the highest order that defies the leveling notion of cultural studies. From Nabokov's heights, there are great texts and miserable ones, and that very hierarchy is all that a poor prisoner has to hang on to in the torture chambers of politics. Nabokovians were recently warned at the MLA annual convention two years ago not to bother assigning *Lolita*, which in the US, unlike Tehran, is not a symbol of imaginative release but a unfeeling mockery of the tragedy of rape. Will the allegorist Nafisi save great art in the context of cultural studies? With any luck

the answer is yes, at least for graduate study. She has done for *Lolita* what the scholiasts did for Homer's copulating gods. In fact, I think one can write elegantly on how all of Nabokov's work is an attack on brutality and tyranny underneath what one would have to admit is a pretty patriarchal husk. Nonetheless, and because of that bias (but I know from experience I am no judge) I think it will be a while before Nabokov, who may have been a postmodernist artist but was a modernist male, is included in the *Norton Anthology*.

A similarly political and perhaps overly sociological view of literature informs Damrosch's *What is World Literature?*, which nonetheless lists three ways a work can make it into the world literature canon: there are classical texts, many foundational or imperial. There are masterpieces that express great ideas anew. And there are works that gives us a window on a foreign world, masterpieces or not (this assumes that the readers are US-Americans, of course, a problem my class was quick to point out). None of these explain why Nafisi devoted herself to Nabokov, whose insistence was that art provides a world away from politics even while showing the cruelties and injustices of the world that require that imaginative retreat. But it is Damrosch's actual practice rather than his definitions or even his choice of texts that shed light on the relationship between comparative literature and cultural studies and I think earn Nabokov a place at the table. Damrosch's actual practice is somewhat allegorical. That is, his choice of texts for explication is eclectic by any standard: Goethe's correspondence with Eckerman, the epic of Gilgamesh, an Aztec poem, an Egyptian hieroglyphic, Mechthild von Magdeburg, Kafka, Rogoberta Menchú's *Crossing Borders*, and Milorad Pavic's *Dictionary of the Khazars*. Given this variety, he not unsurprisingly concludes that world literature is not a canon but a three-way interplay of world, text, and reader; that is 1) an elliptical refraction of national literatures; 2) something that gains in translation; and 3) a mode of reading, "a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time" (281). With that last point we are suddenly in the world of Nafisi, reading *Lolita* in Tehran as an exercise in mental sanity, connecting with other places, other worlds, to assure ourselves that the random brutality and blindly narrow local conception of justice is not the meaning of life. Damrosch's insight lies not so much in the texts he chooses, but in the structuring principles of his book's argument, which sets out a series of chapters, each one in a different critical method, a different methodology for work in comparative literature. None of the chapters is comparative in the old sense of comparing, say, two sonnets, one French, one Spanish. They are, rather, different ways of investigating. For example, the first chapter is an exercise in definition, in this case the notion of "world lit." Chapter two, seemingly about an Aztec poem, is really an essay on "hybridity," the way in which old gods and new merged in the poetry of sixteenth-century Mexico. Chapter three is not really about Aztec poetry but about the problem of translating works, often into English, to make them available globally, what Damrosch calls geographical translation. The next chapter is not so much about Egyptian poetry as the problem of cultural contamination that translation is prone to: this is what Damrosch refers to as temporal translation. The third error to which translation is prone -- almost sounds like a comp lit version of Bacon's idols -- is the problem of social translation, in the case of Mechthild von Magdeburg, the social problem of gender. Like its predecessors, the next chapter is again about a method, rather than an author. Chapter seven, seemingly about Kafka, is really an argument for context: Kafka, once valued for his universal values, is not a Prague Jew, and we perhaps think more about his missteps with his girlfriend and his overbearing father than his allegories of alienation in an industrial age. This chapter is something of a tour de force, in that Damrosch uses P.G. Wodehouse to show how another author also created a closed society that operates by its own rules. Chapter eight is about the editorial fraud perpetrated on Rogoberta Menchú by her editor and chapter nine about the complete political misunderstanding of a book about the Serbs, one that reminds my own experience with a graduate student at Purdue who comes from Ukraine. A few weeks after the recent political events in that country, I, good liberal professor that I am, asked her why she was not wearing orange and it took a few seconds for me to realize the enormity of my faux pas.

Despite the arcaneness of the texts Damrosch chooses, he could not be more clear how he defines the new methodology for comparative literature, for the chapters, each an allegory or example of a critical method, fall into three groups, circulation, translation, and production, and if

this is how we define cultural studies, not so much the leveling of texts to a common flatness but an examination of the circulation, translation, and production of world literature, then I am all in favor of renaming Purdue's program to Comparative Literature and Culture. On the other hand, life is short and art is long. How much detail is enough? It may be that comparative literature should be defined not by the depths of its research, but by its surface, by which I mean real knowledge of at least two languages and familiarity with a third, such as Latin. I think only Harvard and Yale, maybe Princeton and Stanford, still look for someone with genuine literacy in three languages, which would, to me, mean having read the great books in those languages, but today perhaps means the ability to construct a theoretical paradigm across three languages in a severely constricted time period, the 1800 or the 1930s. Nabokov claimed fluency in three languages, French, English, and Russian. Today I would think the ideal would be English, Spanish, Arabic, and Chinese, with reading knowledge of French, German, and Latin: no wonder we gravitate to cultural studies instead of languages. Moreover, language jobs are often occupied by linguists, who have their place in an age of computer programming, at least in certain research institutions, but far too often, for my taste, do I find Germanists who have never read Heinrich Heine and French professors who have not read anything. Nabokov in Pnin mocked the head of a French department who fired one of his faculty members for making students disrespect his colleagues who were just managing to stay a day ahead of their students, although any busy teacher with new courses to prep knows the feeling. I am not sure just how brilliantly Nabokov taught his courses, based on lectures he wrote out early in his teaching career. At least in the classroom, his reading list was very limited, although such an approach is not uncommon among creative writers who regard teaching as a means to income while they compose. Ross Lockridge, Jr., taught at Emerson College in Boston that way while writing the great Northern Civil War novel *Raintree County*, set in Indiana. Local fiction is the hot item in English departments and even redefining what we mean by World Literature. The god of this approach is William Faulkner, whom minority writers around the world regard as a minority writer because he was a Southerner. What Nabokov called Faulkner's local exoticism has had more followers than Nabokov's disdain. I am not sure how a white writer achieves minority status, but writing about race and living in Mississippi, at least part of the time, seems to suffice.

Even the rich regard themselves as outsiders, scrappers. I am not sure comparisons are that real. Nabokov and Albert Camus each reflect the 1930s in their work. Both played soccer intensely when young, rather than displaying any interest in philosophy, although Camus made a career as an intellectual and Nabokov insisted that he thought like a genius. Both rejected existentialism, if we follow Germaine Brée on Camus (in a brilliant book for which she deserved her appointment as distinguished scholar at Wake Forest). Nabokov famously attacked Sartre for his communism and lack of ability to make a world of fiction seem real: when Roquentin decides he does not exist, we have no quarrel, he wrote (*Strong Opinions* 230). Both writers faced personal tragedies. Camus was born poor. His Alsatian father died in World War I. Camus then lived with his widowed mother, impoverished in the bright sun of coastal Algeria, his mean grandmother, and a partially paralyzed uncle. The aristocrat Nabokov had right-wing relatives everywhere he looked and a gay uncle who bequeathed him a two-million dollar estate at the age of fourteen. The Russian revolution took away Nabokov's wealth before he was twenty. Camus contracted tuberculosis at roughly the same age. Both played goalkeeper. Camus, of course, wrote essays, participated in the resistance during World War II, edited a journal, and was famous for his politics. Nabokov retreated to the US and claimed never to have joined a club. Instead of politics, he seems to have sprinkled his prejudices throughout his works. For me, he represents an irritated man, the model of anyone who is annoyed by cell phones (loud radios in Nabokov's day), insomnia, bad grammar, and bad thinking. Portraits of the head of state, I think we can all agree, should be no larger than a postage stamp. And so how does politics interact with literature? "The difference between 'political' and 'non-political' criticism," writes Terry Eagleton somewhere, "is just the difference between the prime minister and the monarch: the latter furthers certain political ends by pretending not to, while the former makes no bones about it. It is always better to be honest in such matters." Ergo, Nabokov's withdrawal is no different, for Eagleton, from

Camus's engagement. I tend to agree, on the level of art, but the collapse of these opposites makes little sense in life, where there is a difference I think between voting and not voting, and no sense in Eagleton, who has trouble, in damp but pleasant Ireland today, maintaining the fires of the class struggle on which he claims to base his own criticism. Nabokov's claims to world-class stature, not helped by a politics that kept the Nobel committee at bay, were also undercut by his cosmopolitanism: the detailed reconstruction in art of Russian (in *Speak, Memory*), Berlin (the 1920s and 1930s), distopia (I'm thinking of *Bend Sinister*, but *Ada* also fits), the US (pre-eminently *Lolita*, but also *Pnin* and *Pale Fire*), and finally Switzerland, France, and Italy (*Pale Fire*, *Ada*, and *Transparent Things*). Nabokov's geography hardly fits Deleuze and Guattari's definition in "What is a Minor Literature?" where they argue that everything in a "minor literature" is political....

The test case, whether for Nabokov or Deleuze and Guattari, seems to be Kafka. Deleuze and Guattari analyze Kafka's writings for how he uses Czech (the rural or vernacular language), Hebrew (the mythic language), Yiddish ("a nomad movement of deterritorialization that rewords German"), and Prague German. Nabokov, by contrast, in his *Lectures on Literature*, looked not at linguistics but at language more generally, in the sense of artistic sensibility: "The greatest literary influence upon Kafka was Flaubert's" (*Lectures* 256) Nabokov decided, giving Kafka a place in the line of influence that still structure the presentation of fiction in all the major anthologies, including the *Norton* and *Bedford*. According to Nabokov, Flaubert, who loathed pretty-pretty prose, would have applauded Kafka's attitude towards his tool. Kafka liked to draw his terms from the language of law and science, giving them a kind of ironic precision, with no intrusion of the author's private sentiments; this was exactly Flaubert's method through which he achieved a singular poetic effect" (*Lectures* 256). Regionalism does not turn on precision, which was Nabokov's gripe about Faulkner. By this standard Kafka's art is not political at all. Nabokov the entomologist notes that Gregor is a six-legged beetle about three feet long, since he turns the key with his mouth while standing on his legs. But then, he admits that Kafka did not see the beetle too clearly, which swings poor Kafka back into Deleuze and Guattari's camp, a yo-yoing that runs through all of Kafka criticism, which cannot decide if all his work is a veiled attack on his father. If it is, it is the end of Kafka, since he finds his place in the modern canon by having produced a work that various people can read in various ways: in fact, multiplicity of responses is the guiding principle in anthology selections, according to the introduction to the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*. But maybe not, since Nabokov himself seems to have no need for polyvalency or symbols, although he could not resist summing up Kafka's *Metamorphosis* with a summary that he must have known (playing the game at Cornell of not telling his students about his work as a novelist) applies to himself: "The Samsa family around the fantastic insect is nothing else than mediocrity surrounding genius" (*Lectures* 260). Just when he gets overly personal, as when he awards his prejudices to his characters the way a general awards medals (a quote I remember John Barths saying he much enjoyed), he shifts to an almost pathetic rendition of the human condition, as pathos (the response of the reader not as reader of symbolis and meanings but as responder to emotions) competes with mimesis: "His sister does not understand that Gregor has retained a human heart, human sensitivity, a human sense of decorum, of shame, of humility, and pathetic pride" (*Lectures* 269). Not regionalism for Nabokov, then, but surprisingly right and wrong are the keys to his work, and how he read others: "It should be noted how kind, how good our poor little monster is. His beetlehood, while distorting and degrading his body, seems to bring out in him all his human sweetness. His utter unselfishness, his constant preoccupation with the needs of others -- this, against the backdrop of his hideous plight comes out in strong relief. Kafka's art consists in accumulating on the one hand, Gregor's insect features, all the sad detail of his insect disguise, and on the other hand, in keeping vivid and limpid before the reader's eyes Gregor's sweet and subtle human nature" (*Lectures* 270). We should not, however, confuse pathos with the maudlin; Nabokov finds the whole scene humorous.

And that humor is what I think lets us reject Eagleton's claim that everything is political. Unless Eagleton is arguing for the value of an honest monarch, his *bon mot* and totalization is insane. The suggestion that "everything" is political is as bad as the notion that we can fight "evil." It blurs everything into one soup. It gives us no way to discriminate, to understand the particular.

How can we evaluate a sudden upsurge in political activity or a need to change governments or correct systems of governance -- in short, the good from the bad -- if everything is political? The trouble with using the term so broadly is that it explains nothing, it does no work (see, for a similar argument, a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* [10 September 2004]: 15). Deleuze and Guattari fare better. His analysis suggests that deterritorialized writers like Joyce or Nabokov are in the best position to "hear" shadings of usage. I would connect this to Nabokov's opinion, above, that Kafka uses language with "ironic precision." What Deleuze does not comment on, it seems, is Nabokov's second main point, that Kafka's story is about the contrast between Gregor's sad insect features and his kindly inner nature. Although Eagleton or Deleuze and Guattari fail to satisfy, they remain more useful than hero worship of the master, such as occurs in the recreation of Nabokov's lecture on Kafka's *Metamorphosis* that is available on videotape. Neither of what I consider to be Nabokov's two main points makes it into Christopher Plummer's reenactment of Nabokov's lecture in Peter Medak's video *Nabokov on Kafka: Understanding "The Metamorphosis"* (1990). The facial mimicry is convincing, but we know Nabokov read his lectures -- he did not recite them (*Strong Opinions* 104) -- in a rather halting English (a hesitation Plummer mimes by dropping the "s" of third person singular verbs). The idea that a story about a man turned into a beetle is literary because it is like a boy crying wolf when there is none there overlooks Nabokov's own insistence on "ironic precision" and the sadness of a sensitive imagination trapped in an uncaring world as key ingredients of Flaubertian art. What Plummer does highlight, besides the idea that a storyteller is a magician -- the point of dimming the lights, the rising and falling vocals, the sudden shifts of tone, including the bits of personal humor that resemble a magician's pattern as he pulls a rabbit out of a hat, and the fact that most of the lecture is a retelling of the plot of the story or reading large segments of it to the class -- is that Gregor's family disintegrates and that his sister is the villain because she decides to abandon and finally starve Gregor to death. This point screams for a feminist response, but the response needs to ask whether Nabokov himself is a bit misogynistic (it is pretty clear he had no trouble making fun of women) or whether misogyny is beside the point, that whatever social causes accounts for the emptiness and cruelty of some women, Nabokov's task is to represent it precisely, almost scientifically, not moralize about it, on the assumption, perhaps, that good morals are something good readers should already have. Is it possible for someone who believes strongly in capital and corporal punishment properly to read "The Penal Colony"?

The key to modern criticism seems to be not acceptance but questioning. If the will is determined not by reason but only by what Walter Jackson Bate called the "fluctuating forces and circumstances in the material world," then "ethical judgment of motives is impossible ... Conceptions of the nature and purpose of art closely parallel man's conceptions of himself and of his destiny. For art, in one of its primary functions, is the interpreter of values, and aesthetic criticism, when it rises above mere technical analysis, attempts to grasp and estimate these values in order to judge the worth of interpretation" (23). And where do values reside? According to the *Norton Anthology's* essay on "The Modern World," in 1678 Valincour questioned the book's use of language, the behavior of the characters and the plausibility of the plot. Stendal could value a book that lacked realistic detail and local color but nonetheless had depth of character and a capacity to embrace serious moral issues. In the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, the new canonical works "are demonstrably part of a new global consciousness, itself fostered by advances in communications, that experiences reality in terms of interrelationships, of boundaries asserted or transgressed, and of the creation of personal and social identity from the interplay of sameness and difference" (vol. A xvi). Even love stories are about society, and the list of important geographical centers looks dated even as I summarize it: Caribbean, Japan, China, India, Middle East, Turkey, Israel, Africa. The Middle East, is it? But just where, exactly, is Africa in the scheme of regionalism? What makes regionalism, finally, is priority. This conception of the novelist's role in the twentieth century was voiced years ago in by Norman Mailer, who argued that somehow the novelist is on the cutting edge of things, the first to perceive and formulate what's going on (see his *Prisoner of Sex*, which begins with Mailer's thinking he has won the Nobel Prize that should have gone to Nabokov). In a recent text titled *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing*, Mailer

reviews the prominence that Hemingway in *The Green Hills of Africa* gave to Huckleberry Finn, that all US-American literature flows from it, as the way one artist naturally praises the precursor who is closest to his own style (258). This history is the US-American version of the line from Flaubert to Kafka that Nabokov subscribed to. Nonetheless as Mailer's own career proved, many novelists feel tempted to stray into journalism, television, art criticism, film, and even the occult. Fiction is a hermeneutic, a mode of discovery.

If there is a world literature in any meaningful sense, the principle of selection, which seems to be, first, what a person must know (if anything), and second, how does prose narrative fiction relate to the other arts, might find some answers in Mailer's thoughts. He compares, for example, literary forms to human relations: a one-night stand is like a poem, good or bad; the affair that does not go on forever is equal to a short story. "By this logic, marriage is a novel. In a short story, we're interested in the point that's made. In a novel, we usually follow the way people move from drama to boredom back to drama again, and, of course, marriage is a paradigm for that. Our interest is not so much in the understanding that is arrived at on a given night but in the way the new sensibility is confirmed or eroded over the weeks or months that follow" (*The Spooky Art* 178). The comparison is well honed; the rest of the argument wanders. If Mailer could lose his way, it was perhaps because he was always regional at heart, a characteristic often mistaken for talent. Mailer became a writer when he realized, reading *Studs Lonigan*, set in Chicago, that he could write about his own life, although Brooklyn where he grew up seemed to have a "flatness of affect" (*The Spooky Art* 6). Hemingway famously said to write about what you know, but one cannot help think he meant the opposite: write about what you know so that the truth will guide people elsewhere. But the guide needs his tools. And perhaps the minor writer is more helpful here than the major talent. Look at Tom Wolfe, who goes out with his shorthand pad to explore the strange and exotic in US life, considering himself a realist in the school of Zola or Balzac. His goal is to create characters, set them in motion, and watch what they do. This emphasis on character, by the way, contrasts Nabokov's essay on inspiration: a certain queer mood and a surprising plot which then requires characters, who therefore are never confused with real people: they are just the author's puppets (*Strong Opinions* 308-14). For Mailer, the early elements of good writing were to imitate the ease of speech, develop sentence construction, and acquire narrative pace (*The Spooky Art* 10). Each of these seems to me to be underexplored. One of his earliest stories came out of his experience of a weekend working in an insane asylum, not dissimilar to Ken Kesey's experience that led to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Alcohol and drugs perhaps lie closer to the surface of fiction than we know -- a final argument for the (comparative) cultural studies approach that characterizes this journal I am publishing my paper in, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*.

I was amazed to learn that Lu Xun, the author of the much-anthologized short story "Diary of a Madman" was a dandy, his socially symbolic madman a pose. Sergei Eisenstein, the film chronicler of Soviet ideology, was similarly addicted to what can only be called aristocratic pleasures. The economist John Kenneth Galbraith liked to make the point that the history has yet to be written of the impact of alcohol on politics. To which we might add, drugs, as Galbraith, who probably knew the kind of thing John Kennedy ingested, would know. How many novels end in a kind of carnivalesque dance of a hero losing consciousness in a crowd: the end of Hawthorne's *Marble Faun*, but also the first volume of Najib Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy*, where one of the sons is swept up in the cause of Arab nationalism against the English and is shot in a demonstration (a scene replayed a dozen times today). The intoxication of the mob -- not a bad rubric for popular modern art. Even Nabokov, the master of language, the hater of groups and politics, relished that *Lolita* made the best-seller lists....

The principle of selection for the six volumes of *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, one must conclude, is as much culturally determined as it is based on strictly literary principles. Much of that cultural determination is a product of the editors' desire to expand the horizons of US-Americans who seem always to be in danger of parochialism. If cosmopolitanism is the proper answer to parochialism, the question remains, what author is truly international? In other words, who should be on everyone's reading list, in every country. Frankly, I do not know, but I think it is not just Iran where the *Norton's* overlooked Nabokov is being read just because his art does not

conform to political dictates. I know a few Russians who still treasure his vision and at least one unemployed actress in New York who is steadily making her way through all of his works.

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