Zadie Smith. Changing my Mind: Occasional Essays. NY: Penguin, 2010.

Four

REREADING BARTHES AND NABOKOV

The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.

—Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author"

Curiously enough, one cannot read a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader.

—Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*

1

The novels we know best have an architecture. Not only a door going in and another leading out, but rooms, hallways, stairs, little gardens front and back, trapdoors, hidden passageways, et cetera. It's a fortunate rereader who knows half a dozen novels this way in their lifetime. I know one, *Pnin*, having read it half a dozen times. When you enter a beloved novel many times, you can come to feel that you possess it, that nobody else has ever lived there. You try not to notice the party of impatient tourists trooping through the kitchen (*Pnin* a minor scenic attraction en route to the canyon *Lolita*), or that shuffling academic army, moving in perfect phalanx, as they stalk a squirrel around the backyard (or a series of squirrels, depending on their methodology). Even the architect's claim on his creation seems secondary to your wonderful way of living in it.

To a rereader of this type, Roland Barthes's authorial death sentence will not seem especially polemical. Long before Barthes told them they could, rereaders had been squatting in the houses of beloved novels, each with their own ideas of the floor plan. "A text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination." Well, yes! And, apart from anything else, we're already living here! On first reading Barthes, in college, the essay struck me as the confirmation of an old desire, to possess a novel entirely. Now when I teach the essay to writing students, the room splits evenly between those who take it in their stride as a perfectly obvious experiential truth and those who take it as an affront. For the first type, the kind of reader I have tried to describe above, Barthes's apparently radical transaction of power is an exchange they have always already assumed. They have always walked into books boldly, without knocking or bothering too much about the owner. But to those students who have the tendency to feel humbled before the act of writing, "The Death of the Author" is a perverse assault on the privileges of authorship, on the possibility of fixed meaning, even upon "Truth" itself. For a polemic a mere seven pages long, it has a great power to disturb, seeming to take from a delicate student her sense of the text as an intelligible thing, as well as her sense of herself as a significant individual capable of receiving meaning:

> Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the room, those bold readers remain unruffled and unsurprised to find themselves described as "destinations"—on the contrary, the impersonality suits them. They were never likely to say, in a college class, "I guess, for me, as a lapsed Catholic feminist from Iowa

this book didn't really work." All texts are grist to their mill: personal sensibilities have never come into it. They are excited to add to the *text's* sudden indeterminacy, their *own* indeterminacy as well. To observe these two natural, unschooled reactions is fascinating: they reveal within the famous ideological debate a more intimate and important question of character, into which a teacher should not necessarily intrude. Why not allow each student to find out for himself what kind of rereader he is? No bad blood need be spilled over it (as it was when I was in college). After all, you can storm the house of a novel like Barthes, rearranging the furniture as you choose, or you can enter on your knees, like the pilgrim Nabokov thought you were, and try to figure out the cunning design of the place—the house will stand either way.

In my own reading life, I've been pulled first in one direction, then in the other. Reading has always been my passion, my pleasure, and I am constitutionally drawn to any thesis that gives power to readers, increasing their freedom of movement. But when I became a writer, writing became my discipline, my practice, and I felt the need to believe in it as an intentional, directional act, an expression of an individual consciousness. And the tension between these two modes grows particularly acute when I try to read the author Nabokov as the critic Barthes recommends. On the one hand there is Barthes's radical invocation of reader's rights ("The removal of the Author . . . is not merely an historical fact or an act of writing; it utterly transforms the modern text or—which is the same thing—the text is henceforth made and read in such a way that at all levels its Author is absent.") On the other, Nabokov's bold assertion of authorial privilege ("My characters are galley slaves"). You can hardly get going at all. This despite the fact that the great critic and the great author have a theme in common: both equally concerned with *jouissance*, with literary bliss (though they define it differently), and the creative act of reading. Barthes spoke of the pleasure of the text, Nabokov of asking his students to read "with your brain and spine . . . the tingle in the spine really tells you what the author felt and wished you to feel." Barthes, though, had no interest in what the author felt or wished you to feel, which is where my trouble starts.

It's easy to read "The Death of the Author" as a series of revolutionary demands, but it's worth remembering that it was also simply a licked forefinger held up to test a wind already blowing. For along with authorial assassination, Barthes lays out his vision for a new kind of "text," and it is one that the reader of 1968 would have recognized:

> Multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. [It is] a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. . . . In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*; the structure can be followed, "run" (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced.

This was the thrilling space of the *nouveau roman*, of Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute and Claude Simon—the new writing was already with us. To read these new texts properly, though, it was necessary that the Author step aside, and here survey gave way to manifesto. The Author was dead, and in his place came the "scriptor," born simultaneously with the text (so that "every text is eternally written *here and now*"), and with no real existence before or after it:

> Succeeding the Author, the scriptor no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt: life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred.

Long live the scriptor! Like a lot of rereaders of my college generation, I fell for this "new" French criticism hard (although much of it was already, by the time we got to Kristeva, Foucault, Derrida and the rest, thirty years old.) For myself, I read it enthusiastically and badly, taking a wide variety of complex philosophical ideas as a kind of personal poetic license. Barthes was

my favorite, both for his relative accessibility and the unlimited power he appeared to be placing at my feet. If the text was eternally written here and now, well then this surely meant I didn't have to worry about its historical specificity, and so could turn to *A Sentimental Education* in perfect ignorance of the 1848 Revolution, or *The Cherry Orchard* without reading a blessed word about the emancipation of the serfs. His theory of the text, too, appealed to me strongly: antic, decentered, many-voiced, perverse. I sought out the "new" fiction that would justify and exemplify it. Nabokov, with his unreliable narrators, with his reversal of the traditional life/art hierarchies ("I am no more guilty of imitating 'real life' than 'real life' is responsible for plagiarizing me," he once claimed), with that referential style that even the noble-winged seraphs envied—Nabokov *should* have been exhibit number one. But there was, there is, a problem. Superficially the ideal Barthesian *text* suits Nabokov quite well. But what about the man who writes it? *Scriptor?* Stripped of his inalienable passions, humors, feelings, and impressions? It's difficult to imagine Nabokov in this club or any club.[1] It's a brave critic who dares tell Vladimir Vladimirovich that he is "diminishing like a figurine at the far end of the literary stage," no longer "the past of his own book" but only incidental to it. Hard, too, to imagine an all-powerful Reader more able than Nabokov to "disentangle" his own cat's cradles. "Genius," he wrote, "still means to me—in my Russian fastidiousness and pride of phrase—a unique dazzling gift." To Nabokov, an author was more than a bricolage artiste, more than a recombiner of older materials. His sensibility, his sensations, his memories, and his mode for expressing it all—these had to be unique. So proud of his own genius, so particular about his interpretations, Nabokov refused to lie down and die.

2

Part of the difficulty to be had linking Nabokov with the French criticism is that criticism's tendentious politics. Barthes's argument flirts heavily with a leftist aesthetic and this is hard to fit to a man who liked to torture his left-leaning friends with paeans to capitalism generally and the Vietnam War specifically. Where Nabokov saw the Author as the very principle of individualized Western freedom, Barthes saw precisely the same thing, but didn't like it:

> The Author is a modern figure, a product of our society in so far as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the "human person." It is thus logical that in literature it should be this positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the "person" of the Author.

Nabokov, having fled the Communist revolution, was not sympathetic to ideologies that made light of Western freedoms and individual privilege, up to and including the individuality of the author. But in a deeper sense, the disjunction between Nabokov and *la nouvelle critique* is philosophical. It has to do with how Nabokov thought about reality:

> Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information, and as specialization. If we take a lily, for instance, or any other kind of natural object, a lily is more real to a naturalist than it is to an ordinary person. But it is still more real to a botanist. And yet another stage of reality is reached with that botanist who is a specialist in lilies. You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it's hopeless.

But this is a different kind of interpretive hopelessness. For Barthes, hermeneutics and epistemology have been subjected to a twin crisis: there is no *there* there. With the Author dead, no longer the past of his own text, nor

1. "I don't belong to any club or group. I don't fish, cook, dance, endorse books, sign books, co-sign declarations, eat oysters, get drunk, go to church, go to analysts, or take part in demonstrations."

its source of nourishment or final meaning, the scriptor merely "traces a field without origin—or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins." And this crisis in authorship, for Barthes, has consequences far beyond the little world of novels and their readers:

> In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*), by refusing to assign a "secret," an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law.

Just as we must give up the urge to know the reality of the text, we must also give up the hope of knowing the world in its ultimate reality. There can be no more "deciphering," we must settle for "disentangling." Power is relinquished. Not so in Nabokov's world. In Nabokov's portrait of subjectivity you can still decipher by *degrees*. The lily can be *more or less real*, and there *exists* an ultimate reality even if we can never know it. Still, we can come close. To approach the reality of a novel, as readers, Nabokov asked that we bring biographical,[2] historical, cultural, entomological, and linguistic knowledge to the task, not to mention attentive care, empathy, synesthetic acuity, and a keen visual sense. There can be ever more accurate readings of the lily. And there can be, consequently, philistine misreadings, a fact Barthes's portrait of the prepotent reader (blissed out, picking her way through a riot of potential meanings, constructing a text playfully, without limits) refuses to acknowledge.

But Nabokov was no cold-blooded empiricist and he was not blind to the indeterminacy of writing. For him, too, there existed a blissful, unfettered, nonhierarchical experience of meaning—but it came earlier in the process.

2. His translated poetry reader of 1944, *Three Russian Poets: Selections from Pushkin, Lermontov and Tyutchev*, takes care to include three sparklingly written mini-biographies of the poets.

Not while the reader reads, but before the writer writes, in a moment that precedes composition: "Inspiration." Nabokov split this old-fashioned word into two Russian parts. The first half of inspiration, for him, is *vorstog* (initial rapture). *Vorstog* describes that moment in which the book as a whole is conceived:

> A combined sensation of having the whole universe entering you and of yourself wholly dissolving in the universe surrounding you. It is the prison wall of the ego suddenly crumbling away and the non-ego rushing in from the outside to save the prisoner—who is already dancing in the open.

Here the author dies, momentarily; *here* meaning is indeterminate and free flowing. *Vorstorg* "has no conscious purpose in view"; in *vorstog* "the entire circle of time is conceived, which is another way of saying time ceases to exist." But after this comes the second stage: *vdokhnovenie* (recapture). And it's here that the actual writing gets done. In Nabokov's experience, the two had quite different natures. *Vorstog* was "hot and brief." *Vdokhnovenie* "cool and sustained." In the first you lose yourself. In the second, you are doing the conscious work of construction. And while making the choices good writing requires, the Author exists, he circumscribes, he controls, he puts walls on either side of the playground. The reader, to read him properly, would do well to recognize the existence of these walls. The Author limits the possibility of the reader's play.

In *The Pleasure of the Text* and "S/Z," meanwhile, we find Barthes assigning this work of construction to readers themselves. Here a rather wonderful Barthesian distinction is made between the "readerly" and the "writerly" text. Readerly texts ask little or nothing of their readers; they are smooth and fixed in meaning and can be read passively (most magazine copy and bad genre writing is of this kind). By contrast, the writerly text openly displays its *written-ness*, demanding a great effort from its reader, a creative engagement. In a writerly text the reader, through reading, is actually reconstructing the act of writing, a thrilling idea with which Nabokov would sympathize, for

that was the kind of active reader his own work required.[3] But then Barthes imagines a further step: that by reading across the various "codes" he believed were inscribed in the writerly text (the linguistic, symbolic, social, historical, et cetera), a reader, in an active sense, constructs the text *entirely anew* with each reading. In this way Barthes reverses the hierarchy of the writer-reader dynamic. The reader becomes "no longer the consumer but the producer of text."

Hard to know for sure what Nabokov would have made of *that*. My guess is he would have found it unhinged. He disliked literary theory in general. ("Every good reader has enjoyed a few good books in his life so why analyse the pleasures that both sides know?") It's probably for the best that he didn't live to see the kind of post-Barthes (and post-Foucault) campus criticism that flowered on both sides of the pond during the eighties and nineties. Wild analogy; aggressive reading against the grain and across codes and discourses; a fondness for cultural codes over textual particulars. You remember the sort of thing:

> *The Trans-gendered Suitor: Refractions of Darcy as Elizabeth's True Sister in* Pride and Prejudice:
>
> *Daisy, the Dollar, and Foucault's Repressive Hypothesis: Portraits of Sexualised Capital in* The Great Gatsby.
>
> *Please Sir Can I Have Some More: Bulimic Rejections of Self in* Oliver Twist.

I've written a lot of essays like this. And found it a wonderful thing, to feel so free. The novel was mine to do with as I wished with, to read upside down, back to front or in entirely anachronistic terms. That kind of freedom makes writers of readers, liberating us from the passive and authoritarian reading

3. Another way of thinking about the distinction might be: there is a style that believes writing should mimic the quick pace, the ease, and the fluidity of reading (or even of speech). And then there is a style that believes reading should mimic the obstruction and slow struggle of writing. Raymond Carver would be on that first axis. Nabokov is *way out* on the second. Joyce is even further.

styles we are taught in school (*Hard Times* = British education system in Victorian England). When we read instead in an active way we get to reinscribe dusty old novels into our own interests and concerns. There is a joy in getting someone to hand us *their* butterfly so we can spend twenty pages making the case for its being *our* giraffe.

But Nabokov believed in the butterfly qua butterfly. For this reason, when I first read his *Lectures on Literature* I was disappointed.[4] Was this really Nabokov? The apparent analytic simplicity, the lengthy quoting without commentary. The obsession with (what seemed to me) utterly banal details: the shape of Gregor Samsa's shell, a map of Dublin, the exact geographical location of *Mansfield Park*. And the questions he set his students! What color are Emma Bovary's eyes? What kind of house was Bleak House? How many *rooms* are in there? You have to reset your brain, away from the overheated hustle of English departments, before you can see how beautiful those lectures are. How attentive. How particular. When it comes to rereading, Nabokov felt "one should notice and fondle details." These lectures are a marvelous, concrete example of that principle.

For Barthes, ideologically tied to a post-Marxist analysis, a bad reader was a consumer and an ideal one, a producer. For Nabokov, the reader is neither. Nabokov's ideal reader is something resembling a butterfly collector, with an interest both empirical and aesthetic. For his ideal reader, the text is a highly particular thing, and the job is to appreciate and note its particularities. If nothing else, in these lectures we find a mirror image of how Nabokov himself hoped to be read. For he felt his own work to be multiplex but not truly multivalent—the buck stopped at Nabokov, the man who had placed the details there in the first place. His texts had their unity (their truest reality) in him.

Consequently, seriously variant interpretations of his novels were only so much *poshlust*[5] to him, to be filed next to "Freudian symbolism, moth-eaten

4. These were originally conceived as lectures for Nabokov's Cornell undergraduates on the Masters of European Fiction. They were collected and published after his death.
5. Properly *poshlost*, from the Russian for vulgarity. Nabokov's definition: "Not only the obviously trashy but mainly the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive."

mythologies, social comment, humanistic messages, political allegories, over concern with class or race, and the journalistic generalities we all know." This makes him a hard author to write about. He seems to admit no ideal reader except himself. I think of him as one of the last, great twentieth-century believers in the autonomy of the Author, as Frank Lloyd Wright was one of the last believers in the Architect. They both specialized in theatrical interviews, struck self-regarding and self-mythologizing poses, all of which would mean nothing (the Author being dead, you don't have to listen to his self-descriptions) if it weren't for the fact that they wove the restrictions and privileges of authorship into the very fabric of the things they built. For it's true that each time I enter *Pnin* I feel its author controlling (via an obsessive specificity) all my reactions, just as, in Wright's Unity Temple, one enters through a small, low side door, forced to approach the magnificence of the interior by way of a series of awkward right-angled turns. There is extraordinary, almost overwhelming beauty in Nabokov—there is also an oppressive rigidity. You will live in his house his way. Nabokov's way means giving up the reader's traditional linear right-of-way through a novel (starting at the first page and ending at the last) and confronting instead a network of connected leitmotifs, quotations, clues, and puzzles that are not so much to be read as deciphered. Faced with a Nabokov novel it's impossible to rid yourself of the feeling that you've been set a problem, as a chess master sets a problem in a newspaper. I am always tormented by the sense I have missed something—and Nabokov makes me feel my failure. The Author, he claimed, "clashes with readerdom because he is his own ideal reader and those other readers are so very often mere lip-moving ghosts and amnesiacs." He claimed to be writing, instead, "mainly for artists, fellow-artist and follow artists," whose job it was to "share not the emotions of the people in the book but the emotions of its author—the joys and difficulties of creation." *Follow* artists! In practice this means subsuming your existence in his, until you become, in effect, Nabokov's double, knowing what he knows, loving as he loves and hating his way, too,[6]

6. Nabokov nerds often slavishly parrot his strong opinions. I don't think I'm the first person to have my mind poisoned, by Nabokov, against Dostoyevsky.

following each nuance, pursuing each reference, in what amounts to a reader' mimeograph of the Author's creative act. (And there exist many people wh hate Nabokov for precisely this reason.) It is a reversal of the Barthes formula tion: here it is the *reader* who must die so that the *Author* may live. There i a sensible school of thought that argues *all* writing makes us do this[7]—bu few writers make you feel your subjection as Nabokov does. The only perfec tenant of the house that Nabokov built is Nabokov.[8]

3

When you teach Nabokov to students, along with the usual complaint tha his vocabulary is unnecessarily baroque, they want to know whether all thi game playing, all this punning complexity is, in the end, truly *for* the reader a all. They scrunch up their noses and direct you to a particular passage: "Nov isn't this just Nabokov basically getting himself *off*?" The question is a fai one. The elusive, allusive, pleasures of the Nabokovian text—whose pleasure are these, really? When asked about "the pleasures of writing" in his *Playbo* interview, Nabokov answered: "They correspond exactly to the pleasures c reading, the bliss, the felicity of a phrase is shared by writer and reader: by th satisfied writer and the grateful reader."

But isn't the aside vital? Doesn't satisfaction trump gratitude? With ou twenty-first-century passion for equality, gratitude seems a slavish sort of att tude to take to an author. Is that truly our reward for being Nabokovians, fc reading and rereading, pursuing every butterfly, every long-vanished Russia émigré poet? Nabokov thought so; he felt that what he offered his reader, an especially his *rereader*, was not the antic pleasure of their own interpretation but the serious satisfaction of *twinning the emotion of creation*:

7. "In many ways writing is the act of saying *I*, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind*. It's an aggressive, even a hostile act. You can disguise its aggressiveness all you want with veils of subordinate clauses and qualifiers and tentative subjunctives, with ellipses and evasions—with the whole manner of intimating rather than claiming, of alluding rather than stating—but there's no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer's sensibility on the reader's most private space." —Joan Didion
8. Vera, his wife and "first and best reader" being a close second.

I would say that the main favour I ask of the serious critic is sufficient perceptiveness to understand that whatever term or trope I use, my purpose is not to be facetiously flashy or grotesquely obscure but to express what I feel and think with the utmost truthfulness and perception.

By following all his threads, you are doing more than reading, you are given the opportunity to precisely reconstruct the bliss of *vdokhnovenie*, of Nabokov's own writerly act. (And maybe even a trace of *vorstorg*. Nabokov thought that the "force and originality involved in the primary spasm of inspiration is directly proportional to the worth of the book the author will write." We might hope, then, for a trace of the propellant to be left after the explosion.) The difference is that Nabokov asks that we admit it is the *author's* gift in the design, rather than *our* gift at connecting the dots, that is truly meaningful, and meaning producing. No matter how I try to slot them together, Nabokov goes a certain way along with Barthes and no further. Reading is creative! insists Barthes. Yes, but writing creates, replies Nabokov, smoothly, and turns back to his note cards.

Maybe we can say that Nabokov makes his readers so very creative that we are liable to feel that we ourselves have made something. *Pnin* rereaders can follow the Lermontov hints (to a poem called "The Triple Dream") and the Tolstoy hints (to "The Death of Ivan Ilyich") and find in those texts miniature versions of *Pnin's* Russian doll structure, *mise-en-abymes* placed by Nabokov into his novel with the care of Van Eyck.[9, 10] They are so hard to see, such particular details, that you feel you placed them there yourself. An[d] the experience of rereading *Pnin* is never perfect or finished—there's alway[s] some new detail to fondle. A newcomer to Nabokov will notice only the actua[l] butterflies fluttering around; as you get further in, you'll start to notice th[e] entomology sunk deep into the weft and weave. Those Nabokovian word[s] pressed into service for quite other purposes, which, upon closer inspection reveal their hidden wings and abdomens (bole, crepitation, Punchinello[11]). And it's only on this most recent rereading that I think to kneel in front of m[y] desk, place a glass of water at eye level and position a comb, on end, behin[d] it. *Zebra cocktail!*[12] Nabokov saw it—now I do. And it's beautiful. Gratitud[e] does not seem out of place.

Whether one quite approves of it or not, it's a Nabokovian assumptio[n] that if you work to give him back what he has given to you, this should b[e] reward enough (for you). His students learned this soon enough.[13] And c[of] course Vera lived it. (The character most closely modeled on Vera—Zin[a] from *The Gift*—is praised by the narrator for having a "perfect understanding . . . for everything that he himself loved.") Here Barthes comes up agains[t] a wall of pure Nabokov. Barthes scorned that "image of literature, to be foun[d] in ordinary culture, [which] is tyrannically centred on the author, his persor[n], his life, his hates, his passions." And then Foucault, in the essay that answere[d]

9. Warning: this footnote for *Pnin* nerds only. Galya Diment's illuminating study *Pniniad* reveals that Nabokov meant to kill Pnin, and was committed to this plan until quite far along in the novel. It appears to be a case of a writer becoming too charmed by his own creation to kill him. But it also means that the Tolstoy and Lermontov echoes (this sense of being spoken about casually, or caricatured, by other people, while you yourself are experiencing an extremely personal and ulterior reality) are deprived their final satisfaction (as Pnin's escape from the jaws of death finds its own echo in the glass bowl that improbably survives the washing up). We can faintly imagine what the last chapter was to have been: the narrator and Jack Cockerell doing their sordid, lame little impressions of Pnin, while Pnin lies dying, or perhaps has already died. (Which leads to the question: what is it about having people speak of you as you lie dying that is particularly Russian?)

10. Of course an *actual* Van Eyck turns up at Pnin's successful little party, when Laurence Clements, lost in thought while holding a dictionary, is compared to the master's portrait of Canon van der Paele. At the same party, a little later on, bored Laurence is to be found "flipping through an album of *Flemish Masterpieces*."

11. All appear in *Pnin*. *Bole* is used for "the trunk of a tree" but is also the small eye on a butterfly wing; *crepitation* is a Nabokov favorite, but aside from crackling generally, it's the word for what a (bombardier) beetle does when he "ejects a pungent fluid with a sudden shar[p] report." *Punchinello*, in *Pnin*, is of course the ugly Italian commedia character, who is short and stout, and so, in the simile under consideration, reminiscent of a tongue. But it is also a very pretty butterfly.

12. From *Pnin*: "He placed various objects in turn—an apple, a pencil, a chess pawn, a comb—behind a glass of water and peered through it at each studiously: the red apple became a clear-cut red band bounded by a straight horizon, half a glass of Red Sea, Arabia Felix. The short pencil, if held obliquely, curved like a stylized snake, but if held vertically became monstrously fat—almost pyramidal. The black pawn, if moved to and fro, divided into a couple of black ants. The comb, stood on end, resulted in the glass's seeming to fill with beautifully striped liquid, a zebra cocktail."

13. "My method of teaching precluded genuine contact with my students. At best, they regurgitated a few bits of my brain during examinations."

Barthes's own, and deepened it, identified the Author (or "Author-function") as "the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning."[14] In Nabokov's case, the arrow hits its bull's-eye: this author's high-handed rules about reading, his various strictures concerning interpretation, and his defensive humiliations of his own potential readers (especially on the topic of Freudian critics and *Lolita*[15])—these all work to "impede[s] the free circulation, the free manipulation, the composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction."[16] But a question I never asked as a college rereader, now bothers me as a writer: *and what of it?*

It was meant to be obvious, to the college rereaders we once were, that any restriction on the multivalent free flow of literary meaning was not to be stood for. But to speak for myself, I've changed my mind. The assumption that what a reader wants most is unfettered freedom, rather than limited, directed, play,[17] or that one should automatically feel nostalgia for a bygone age of collective, anonymous authorship[18]—none of this feels at all obvious to me anymore. The house rules of a novel, the laying down of the author's peculiar terms—all of this is what interests me. This is where my pleasure is. Yet it must also be true that part of the change in my attitude represents a vocational need to believe in Nabokov's vision of total control. Nabokov's profound hostility to Freud was no random whim—it was the theory of the unconscious itself that horrified him. He couldn't stand to admit the existence of a secondary power directing and diverting his own. Few writers can. I think of that lovely idea of Kundera's: "Great novels are always a little more intelligent than their authors." This, in part, is what Barthes had to tell us

14. Foucault, "What Is an Author?," 1969. The English translation quoted is by Joseph V. Harari, first published in 1979.
15. "Ferrety, human-interest fiends, those jolly vulgarians," as he called them. And that cagey afterword to *Lolita* performs a similar function.
16. Foucault, "What Is an Author?"
17. In Nabokov's case, it's more like S&M—an experience you'd hope Foucault could get behind.
18. A largely romantic concept. And wasn't it always the same examples? Either it was Homer; some unspecified "ethnographic societies" within which "narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman or relator whose 'performance'—the mastery of the narrative code—may possibly be admired but never his 'genius'" (Barthes); or else the rather weak model of Beaumont and Fletcher.

and what Nabokov wanted to dispute. Maybe every author needs to keep faith with Nabokov, and every reader with Barthes. For how can you write, believing in Barthes? Still, I'm glad I'm not the reader I was in college anymore, and I'll tell you why: it made me feel lonely. Back then I wanted to tear down the icon of the author and abolish, too, the idea of a privileged reader—the text was to be a free, wild thing, open to everyone, belonging to no one, refusing an ultimate meaning. Which was a powerful feeling, but also rather isolating because it jettisons the very idea of communication, of any possible genuine link between the person who writes and the person who reads. Nowadays I know the true reason I read is to feel less alone, to make a connection with a consciousness other than my own. To this end I find myself placing a cautious faith in the difficult partnership between reader and writer, that discrete struggle to reveal an individual's experience of the world through the unstable medium of language. Not a refusal of meaning, then, but a quest for it. Whether it is "ultimate" or "secret" meaning, seems to me besides the point and rather a sleight of hand on the part of Barthes; by using such terms he forces a monumental, essentialist, and theological discourse on a relationship that is in fact far more hesitant and delicate than he allows. Nabokov is not God, and I am not his creation. He is an Author and I am his reader, and we are stumbling toward meaning simultaneously, together. Zebra cocktail!