

Nabokov on
 “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” :
 Reading Professor Nabokov’s Reading

Sachiko Urasaki

At the University of Cornell from 1950 to 1958 Vladimir Nabokov gave a lecture on Literature which was entitled “Masters of European Fiction.” The catalogue describing the content of the lecture was almost certainly written by Nabokov himself: “Selected English, Russian, French, and German novels and short stories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will be read. Special attention will be paid to individual genius and questions of structure . . .”¹⁾ Then Nabokov chose four English works; *Mansfield Park*, *Bleak House*, “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,” (henceforth “Jekyll and Hyde,”) and *Ulysses*.²⁾ *Mansfield Park* and “Jekyll and Hyde” were selected after certain complication. We can follow closely its process in *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*. On 17 April 1950, Nabokov wrote to Wilson and said, “What English writers (novels or short stories) [in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries] would you suggest?”³⁾ Wilson answered his letter on 27 April, saying that “. . . the two incomparably greatest (leaving Joyce out of account as an Irishman) are Dickens and Jane Austen.”⁴⁾ On 5 May, Nabokov wrote back to Wilson as follows. “I [Nabokov] dislike Jane, . . . Could never see anything in *Pride and Prejudice* . . . I shall take Stevenson instead of Jane A.”⁵⁾ On 9 May, Wilson objected to Nabokov’s view and wrote, “You are mistaken about Jane Austen . . . She is, . . . one of the half dozen greatest English Writers (the others being Shakespeare, Milton, Swift, Keats, and Dickens). Stevenson is second-rate. I don’t know why you admire him so much—though he has done some rather fine short stories.”⁶⁾ On 15 May, Nabokov partly accepted Wilson’s idea, writing that “I have obtained *Mansfield Park* and I shall take

it too in my course.”⁷⁾ But Nabokov would not change his strong opinion on Stevenson and he said that “[y]ou approach Stevenson from the wrong side [t]he *one* masterpiece he wrote is the first-rate and permanent *Jekyll and Hyde*.”⁸⁾ Eventually, *Mansfield Park* and “Jekyll and Hyde” were both taken up in the course of his lecture. From such an episode, it is obvious that Nabokov highly estimated “Jekyll and Hyde.”

In his academic days Nabokov “endeavored to provide students of literature with exact information about details, about such combinations of details as yield the sensual spark without which a book is dead.”⁹⁾ In that respect he said, “[G]eneral ideas are of no importance. . . , and unless the façade of Dr. Jekyll’s house is distinctly reconstructed in the student’s mind, the enjoyment of Stevenson’s story cannot be perfect.”¹⁰⁾

“Jekyll and Hyde” has a theme of “double,” which is the usually remarked facet of the story, and a complex narrative. But Nabokov does not focus his attention on the theme and the narrative of the text, in spite of the fact that his own novels and short stories such as *The Eye* (1930), *Laughter in the Dark* (1931), *Despair* (1934), *Lolita* (1955), *Pale Fire* (1962), *Invitation to a Beheading* (1969), all of which are stories on and around a motif of “double,” seem to have the complex narrative discourse. Thus Nabokov’s attitude to criticizing “Jekyll and Hyde” differs from his attitude toward writing. It may well be said that his critical attitude is, as it were, in “eloquent silence.”

In an essay “Good Readers and Good Writers” Nabokov said that in reading “one should notice and fondle details,” and he mentioned metaphorically that “[t]here is nothing wrong about the moonshine of generalization when it comes *after* the sunny trifles of the book have been lovingly collected.” (N, p. 1) In an interview, he stated that “detail is everything”¹¹⁾ in high art and pure science,¹²⁾ whereas Stevenson conceptualized somewhat differently “detail” or “trifle.” For Stevenson it is not “detail” but “incident” that is important. Writing “[a] certain sort of incident” well represents the romantic ideals of Stevenson,¹³⁾ on the contrary, the “detail” of taxonomic precision, the *sine qua non* of lepidopterological research, is what typified the scientific ideals to which Nabokov aspired.¹⁴⁾

However, it is worthy of being noted that both talked about their ideals in terms of “poetry.” On the one hand, Nabokov characterized his own sci-

entific method in the creative writing as “the precision of poetry.”¹⁵⁾ On the other hand, Stevenson wrote, “Drama is the poetry of conduct, romance the poetry of circumstance.”¹⁶⁾ The link through “poetry” shows that Nabokov shares creative values with Stevenson. Using the word, “poetry,” both writers laid stress on the need for the craft of writing.

Stevenson begins his essay “A Note On Realism” by saying that “[s]tyle is invariable mark of any master; . . .”¹⁷⁾ At the end of another essay he expands the views further and says as follows. “From the arrangement of according letters, which is altogether arabesque and sensual, up to the architecture of the elegant and pregnant sentence, which is a vigorous act of the pure intellect, there is scarce a faculty in man but has been exercised.”¹⁸⁾ Stevenson thinks that the “style” is a product of his (super-) sensuality but exercises for writing are necessary to have a good “style.” In this respect, it can be said that Nabokov reads “Jekyll and Hyde” much as Stevenson wants it to be read when Nabokov focuses on “artistic problems” and reads the story as “a phenomenon of style.” What organizes Nabokov’s reading of “Jekyll and Hyde” as “a phenomenon of style”?

In this paper, in order to consider Nabokov’s reading of “Jekyll and Hyde,” three analytical view points can be taken; “image-linked,” “spatial,” and “discursive.” I shall pay attention to his predilection for eccentric aspects of the story, his structural analysis, and his anti-thematics.

The original device in “Jekyll and Hyde” was, paradoxically, utterly annihilated by the very fact of the success as a novel. The mythology of “Jekyll and Hyde,” which is the most celebrated fictional realization of the “double,” has rendered any reading superfluous. However, Nabokov digrammatizes the relationship of Jekyll and Hyde, and he pictures in the shape of some various rings the mechanism of Jekyll / Hyde’s metamorphosis. And Nabokov calls the text by the strange names of the genres, the “fine bogey tale”¹⁹⁾ and the “Gothic gnome,”²⁰⁾ about which Stevenson himself talked. Nabokov’s practice of reading is neither conventional nor *fabula*-bound. His “perverse” and “oblique” approach probably initiates new readings; “image-linked,” “spatial,” and “discursive,” all of which will be essential to the complexity of the text.

First, we will take up the “image-linked” reading. I name one of Nabokov’s

kov's readings "image-linked" because it aptly demonstrates the text's image repertoire. Parenthetically suggested from Stephen Gwinn, Nabokov primarily focuses on the role of wine. As Nabokov says that in the text "[t]here is a delightfully winey taste. . . . [e]verything is very appetizingly put. . . ; there is appetizing tang about the chill morning in London," (N, p. 180) wine is all-pervasive and suffusing the narrative discourse.

Nabokov notes another kind of "liquid," too, which is the "potion," the machinery of metamorphosis. He says that the "sparkling and comforting draft [wine] is very different from the icy pangs caused by the chameleon liquor [potion], the magic reagent that Jekyll brews in his dusty laboratory." (N, p. 180) Thus he contrasts the warm "wine" with the cold "potion." The "wine" is linked with the images of the interior; warm fires, speech [talk], hearthside, a well-lit dinner and so on, the "potion" is linked with the images of the exterior; wintry cold, impossibility of speech [talk], a deserted street, a fog night and so on.

There are the two clusters of images in the text. The one cluster consists of positive images; possibility (of speech), presence, natural state, whereas the other cluster consists of negative images; impossibility (of speech), absence, unnatural state. We can say that the "wine" (drinkable) is representative of the cluster of the positive images and the "potion" (even non-drinkable) is representative of the hostile cluster of the negative images. Nabokov reads the story, paying close attention to the inconspicuous contrast between the two clusters, of which the two "liquids" are each representative, in the image structure of the text.

Under normal conditions, just as the "man" is "Jekyll," so the "liquid" remains the "wine" having the positive and warm images. But when the "man" turns into "Hyde," the "liquid" changes into the "potion" having the negative and cold images. Here we can see that there are singularly analogical relationship between the "liquid" (as the catalyzer) and the "man," the central figure whose name is Jekyll or Hyde. So to speak, just as Hyde is Jekyll's "double," so the potion is wine's "double." The red (or rose) "wine" and the blue (or green) "potion," which course the narrative constantly, omnipresently, and sometimes markedly, are both the arteries and the veins of the story. We should note the subtlety of the image system in

the narrative and respect the shrewdness of Nabokov's unobtrusive reading.

Secondly, we will consider the "spatial" reading. To question the homology [Jekyll: Hyde = Good: Evil] is nothing new. Nor Nabokov's diagrams of the relationship between Jekyll and Hyde newly present any ideas in themselves, and the reification he does is not beyond diagrammatic one. But they clarify many things in the text. Nabokov shows visually how Hyde is lodged within Jekyll, (according to his explanation, it is because Jekyll is a big man and Hyde is a small man that Hyde can be lodged within Jekyll,) and how the reagent effects a physical separation of these metaphorical components. The significant points Nabokov indicates are that the "Jekyll-residue" lurks near Hyde after "hydization" and "Hyde [Jekyll] still wants to change back to Jekyll," (N, p. 184) and that Jekyll necessarily wants to escape legal retribution within the compass of narrative events. Just as Hyde is not pure evil, so Jekyll is not pure good, because Jekyll [Hyde] is a "mixture" of "components" of "Jekyll" and "Hyde."

In the text, the most fundamental paradox is the coexistence of a conjunction and a verb: Jekyll *and* Hyde; Jekyll *is* Hyde. Nabokov illustrates the crucial point that the relation between Jekyll and Hyde is not "and" but "is", with diagrams. The "spatial" reading of Nabokov underlines the essential inseparability of the central character as a split subject. His idea of this inseparability of the separate is vital to recognize the paradox of the text.²¹⁾

Then the "spatial" reading goes into the geography of the text, in which we can find some analogues of Jekyll's psychic (physical) nature. For instance, Jekyll's house has the two halves that so differ from each other in appearance despite it is wholly one house.

On the one hand, the Jekyll-half of the house wears "a great air of wealth and comfort"²²⁾ at the door. In the neighborhood, there was "a square of ancient, handsome houses," (S, p. 14) but now it is a depressed area, "for the most part decayed from their estate, and let in flats and chambers to all sorts and conditions of men: map engravers, architects, shady lawyers, and the agents of obscure enterprises." (S, *ibid.*) However, only Jekyll's house is "still occupied entire." (S, *ibid.*)

On the other hand, the by-street, where the Hyde-half stands, shines

out "like a fire in a forest; and with its freshly painted shutters, well-polished brasses, and general cleanliness and gaiety of note, instantly caught and pleased the eye of the passenger." (S, p. 2) But the Hyde-half, the "sinister block of building," thrusts "forward its gable on the street." (S, *ibid.*) It has "no window, nothing but a door on the lower storey and a blind forehead of discoloured wall on the upper;" and bears "in every feature the marks of prolonged and sordid negligence." The door, which is "equipped with neither bell nor knocker," is "blisterd and distained." (S, pp. 2-3)

The Jekyll-half brightens a dingy neighbourhood, and the Hyde-half disfigures an attractive street. Just as Jekyll and Hyde are so, so both "Jekyll-quarters," the façade it shows to the society, and "Hyde-quaters" are out of harmony with their surroundings: a millionaire among the map-engravers etc., a monster among the business men.

And, Hyde / Jekyll has "only used a couple of rooms" (S, p. 23) in his residence in "the dismal quater of Soho." (S, p. 22) But "these were furnished with luxury and good taste. A closet was filled with wine; the plate was of silver, the napery elegant; a good picture hung upon the walls, a gift. . . ; and the carpets were of many piles and agreeable in colour." (S, *ibid.*) Hyde / Jekyll's house in Soho is neither a space of natural order nor a space of dark disorder. It is, as it were, a disorderly mixed bag of orderly materials.

Thus, in the ideology seen in the geography of the house, Nabokov's view is appropriate that Jekyll / Hyde is "a composite being, a mixture of good and bad, a preparation consisting of a ninety-nine percent solution of Jekyllite and one percent of Hyde" (N, p. 182) and that "Jekyll is not really transformed into Hyde but projects a concentrate of pure evil." (N, *ibid.*) As Nabokov says, Jekyll / Hyde is quite one man, and rather than a complete metamorphosis a concentration of evil that already inhabited Jekyll occurs.

The evil can be separated as Hyde. In the chemical sense Hyde is a precipitate of pure evil, but in the narrative he is not. For "aghast, but dominating, a residue of Jekyll" (N, p. 184) floats above Hyde and a "halo of Jekyll" (N, *ibid.*) hovers over Hyde. After "hidization" Jekyll still remains "near" or "above" Hyde. Jekyll is not pure good and Hyde is not also pure

evil, and Jekyll / Hyde is "a composite being, a mixture of good and bad." (N, p. 182) In short, the relationship of Jekyll and Hyde is pictured in the geography of Jekyll / Hyde's houses. And the geography of Jekyll / Hyde's houses is related in parallel with the geography of Jekyll / Hyde himself.

The order of the geography in the wider space is not coherent in the story, though the names of the streets and towns which really exist in London appear in the text. It can only be said in this story the ability to move about freely in space is significant. But to adduce wider geographical contexts is more difficult. Nabokov does not touch upon it.

Thirdly, we might broadly describe Nabokov's reading as "discursive," which concerns "discourse" (in Gerard Genette's way) and "communication," ("talk," "speech,") and at the same time means "rambling," though Nabokov calls what motivates him, in the more general term, "artistic problems" of the text.

For the "artistic problems," Nabokov primarily notes the "plausibility" and "believability" of Jekyll's potion, the concentration (transformation), and Hyde's face and feature and so forth. Stevenson, as a writer, in such "a fantastic drama," (N, p. 180) tries to catch "verisimilitude." But he depicts the unverisimilar, risky, and fictional devices such as potion, powder, and will. In the text, the combination of verisimilar settings and dialogues and details about "unreal" matters constitutes the "classical" fantastic. But here the subversive effect of the fantastic is to be found, and that subversion leaves much uncertainty. As Rosemary Jackson says, narratives of the classical fantastic "assert that what they are telling is real . . . and then . . . proceed to break that assumption of realism by introducing what . . . is manifestly unreal."²³)

Then Nabokov focuses on Utterson, Enfield, Poole, and Dr. Lanyon, each of whom concerns the narrative with specific references and plays a significant part. For instance, as a man of sense, Utterson and Enfield, who are "matter-of-fact persons" (N, p. 192) possessed of "commonplace logic," (N, *ibid.*) are both essential in the narrative discourse. For they each tell their impressions of the things and their perceptions of the problems as men of sense and their discourses place any credibility in the following events. Dr. Lanyon, as a man of science, is trustworthy for

observation of scientific details in the scene of Jekyll's concentration into Hyde. Lanyon's discourse has also believability and plausibility in the narrative.

Quoting from Gwynn, Nabokov characterizes the society in which the main characters (Jekyll / Hyde, Utterson, Enfield, Poole, and Lanyon) live as the "community of the monks."²⁴) In the narrative world only bachelor men appear and each plays a vital role, but women scarcely have any part in the action. And besides, Nabokov suggests that "the shock of Hyde's presence brings out the hidden artist in Enfield and . . . in Utterson" (N, p. 193) who live in the society of "the monks." At the very beginning of the story, the lawyer Mr. Utterson is described like a "monk" as follows. "[A] man of a rugged countenance, that was never lighted by a smile; cold, scanty and embarrassed in discourse; backward in sentiment; lean, long, dusty, dreary, . . ." (S, p. 1) However, as the story moves, Utterson himself changes from cold and scanty to warm and prolific in discourse and becomes to have a great imagination in his conscious life. In other word, even Utterson doubles himself. Both as "the seeker of Hyde" and as "the poet of Hyde," Utterson generates a new discourse. The imagination of man of sense (as the dry lawyer) and man of poetry (as the seeker and the poet) has more rich and evocative power than the Lanyon's professional observation and consideration. By doubling such an ordinary Victorian as Utterson, Stevenson achieves the effective representation of reality in the fiction.

I have thus far been considering Nabokov's reading; the "image-linked," "spatial," and "discursive." However, finally I will point out a shortcoming in his reading of the text. Nabokov comments that it is "safer for the artist not to be specific and to leave the pleasures of Jekyll undescribed. But does not this safety, this easy way, does it not denote a certain weakness in the artist? I think it does." (N, p. 194) Thus he criticizes Stevenson's craftsmanship and looks upon it with a prejudiced eye, as if it is in an vagueness in the "nightmare world." Here we can see the limitation of Nabokov's reading. Indeterminacy is a vital part of every experience in reading, no matter how detail-encumbered a particular passage might be. The work of the imagination in picturing a character or a scene of a story

consists of concretizing various details. But the imagination itself still remains free, in and with intertextual or contextual frame, to fill in the “gaps.” The power of fiction especially in abnormal or fantastic taste resides in this essentially imaginary realization of characters or scenes, for the indeterminate and imagined image is more powerful than the concrete image. To wish for more concrete descriptions or accounts surely denotes a weakness in the critic and reader.

So what it comes down to is as follows. Nabokov’s reading calls our attention to some crucial facts. First, “Jekyll and Hyde” achieves an extremely colourful (not monochrome) and stereoscopic fictional realization in the image repertoire, in the spatial dynamics of the story, and in the subsidiary characters, all of which help to authenticate and substantiate the split subject at the text’s centre. The text has a carefully wrought and elaborated plot schema for the type of the manifest “double” as Jekyll / Hyde. Second, Jekyll / Hyde shares one body and one brain, and there is no separation at all. The chemicals merely bring about an oscillation of Jekyll / Hyde’s forms. Finally, the text realizes the essential ambiguity and unknowableness of the “self” and the “double.” In suggestiveness and indeterminacy, Stevenson is an accomplished writer who uses the image repertoire, which generates the basic paradigmatic polarity and duplicates the atmosphere of the story.

As John Simon says, the very fact that in the course of lectures Nabokov includes “Jekyll and Hyde” among the great novels, such as *Madame Bovary* and *The Walk by Swann’s Place* and “The Metamorphosis,” is “quite a comedown,” and it “reads at times like an uneasy apologia.”²⁵⁾ Certainly in Nabokov’s reading of “Jekyll and Hyde” so much of the Stevensonian context is missing; the backdrop of Edinburgh, that is omnipresent in this London narrative. But, to use Simon’s words, we can say that Nabokov is learned, meticulous, fascinating, erratic and frustrating as a teacher and a critic. He opens up a large number of new ways of reading the text, which was previously clogged by a small number of frozen reading. Suffice it to say here that Nabokov’s reading has efficacy if the complexities of the richly shortened text are to be activated and reactivated.

NOTES

- 1) Vladimir Nabokov, Fredson Bowers (ed.), *Lectures on Literature* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), p. vii. Page numbers appear in parentheses after quotations, e.g., (N, p. vii).
- 2) The course included the other works such as *Anna Karenin*, "The Death of Ivan Ilyich," *Dead Souls*, "The Greatcoat," *Fathers and Sons*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Walk by Swan's Place*, "The Metamorphosis," and possibly some Chekhov.
- 3) Simon Karlinsky (ed.), *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 236.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 238.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 241.
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 243.
- 7) *Ibid.*, p. 246.
- 8) *Ibid.*
- 9) Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), pp. 156-157.
- 10) *Ibid.*
- 11) *Ibid.*, p. 168.
- 12) Throughout *Lectures on Literature*, the coupling of "art and science" is repeated obsessively: "... [A] work of fiction or a work of science (the boundary line between the two is not as clear as is generally believed) ..." (p. 3); "... [T]he best temperament for a reader to have, or to develop, is a combination of the artistic and the scientific one" (pp. 4 - 5); "That little shiver behind is quite certainly the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained when evolving pure art and pure science" (p. 64); "What is the joint impression that a great work of art produces upon us? ... The Precision of Poetry and the Excitement of Science" (p. 123); "... , [T]here are other thrills in other domains: the thrill of pure science is just as pleasurable as the pleasure of pure art" (p. 382) and so forth.
- 13) Robert Louis Stevenson, "A Gossip on Romance" in *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, Tusitala Edition, vol. 29: *Memories and Portraits & Other Fragments* (London: William Heinemann, 1924), p. 119.
- 14) Andrew Jefford, "Dr. Jekyll and Professor Nabokov: Reading a Reading," in

- Andrew Noble (ed.), *Robert Louis Stevenson* (London: Vision Press, 1983), p.48.
- 15) *Strong Opinions*, p. 79.
 - 16) "A Gossip on Romance," p. 120.
 - 17) "Note On Realism" in *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, vol. 28: *Essays Literary and Critical*, p. 69.
 - 18) "On Some Technical Elements of Style in Literature" in *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, vol. 28, p. 50.
 - 19) Jenni Calder, *RLS: A Life Study* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1980), p. 220. See James Pope Hennesy, *Robert Louis Stevenson* (London: Cassell, 1989), pp. 19-20.
 - 20) Stevenson wrote of the "Gothic gnome" on 2 January 1886 to Will H. Low. See *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, vol. 33: *Letters Vol. III*, pp. 66-69.
 - 21) Jefford, p. 56.
 - 22) "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" in *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, vol. 5: *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Fables & Other Stories & Fragments*, p. 14. All further references are taken from this edition. Page numbers appear in parentheses after quotations, e.g., (S, p. 14).
 - 23) Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 34.
 - 24) Stephen Gwinn, *Robert Louis Stevenson* (London: Macmillan, 1939), p. 130.
 - 25) John Simon, "The Novelist at the Blackboard," in *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 (1981).