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The Real Hound, the Real Knight: Tom Stoppard Reads Nabokov

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The Real Hound, The Real Knight

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Even if Tom Stoppard's involvement with Nabokov were not documented by his having written the screenplay for Fassbinder's 1978 film of Despair, we would have had to posit it. Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound* shows that he read *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* attentively and animated its metaphors with his usual playful philosophical acuity. The interplay reveals the seriousness of Stoppard's reading and rewriting of Nabokov, which in turn peels the mask from Sebastian Knight's face to reveal Nabokov's coded autobiographical game.

In his previous play, *Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard had developed characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In *Hound*, Stoppard stages Sebastian Knight's first novel, *The Prismatic Bezel* , in which Sebastian uses "parody as a kind of springboard" (91). Central to Stoppard's game is Sebastian's "fanatical hate" of

> things which had once been fresh and bright but which were now worn to a thread, dead things among living ones; dead things shamming life...continuing to be accepted by lazy minds serenely unaware of the fraud. The decayed idea might be in itself quite innocent and it may be argued that there is not much sin in continually exploiting this or that throughly worn subject or style if it still pleases and amuses. But for Sebastian Knight, the

> merest trifle, as, say, the adopted method of a detective story, became a bloated and malodorous corpse. (92)

This is the very corpse found on the stage at the beginning of Stoppard's play; its presence declares his intention to play with the method of the detective story. The characters, like the lazy minds, remain "serenely unaware of the fraud" until the middle of the play, during which the corpse is a "dead thing among living ones" and the characters, by virtue of their hilarious well-wornness, are "dead things shamming life."

The Prismatic Bezel is "not only a rollicking parody of the setting of a detective tale" but also of the "fashionable trick of grouping a medley of people in a limited space (a hotel, an island, a street)" (92).

Stoppard's whodunnit parodies the great English tradition of the country house murder mystery. The plot, the characters and the dialogue are made entirely out of cliches, but each one of these cliches is renovated by being given a double meaning or a dual context. The play's *dramatis personae* of Act I are doubled by the "real" critic-characters in Act II; by the end their interpenetration is hard to untangle, the nature of "reality" has become blurred, and the audience's reality is itself called into doubt. It takes work to deduce that on the "real" level, the first- and second-string critics Higgs and Moon are shot by the ambitious third-string critic Puckeridge, who also kills the critic Birdboot because Birdboot is about to reveal Puckeridge's identity.

But the plot is considerably thickened: each critic has a double within the thriller taking place on stage. Thus Birdboot becomes Simon's double, Moon--Hound's. Felicity and Cynthia are doubled by the "real" actresses who play them, as courted by Birdboot. If this were all, it would be a simple theater vs. life metaphor, one which Nabokov uses throughout his work in the Shakespearean sense of the stage as this life, the world beyond it as the otherworld. But as Magnus declares in his final speech, "I have been leading a double life--at *least*!!" (44): Magnus, the heavily-disguised half-brother of Lord Muldoon who just turned up from Canada, reveals himself to be first, the real Inspector Hound, and second, the long-lost Lord Muldoon himself. That is, within the play-within-the-play. Outside it, Moon recognizes Magnus to be the critic Puckeridge.

Critics have commented on the degree to which Stoppard is parodying Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*, which was in the fifteenth year of its run on the London stage in 1968 when *Hound* was written. Agatha Christie's detective arrives on skis, Inspector Hound on pontoons; the denouement reveals that the real policeman is disguised as one of the house guests. *The Mousetrap* is also the title of the play that Hamlet uses to trap Claudius.[1] In *Hound*, *The Mousetrap* too has double identities. The first is as Agatha Christie's parodied murder mystery, but the second is as Shakespeare's: Puckeridge has used the play as a trap to catch Higgs and Moon, the obstacles to his career as critic. He furthermore kills Birdboot when Birdboot is about to reveal that Puckeridge murdered Higgs.

Within the "real" system, this scenario, while not easy to unravel, has clear motivation and unambiguous resolution. Within the "play," the situation is more complicated. Who is the corpse?! Stoppard forces the audience into acting out the play's central device: we are made to use a cliche in a newly-motivated setting, since we have to ask: who is the real McCoy?

When the false Inspector Hound arrives at Muldoon Manor in Act I, he (and we) assumes that Simon is the escaped madman who bears a grudge against someone in the house.

> Hound: I have reason to believe that one of you is the real McCoy!
>
> Felicity: The real what?
>
> Hound: William Herbert McCoy who as a young man, meeting the madman in the street and being solicited for sixpence for a cup of tea, replied: "Why don't you do a decent day's work, you shifty old bag of horse manure," in Canada all those many years ago...The madman was a mere boy at the time...and thenceforth carried in his heart the promise of revenge!

It is at this point Hound discovers the corpse. No one in the cast has ever seen him before. Hound thinks it's Albert, Lord Muldoon, but Cynthia knows it isn't.

> Hound: Then who is it?
>
> Cynthia: I don't know.
>
> Hound: Anybody?
>
> Felicity: I've never seen him before.

Magnus: Quite unlike anybody I've ever met. (30)

In this version false Hound casts Simon as a madman avenging a boyhood insult, but of a"McCoy" who is completely unrelated to the characters in the thriller. And when Simon enters to discover the corpse, he is surprised. Having turned the corpse over, the stage direction instructs: "he looks about in alarm" (30). Is he alarmed because he recognizes McCoy? Or because he realizes that he has found a real corpse (namely, Higgs) on stage? But as Birdboot predicts, "This is where Simon gets the chop," so we never find out.

Birdboot is drawn onto stage, and involuntarily assumes the role of Simon, replaying Simon's scene from Act I. In the process he discovers the body whom he, unlike Simon, can identify as Higgs. Birdboot begins to accuse Moon of shooting Higgs, since Moon has shown himself to be obsessed with Higgs, but Birdboot is shot from offstage before he can pursue the accusation. Now Moon, onstage, is thrust into the role of Hound. As Hound, he now accuses Magnus of the murder, but can't identify the corpse within the plot of the thriller. Moon accuses Magnus of killing "this...chap," but Magnus asks: "But what motive would there be for killing him? Who *is* this chap?" While Moon knows the corpse is Higgs, he doesn't yet recognize Magnus as Puckeridge and so can't see that he has a motive for murder on the "real" plane. Within the fictional plane, Moon-Hound is unable to give an identity to the corpse provisionally named McCoy by the original Hound. "...well, that's it then. This...chap...(pointing) was obviously killed by (pointing) er...by (pause) Simon." With no further evidence, he accepts

the false Hound's conclusion that Simon killed McCoy, but Felicity objects that "it doesn't make any sense!...Why should any of us want to kill a perfect stranger?" (43). Magnus, not yet revealed as the real Hound, challenges the whole premise of McCoy:

> We only have your word for that, Inspector. We only have your word for a lot of things. For instance--McCoy. Who is he? Is his name McCoy?...Or is there something else, something quite unknown to us, behind all this?

In short, there appears to be no real McCoy. Magnus unmasks Moon as a false Hound. Revealing that he himself is the real one, he simultaneously reveals that, for Moon and the audience at least, he is the even realler Puckeridge. Puckeridge shoots Moon, his remaining rival critic, having framed him as the madman who murdered the still unidentified corpse. Magnus's final revelation is that he is Albert, missing for ten years and supposed dead. Within the thriller, Albert is resurrected; on the "real" plane, three out of four critics are dead.

This may be either more or less than you want to know about *The Real Inspector Hound*, but it sharpens our reading of Sebastian's *Prismatic Bezel*, and more so of Nabokov's *Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. The plot of Sebastian's novel involves twelve lodgers in a boarding-house.

> A certain G. Abeson, art dealer, is found murdered in his room. The local police-officer, who is described solely in terms of his boots, rings up a London detective...he is very long in arriving. In the meantime, the inhabitants of the boarding house plus a chance passer-by, old Nosebag,

> who happened to be in the lobby when the crime was discovered, are thoroughly examined. ... (the detective, it must be remembered, is still on the way and G. Abeson's stiff corpse lying on the carpet).

The corpse on the carpet, the country house-boarding house isolation, the slow-to-arrive detective are features parodying stock thrillers shared by Stoppard and Knight. The denouement of Knight's novel also resembles Stoppard's:

> The old gag of making the most innocent-looking person turn out to be the master-villain seems to be on the point of being exploited...Suddenly a policeman lumbers in...and reports that the corpse has gone..."I think," said Old Nosebag quietly, "that I can explain. Slowly and very carefully he removes his beard, his gray wig, his dark spectacles, and the face of G. Abeson is revealed. "You see," says Mr. Abeson with a self-deprecating smile, "one dislikes being murdered." (94-5)

Just as Albert appears to be dead at the beginning and reappears at the end as Magnus peels off his disguise, G. Abeson is resurrected out of Old Nosebag. The name G. Abeson is Nosebag spelled backwards; since Nosebag is present simultaneously with G. Abeson's corpse, which is said to be lying "behind a sealed door" (94), we may read him as an inverse alter ego or even the spirit of the dead Abeson.

As in *Hound*, everyone in the cast of *The Prismatic Bezel* has dual identities:

> It gradually transpires that all the lodgers are in various ways connected to each other. The old lady in No. 3 turns out to be the mother of the violinist

> in No. 11. The novelist occupying the front bedroom is really the husband of the young lady in the third floor back. The fishy art student is no less than this lady's brother. The solemn moon-faced person who is so polite to everyone, happens to be the butler to the crusty old colonel, who, it appears, is the violinist's father. The gradual melting process continues through the art-student's being engaged to the fat little woman in No. 5, and she is the old lady's daughter by a previous marriage.

This "gradual melting process" of boarders into family is related to Stoppard's melting of the real world of the critics into the fictional country-house thriller. As the merging continues,

> And when the amateur lawn-tennis champion in No. 6 turns out to be the violinist's brother and the novelist their uncle and the old lady in No. 3 the crusty old colonel's wife, then the numbers on the doors are quietly wiped out and the boarding-house motif is painlessly and smoothly replaced by that of a country-house, with all its natural implications. (93)

What are these "natural implications"? As Stoppard's critic Moon puts it, rehearsing his review of the thriller we're watching, "within the austere framework of what is seen to be on one level a country-house week-end, and what a useful symbol that is, the author...has given us the human condition" (31-2). Nabokov lived in boarding-houses during his early years of exile in Berlin. We can imagine him as resembling Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev in *The Gift*, recalling the family delights of his his childhood summers from the

bed of a rented room. Keep that image in mind as you listen to the continuation of the passage:

> And here the tale takes on a strange beauty. The idea of time, which was made to look comic (detective losing his way...stranded somewhere in the night) now seems to curl up and fall asleep. Now the lives of the characters shine forth with a real and human significance and G. Abeson's sealed door is but that of a forgotten lumber-room. A new plot, a new drama utterly unconnected with the opening of the story, which is thrust back into the region of dreams, seems to struggle for existence and break into light. But at the very moment when the reader feels quite safe in an atmosphere of pleasurable reality and the grace and glory of the author's prose seems to indicate some lofty and rich intention, there is a grotesque knocking at the door and the detective enters. (94)

The forgotten lumber-room is familiar in Nabokov's work from *Pale Fire*, where it is King Charles's point of departure from Zembla via the theater to exile in New Wye. In*The Prismatic Bezel* it is also a point of transition, in the opposite direction: from exile to homeland, from boarding-house to country-house, from death by murder to timeless family pleasurable country scene. The grotesque entrance of the detective is the shock of reality: there is no eternity, no family--only a boarding-house full of strangers and death.

Stoppard's detective also brings death: the real Inspector Hound is Puckeridge, the murderer from the "real" dimension of the play. But in his

identity as Albert, he is also cast in the role of G.Abeson-Nosebag: dead at the beginning, alive at the end. The device of the murderee appearing at the denouement is used by Agatha Christie in *The Unexpected Guest*, and the device of having the detective be the murderer by Chekhov in *The Shooting Party* (Kamyshev, the investigating magistrate). But Stoppard compiles all these devices: the melting process of one level of reality into the other, the detective who turns out to be the murderer, and the parody of the English country-house thriller, and uses them to write about the nature of identity within shifting levels of reality. The detective critic finds the real Hound to have as one of its identities a heavily-disguised *Real Life of Sebastian Knight.*

Reading *The Prismatic Bezel* through the prism of *Hound* highlights Nabokov's dictum that reality is a series of false bottoms. Sebastian's novel prefigures the denouement of the novel in which he is a character: Sebastian, dead at the beginning, is "alive" in the person of V. by the end. As V. says of his late half-brother, the writer Sebastian is also "laughingly alive in five volumes" (52). Like Stoppard, Sebastian is a writer who plays with the theme of art's relation to reality: Abeson is an art dealer; the most likely suspect is "a fishy art student"; the detective, "a shifty fellow," drops his h's, saying: "'Ullo,...'ow about Hart?" which translates into "How about art?" The boarding house characters are themselves artists--a violinist, an art student, a novelist, even (in Nabokov's system) the lawn-tennis champion. In the realm of art

Abeson can be resurrected from Nosebag, and murder may be merely the premise of a detective tale.

Sebastian the writer is conspicuously the creation of Nabokov, the writer. A Russian born in Petersburg in 1899, Sebastian is made from the outset to double his author. He shares Nabokov's Swiss governess, his education at Cambridge, his father's duel. But unlike Vladimir Dmitrievich, Sebastian's father dies after (though not in) the duel (6). That is, the novel insists that we relate it to its author, that we compare Zelle to Mademoiselle O from Chapter five of *Speak, Memory*. Sebastian loses first his mother, then his father, then his country, before losing his life at age 36. Sebastian's life as a writer in England and English is defined by his exile from Russia; his death is heralded by his return to his Russian identity represented by the Russian language, his doctor Starov, and his Russian half-brother, V.

All of this directs our interpretation of Sebastian's first novel. A "nasty" boarding-house with "rooms numbered with large black figues stuck onto the doors" (5) is the setting of Nabokov's first novel, *Mary*. Inhabited by Russian emigres, it is the emblem of dreary exile. The boarders are "the ghosts of [the hero's] dream-life in exile" (52) who surround him as he recalls his Russian past with his first love, Mary, "a life that was much more real...than the life lived by his shadow in Berlin" (55-6). Ganin says that thinking of Russia, he dreams only "about the beautiful things. The same woods, the same country house" (81).

The melting of the boarding house into the country house in Sebastian's *A Prismatic Bezel* is a condensation of Nabokov's *Mary*: Nabokov's emigration is transformed into the grotesque parody of a boarding-house thriller that slowly metamorphoses into the "pleasurable reality" of a family at a country house, emblematic of Nabokov's lost kingdom. The miraculous resurrection of G. Abeson is both the parody of Sebastian's and Nabokov's desire to bring back their dead and an affirmation of faith in the Otherworld.

Stoppard's *Hound* and Nabokov's *Knight* deny the usual limits of personality. One (rather Moon-like) critic has said of *The Real Inspector Hound*,

> [T]he jolt from one system of "reality" to another need not stop where it does--with Puckeridge's triumph; as it spirals outwards, the play demonstrates the unreality of *all* acting, and invites the audience to consider whether, in terms of a focus beyond their perception, they too are no more than actors in a play...Stoppard leaves us begging the inevitable logical question: whose illusion is our reality?[2]

This is also the question posed by *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: Who is the author? Has V. constructed Sebastian, using elements of his brother's novels to create his own narrative? Has Sebastian written an autobiography, imagined from the point of view of his half-brother? Or can we credit V.'s sense that "in some unobtrusive way Sebastian's shade is trying to be helpful" (101), and the novel represents the collaboration of two brothers from two shores?

The Real Inspector Hound too has multiple solutions to its mystery. The reality knowable by the critics is that Puckeridge has shot three of them. But the motives of the murderer in the play-within-a-play are unknowable, since we cannot identify the initial corpse. Who is the real McCoy? *Oedipus*, the original detective play, becomes the crucial subtext: we are looking at ourselves, our own inexplicable, unavoidable, but incontrovertible death. Death is the real McCoy, and some miserable Gradus-like third-string critic is the agent of our destiny.

As Nabokov puts it in the foreword to *Bend Sinister*, "death is but a question of style, a mere literary device, a musical resolution" (xii). In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Sebastian's novel demonstrates that playfully, lyrically, while Nabokov's conveys the tragedy and the means to transcend it. In both works, the levels of reality blend, become inextricable, and the plot unresolvable, because everything undergoes constant metamorphoses: identity, life, death and the very genre of the work. Sebastian's thriller becomes Nabokov's memoir; Stoppard's comedy becomes metaphysical deliberation. With Stoppard's help, we read Sebastian's novel as the play-within-a-play whose doubled reality spirals outward to include Nabokov's own life.

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[1] Thomas R. Whittaker, "Logics of the Absurd," *Critical Essays on Tom Stoppard*, ed. Anthony Jenkins (Boston: G. K. Hall), 1990, 110-20, p. 135.

[2] Tim Brassell, *Tom Stoppard: An Assessment* (New York: St. Martin's Press), 1985, p.101.