

Panelist: Alisa Sniderman, Harvard University

Title: "The Problem of Knowledge: Vladimir Nabokov and the Detective Novel"

"And speaking of literature, there is not a thing about it that I do not know," boasts the criminal narrator of Nabokov's *Despair* (45). As a child, Nabokov read Arthur Conan Doyle and Edgar Allan Poe. As a professor, he described his literature course as "a kind of detective investigation of the mystery of literary structures" (LL 1). Alfred Appel Jr. once asked Nabokov why he "transmuted the properties of the detective story" into his work and Nabokov shrugged off the question evoking his "boyhood passion for Sherlock Homes and Father Brown stories" (SO 174). My aim is to show that Nabokov's interest in the detective genre went beyond parody, pastiche, or the mischief of pulling the reader's leg. In Nabokov, the detective story finds a philosophical dimension. If taken seriously, the detective story does not merely deal with the investigation of a crime, but is an inquiry into the nature of knowledge. Focusing on Nabokov's early Russian novels that borrow and bend elements of the detective novel (*King, Queen, Knave; The Defense, The Eye*, and culminating in *Despair*), I propose to look at how Nabokov develops and reimagines the detective novel to probe the problem of knowledge.

Indeed, Nabokov's characters are often preoccupied with the problem of knowledge be it the metaphysical question of the otherworld or the ethical question of knowing others (or *not* knowing as in the case of solipsism in *Lolita*). Employing elements of hardboiled fiction, *King, Queen, Knave* ends with Dreyer not knowing about the danger he was in. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* ends on the enigmatic reflection: "I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows" (186). In the preface to the English translation of *The Eye*, Nabokov writes that "the stress is not on the mystery but on the pattern" (iv).

This problem of knowledge is intimately connected to the power of expression. Inspired by the Russian formalists' differentiation between *fabula* and *syuzhet*, Todorov argues that the classical detective story comprises two different orders: the story of the crime and the story of the inquest. In the opening of *Despair*, however, Nabokov already problematizes this neat division between events and the manner in which they are told by having Hermann remark that if he lacked "the marvelous ability to express ideas with the utmost grace and vividness" "nothing at all would have happened" (3). Nabokov himself hinted at the relationship between knowledge and the ability to express that knowledge: "I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more" (SO 45).