

# The Poetics of Vladimir Nabokov's Russian Novels in The Synthesis of Modernism and Postmodernism

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**Abstract:** This article examines the unique artistic synthesis of modernist and postmodernist poetics within the Russian novels of Vladimir Nabokov. By analyzing the evolution from his early Russian works to his major English-language novels, specifically "Pnin" and "Lolita", the study identifies a distinctive shift in structural architecture and narrative play. The analysis focuses on how V.Nabokov's cosmopolitan journey informed his experimentation with intertextuality, irony, and the "matryoshka" principle of nested narratives. It argues that V.Nabokov's creative output serves as a comprehensive literary map, bridging the gap between European aesthetic traditions and the emerging postmodern sensibilities of the mid-20th century. Ultimately, the study highlights how author's linguistic transition redefined the boundaries of the novel genre, establishing a metapoetic system that prioritizes aesthetic bliss over objective realism.

**Keywords:** Vladimir Nabokov, Modernism, Postmodernism, Pnin, Lolita, Poetics, Metanovel, Cosmopolitanism.

**Introduction:** The artistic traditions of 20th-century European modernism and American postmodernism do not appear as antithetical phenomena in the literary activity of Vladimir Nabokov; rather, they manifest as a "product of the dialogue between cultures and the process of cosmopolitanization" [1]. As Kh. Tabatadze emphasizes, this harmony actually constitutes a large-scale "cultural synthesis" [2], and it is precisely this process that raises V.Nabokov's work to the level of a unique "literary experiment" [3].

The author's experimental approach is observable from the very beginning of his creative formative period. Even as a teenager in Russia (1914), attempting to enter the literary arena with his initial poems, the young poet's striving to harmonize Russian poetic traditions with the new stylistic explorations of Symbolism, Acmeism, and Futurism [4] shows he was far from indifferent to the aesthetic processes and literary evolutions of the new era.

## METHOD

This inherent trait a passion for tireless experimentation with form and style never left V.Nabokov throughout his creative journey. Significantly, the author's sixteen novels, including

eight Russian-language works "Mary" (1926), "King, Queen, Knave" (1928), "Defense" (1930), "Glory" (1932), "Laughter in the Dark" (1933), "Despair" (1934), "Invitation to a Beheading" (1936), and "The Gift" (1938) and eight English-language works "The Real Life of Sebastian Knight" (1941), "Bend Sinister" (1947), "Lolita" (1955), "Pnin" (1957), "Pale Fire" (1962), "Ada or Ardor" (1969), "Transparent Things" (1972) and "Look at the Harlequins!" (1974), embody almost all the major aesthetic and literary processes of 20th-century world literature.

Therefore, we can interpret V.Nabokov's creative activity as a unique "literary map" that embodies and reflects the characteristic aspects of understanding the 20th-century artistic world [5]. Consequently, we must first examine the factors of the cultural-spiritual crisis of the last century which prompted a reconsideration of the relationship between man and truth and the philosophical foundations that led to the formation of modernism and postmodernism, in order to clarify the problems regarding V.Nabokov's artistic features and style.

It is well known that Vladimir Nabokov began creating fully in the English language just before moving to

America, with the novel “The Real Life of Sebastian Knight” (1941). Therefore, it is appropriate to seek the foundations of modernism and postmodernism specifically within American literature. In the 20th century, American poets and writers were finally able to contribute worthily to world literature without merely imitating European and British masters [6].

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The 20th century entered the pages of history as a period of radical turning points in human thinking and social life. As a result of the erosion of long-established beliefs, values, and ideological principles, humanity faced a “clash of ideas” [7]. The decline of stable religious, moral, and social foundations forced a reconsideration of the concept of “truth.” While Darwinism undermined the foundations of religious faith, F. Nietzsche’s “death of God” concept caused a crisis in metaphysical perceptions.

Henri Bergson’s (1859-1941) psycho-philosophical theory emphasized that man can understand truth not only through reason but by relying on inner intuition [8], thereby limiting the possibilities of rational thought. Z. Freud’s (1856-1939) theory of the subconscious served as a “shot fired” against individualism, suggesting that “man cannot analyze his own subconscious activity” [9], translating the unique secrets of the soul into the language of universal psychoanalytic schemes. His colleague, C.G. Jung (1875-1961), introduced the concept of the “collective unconscious” [10]. Such views weakened the idea of the absolute priority of rational thinking, harmonizing with the idea of American philosophers J. Dewey and W. James that “there are no fixed truths” [11].

This process at the beginning of the 20th century showed that reality could no longer be expressed solely through the descriptive means of realism, creating the ground for various non-realistic trends in literature [12]. Movements such as avant-gardism, polystylistics, baroque, existentialism, expressionism, futurism, acmeism, impressionism, and symbolism united under the term modernism.

The rejection of classical logical systems of understanding existence led to a new intellectual turn based on the epistemology of doubt. More precisely, this was driven by the emergence of a “centerless world” (W.B. Yeats)... the existence of irreconcilable contradictions between epistemological ambiguity, formalized utopian dreams, and a formless, uncertain anti-utopian reality. As B. McHale noted, modernist writers were cast into a whirlpool of existential anxiety caused by the questions “What is reality actually like?”, the problem of identity, as well as doubt, despair, and the search for meaning.

Consequently, modernism in both art and literature advocated for the perception of truth not through a logical, single criterion, but through individual experience, an internal psychological flow, or subjective sensation, completely rejecting objective reality. U. Hamdamov points out: “The reason for this is that humanity... witnessed the destruction of millions of innocent fellow beings during the world wars and concluded that this world cannot be fixed by measures (reforms); thus, they turned their entire attention inward. The view that man can only be happy in his imagination, not in real life, became the catalyst for the emergence and development of modernism”.

The observation of Spanish aesthetician and philosopher Ortega y Gasset reinforces this: “The essence of new art—that is, modern art—is to take human attention away from the outside, turn it 180 degrees, and direct it toward one’s inner world”. Previously, literature diligently described the external (real reality); today, this has lost its interest. The prioritization of one’s own soul led people toward “tragic loneliness”, as they perceived the world as “chaos” and attempted to escape it. They believed beauty was absent in the outer world and must be sought within. Simultaneously, this movement advocated for anthropocentric humanism—a love for humanity.

Founders of the “modern revolt” such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust, Gertrude Stein, and John Dos Passos advanced the idea of the absence of absolute truth through artistic means like the stream of consciousness, fragmentation, and existential distress. Gertrude Stein (1874–1946), a theorist of modernism who called for the creation of works distant from traditional art, emphasized that the 19th-century “literature of event” must become the 20th-century “literature of state.” In her view, “literature of state” eliminates the need for traditional composition and plot; there is no need to describe character traits or reflect existing life conditions. It is sufficient to reflect the complex of subconscious sensations, irrational experiences, and pathological impulses.

Under the influence of these views, modernist works were born based on principles of refining crude, illogical, irrational, and unreal plots, imbuing them with beauty and aesthetics. Declaring the value of art to be “outside of life,” the slogan “Art for art’s sake” became its banner. V. Nabokov’s works are similarly distant from social issues and do not aim to reflect “modern reality”; instead, they create a separate aesthetic world built on the play of form and meaning. I. Paperno highlights V. Nabokov’s modernist position, interpreting it as the view of a modernist with an anti-positivist and

anti-realist spirit characteristic of the era. V.Nabokov departed from the traditional interpretations of the novel genre, enriching it with new poetic meanings and utilizing tools that highlighted the artificiality of the text and the individuality of creative style.

For V.Nabokov, one of the most important aspects is the description of the individual's inner world. His characters, unable to realize their talents in an external, alien world, dive into their internal psychological realms to create an individual artistic system built solely on the laws of literary play. While such modernist views prevailed in Europe, A. Werth noted a process of "distancing from the traditions of Russian literature" in Nabokov's work. This was rooted in the author's worldview, shaped by Anglophilia and cosmopolitanism, leading him to consider himself a creator belonging to "Western culture". It is no coincidence that the most influential representatives of modernism Joyce's "Ulysses", Kafka's "The Metamorphosis", Bely's "Petersburg", and the first half of Proust's "In Search of Lost Time" were his "artistic teachers".

It is also necessary to focus on postmodernism, the creative method that began to be observed in art and social spheres from the second half of the last century. As N. Ivanova states, Nabokov mastered the aesthetic principles of both modernism and postmodernism, reinterpreting them through his individual artistic thinking as a creator "presenting his inner world to the reader".

The discoveries of Einstein and Curie increased the prestige of science, yet the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki revealed its destructive power. Such historical-philosophical changes led human thought toward even greater disorder chaos prompting ontological questions like: "What is the world itself?", "Do parallel existences exist?", and "How do they differ from one another?". This led to a "skeptical attitude toward the foundations and structures of knowledge", where postmodern literature emerged as a linguistic construction. This construction leaves it to the reader to connect it to the truth we think we know. Consequently, postmodernism as a literary phenomenon reflected innovations such as the play of styles, pastiche, the synthesis of genres, a plurality of "voices" (points of view), and the fragmentation of chronology.

While some experts date postmodernism to the 1940s or 70s, the term appeared earlier in P. Wignits's *The Crisis of European Culture* (1917) to denote the end of Eurocentrism. We believe postmodernism entered literature and art then, as we observe the following

features noted by F. Khajiyeva in V.Nabokov's Russian novels:

1. Intertextuality expressed through allusion, parody, and pastiche;
2. The dominance of irony, fatalism, and skepticism;
3. Plot fragmentation rather than chronological order;
4. The goal of allowing the recipient to derive independent meaning rather than imposing a deep philosophical conclusion.

In V.Nabokov's work, these methods are not separate phenomena but complementary tools. B. Averin notes that Nabokov synthesized the artistic discoveries of 20th-century prose and poetry, creating a metapoetic system that prefers irrational "artistic chaos" over logic.

"Mary" features hallmarks of the modernist metanovel: synthesis of subjective realities and stream of consciousness. The hero, Ganin, is only happy when reviving memories of his homeland and first love in his mind.

In the novel "King, Queen, Knave" V.Nabokov compares the murder plot to the novel's own plot, interpreting the crime as a creative act. He creates a "nonsense text" using intertextual illusions from Andersen, Carroll, Kafka, and Shakespeare. Characters feel like mannequins, corresponding to the principle of dehumanization through parody. Irony becomes the supreme aesthetic value.

In "Defense" the chess theme determines the structural plot. This demonstrates the "erasure of boundaries between art and life" and the isolation of the individual within a hyper-space of artistic play. It creates an "open-ended narrative style" characteristic of postmodernism.

"Glory" reflects the modernist principle of the dominance of creativity over worldly truth, while its fragmentation creates a postmodern deconstruction. The text is built on the "Matryoshka" principle. Martin eventually disappears into a watercolor landscape, preserving himself in the eternity of art.

"Laughter in the Dark" is a unique metanovel where literary and cinematographic elements merge. Cinematic reality replaces true reality. Using the principle of cinematography, Nabokov creates an artifact-text containing cultural codes from Shakespeare to Tolstoy. J. Baudrillard notes that cinema is a form of aesthetic simulation that does not claim to depict the world's real picture. Yu. Lotman notes that its mechanism reveals the internal construction of any narrative structure.

“Despair” deconstructs the detective genre. From a modernist perspective, if a murderer expresses a crime as an act of art, he can be justified as a creator. V. Khodasevich notes that this is a work about self-expression through artistic creation. Here, we see the removal of the “fourth wall”. The structure resembles a many-rooted tree system (rhizome) that multiplies meanings rather than narrowing them.

“Invitation to a Beheading” is a bright example of European modernism. It functions as a nonsense-play, transferring the absurd into the realm of creative madness. V. Alexandrov emphasizes its description of “otherworldliness” (potustoronnost) while C. Davydov calls it a Matryoshka-type text. V. Nabokov adapts the Shakespearean concept of “all the world's a stage” into a modernist “theater of the absurd”.

“The Gift” is deconstruction of the traditional novel genre. Nabokov fragments the plot using collage or the postmodern rhizome principle. M. Lotman notes that in such works, the “diversity of codes” is moved inside the text. O. Fedotov emphasizes that every word reflects the author's creative individuality. Genres like the historical novel, scientific research, and mini-poem synthesize into a whole, marking a clear mutation of genres.

By the late 1930s, the shrinking audience for Russian emigre literature and the global geopolitical shift led Nabokov to English. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* emerged as a product of these explorations a synthetic expression of the poetic ideas from *The Gift* tailored for an English-speaking audience.

## CONCLUSION

Vladimir Nabokov occupies a unique position in 20th-century literature as a writer who successfully synthesized the aesthetic rigor of modernism with the playful, deconstructive elements of postmodernism. His transition from Russian to English was not merely a linguistic shift but a poetic evolution that allowed him to map the cultural and spiritual crises of his era. By rejecting objective realism in favor of a “literary map” of subjective experience and intertextual play, Nabokov transformed the novel into a space where the author maintains supreme sovereignty. Ultimately, his work demonstrates that art is an independent system, where “truth” is found not in historical context, but in the aesthetic bliss of the creative act.

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