

INFLUENCES

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IT WAS ONLY AFTER I PUBLISHED A BOOK that I was forced to consider the question of influence on my writing. Until that point I had merely written. But reviewers made me aware of the problem of influence, drawing as they did convincing parallels between my short stories and the work of writers I had never read. Interviewers, too, were keen to unearth literary debts. Which writers and books, they asked, had most influenced me?

It was a question I wanted to answer honestly. But I was not sure I could. For one thing I had the impression I was really being asked which books and writers I admired most, asked that in the certainty that the answer to both questions was the same. That might be so, but isn't necessarily. *Ulysses*, for instance, is one of those universally admired works which has influenced writers less than one would think. *Remembrance of Things Past* is another.

What I was coming to suspect was that literary influences are more various and varied than I had imagined. In my case, the threads of these influences resolved themselves into a Gordian knot which stubbornly resisted all my efforts to untangle it. For instance, when asked to produce a list of those authors whom I particularly admired I was inevitably struck by the heterogeneity of the list I compiled. I could not but help imagine these authors incongruously yoked in conversation at literary cocktail parties. Flannery O'Connor and Anthony Powell? Christopher Isherwood and Rudy Wiebe? Alice Munro and Evelyn Waugh?

I could not see how these converging vectors of probable influence had shaped my writing. Worse, I felt I was suppressing another, perhaps equally important list of names. Names such as Zane Grey, Walter Scott, John Buchan, and Robert Louis Stevenson came immediately to mind. Yet I was afraid of being thought facetious if I gave these writers the nod of acknowledgement.

It was only when I read Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography *Speak, Memory* that I seriously began to define and elaborate a dim suspicion I had been harbouring: that "bad" writing is as influential in the development of a writer as "good" writing. A brief reference of Nabokov's to an article he had read as a child in the *Boy's Own Paper* strengthened that suspicion because it helped carry me back, back beyond my first acquaintance with Zane Grey, Stevenson, Buchan,

and Scott, back to my earliest reading, to my introduction to the *Boy's Own Annual*.

During Nabokov's Edwardian childhood the *Boy's Own Paper* was one of those bellicose boys' magazines which tub-thumped for the British Empire and the "right little, tight little Island!" It may seem strange that such a paper found its way into the Nabokov home, but Vladimir Nabokov's father was a wealthy anglophile who insisted on English governesses, governesses who, in turn, insisted that their little Russian charges read and wrote English before they read and wrote Russian. Thus the *Boy's Own Paper*.

All this smacks a bit of Alice in Wonderland. There is surely something absurd in the notion of a young Russian aristocrat, citizen of a xenophobe empire, reading, in English, the rival claims to glory of a competing xenophobe empire. The only thing possibly more absurd is that almost exactly fifty years later, in 1957 or thereabouts, I was poring over a like-minded publication, the *Boy's Own Annual*. My volume too was Edwardian, an issue that Nabokov might conceivably have read on dark St. Petersburg winter evenings, a book that had lost its covers and was coming apart in my hands and which I, at the age of six, took to be a reasonably accurate account of the world outside my bailiwick. No one told me that the fabulous world described in its pages had expired in the mud of Flanders more than forty years before.

Or perhaps it was just that I refused not to believe in what I was reading. In any case, I held on to the illusion for something like three years before it evaporated. During that time I confined my reading basically to two books (aside from the insipid things assigned in school) and those books were an old school text of my mother's, *A History of the World*, and the previously mentioned volume of the *Boy's Own Annual*. In the beginning I found *A History of the World* the more intriguing because of its illustrations: photographs of antiquities such as Mycenaean daggers and Etruscan coins, and reproductions of "historical" paintings which showed Egyptian charioteers dramatically dying, transfixed by Hittite arrows. The *Boy's Own Annual* supplanted the *History* in my affections only as my ability to read improved. Only then did it become the staple nourishment of my imagination. I never read, or had read to me, for instance, any of the children's classics such as *Winnie the Pooh*, *The Jungle Book*, or *The Wind in the Willows*. In retrospect I can say it would have been a good thing if I had read other books, but at the time I certainly didn't suffer from these omissions. My pre-World War I issue of the *Boy's Own Annual* kept me entranced. I needed no other books. I was like a fundamentalist with his Bible.

The *Boy's Own Annual* fell into my hands by way of an elderly English lady who was cleaning out her attic. This lady was typically English — or at least what North American readers of Agatha Christie mysteries might imagine as

typically English. A widow, she lived for her huge garden, her budgerigars, and a cocker spaniel named Rusty. She presented me the tattered copy with the assurance that it was "just the thing for a lively young fellow." Against all odds it was.

The contents of the *Boy's Own*, as I remember it, divided fairly evenly into three broad categories. Practical knowledge; historical yarns which even I recognized as historical; and "contemporary" tales which were, at the time I read them, already more than forty years old. The latter I insisted on thinking of as accurate reflections of life in the British Isles and Empire. With hindsight I conclude that this misconception of mine probably continued to flourish primarily because my parents didn't own a television. A TV set would have rubbed my nose in the grit of reality. But I also must have practised self-delusion on a grand scale, some part of my mind censoring all evidence that contradicted the *Boy's Own* picture of the world. Still, in my defence I can say that this was the age of Tarzan movies.

Anyway, who wouldn't wish to keep alive such magnificent delusions? How well I recall the *Boy's Own* article on self-defence. Here was practical knowledge indeed, a step by step, blow by blow account of the proper use of one's walking stick in repulsing assailants. The reader was enjoined to strike *glancing* blows off threatening blackguards because glancing blows foil any attempts at seizing one's walking stick, wresting it from one's grasp, and turning it against one. (It being understood that blackguards were clearly not the kind of fellows to carry walking sticks of their own.) Recommended targets for such glancing blows were elbows, shins, and, of course, the crown of the head. As a bonus several policeman's grips were described and illustrated. When applied these grips promised to bring about the instant submission of felons. Young readers were reminded to use minimum force when practising such grips on their chums.

The article incited in me a powerful longing. I knew that there were no interesting blackguards stalking the streets of Esterhazy, Saskatchewan, of the type depicted in *Boy's Own*. Nor did I own an ashplant. However, that didn't mean I oughtn't to study the article very closely. Particularly since I had, on the spot, determined to go to England where there apparently was an abundance of blackguards, villains, and ruffians. All suitable for thrashing.

The rest of *Boy's Own* was, if possible, even better, stuffed plum-full to bursting with plucky youths. There were the plucky youths of the past: a ferreter-out of the Gunpowder Plot, an alarm-raiser at the Great Fire of London, an aider and abettor of the escape of Bonny Prince Charlie to France. Then there were the plucky youths I mistook for my contemporaries. My favourite among these was a lad who had stained his skin with berry juice, wrapped his head in a turban, and embarked on a steamer ferrying pilgrims to Mecca. His mission? To uncover a ring of Arab slavers dealing in British subjects. After making fog-bound London

streets safe for respectable strollers I thought I might lend this chap a hand tidying up the Red Sea. My future bloomed.

IF IT WAS NABOKOV'S PERFUNCTORY COMMENT about the *Boy's Own Paper* that resurrected memories which had lain mute under the dead weight of all the books that followed this one volume, books deposited year by year, strata upon strata, it was something else in *Speak, Memory* that made me consider whether my writing hadn't been flavoured by this early infatuation of mine with the *Boy's Own Annual*.

Reading Nabokov's autobiography I was struck by a curious thing. I noted that although Nabokov makes frequent reference to the authors of the great European and Russian masterpieces, he devotes more space to a man called Captain Mayne Reid than he does to either Blok, Pushkin, Tolstoy, Gogol, Kafka, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, or for that matter, any other writer.

Who was Captain Mayne Reid? Captain Mayne Reid (1818-83), Nabokov informs us, was a writer of Wild West romances. At the turn of the century translations of his work were enormously popular with Russian schoolchildren. Young Vladimir Nabokov was, however, because of the diligence of his governesses, fluent enough in English to have the privilege of reading them in the original language. His favourite, he tells his readers, was *Headless Horseman*.

From what Nabokov has to say in *Speak, Memory* it is possible to deduce that Mayne Reid completely captivated his young reader. Nabokov even admits to re-reading *Headless Horseman* as an adult, and he maintains that the book has its points. It is instructive to note what these points are.

First of all Nabokov takes delight in the artificiality and intricacy of Captain Mayne Reid's plots. Second, several passages of prose are quoted with approval. There is the whiskey decanter behind a Texan barman which looks like "an iris sparkling behind his shoulder," and the barman himself is improbably graced with "an aureole surrounding his perfumed head." Now it is true that in all this Nabokovian applause there is more than a trace of the familiar Nabokovian mockery. But two things came to my mind also: Nabokov's own prose touched as it is with the fantastic and a tincture of the archaic, and his own taste for studied melodrama and gloriously coincidental plots. One has, after all, only to think of how improbably the nymphet's mother was despatched in *Lolita* to leave the field free for Humbert Humbert.

On such slender, even feeble evidence it would be foolhardy to argue a connection between Reid and Nabokov, to see the romancer's taste, filtered and purified by Nabokov's genius, later making a bow in the shadows of Nabokov's novels.

But I sensed that, if clearly unprovable, it was still possible. Nabokov himself is frank in admitting that many of the books he later read resonated with Reidian echoes. Dwelling on Louise Pointdexter, a young lady equipped with lorgnette that he discovered in *Headless Horseman*, Nabokov writes,

That lorgnette I found afterward in the hands of Madame Bovary, and later Anna Karenin had it, and then it passed into the possession of Chekhov's Lady with the Lapdog and was lost by her on the pier at Yalta. When Louise held it, it was directed toward the speckled shadows under the mesquites, where the horseman of her choice was having an innocent conversation with the daughter of a wealthy haciendado, Doña Isidora Covarubio de los Llanos (whose 'head of hair in luxuriance rivalled the tail of a wild steed').

In just this manner the turbaned heads of Moslem pilgrims that I had met in the *Boy's Own Annual* sprang into view when I read *Lord Jim*, and walking sticks in the hands of Henry James' characters were suddenly transformed from the innocent appurtenances of dandies into menacing clubs.

THERE WAS SOMETHING ELSE, TOO. I had come to wonder if I had not begun the process of learning to write long ago with the *Boy's Own*. The one problem with the magazine was that it was a serial, and I possessed only a single volume. Some of the stories had no beginning. Worse, some had no end. Several of the more harrowing tales had appended to their last page a cruel joke: To be continued. My favourite character, the berry-stained boy, I had to leave manacled in the bottom of an Arab dhow on the point of being pitched overboard to sharks. What, I asked myself in torments of anxiety, had happened to him?

I like to think now that he would have remained forever frozen in that queer limbo of near death if I hadn't assumed the responsibility of rescuing him. Because at some point in my childhood I came to realize that what I was reading was fiction, a structure created by the imagination. If I were daring enough I might collaborate in the making of it. Or as I saw it then: the boy can be saved. So at about the age of seven or eight I set about saving him, manufacturing ploys and desperate acts of desperate courage that would deliver him from implacable fate. In other words, I began an apprenticeship. I was learning to write.

Perhaps all my subsequent fiction has been marked by this experience, this revelation. Certain reviewers have remarked on my "traditionalism." Others have gently chided me for my interest in plot and "story." Is the *Boy's Own Annual* the obscure root of these tendencies? Have the stratagems concocted to elude the wicked slavers become, in some sense, second nature?

I don't know. The only testimony I can offer is the confession that when I sit down to write it is only with the greatest effort of will I manage to force the turbaned heads down, out of sight below the bulwarks of the dhows, or manage to master the violent and intoxicating urge to conclude every chapter with a clear suggestion of imminent peril.

It is, I suppose, only a matter of time before the will weakens and the long serialization begun twenty-five years ago resumes under a slightly different guise. I find that once acquired the taste is hard to lose.

