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The Nabokov Paper. Exam Question 16. Alliteration: follow the adventures of a letter through any passage that has particularly pleased you.

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[‘Follow’ – there is the first sniff of the handkerchief dropped by o. And I do. And off through the passage it goes, as if separate from it, as if behind it, or to be found via it, as if the passage itself were a window whereat I am glimpsing o living and travelling through the passage. I photocopied the passage called ‘Incident at the Window,’ blew it up in the Antonioni manner to A3 and fixed it to the window, the better to see what was not there and should have been there: my incident happening to me. An incidence of reading.]

Incident at the Window

[First, there was the draught ...

... and then the transcription, with added windows in square brackets. Nothing happens without the window memory. I wrote through the window, which was the letter o, and who was you. At times I called up indistinctly in your direction and under the direction of the window. At times I was the ‘prisoner,’ outside or inside, waiting. It all happens at the window, to me, facing towards you. Reading. Writing. Between the two.]

[Are these inserts ‘windows’, or shutters? Did I ever know what I was doing? And now, do I know when I am doing it? Or to whom? With you? ‘God forgive us.’]

‘Incident at the Window’: o and how it winds its way or winds an invisible thread through the rings [o-o-o-o-o-]. There is an in there too. But there is nothing in the o. Nab[okov] asks after the letter, not the vocable. O has a large counter (the space within a printed letter, itself a round window. ‘Incident’ [corresponds to Nabokov’s] ‘adventures of a letter’: neither out, disclosed, Uttered, nor subject to an Enfielding that encloses [and formalizes]. Reading at the window, with my eyes and ears ... The paper window here where I write, following the letter o through the passage of The Strange Case[ment] of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde called ‘Incident at the Window’ ...

‘Once again’: the letter o once again, the repeated walk. Utterson with Enfield, Enfield with Utterson. It is U and E’s ‘usual walk’ that passes ‘once again’ through the by-street where the [‘door’ that is the] back door to Jekyll’s house is. They ‘came in front of the door.’ Can o be my door, can I go through o to the other side? [The paper prevents this, obviously. It is deep.] The doors that interest us stop us: ‘in front of the door, both stopped to gaze on it.’ [It is no longer simply a door. For them too. It provokes memory of the other door that was this one before.] Which one could be the right one to want to go through, or to know not to go through? Perhaps remembering the incident at the door makes a coincidence where there is none, perhaps it is an entirely different door this time?]

[‘Elle ne procède que par sauts. Ce qui la rend périlleuse. La mort se promène entre les lettres.’<sup>2]</sup>

A window one can look through. A door one gazes on. It is closed to them. Enfield takes this for an end. For reading and thinking the door is where we stop, to begin. Enfield: ‘that story’s at an end ... We shall never see more of Mr Hyde.’ The door hides the past behind it. Who wants more than closure? A reader. Utterson is not so sure. He ‘hope[s] not’: [Freud on negation: ‘we take the liberty of disregarding the negation and picking out the subject-matter alone of the association.’<sup>3]</sup> a chink for the curious. He recounts a memory - [Only one alone sits at the window memory. It is necessary to tell what one sees there] and the great window through which writing comes [un-foreseen] here on to the paper: ‘you,’ ‘your feeling of repulsion’ (which as a feeling is invisibly attached to, opens on to its other side – attraction. The ambivalence at the window. ‘It shall be inside me’ or ‘it shall be outside me’ (Freud 237). Oh the ego and ‘the language of the oldest – the oral - instinctual impulses!’ [W]hat an ass you must have thought me not to know ...’ Somewhere we knew, between us, what was on the other side [of the door, of Jekyll’s house, and therefore perhaps we can believe that somewhere we both know what is on the other side of now. You, I mean, and me. Incident at the window.] Form! says Nabokov. [Kate explains his idea: ‘one must teach how to read books for the sake of their form.’]

[Form generates a fantasy; that] between U and E, between me and you, it all adds up. The mysteries of front and back are revealed, the primal scene that got me guessing reappears when I speak or write to you, uttering, enfielding. We know, and then, I can write. [But] it is [also] an incident at the window and the adventure of a letter [and these are events that can’t be formalized.] ‘It was impossible to do one without the other,’ returned Enfield. Together – but the ‘return’ is to a remark that comes straight out of solitude: ‘Did I ever tell you that I once saw him, and shared your feeling of repulsion?’ Did I ever tell you that I saw what you saw and felt just the same? It is ‘partly your own fault’ that I know what I know, that I find out what I find out. My text is your fault. [Who is responsible?] Years later last night a dream of you reading, so close. Dream window, dream reading, day’s residues. Fault at the window, fault of the window. O, you, I ... vowels, pronouns, invocations. No adventures of a letter, no adventure tout court without memory and repetition.

‘So you found it out, did you?’ said Utterson. It cannot be told, what we share here and now. You have to find it out yourself. Then we ‘may step into the court and take a look at the windows’ [‘at,’ not ‘through’ the windows. The window itself is a text and there may be an acoustics of the window, which is just as much an opaque surface as a curtain, blind or shutter.] We go together into the court, the enclosure behind the building. We go a little by the back way, more private, more secret, inside and [still outside we] look together: two. Two lookers, two pairs of eyes, two round-eye-os. [Witnesses for each other and of the incident at the window. But it’s ‘the windows,’ plural, that they will look at. How can we be sure they see the same one? Form is no guarantee of shared presence. A window may be the figure of form but form does not open onto presence, only on to the court.]

[The double-o’s: ‘door,’ ‘look,’ ‘poor,’ ‘good,’ ‘too,’ ‘indoors,’ ‘good,’ ‘good-naturedly,’ ‘blood.’ The oo’s look cut off like this, like cut-outs, like proper names or spectacles. What circulates through them? ‘God?’ Wood? Do-what?]

‘To tell you the truth ...’ – I tell you, because as we read together you won’t know what I am feeling and because I know what I am feeling because I tell you, as if you were here, or whereabouts. Together with you I can feel ‘poor Jekyll’ and feel, ‘even outside,’ that the presence of a friend (which one? Are the two now one?) ‘might do him good.’ Like friends, the letters near each other make a difference, call it alliteration [as Nabokov does], or assonance, or chiming. They are a kind of good, ‘even outside.’ The friend-letters call [and call on] each other. They comfort each other [at a distance], regardless of [the distinction between] inside and outside. Is there an inside where you are alone: in solitary? A letter might reach you. It might reach you because it is already with you: in you, in the very o of you.

In the same way the court comes together across iterations of o that round the wall’s enclosure, provide atmosphere. It is a scene with o: ‘cool,’ but with the sky ‘high up overhead’ still bright. O is an absent sun, an ‘active absence’<sup>4</sup> [in the ‘premature twilight.’] There the ‘middle one of the three windows was half way open’ with Jekyll ‘close beside it’ ‘like some disconsolate prisoner.’ Each o still prisoner, despite the hope of meeting that comes with each reappearance of the letter. They can’t escape [from] where they are held in the words, sentenced to signify but also able to [cut loose and] soar out. Jekyll is [to be] found, like Hyde, close by. Everything that matters is close and far, also moored, also free. O does not inform us of anything. Space for projection, for vision, for intimation, for surprise, for nothing. A defunct passage, closed door, walled court, dead end o.

Jekyll: ‘I am very low ... very low. It will not last long, thank God.’ [There is] no God in this story, only you, and me here all alone, and the voice I hear in the letters, ‘very low,’ ‘not long,’ ‘that story’s at an end.’ Little finite o, littlest one, with your innocent face. I look down to write. The page I read is above me at the window looking down on me in king-size photocopy but at this level of reading I have to go ‘low’ and ‘slow.’ There is no inside [therefore no entry]; I am looking down at a shallow scratch-work or engraved inscription. Utterson calls Jekyll out: ‘You stay too much indoors ... You should be out, whipping up the circulation ...’ Round and round the o faster and faster, the inside blood [moves thanks to] the pleasant outdoor activity of walking. The old argument about writing, thinking and reading: you have to sit down, bend over your books.<sup>5</sup> Everything pools [and stagnates], ‘[y]ou stay too much indoors.’ [‘T]oo much,’ [‘c]ome now’ – but it is the time for reading, always this terrible solitude at the window. The text calls, you call, I have to go on through, the adventure only through the other, never getting to the other side. O hope!

‘You are very good,’ sighed the other. ‘I should like to very much; but no, no, no, it is quite impossible; I dare not.’ ‘I dare not’: why [would he have to] dare at all, if it is ‘impossible’ to come out? If it is a matter of daring or not daring, it must be possible to come out for a quick turn, quickly round, circling through the streets, with you. But then I would abandon my post at the window, my only chance to see you, to be close, to be out with you. I would be impossibly simply out for a walk, on an adventure. Utterson the lawyer knows the laws and the loopholes: ‘the best thing we can do is to stay down here and speak with you from where we are.’

The o is a mouth that opens and closes without changing its form, that lets breath and mind go through. It is not an eye, not only an eye, not only an ear-and-eye but a mouth. True to the friendship of the letters and their kindred-spiritedness, Jekyll was also thinking of this staying and speaking from there. He was ‘just about to propose’ it. It is the desire to be close, to be where the openings are given. The o’s don’t swallow anything up into an inside. They don’t thrust anyone out into an outside where he cannot live. They are a place to be at, for greeting and farewell.

[The ‘doctor’ Jekyll speaks with the ‘lawyer’ Utterson. Utterson introduces his ‘cousin,’ Mr Enfield. Each is where he is. They belong to the same professional and social class: ‘(This is my cousin – Mr Enfield – Dr Jekyll.)’ They can speak to each other from where they are - but o opens on to the void: ‘no, no, no, it is quite impossible; I dare not ... the place is really not fit.’ Jekyll says he was ‘about to propose’ what Utterson had just suggested. He speaks ‘with a smile’ and we see the simultaneity, similarity, simplicity in the situation: we overlook the fact that full presence, that too, is ‘quite impossible.’ [D]octor: from classical Latin ‘teacher,’ from docere ‘to show, teach, cause to know,’ originally ‘make to appear right,’ causative of decere ‘be seemly, fitting’ as in ‘decent.’ Jekyll is a teacher. He displays himself at the window, appearing in a kind of dumb show: ‘taking the air with an infinite sadness of mien, like some disconsolate prisoner.’ And after the short conversation with Utterson he is dumb again, now the picture of terror like an illustration out of Lavater: ‘the words were hardly uttered, before the smile was struck out of his face and succeeded by an expression of such abject terror and despair, as froze the very blood of the two gentlemen below.’ Face of the ‘doctor,’ the ‘other’ like the frozen blank of an o, where a succession of expressions appear and are replicated in turn on the silent faces of Utterson and Enfield: they ‘were both pale; and there was an answering horror in their eyes.’ It is a reading lesson and part of it, as always, involves a replication of forms perceptible in the frame of ‘story’ or of its ‘words’ in forms that emerge at the level of the reader’s very being.]

The smile ‘was struck out of his face,’ as if by the reverberation of a blow from behind, on the back of the head, or ‘struck out’ like a writing-mistake. The smile is ‘struck out,’ gone, but there is no narrative to explain why or how. There is a violent change, not psychological. A violent substitution: for the smile, ‘an expression of such abject terror and despair, as froze the very blood ...’ The circulation stops. It is form out of time: traumatized and traumatic form. Without adventure but learned by heart, telepathically, [instantaneously] and without words. The ‘window was instantly thrust down ... they turned and left the court without a word.’ It’s been so fast, so brief, like a poem or a poetic impact. Oh for shock and the break with language and mediation.

‘God forgive us, God forgive us,’ Utterson repeats mechanically. He and Enfield have abandoned Jekyll. The expression on the face glimpsed at the window was enough to make them turn and leave at once. His guilt suggests that the story is over and that Utterson and Enfield are the criminals. Enfield ‘only nodded his head very seriously, and walked on once more in silence.’ How do I leave now? For whom would I conclude, [complete the circle?]

What has the silent nod of writing got to do with this other silent nod? Do I thrust the window down, do I leave the court without a word? How do I take leave of you, for whom the adventure ends not here but entirely elsewhere?

1 Notes (‘...shut but they’re clean’).

There has already been a ‘Story of the Door,’ right at the beginning (Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales*, ed. Roger Luckhurst, Oxford: OUP, 2006, 5-10). The door was in a ‘sinister block of building’ that ‘showed no window’ (6). Mr Enfield told Mr Utterson he had seen Hyde go in there and come out with a cheque to pay off the father of the girl he saw Hyde trample down (8). Hyde had a key to the door. Somewhere on page 8 the lawyer Utterson realises, silently, that this very door opens on to his friend Jekyll’s house. Enfield said he had ‘studied the place’ and noticed ‘three windows looking on the court on the first floor; none below; the windows are always shut but they’re clean’ (9). The door also opens on to the ‘Search for Hyde,’ with rumination and troubled dreams, after which Utterson ‘began to haunt the door in the by-street’ (13). He waits for Hyde, accosts him, is refused admittance and then goes round the corner to the front. The house, or the door ‘wore a great air of wealth and comfort’ (16). But the servant told him ‘Dr Jekyll was gone out.’

2 Jacques Derrida ‘Edmond Jabès et la question du livre,’ *L’Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967) 108.

3 Sigmund Freud, ‘Negation,’ tr. Joan Rivière, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works XIX* (London: Vintage, 2001) 235.

4 Derrida, ‘Entre crochets,’ *Points de suspension: Entretiens, choisis et présentés par Elisabeth Weber* (Paris: Galilée, 1992) 15.

5 See Derrida ‘Force et signification,’ *L’Écriture et la différence* 48-9.