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Proustian echoes in Nabokov's novels : in search of the truth of art

One recurring feature about comparative studies between Proust and Nabokov is their tendency to excerpt from the Nabokovian corpus the novel which seems particularly Proustian. In this respect, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* is often singled out. Both Yvette Louria and John Rivers see in this novel the prominent achievement of the Proust / Nabokov confrontation. On the contrary, Karen Haddad-Wotling, after pointing out this exegetic trend and analysing the Proustian echoes of *Ada* in terms love and jealousy, places definite emphasis on the Proustian subtext in *Lolita*, prior to extolling *Pale Fire* as the most Proustian novel. It seems to me that both *Ada* and *The Gift* embody the most striking aspects of Nabokov's perception of Proust's vision of art.

My purpose here is not so much to establish Nabokov's opinion of Proust as a writer as to stress the strong affinities displayed by two distinct artistic worlds. To me, if Proust is so often quoted or alluded to in Nabokov's novels, it is precisely because both authors share a common purpose, namely to establish inside their respective worlds or *mirages* the true meaning of art.

“Death is but a question of style”

Nabokov has staged in *Pale Fire* a terrifying vision of the artist's duel with death. It is indeed in this novel that the poet, John Shade, is surrounded on one side by a madman,

Charles Kinbote, supposed king of Zembla, and on the other by a killer, Gradus. The Latin sentence, “*Et in Arcadia ego*” seems to hover upon the entire text.⁽¹⁾ The threat comes nearer and nearer as the commentary proceeds to its end, until Gradus finally shoots John Shade dead. At the very end of his commentary, Kinbote sums up the plot of *Pale Fire* as he imagines how he could rewrite the whole story in the form of an “old-fashioned melodrama with three principles: a lunatic who intends to kill an imaginary king, another lunatic who imagines himself to be that king and a distinguished old poet who stumbles by chance into the line of fire and perishes in the clash between the two figments” (657-658). This vision of the artist as caught between madness and death, striking as it is in *Pale Fire*, mainly because of its dramatic staging, is not uncommon in Nabokov’s novels. *Ada*, of course comes to mind, because of its final vision of two people in bed correcting galley proofs of a book they strive to complete before death prevents them from doing so – the very book, moreover, that we, readers, are reading.

In Search of Lost Time seems at first to offer no such concept. ⁽³⁾ However, in the final pages of *Time Found Again*, the narrator senses he must write his book quickly, lest death takes him first. He discovers simultaneously the future shape and body of his book and the all-devouring nature of time: “But there was a graver reason for my pain; I discovered that destructive action of Time at the very moment when I wanted to elucidate, to intellectualise extra-temporal realities in a work of art” (291).

We might also point out the fact that Proust stages in *The Captive Girl* the death of a prominent artist, the writer Bergotte. The disappearance of one of the three main models for the future artist Marcel gives vent to a reflection on the nature of artistic immortality. The books written by Bergotte are described as keeping watch over his mortal remains – thus symbolizing the interplay between art and eternity: “They buried him, but all through the night of mourning, in the lighted windows, his books arranged three by three kept watch like

angels with outspread wings and seemed, for him who was no more, the symbols of his resurrection” (251).

One of the goals of art would be to allow access to some kind of immortality. In *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert assigns no other goal to his book; to him, the work of art he created is the only way to turn Lolita into an immortal creature:

And do not pity C. Q. One had to choose between him and H. H., and one wanted H. H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita (291).

There is however one difference between these two texts: whereas in Proust’s novel it is Bergotte, the creator, who is supposed to gain immortality through his books, in Nabokov’s one it is the creation, Lolita, who is immortalized.

In Proust’s words: “I say that the cruel law of art is that beings die and that we ourselves must die after we have exhausted suffering so that the grass, not of oblivion but of eternal life should grow, fertilized by works upon which generations to come will gaily picnic without care of those who sleep beneath it” (*Time Found Again*, 422). The translation fails to retain an interesting allusion to French painter Edouard Manet.

Here is the French text : “...la loi cruelle de l’art est que les êtres meurent et que nous-mêmes mourions en épuisant toutes les souffrances, pour que pousse l’herbe drue des œuvres fécondes sur laquelle les générations viendront faire gaiement, sans souci de ceux qui dorment en-dessous, leur ‘déjeuner sur l’herbe’” (*RTP IV*, 615). Proust alludes here to a painting by Manet, *Lunch on the Grass*, painted in 1863, a forerunner of the impressionist

revolution. In a strikingly similar manner, Nabokov proposes the following definition of art in his *Lectures on Literature*: “*Beauty plus pity* – that is the closest we can come to a definition of art. Where there is beauty there is pity for the simple reason that beauty must die: beauty always dies, the manner dies with the matter, the world dies with the individual” (251).

The link between beauty and death – as seen also in *Ada*, “*that has to be heard, smell and seen through the transparency of death and ardent beauty*” (60) – adds a deep undertone to Nabokov’s work. It is also, perhaps, one of the reasons why Nabokov was so fascinated by butterflies: there are the incarnation of ephemeral beauty, always on the brink of mortality. As Jean Blot pointed out: “However, hypocritical though this may seem, the idea or the spectacle of a poet killing a butterfly is somehow shocking. [...] Wouldn’t this be the image or the sign of a link between murder and love which leads to an aesthetic which is not deprived of sadism – in order to seize, to immobilize beauty, one has to pin it down, to kill it – an aesthetic of which *Lolita* would be the crowning achievement?” (33). (3)

To a certain extent, Nabokov stands a step ahead of Proust: if in Proust’s work death represents the horizon of the novel, Nabokov goes as far as to offer, in *Pale Fire*, the vision of the work of art as containing its own execution, as hosting its own destruction. Indeed, the killer’s approach is synchronized with the poem’s advance. As we read forward, we trigger off, so to speak, the whole lethal machinery, which will lead to the poet’s death.

From *The Gift* to *Ada* : two Facets of Proust’s Prism

Proustian echoes in *The Gift* are relatively numerous. First comes the playful allusion to the title of Proust’s novel, *In Search of Lost Time*, and subtitle – the final section, *Time Found Again* – through the evocation of two poems written by Fyodor Godounov, “A Lost

Ball” and “The Found Ball”: “Or did he simply skim over them, like them and praise them, calling attention to the significance of their sequence, a feature fashionable in our time when time is in fashion : if a collection opens with a poem about ‘A Lost Ball’, it must close with ‘The Found Ball’” (33).

The allusion to an episode of *The Captive Girl* – the cries of ambulatory salesmen – coupled with an allusion to the ‘Sole Mio’ of *La Fugitive* (*The Gift*, 33), as well as the resemblance between Zina Mertz’ father and Swann are also worth noticing. (4)

We could also signal what seems to be an allusion to the pages narrating Bergotte’s death : the description of the “little patch of yellow wall” of Vermeer’s *View of Delft* and the subsequent comparison between painting and literary style seem echoed by Fyodor’s depiction of Lechino’s park :

If circles of warm light palpitated underfoot in the avenue, then a thick velvet stripe was sure to stretch across in the distance, behind it again came that tawny sieve, while farther, at the bottom, there deepened a rich blackness that, transferred to paper, would satisfy the water colourist only as long as the paint remained wet, so that he would have to put on *layer after layer* to retain its beauty – which would immediately fade (77-78).

Although the colour hue is quite different, we are reminded of the following sentences of *The Captive Girl*:

His giddiness increased; he fixed his eyes like a child upon a yellow butterfly, which it is trying to catch, upon the precious little patch of wall. “That is how I ought to have written”, he said. “My last books are too dry, I ought to have

gone over them with *several coats of paint*, made my language exquisite in itself, like this little patch of yellow wall” (249).

Moreover, the general structure of *The Gift* parallels that of *In Search of Lost Time*: as Nabokov himself stressed in *Lectures on Literature*, the pattern of Proust’s novel is akin to a spiral:

The book that the narrator in Proust’s book is supposed to write is still a book-within-the book and is not quite *In Search of Lost Time* - just as the narrator is not quite Proust [...]. Within the novel, the narrator Marcel contemplates, in the last volume, the ideal novel he will write. Proust’s work is only a copy of that ideal novel – but what a copy! (210-211)

Thus, the end of *The Gift* and the vision of Fyodor’s future novel can be read as a striking homage to Proust’s masterpiece. (5)

Less obvious is the parallel between the two novels in terms of intertextuality. Indeed, Nabokov’s novel, as well as Proust’s, appears to be “literary criticism in action”. (6)

Placing the first two chapters under the tutelage of respectively Pushkin and Gogol, regularly referring to Pushkin’s novel in verse *Eugen Onegin* – by inserting fragments of hidden verse form or by imitating its final stanza in the last page’s “Good-bye, my book!” (*The Gift*, 333) – Nabokov turns *The Gift* into a work of literary criticism. Similarly, Proust pays allegiance to Saint-Simon, Balzac or Racine and includes in *The Captive Girl* a long meditation on literature.

As *In Search of Lost Time*, *The Gift* is both *Bildungsroman* and *Künstlerroman*. Both novels could bear the title alluded to by Proust's narrator, "the story of a vocation" (*Time Found Again*, 251).

Both novels include the story of love inside the novel of apprenticeship, featuring, as it were, an artist – Elstir versus Romanov – in the part of mediator in the field of love as well as in the field of art. (7)

Last but not least, *The Gift* is Nabokov's novel in which the creation of fictional artists reaches its largest scope. As the *In Search of Lost Time*, *The Gift* teems with secondary artists, amateur poets and would-be painters, as, for example, Iacha Chernyshevski or Margarita Lvovna Lorentz.

On a sheer quantitative level, Proust's presence in *Ada* is impressive. More importantly, Proustian echoes tend quite often to become authentic Proustian rewritings. These echoes fall into three categories.

First, we find the various allusions to given scenes of the *In Search*, such as the birth of Swann's love for Odette. This category encompasses more subtle hints to precise objects or notations excerpted from Proust's novel: for example, the "special asparagus" stemming from the kitchen scenes in *Combray* (202).

Allusions to Proustian characters are also quite numerous: Odette and the Guermantes family, as well as Albertine later on. (8) So are the references to Proust's titles, *Du côté de chez Swann* being humorously coupled with the *Bibliothèque Rose* novel *Les Malheurs de Sophie*, by the Countess of Segur, and transformed into *Les Malheurs de Swann* (49).

Nonetheless, it seems quite in keeping with Nabokov's dislike regarding any kind of influence hunting that the precise allusions should also be the less inventive. To a certain extent, one could argue that the less obvious the references are, the more subtle and achieved the rewriting of Proustian material appears. Three examples might bring this aspect into light.

The first one is well known: I am thinking of the Proustian echoes in *Ada*'s Part One, Chapter two. As Brian Boyd has proved it in his paper "L'art et l'ardeur d'*Ada*", these few pages literally teem with Proustian hints: for example, the love triangle involving a man – Swann / Demon – a woman – Odette / Marina – and a painting – Botticelli / Parmigianino, the similarities between Swann and Demon and, more strikingly, between Odette and Marina – both are described wearing a "flimsy nightgown", both are actresses, both are philistines. Moreover, in these pages, Nabokov not only appropriates the Proustian theme, but goes as far as to create what Proust had only fantasized, a fictional painting featuring a woman on the phone:

Your voice was remote but sweet; you said you were in Eve's state, hold the line, let me put on a *penyuar*. Instead, blocking my ear, you spoke, I suppose, to the man with whom you had spent the night [...]. Now that is the sketch made by a young artist in Parma, in the sixteenth century, for the fresco of *our* destiny (18).

The second example is shorter: in the depiction of the "sun and shade" game in *Ada*, the Proustian reader may notice the phrase "gleaming '*infusion de tilleul*'" (*Ada*, 45) which seems to be an allusion to the *madeleine* episode in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Thus, in Nabokov's text, Proust's motif is turned into a game – a device which may synthesize the kind of playful relationship established by Nabokov with Proust.

The third example concerns the last reunion between Van and Ada in Part Four, the only part in the entire novel deprived of chapters sequencing. According to Nabokov, this part, and especially Ada's telephone call, was at the source of the entire novel:

I began working on the Texture-of-Time section some ten years ago, in Ithaca [...], but only in February 1966 did the entire novel leap into the kind of existence that can and must be put into words. Its springboard was Ada's telephone call (in what is now the penultimate part of the book) (*Strong opinions*, 122).

Devoted to the "Texture of Time", as, in a way, is *In Search*, this fourth part concentrates in its last pages a dense web of allusions to Proust and two major rewritings. Of these allusions, some seem to be mere details – but, in Ada's words, "detail is all..."

1922, the year when Van and Ada are reunited is also the year when Proust died, aged fifty-two – as Van is at this time of the novel : "I am today (mid-July 1922) quite exactly fifty-two, *et trêve de mon style plafond peint*" (427). The hotel where the lovers meet is conveniently named "The three swans" (442), discreet hint to Proust's hero, Charles Swann. At the beginning of his treatise, Van writes: "I am also aware that Time is a fluid medium for the culture of metaphors" (428), which might refer to Proust's theory of metaphor as expressed in a work in which time plays such an important part. Later, Van admonishes himself to "beware [...] of the *marcel*-wave of fashionable art" and to "avoid the Proustian bed" (432). Here, Proust appears to be more a foil than a model.

And yet, the staging of Van's reunion with Ada in Montreux is perhaps the more elaborate as well as intricate rewriting of Proust, since it weaves together three prominent episodes of Proust's novel, namely the balcony description in *The Walk by Swann's Place*, the picture of the sea at Balbec and the grandmother's telephone call.

In a process now familiar, Nabokov fuses three scenes in one – in the same manner as he synthesized *Un jour de Swann* in just a few pages – thus endowing his text with dazzling virtuosity. Here is the opening description:

The ironwork balcony jutted out far enough to catch the slanting rays. He recalled his last glimpse of the lake [...]. But now, on this radiant summer evening, no waves foamed, no birds swam; only a few seagulls could be seen, fluttering white over their black reflections (*Ada*, 444).

The balcony motif recalls Proust's "Rayons de soleil sur un balcon": this famous depiction occurs just a few pages ahead of a meeting between young Marcel and Gilberte Swann at the Champs-Élysées garden – quite in keeping with the fact that the balcony motif plays a crucial part in Van and Ada's idyll. Here is this purple patch :

Outside the window, the balcony was grey. [...] A moment later the balcony was as pale and luminous as standing water at dawn and a thousand shadows from the iron-work of its balustrade had come to rest on it. A breath of wind dispersed them; the stone grew dark again, but, like tamed creatures, they returned; [...] and [...] I saw it attain to that fixed, unalterable gold of fine days, on which the sharply cut shadows of the wrought iron of the balustrade were outlined in black like a capricious vegetation [...] with [...] so velvety a bloom in the restfulness of their sombre and happy mass that, in truth, those large and leafy shadows which lay reflected on that lake of sunshine seemed aware that they were pledges of happiness and peace of mind (*The Walk by Swann's Place*, 247-8).

Moreover, the view of the lake of Geneva seems to be a reworking of the description of the sea in Balbec :

The wide lovely lake lay in dreamy serenity, with green undulations, ruffed with blue, patched with glades of lucid smoothness between the ackers; and, in the *lower right corner of the picture*, as if the *artist* had wished to include a very special example of light, the dazzling wake of the *westering sun* pulsed through a lakeside lombardy poplar that seemed both liquefied and on fire (*Ada*, 444).

Compare that to the following passage:

I went into my room. Regularly, as the season advanced, the picture that I found there in my window changed. [...] And sometimes to a sky and sea uniformly grey a *rosy touch* would be added with an exquisite delicacy, while a little butterfly that had gone to sleep at the foot of the window seemed to be attaching with its wings *at the corner* of this “Harmony in grey and Pink” in the Whistler manner *the favourite signature* of the Chelsea master (*In the Shade of Blooming Young Girls*, 142-146).

Oddly enough, Nabokov’s text seems to begin at the exact point where Proust had left his. The episode in Balbec ends with the vision of the narrator closing the curtains: “The pink vanished, there was nothing more to look at. I rose for a moment and before lying down again drew close the inner curtains” (146). And the scene in Montreux begins with the following sentence: “The chambermaid had drawn the curtains. He wrenched them open, as if resolved to prolong to its utmost the torture of that day” (444).

In Proust's as in Nabokov's texts we find the artist's signature, the attention paid to shades of light, colour hues and pattern. Both authors see nature as beginning of art, "commencement d'art" (*RTP IV*, 468). Both are accustomed to insert the beauties of nature in a frame that turns the view in an imaginary picture – note the words "picture" in Proust's text and "canvas" in Nabokov's.

The truly Nabokovian touch consists in a brilliant finding: immediately after staging a distinctly Proustian vision, heedless to disrupt this classical beauty, Nabokov stabs the painting, as it were: "A distant idiot leaning backwards on waterskis behind a speedboat started to rip the *canvas*; fortunately, he collapsed before doing much harm, and at the same instant the drawing-room telephone rang" (*Ada*, 444).

Indeed, this turning-point announces yet another leap into the Proustian intertext. We are now reminded of the narrator's telephone call with his grandmother in Doncières:

[...] suddenly, I heard that voice which I supposed myself, mistakenly, to know so well; [...] I discovered for the first time how sweet that voice was [...]. It was sweet, but also how sad it was, first of all on account of its very sweetness [...]; fragile by reason of its delicacy, it seemed at every moment ready to break, to expire in a pure flow of tears; [...] "Granny!" I cried to her, "Granny!" [...] and, standing alone before the instrument, I went on vainly repeating : "Granny! Granny!" as Orpheus left alone, repeats the name of his dead wife (*The Guermantes Walk*, 179-181).

Truly Proustian in its aim, this scene of *Ada* recreates – as in *Time Found Again*'s series of reminiscences – "un peu de temps à l'état pur" (*RTP IV*, 451), "pure Time, tangible time" (*Ada*, 430), since Ada's voice is "the timbre of their past":

That telephone voice, by resurrecting the past and linking it up to the present, with the darkening slate-blue mountains beyond the lake, with the spangles of the sun wake dancing through the poplar, formed the centerpiece in his deepest perception of tangible time, the glittering “now” that was the only reality of Times’s texture (444).

Thus, Nabokov succeeds in turning Proust’s tragic purple patch into his hero’s own triumph over the *ardis* of time. In doing so, he transforms the aesthetic discoveries of *Time found again* in a genuine novelistic event. The series of similarities – the words “miracle” versus “miraculous connection”; the use of preterit in both texts; the motif of the essence of the beloved’s voice; the notion of first time; the interpolation in French, “*huitante-six*” (445) – cannot mask the differences, youth as opposed to old age, exultation as opposed to grief. (9)

In fact, we witness an inversion of the polarities of Proust’s text: all the indications that convey sorrow or suffering in the Doncières episode are turned, as it were, inside out – the “pure flow of tears” (180) becoming “the laugh clinging to the contour of the phrase” (444). Nabokov devotes the same precision to describing the subtlest shades of Ada’s voice as Proust does. But the notions of grief are transfigured into elation:

It was the timbre of their past, as if the past had put through that call, a miraculous connection (“Ardis, one eight eight six” – *comment? Non, non, pas huitante-huit, huitante-six*). Goldenly, youthfully, it bubbled with all the melodious characteristics he knew – or better say recollected at once, in the sequence they came: that entrain, that whelming of quasi-erotic pleasure, that

assurance and animation – and, what was especially delightful, the fact that she was utterly and innocently unaware of the modulations entrancing him (445).

The difference between the two texts seems somehow existential: Nabokov's present – unlike Proust's, which is artistic, – is definitely erotic. Eroticism permeates the entirety of Van's depiction of Ada's voice : for example, the alliterations – “as if afraid in girlish glee to slip off the quick words it rode” – as well as the voyeur theme – “the fact that she was utterly and innocently *unaware* of the modulations entrancing him”.

More accurately maybe, we could argue that “the glittering now” is erotic and, at the same time, artistically embedded since, in the last sentences, the telephone voice is linked with the landscape described at the opening of the passage. In fact, Nabokov equates “pure time” with “tangible”, “perceptual” time: far from being a general idea, time has to be heard, touched, perceived.

To conclude, it seems that a first series of differences opposes these two artistic worlds through two visions of the link between art and life.

In his *Lectures on Literature*, Nabokov points out that “for Proust, art was the essential reality of life” (228). This statement represents an accurate insight into Proust's aesthetic creed. In a way, everything in Proust's work, from flowers to music, from love to the grandmother's death is viewed through the prism of art. It seems that Nabokov does not share this Proustian creed. Not to mention the fact that he repeatedly claims that the joys of literature can sometimes not vie in sheer intensity with those of butterfly hunting, it seems that art, in Nabokov's work of fiction, does not stand for the only path to truth. The study of nature or of lepidoptera, the invention of chess problems and even the novelization of these fields of study clearly propose an alternative project. However, one should be careful not to take for granted every position adopted by Nabokov in his interviews or extra-fictional texts,

as well as to consider on a different level the views expressed by Nabokov and those attributed to his characters. Thus, Nabokovian heroes such as Kinbote, would appear more Proustian than their author.

As a novelist, Nabokov remains the author who stages in Kinbote the truly Proustian vision of a human being deprived of everything except art: “I may turn up yet, on another campus, as an old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian, a writer in exile, *sans* fame, *sans* future, *sans* audience, *sans* anything but his art” (657).

That this artist should be a lunatic and an impostor clearly demonstrates Nabokov’s originality; yet, at the bottom of this statement, lies the idea of art as sole reality. One should also notice here that Kinbote wishes to be transformed into his creator, Nabokov before *Lolita*, which Kinbote’s vision seems to describe.

The second series of differences lies in the sharp contrast between the two works. Whereas Proust’s novel is unique, organic and requires to be read with constant shifts upstream and downstream, Nabokov’s novelistic work is heterogeneous and offers throughout fifteen novels a multitude of intrigues, characters and even novelistic patterns. It is one of the prominent difficulties found in comparing these two authors. The unity of the Nabokovian corpus would be that imparted upon it by the recurring presence of the author’s figure, whose permanency might vie with that of Proust’s narrator.

Notes

(1) Nabokov was familiar with this motto: “My source for understanding *et in Arcadia ego* meaning “I (Death) (exist) even in Arcady”, is an excellent essay in Erwin Panofsky’s *THE MEANING OF THE VISUAL ARTS*, Anchor Books, NY, 1955” (*Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, 320).

(2) I choose to follow Nabokov's position which consists in discarding "the more or less fancy translations that Mr. Moncrieff inflicted upon Proust" regarding the title and subtitles of the novel and preferring a "literal transcription" – taught by Nabokov to his Cornell students. For further details, see *Lectures on Literature* (206). Thus, *Remembrance of Things Past* will be alluded to as *In Search of Lost Time*, shortened as *In Search*, as has become usual in French criticism.

(3) Translation is mine.

(4) Many of these allusions have been pointed out by Y. Louria (469-470).

(5) "The novel's last chapter [...] ends, like *In Search of Lost Time* (to which it is in many ways quite similar) and every *Künstlerroman* by a metafictional touch implying that this novel tells the story of the hero's apprenticeship as a writer; this touch is constituted by a poetic epigram which parodies a stanza from Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*: 'Farewell my book!' *The Gift* presents in fact indirectly the main elements of Nabokov's intertext theory: Fyodor, the future writer, reconstructs the steps of his apprenticeship." See: Maurice Couturier (*OC, Introduction*, XXV). Translation is mine.

(6) A phrase used by Proust in order to define his pastiches.

(7) In *In Search*, Elstir not only introduces Albertine to the narrator; he initiates him to the subtleties of his painting in Balbec, thus enabling him to perceive a whole aesthetic. Similarly, the painter Romanov nearly presents Zina Mertz to Fyodor and offers in his painting a reflected image of Fyodor's writing practice.

(8) For Odette and the Guermantes family, see the entries of Ada's diary describing the specimens kept in her larvarium, especially, "the noble larva of the *Cattleya Hawkmoth* (mauve shades of Monsieur Proust)" (49) and Van's comment, "the Odettian Sphinx had turned, bless him, into an elephantoid mummy with a comically encased trunk of the

guermantoid type” (50). Regarding Albertine, see the discussion of the “Marcel-Albertine affair” between Van and Ada (136).

(9) The interpolation in French sends us back to the year 1886, year of the first reunion between Van and Ada.

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