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The Meaning of Russianness in the Fictional System of Some of Nabokov's "Russian" Novels

When Sirin-Nabokov's third novel, *the Defense*, was published, (1) many exiled Russian critics wrote in their review of the novel that the young author could not be considered a Russian writer. In 1956, in his essay on Sirin in *Russian literature in exile*, the eminent critic Gleb Struve refers to the exiled Russian critics' common attitude to Sirin and his work. They were astonished by his remarkable, indisputably original writing talent and at the same time they acknowledged his "non-Russianness" (Struve 2; my translation). In 1930, one of these critics, the writer M. O. Tsetlin, contended that "both of Sirin's novels - *King, Queen, Knave* and *The Defense* - are so far outside of the mainstream of Russian literature, so alien to the Russian literary influences that critics are unintentionally searching stranger influences" (Ibid. 284). Four years later, after the publication of *Camera obscura*, Mikhail Ossorguin declared Sirin to be an emigration writer almost entirely cut off from vivid Russian questions (Ibid.).

The novelty of Sirin's style is also confirmed by the Russian writer Ivan Bunin who, in a letter to Galina Kuznetsova, declared that "Nabokov had introduced "a new kind of literary art" and discovered "a whole new universe for which one can only be grateful to him." (2)

Nerusskost'. Non-Russianness. What is non-Russianness? And what is Russianness? What did exiled Russian readers reproach Sirin-Nabokov with? In the first

place they generally mentioned the non-Russian themes of his novels; but above all they considered that "his exceptional mastery of composition and the formal layout of his novels were specific features of non-Russianness" (Ibid. 285). Struve agreed on that point when he observed that "showing the life and the work of the writing process itself (which the poet Vladislav Khodasevitch had identified earlier as the main characteristics of Sirin's style) did not belong to the tradition and the spirit of classical Russian literature" (286).

For most Russian readers, formalism was suspicious and opposed to the specificity of Russian literature, i. e. its "humanity." In 1930, Struve conceded that Sirin lacked above all the "concern for one's fellow man," so characteristic to Russian literature. On the other hand, some Russian critics added more nuance to their opinions: Struve himself conceded that Luzhin, hero of *The Defense*, somehow really represents human pathos (286). N. E. Andrejev talks of a synthesis of Russian mood and western European form in Sirin's work (Ibid. 285). From a general point of view, however, few critics considered the possible relation between the innovation and originality of Sirin-Nabokov's form and the question of Russianness.

It is absolutely certain that Sirin was not interested in Russian national issues, in strictly political terms. He liked to recall that many Russian novels had been written abroad, or on non-Russian territories of the Russian empire. At the same time it is unlikely that he did not feel at all concerned with Russian literary questions. On the contrary they were at the center of his preoccupations. But, as well-known, form for him was the unique concern of art, the only artistic element that mattered. If Bunin – who commented on *The Defense*: "This kid has snatched a gun and done away with the whole older generation, myself included" (Boyd 343) – if Bunin thought that Nabokov's interest

was purely and simply to eliminate the old generation of Russian writers, he was mistaken concerning the young writer's motives. In the context of emigration, it was vital for Sirin-Nabokov to reinvent Russian literature: how else could it persevere and – on a larger plan - continue to play a part in European literature?

In attempting to answer this question, I have chosen to concentrate on two novels. First, *Mary*, primarily because it is his first novel, and as such the one written closest to the moment of exile; it is also the novel in which the nostalgia for Russia can be felt most strongly and in which the methods of composition are still simple. Then *Despair* because it gives the first real portrait of a writer; because Russia seems less present in it and because the composition has become very complex, anticipating that of American novels such as *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*.

In fact, Russia is present in most of Sirin's Russian novels. Struve remarked that when merely considering Russia's thematic presence only two out of the nine novels Sirin wrote before the war could be declared wholly not Russian in terms of setting and characters: *King, Queen, Knave* and *Camera Obscura*. In the other seven, Russian thematic elements are in a rather numerous (Struve 285). Today this observation on Sirin's narratives is not so new and basically not of much interest. What is first and foremost interesting to emphasize is that Russia appears in diverse forms in Sirin's novels, sometimes even in an ambivalent manner.

In *Mary*, six chapters out of the seventeen constitute the evocation, (3) from the point of view of the protagonist Ganin, of his first love in Russia, from 1915 to 1918. The story of Ganin and Mary's love affair consists of five episodes from their encounter in the summer of 1915 in the countryside near Voskresensk, to the last episode, their

correspondence in 1917 and 1918, while Ganin performs his military service in the Crimea and Mary lives on a farm near Poltava. (4)

It has often been argued, and at length, that what gives the ulterior narration of the love story its emotional strength is the leading character's outlook towards Russia: for him and those like him, Russia is definitively lost. But within these five episodes, the nostalgic celebration of Russia, the native country, does not present itself under a homogeneous picture, and this despite the historical fate of the Revolution, the Civil War and the exile that hangs over the story and is known to the reader from the beginning of the novel.

To Ganin, the first episode contains the most intense moments with his first encounter with Mary, their meetings in the nearby Russian countryside, his declaration of love and their intimate relationship. The narrative treatment of this episode via a series of long descriptive passages describing Mary and the Russian landscape together with the intentional elimination of historical time, whether political, or social, transforms this affair into a poetic islet of bliss. The two narrative processes give intensity to the love story. One is the dramatization of the love story through two events: the first event takes place on the terrace where the lovers are used to meeting and where the desecration of the table leads to Ganin's declaration of love; the second event is the fight between Ganin and the voyeur at the lovers' last meeting. These two events, which frame the beginning and end of the first episode of their love story, create a climate of intimate fate. The other process is the identification of feelings of love with the perception of the Russian landscape, of Machenka with Russia; the aesthetic and poetic qualities of the former are transferred to the latter, and vice versa.

In contrast, the second episode gives a radically different picture of that other significant part of Russia which is Saint Petersburg. The city symbolizes an obstacle to the young lovers: faceless, inhospitable, under the snow and the wind, it does not provide them with any place where they could live their love to the full. The narrator intentionally mentions that when they first meet again in Saint-Petersburg, it is "under the same arch where Liza dies in Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades*" (Mary 69). This allusion to the end of the opera, which is the opposite of the end of Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades*, places a romantic cliché, an artificial interpretation, at the beginning of this second episode. This contrasts moreover with the reference to the poet Fet with which Ganin began his remembrance of the beginning of his love story. It is an ironical way of indicating the inevitable degradation of their love which will go on in episodes 3 and 4. Afterwards Sirin is careful to show that it is not the consequence of a tragic, historical fate (of lovers being separated by the Civil War for example), rather the consequence of the impossibility to recover (as in the first episode) the necessary conditions, both external (the Russian countryside) and internal (poetic exaltation) and then to recover the symbiosis between the two young people.

Within the metadiegetic narrative, the evocation of the first love story, a network is already set up, structuring the novel and confronting true Russia with false Russia, or, in other words, true representation of Russia with its false representation. The writer's purpose is not to represent the Russian heritage in the form of fixed images but to question it. This questioning of the Russian heritage is of course repeated at the diegetic level and is confronted with a new narrative line, that of emigration. In each novel Sirin-Nabokov gives a narrative form to the separation from Russia that his exiled heroes experience. The formal innovations that was thus perceived by the whole of his

contemporaries as treason to the traditional considerations of Russian literature was in fact corresponding to the attempt to find new forms for dialoging with Russia while keeping the point of view of emigration, new forms for confronting Russia to what is not Russia. In this sense, Nabokov has the same concerns as the poet Vladislav Khodasevitch.

Indeed, in 1933, in a very pessimistic article on Russian exile literature, Khodasevitch predicts its imminent disappearance, not because it would be deprived of its national soil, as Russian "publicists" have it, but "because in its inner essence it is not sufficiently in exile, perhaps not even in exile at all" (466-472). "It has not found in itself the pathos which can create new feelings, new ideas and at the same time new literary forms on its own" (Ibid.).

Brian Boyd remarked that when *Mary* appeared in Russian in 1926, it was received as a "novel of emigre life" but some reviewers found "his lyrical celebration of a patch of old Russia" "slightly old-fashioned" (245-246). A novel of emigre life or a lyrical celebration of a patch of old Russia? As a matter of fact, the reader does not have to choose between these two interpretations because the novel is built on the interpenetration and interdependence of the diegetic and metadiegetic narratives. Besides, in spite of the apparent and classical clarity of the novel, Sirin makes specific choices in terms of composition and narration, consistent with his personal perception of the world, marked by the historical experience of exile and by his attempt to find a literary means to express that experience. In fact, in this first novel, tensions clearly emerge which will later on be constantly at work in Nabokovian writing: tensions between past and present overlapping with Russia's past existence and its loss and absence in the present time; tensions between native Russian culture and the possibilities of perpetuating it in a

foreign context overlapping with that of Sirin's self-inscription, as a writer, into one or the other of what are for him the two great literary traditions, namely the Russian and the European traditions.

Mary opens with a question: what do life in exile and this "perpetual waiting" mean? The novel builds up an answer to that question. But to precisely understand Sirin's radical difference, we can compare *Mary* with *Mitia's love*, published by Bunin in 1925, just one year before *Mary*. (5) Both stories are close, in terms of date and subject. They share a common theme, the story of a first love in pre-revolutionary Russia, of its strength and decline, all both seen through the eyes of the young men. In both cases, the argument has a clearly autobiographical origin, and this leads me to suggest that in a writer's first novel written in exile it appears to be necessary for him to link together representations of his lost native country and the transposition of his first love. (6) Furthermore, what I would like to underline in comparing both novels are their different constructions and the consequences of these constructions on the meaning of both fictions. In his novel, Bunin's narrator strictly adheres to the ulterior chronological narration of this first love and its tragic ending with Mitia's suicide. This narrative is set at a time and in a society from which the author (and his reader) is historically and geographically excluded. But although Bunin is writing from the place of exile, this place does not exhibit itself either in the narration, or by a particular poetic process. Moreover, these narrated events, taking place at a time and in a society which have disappeared, are not put into perspective in one way or another in relation to the Russian revolution and its repercussions.

In *Mary*, when continuing the parallel between first love and lost Russia, Nabokov perpetuates the classical vein of Russian literature. But as far as we know, this

narrative line corresponds to the novel he had started to write before he wrote *Mary, Happiness*, and which he abandoned. By inserting it into the narrative of life in exile, i.e. into what is at the same time the consequence and the opposite of the metadiegesis, he builds up a system in which diegesis and metadiegesis meet and are confronted with each other. When pondering the meaning of this "perpetual waiting," the most evident answer that elaborates the fictional construction is the possibility of "eternal return." The conscious and methodical remembering of his love story makes Ganin believe that if he meets with Mary again, he will rediscover the happiness that has escaped him and, with it, that part of the real and eternal Russia which is consubstantial with the past love story. Ganin thus plans to take Mary away from her husband upon her arrival in Berlin.

This egocentric answer is confronted within the sphere of emigration with other perceptions of Russia that emigres might have, like the one developed by the philistine Alferov, Mary's husband: for him it is because Russia stayed at a lower stage of development, because Russia always had been under-developed, that she is finished. (7)

But what is particularly interesting in *Mary* is the way the fiction and the hermeneutical code, in Roland Barthes' meaning, operate. During the process of reading, especially during the first reading, most fictional means, even the hidden network of internal correspondences, converge to allow the reader to believe in the possibility of Ganin meeting again with Mary. Let us take the most obvious example: by the use of the same violet indelible ink the person who desecrated the table on the terrace where Ganin and Mary were meeting by writing obscenities on it, is linked with Alfyorov, Mary's husband, who inscribes on his watch Mary's arrival time before falling asleep after having got drunk by Ganin.

This detail, one among several similar details, accredits Ganin's hypothesis; and this interpretation of the meaning of *Mary*, which we could qualify as "romantic," is allowed by the chosen fictional point of view, which encourages the reader to identify with Ganin and share in his blindness.

But the romantic reading is unexpectedly contradicted in the closing chapter: Ganin, sitting in a public garden near the rail station on the same bench where he remembered the beginning of his first love story, is waiting for Mary's train to arrive; then he starts contemplating the construction of a building and the slow and measured labor of the workers passing tiles which resemble a book. For the first time in the novel, Ganine can see the reality which is in front of his eyes, the urban landscape in Berlin, and can perceive its esthetic possibilities. And by the comparison of the tile with a book the narrator underlines the work of deciphering with which Ganin is absorbed. The consequence is immediate: Ganin realizes that his love for Machenka is dead, that she is also an image of the past, just as the emigres in the pension which he just left.

One term is capital: when Ganin understands that his love for Mary is dead, Sirin uses the Russian term "roman," which is polysemous in Russian, denoting a love story as well as a romance. The reader is thus sent back to the beginning of the novel to the epitaph from *Eugene Onegin*.

The Ganin's egocentric response found it important to deny the period of emigration. Sirin suggests that another interpretation of his novel is possible, one which keeps in mind the Pushkin's underlying text and which disavowes the apparent adherence to the fictional system for that of the possibility of the "eternal return." Metadiegesis and diegesis no longer act against each other, rather work together to create a new meaning for the question of Russianness. The evocation of the love story has now to be considered

at the same level as that of life in emigration, as the same time that it is transformed into romance by the contemplation of a world of new poetry, a world which is not Russia. Finding Machenka again would have been a trap comparable to that of imprisoning the emigres in their "perpetual waiting." What was once cannot return and for Ganin it is liberating to understand this in time. For Sirin working to confront the evocation of Russia with the perspective of emigration allows him to elaborate the definition of a new Russian mood: continuing to be Russian from this point of view is continuing to perceive the poetry of the world and to produce a literary and poetic image of it, beyond the form that exile gives to the recollection.

In 1927, for the tenth "anniversary" of the Russian October revolution, Sirin published a two-page article entitled "Jubilee" in *Rul'*, inviting Russian emigres to celebrate their ten years of contempt, their ten years of faithfulness, their ten years of liberty. At the heart of his argument is the distinction between two faces of Russia. On the one hand, there is the Russia distorted, he declared, "by that monstrous and stubborn idea that turns simple-minded Russians into communist suckers and human beings into ants" (214-216; my translation). On the other hand, there is the Russia which he qualified as a "poor relative of Europe." He added, "we are faithful to Russia not only as one is faithful to a memory, we love her not only as one loves his childhood which is gone, his vanished youth, no, we are faithful to this Russia which we are proud of, Russia which was created slowly and without excess and which is an old great power among other great powers" (215). Finally he claimed that, "someday, we will be grateful to the blind Clio for giving us the possibility to taste this liberty and in emigration to understand and intensely experience our native country" (216).

Sirin not only presents Russian emigres with the duty of loving Russia but also makes a clear distinction between the Russia, revolutionary and violent, turned communist, which is not Russia, rather a totalitarian regime, and the unique real Russia which is an equal to other great European nations, sharing their values and their progress. This Russia, incarnated among others by his father, is the Russia Nabokov will spend his life defending: sometimes against European and American intellectuals, sometimes against the 20th century passion for literature "engagee," sometimes against Russian literature itself. And the particularity of emigration makes it possible for him to begin discriminating between disparate representations and definitions of Russia.

For Sirin of course this process of understanding and knowing occurs through writing. Related to the question of Russianness, the question for him is about knowing how to be a Russian writer in emigration, even which Russian writer to be. Nabokov accomplishes this step in *Despair*, written in 1932 in Berlin, (8) his first novel with a narrator-writer who narrates the adventure he has experienced: meeting and killing his double, Felix. But in *Despair* the narration becomes a narrative. Hermann Karlovich, the leading character of the story and the first-person narrator, has a particular characteristic, he declares himself a writer, moreover a writer who is "perfectly sure of (his) power to write and of (his) marvellous ability to express ideas with the utmost grace and vividness" (13). In this narration's opening Hermann advises his reader that he will improve on the events, he will even misrepresent them, in order to produce a perfect literary equivalent of the "real" crime he committed, the perfect murder he thinks Felix's is. That is the conscious intention of the fictitious author and hero of *Despair*.

The construction and the narrative processes of the novel are far more complicated than the regular alternation between diegesis and metadiegesis in *Mary*. In

fact, from the beginning of the novel, two sequences of events are mixed and juxtaposed. One sequence, the first diegesis's chronological sequence, is relative to the events described: Hermann, a partly-Russian emigre, living with his wife in Berlin, goes for a business trip to Prague, meets Felix who proves to be his double, then, after returning to Berlin, prepares Felix's murder, kills him, takes his identity and leaves for the south of France. This first diegesis goes from the ninth of May 1930 until March 1931. The other sequence is relative to the narration itself: at the end of chapter ten, out of eleven, the reader learns that the text Hermann started to write is also a diegetic event: around the nineteenth of March 1931, in a Pyrenean hotel, Hermann decides to write his story to prove to his detractors (German policemen and journalists) that Felix really was his double and that he committed a perfect crime.

This second line could be termed metadiegetic, since it is the moment inside diegesis when Hermann's narration begins and also because Hermann's narration proceeds directly from the story itself. But, as is well-known, Hermann's narration started at the beginning of the text that the reader has already read and the juxtaposition between the diegesis of the events and the narration of the diegesis is performed since the beginning of chapter one. In Hermann's mind, the juxtaposed construction is supposed to be useful to the embellishment of the murder tale. The narration is meant to prove that, being in life a real artist, he became an artistic criminal. Hermann's aesthetic conceptions are consistent with his ideological and political conceptions: he admires the Russian communist power, he meets and kills his double, text is the literary perfect double of a real perfect crime. According to this conception of the literary purposes, the reader is about to adhere to a monstrous proposition: literature hides how it lives and works so as to make the reader believe in the veracity of the literary representation. For the poet

Khodasevitch, hiding the life and the working of the writing process itself was the specificity of Dostoyevski's style with which Hermann compares himself.

But what I termed the metadiegetic line, Hermann's narrative, has another narrative status: from Sirin's point of view, this second sequence is a second diegesis corresponding to the scene itself of Hermann's specific conditions while writing his text: a windy room in a Pyrenean hotel, in March 1931. And what is well-done in *Despair* is that Sirin undoes what his first-person narrator did: although the juxtaposition of the diegesis 1 and the narration supposedly allowed Hermann to control his story, the same juxtaposition understood as the juxtaposition of diegesis 1 and diegesis 2 makes the reader doubt the origin of the text: murder or Hermann's narration, which comes first? Maybe Hermann invented everything. And when the time frames of diegesis 1 and diegesis 2 begin to coincide, when there is no more shift between the scene of narrated events and narration, the genre of Hermann's writing changes. From the opening Rousseau like-Confessions, it turns into a Gogol like-diary, the necessity to write surpasses every other motivation, and Hermann's true nature is revealed: assassin, bad writer, madman.

What kind of relation does the construction of *Despair* have with the question of Russianness? In *Despair* we witness the invention in Russian literature of what is named the unreliable narrator, of a new form of extra-homodiegetic narrator who declares himself the master of his text and of the narrated events but whose real author undoes the construction, having voluntarily deprived himself of a voice in the novel.

Behind Hermann's back, against his fictional, ethical and political conception of likeness and equivalence, Nabokov begins a dialogue with the different paths of Russian literature and, despite emigration, seeks to define himself as a Russian writer.

From this perspective the choice of the double is not innocent: Hermann, the modern successor of Raskolnikov and of Pushkin's Hermann, ponders again, in a new foreigner context, one of the fundamental questions of Russian literature, asked by Pushkin's Salieri: are genius and crime compatible? Hermann is condemned by Nabokov for the reason that, even if he did read one thousand and eighteen books, he used his artistic and aesthetic sensibility for a purpose exterior to art, moreover for an anti-artistic purpose: abolishing difference and putting art to the service of an idea or an ideology. In Nabokov's mind, this path, the "Dosto" path, as writes Hermann, leads to the worst end, the one developed by Tchernychevski, then by Lenin and Stalin.

But how can tyrants be destroyed? Not by using the arms they use, or you will become a tyrant yourself. Nabokov does not condemn Hermann by using ideological processes but by the recourse to a complex fictional construction inside which, at the end, it is in his own text, the one he wrote and he read again to understand where he failed, that Hermann finds the reason for his failure, the detail of the stick. Hermann read Pushkin poorly. Behind Hermann's back, Sirin-Nabokov constructs with his reader a community of kind and gentle readers who know how to read and, we hope, have read well, having taken care of the details and the differences, and artistically appreciated them. For Nabokov, the question Pushkin asked the Russian literature about the liberty and the independence of the artist also concerns Russian literature in exile. And the complexity of what some critics named the "European" manner of the Russian Nabokovian form is a means of offering the necessary progressiveness and a larger audience to this artistic question via the intimate tragedy of emigration. In this manner, he is a real Russian writer who in searching to renew the fiction also searches to renew, and thus to perpetuate, Russian fiction. So did not the blind Clio prove that Nabokov was right?

Notes

(1) A part of *The Defense* was first published in 1929 in the Paris-based Russian journal *Sovremennye Zapiski (Contemporary Annals)*, then it was published in a separate volume in 1930.

(2) Bunin's letter to Galina Kuznetsova of November 2, 1930.

(3) Namely, chapters 4, 6, 8, 9, 13 and 15.

(4) The five episodes are :

- summer 1915, country near Voskresensk, their encounter and their meetings on the terrace of an inhabited manor ;
- winter 1915, Saint-Petersburg, their numerous and disappointing meetings in the city. Beginning 1916, Mary leaves for Moscow ;
- summer 1916, their single meeting in a public garden in a town located 50 kms from Voskresensk ;
- 1917, in a train, the last time they saw each other ;
- 1917-1918, their correspondence during the Civil War.

(5) Sirin-Nabokov, who felt great admiration for Bunin, sent him a copy of *Mary*, inscribing it : "I am delighted and terrified to send you my first book. Please do not judge me too harshly" (In Boyd 257).

(6) In Nabokov's case, *Mary* is his first novel, written in emigration. In Bunin's case, *Mitja's love* is the first novel he wrote in exile.

(7) "It's time we all admitted frankly that Russia is done for, that our 'saintly' Russian peasantry has turned out to be nothing but gray scum – as might have been expected, by the way– and that our country is finished for good" (*Mary* 24).

(8) Published in 1934 by the Russian Paris-based revue *Sovremennye Zapiski*; in 1936 *Otchayanie* was published as a separate volume by the Petropolis publishing house. In 1937, the English version, translated by Nabokov himself, was published by John Long in London under the title *Despair*.

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