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Do you believe in ghosts? Nabokov and French Thought

The analysis of “The Art of Literature and Commonsense,” a lecture conceived in 1941 by Nabokov and published posthumously in 1980 in *Lectures on Literature*, has allowed Richard Rorty and Vladimir Alexandrov to treat Nabokov’s metaphysics. Rorty considers that “The collection of general ideas which Nabokov assembled [. . .] is an odd, inconsistent mixture of Platonic atemporalism and anti-Platonic sensualism.” He raises therefore the issue as to whether there is in Nabokov’s works and thought a heritage of Plato’s metaphysics. (1) However, Nabokov clearly rejected any relationship between his works and Plato as he declared: “I am afraid to be mixed up with Plato, whom I do not care for,” (*Strong Opinions* 69) insisting later on: “As I have said I am not particularly fond of Plato [. . .] I do not think that this cave business has anything to do with my Shade and Shadows” (ibid. 70). Even if an author’s declaration should not always be taken for granted all the more so as Nabokov is well-known for his misleading assertions, the question is left open.

In 1991, Vladimir Alexandrov initiated a new trend of Nabokov research as he published *Nabokov’s Otherworld* in which he considers that “The Art of Literature and Commonsense [. . .] is a revealing expression of his sui generis faith in a transcendent realm” (3). He develops his argument as follows: “In my view [. . .] his central theme [is] the otherworld. This term is my [. . .] translation of the Russian word *potustoronnost’*, a noun derived from an adjective denoting a quality or state

that pertains to the “other side” of the boundary separating life and death, additional possible translations are ‘the hereafter’ and the ‘beyond’” (3). (2) Alexandrov’s position entails a metaphysical choice, with first an indirect reference to religion, and second a position on Nabokov’s metaphysics. As regards religion, Alexandrov mentions Nabokov’s famous response when questioned about his belief in God, that is: “I know more than I can express in words and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more” (*Strong Opinions* 45). Both Alexandrov and Leona Toker agree on the religious overtones of this statement. (3) As for Nabokov’s belief in the otherworld, Alexandrov’s main argument rests on the idea of a boundary separating life and death.

However, all these philosophies – Platonism, theology, transcendence – rest on the principle of the existence of an exterior, superior element which explains the world, on the idea of a separation between two worlds – the world of universal and permanent forms as opposed to the world of degraded copies for Plato, the idea of a superior unique principle in God, or the idea of the separation between this world and the otherworld, this world and the beyond. I would like to show that contamination characterizes on the contrary Nabokov’s metaphysics which is based on a poetics of a space located “elsewhere” which encloses the beyond in this world in the interlocking of a double bind. (4) Contamination can also be evidenced in his conception of the opposition between life and death, reality and fiction. My intention is not – as would suggest the title of my paper – to make a comparison between Nabokov’s thought and French thought, wondering whether Nabokov has or has been inspired by French thought. I will, however, rest my argument on Jacques Derrida’s philosophical stance which will help me to analyze Nabokov’s thought through the prism of some of Derrida’s concepts.

I will therefore first challenge Alexandrov's argument by analyzing Nabokov's reply as to his belief in God. The first remark to make is that he does not answer directly, neither with a Yes nor a No: he neither approves nor denies the existence of God. He merely mentions the gap inherent between knowledge and language. This gap alludes to notions of excess ("I know more") and reserve ("the little"). When he thinks of God, he thereby connects Him to the certainty of an impossible totality, challenging the theological pretension to the quest of a truth and a meaning. He talks of the multiplicity of words, not the Word, the lack in language, the inadequacy between knowledge and expression, the "play" inherent between them, the "play" which, according to Derrida, characterizes the "différance" ("Marges de la philosophie" 1-29), i.e. that which differs, being constantly different and deferred.

As for the hereafter, Nabokov mentions it in the poem of *Pale Fire*. He writes:

L'if, lifeless tree! Your great Maybe, Rabelais :

The grand potato

I.P.H, a lay

Institute (I) of Preparation (P)

For the Hereafter (H), or If, as we

Called it – big if! – engaged me for one term

To speak on death (44)...

Beyond the mere wordplay between French and English as I.P.H can only be pronounced "if" in French, "if" being an English word and a French term corresponding to a tree, it is noticeable that Nabokov treats here the theme of death and the hereafter with extreme ambiguity, as he resorts to two modelizing devices – that of the hypothesis and that of the "maybe," which renders the existence of a

hereafter an undecidable issue: he again neither asserts nor denies its existence, keeping both possibilities interlocked.

What's more, the hereafter refers to a certain conception of time and space, which is opposed to Nabokov's imagination. Considering indeed the hereafter or the beyond supposes the notion of a linear sequential time, a before and an after, a beginning and an end. However, there is no conception of a teleological time in Nabokov's thought. When he talks, for example, of his method of composition, he insists on the fact that he resists "the absurdity of beginnings and ends" ("The Art of Literature..." 380) describing his method as follows: "I do not begin my novel at the beginning. I do not reach chapter three before I reach chapter four. I do not go dutifully from one page to the next, in consecutive order; no, I pick out a bit here and a bit there, till I have filled all the gaps on paper" (*Strong Opinions* 32) Likewise, the otherworld involves an opposition between the inside and the outside, whereas what characterizes Nabokov's conception of space undermines this opposition. I will take two extracts for examples of the representation of space in Nabokov's fiction and imagination – one from *Lolita* and the second from *Speak, Memory*. When Humbert describes his travels with Lolita all over the United States, he sees its geography as "the crazy quilt of forty-eight states" (150) In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov recalls the image of a fence which he describes as follows:

Years later, [...] I remember seeing a paling, the boards of which had been brought from some other place where they had been used, apparently, as the inclosure of an itinerant circus. Animals had been painted on it by a versatile barker; but whoever had removed the boards, and then knocked them together again, must have been blind or insane, for now the fence showed only disjointed parts of animals

(some of them, moreover, upside down) – a tawny haunch, a zebra's head, the leg of an elephant (178).

Both images refer therefore to an insane fragmented and aleatoric composition reminding of mosaics.

His poetics is, in fact, not based on the otherworld but on another world, a space located “elsewhere.” This space can be associated in Nabokov's imagination to, first, “the intangible island” (*Lolita* 17) where nymphets live, “the quelquepart island” (Ibid. 248, 249) that Humbert tries to locate when he pursues Lolita and Quilty, and second to the “somewhere” that Nabokov alludes to, when, in his famous definition about aesthetic bliss, he declares that it is “a sense of being somehow, somewhere connected with other states of being” (“On a Book Entitled *Lolita*” 313). This space is not a superior, elevated, separated place: it encloses the beyond in this world, the outside in the inside. The boundary is dissolved and mobile. Nabokov describes the experience of inspiration as a “combined sensation of having the whole universe entering you and of yourself wholly dissolving in the universe surrounding you. It is the prison wall of the ego suddenly crumbling away with the nonego rushing in from the outside to save the prisoner – who is already dancing in the open” (“The Art of Literature...” 378). The outside invades the inside, and vice versa. The world elsewhere has always been present in Nabokov's life and works, since his experience as an exile has created other places to go, or return to.

The world elsewhere is, according to Jacques Derrida, another place but mainly the place of the other, (5) the other which is constantly referred to by Nabokov in his opinions and his fiction. His apology for differences and even eccentricities is well-known; he rejects the philistine with “his urge to conform” (“Philistines and

Philistinism” 310) but he cries out: “Let us bless the freak” even though “stranger always rhymes with danger” (“The Art of Literature...” 372). What’s more, he has a perception of the origin which is not pure, unique, uncontaminated, but disjoined, because subjected to division which constantly alters it. Thus, when he recalls in *Speak, Memory* the instant of the inspiration of his first poem, he says: “the instant it all took to happen seemed to me not so much a fraction of time but a fissure in it, a missed heartbeat” (168). He already alluded to the disjunction inherent in the origin when, in the “Art of Literature and Commonsense,” he distinguished two types of inspiration: *vorstog* and *vdokhnovenie*, i.e the moment of “rapture” and “recapture” (378). Delay repeats the first gesture. Even sex differences can overcome the binary duality of male and female, the female being split in two in Humbert’s eyes who describes his perception of nymphets as follows: “My world was split. I was aware of not one but two sexes, neither of which was mine; both would be termed female by the anatomist. But to me, through the prism of my senses, they were as different as mist and mast” (18).

All these examples show how Nabokov constantly creates alterities within oppositions. Boundaries are not fixed and clear-cut but gradual and mobile. Thus, Humbert wonders: “...the beastly and the beautiful merged at one point, and it is that borderline I would like to fix, and I feel I fail to do so utterly. Why?” (134). Therefore just as, according to Pascal, we are a mixture of contrary or even contradictory trends, being both angels and beasts, Humbert realizes that the beautiful and the beastly are interlocked, contaminated.

Contamination characterizes indeed Nabokov’s conception of the two basic oppositions – that between life and death, and that between “reality” and fiction. Death is, according to Nabokov or, at least, Krug’s allegation in *Bend Sinister*, the

point of contact “between ‘the outer problem’ (space, time, matter, the unknown without) and the ‘inner’ one (life, thought, love, the unknown within)” (146). The other border of life – that of birth – is however as puzzling as death for Nabokov who considers that what happens before birth is in a strange analogy with what happens after death. I am here alluding to the famous first paragraph of *Speak, Memory* where Nabokov narrates how he felt a sensation of panic when he looked at homemade movies that had been taken before his birth (17). His absence is felt like the absence of a dead man: he wonders why nobody mourns his absence. The baby carriage seems to him a coffin: death is therefore present in life, and birth corresponds to the coming back of a ghost taking shape.

The issue of the afterlife is even more challenging as it is related to metaphysical speculations. I propose to tackle a sentence extracted from the “The Art of Literature and Commonsense” which was selected by Alexandrov as a proof of Nabokov’s belief in immortality. Nabokov writes:

That human life is but a first installment of the serial soul and that one’s individual secret is not lost in the process of earthly dissolution, becomes something more than an optimistic conjecture, and even more than a religious faith, when we remember that only commonsense rules immortality out (377).

According to Alexandrov, this sentence is “self-explanatory” (57) and it is “one of the most candid avowals of his belief in the otherworld” (56). However, Nabokov asserts the existence of the soul and immortality because he refutes what commonsense and reason refuse: it is therefore, from Nabokov, a criticism of the limited blindness of rationality. He indeed alludes to the soul, but he resorts to an economical metaphor to

describe it and does not imagine it as a unique global element: it is serial, therefore discontinuous. He, moreover, does not allude precisely to the otherworld but he declares that there remains something after life (“one’s individual secret is not lost”). There is no strict separation between life and death, but a continuity, as secrecy persists in the afterlife. The beyond has its origin within the intimacy of life. It is because man is mortal that he can pretend to immortality which becomes a survival, or rather “une demourance.” I am here using a term coined by Jacques Derrida in which he mingles the French terms “demeurer” (to live somewhere, to dwell, and to remain), “mourir” (to die) and “différance” (“Demeure” 56). Survival can even appear through resurrections, as if dead men reappeared as ghostly figures. Nabokov describes therefore the experience of inspiration as follows: “You experience a shuddering sensation of wild magic, of some inner resurrection, as if a dead man were revived by a sparkling drug” (“The Art of Literature...” 378).

Even “reality” is haunted by ghosts for Nabokov who indeed resorts to the semantic field of “ghosts” and “specters” to describe it, announcing perhaps therefore what Derrida calls “la fantomachie,” “la fantomaticite,” or “l’hantologie,” terms created from the word “fantome,” *i.e.* ghost and the verb “hanter,” *i.e.* to haunt. (6) It is, first, a well-known fact that reality, according to Nabokov, means nothing without quotes. Reality does not exist as such; it is for him a form of imagination. The ghost-like reality corresponds therefore to something which exists without really existing. That is why he uses the terms “ghosts,” “ghostly,” “specters,” “spectral,” to refer to objects and people. During an interview, he insisted on the fact that reality is unattainable and declared: “So we live surrounded by more or less ghostly objects – that machine, there, for instance. It’s a complete ghost to me” (*Strong Opinions* 11). In *Lolita*’s postface, he tells how he resisted burning the unfinished draft of *Lolita*

because “he was stopped by the thought that the ghost of the destroyed book would haunt [his] files for the rest of [his] life” (“On a Book Entitled *Lolita*” 310). Memory metamorphoses time as he writes in *Speak, Memory*: “A sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth pervades my memory. That robust reality makes a ghost of the present” (62). Exile and the experience of *Unheimlichkeit* related to it renders reality spectral and ghostlike, as he narrates in *Speak, Memory*:

As I look back at those years of exile, I see myself, and thousands of other Russians, . . . among perfectly unimportant strangers, spectral Germans and Frenchmen in whose more or less illusory cities we, emigres, happened to dwell. . . . It seemed at times that we ignored them the way an arrogant or very stupid invader ignores a formless and faceless mass of natives; but occasionally, quite often in fact, the spectral world through which we serenely paraded our sores and our arts would produce a kind of awful convulsion (211-212). (7)

The world is spectral because it is constantly being created: reality does not precede fiction. Art corresponds to the invention of new worlds. Nabokov said, for example, that he had to invent America when he got down to the writing of *Lolita* (“On a Book Entitled *Lolita*” 310). Imagination prevails against reality. Nabokov indeed specified that, to write *Lolita*, he injected “a modicum of average reality [. . .] into the brew of individual fancy” (Ibid.). Reality is perceived through and thanks to art which is not the degraded copy of an intangible reality. It is, on the contrary, Claude Lorrain clouds and an El Greco horizon which Humbert sees when he admires the North American countryside (150) which therefore becomes unreal. Even memory needs to be seasoned by imagination to restore reality, as Nabokov admits in *Speak,*

Memory that, although he was not there to greet his French governess when she arrived in Russia, the fact that he describes her arrival makes him see and feel the “spectral road” (78) of the moonlit dreamland. Reality is mingled with fiction which contaminates the world.

Deception characterizes also Nabokov’s poetics: he is indeed a master in mystification and he constantly plays on the reader’s propensity to believe and disbelieve. (8) Although Nabokov did not initiate the practice of artifice in art, the naive, non informed reader falls into the traps of the simulacra of fictional paratexts. I am here referring to the fictional forewords – that of John Ray in *Lolita* and that of Kinbote in *Pale Fire* – or fictional footnotes, such as “Notes to *Ada* by Vivian Darkbloom” at the end of *Ada*. The reader, at first, believes they are authentic: dates and places of composition are given, the formal codes of these paratextual devices are complied with. The author therefore bluffs and deceives the reader, making him believe until he does not believe any more. Gradually or suddenly, after the delay necessary for the recognition of forgery, the reader understands he has been mystified, that Vivian Darkbloom, John Ray or Charles Kinbote are mere fictions. He therefore accepts not “a willing suspension of disbelief,” to use Coleridge’s famous phrase, but “a willing suspension of belief.” Nabokov plays on the ambiguity of the opposition Belief/Disbelief performing a deconstruction of these supposedly obvious but deceptive notions. At first overwhelmed by doubt, the reader is afterwards led to believe again as Nabokov rehabilitates belief in his work. (9) The reader is forced to trust the author again; he cannot be indifferent to the accents of sincerity when Nabokov proposes to link Man to the world. When he declares: “That human life is but a first installment of the serial soul [. . .] becomes more than [. . .] a religious faith,” his secular belief expresses an ontological faith which exceeds religious belief

because one has to believe in the goodness of Man. (10) His credo is therefore a hope and a promise, it is the expression of a Yes to life, the “Yes” which is at the origin of the address to the other and which, according to Derrida, accepts and promises, binds and is constantly reiterated. (11)

Notes

(1) Rorty qualifies, however, his allegation about the presence of Platonism in Nabokov’s philosophy by arguing that “the comforts of old-fashioned metaphysics” are combined “with antimetaphysical polemic common to Bergson and Heidegger” (154).

(2) This idea was announced, he said, by Nabokov’s widow, Vera Nabokov who, in her foreword to the posthumous collection of his Russian poems published in 1979, considers that “potustoronnost” is the “main theme.” It could be argued that if an author’s declaration about his works is, if legitimate, not always authoritative, the interpretation of an author’s wife can also be disputed.

(3) Leona Toker writes: “Elusive as this statement may be, it leaves no doubt of the tinge of mysticism in Nabokov’s view of the world” (4). Alexandrov explains Nabokov’s ambiguity by the fact that he referred to an incommunicable mystery, which could only be described in circumlocutions and expressed through “veiled hints.”

(4) I agree on that point with Maurice Couturier who entitles his introduction of the first volume of the French edition of Nabokov's works in La Pleiade "Nabokov, ou la poetique de l'ailleurs" ["Nabokov, or the poetics of the world elsewhere"] (ix).

(5) “Lettres sur un aveugle. *Punctum caecum*” 104.

(6) “Fantomachie” is a term used by Derrida in the film *Ghostdance* (by Ken Mc Mullen, 1982), according to Charles Ramond who explains all these words in *Le Vocabulaire de Derrida* (Paris: Ellipses, 2001) 32-33.

(7) Even Nabokov himself is a ghostly figure as he appears and disappears in his works through eclipses due to the anagrams of his name – the most frequent one being Vivian Darkbloom.

(8) For an analysis of the concept of “belief”, see Jacques Derrida, “Foi et savoir,” *La Religion*, dir. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Paris: Seuil/Laterza, 1996) 76-86 and Daniel Sibony, *Nom de Dieu* (Paris: Seuil, 2002) 256-87.

(9) Doubt occurs indeed when, reading *Lolita*'s postface, he is warned by the author that, after doing the impersonation of John Ray, any comments from him may strike one as an impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov.

(10) In “The Art of Literature and Commonsense,” Nabokov writes: “It is in this childishly speculative state of mind, so different from commonsense and its logic, that we know the world to be good” (374).

(11) “Nombre de oui” 639-50.

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