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A Portrait of the Artist as a Child: Vladimir Nabokov and Steven Millhauser

In this paper I would like to explore what seems to me an undeniable literary kinship between Nabokov's art of fiction and a number of recurrent formal and thematic features present in the work of Steven Millhauser, author of several novels and collections of short stories and winner of the 1997 Pulitzer Prize for *Martin Dressler*. I will focus more specifically on Millhauser's acclaimed novel *Edwin Mullhouse. The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943-1954* by Jeffrey Cartwright (published in 1972 and winner of the Prix Médicis Etranger in France), which uses and transforms an impressive amount of Nabokovian intertexts coming from *Ada*, *Speak*, *Memory* and especially *Pale Fire*. The novel's rich intertextuality also includes allusions to Dickens, Mann and Boswell, but Nabokov's *Pale Fire* seems to provide a privileged point of reference.

Edwin Mullhouse appears as the biography of a brilliant child-writer, Edwin Mullhouse (author of a masterpiece entitled *Cartoons*), recorded by his equally brilliant friend and peeping neighbour, Jeffrey Cartwright, a Kinbote-like figure who constantly constructs Edwin's present life from the perspective of a future recollection (a jocular strategy evoked in *Speak*, *Memory*) ready to be metamorphosed into a biographical item useful to the budding biographer who is a veiled tyrant eager to have the last word. *Edwin Mullhouse* is inhabited by Nabokovian children of genius who read Shakespeare at a tender age and nurture the precocious desire to exhaust the

world linguistically through the naming of all its details (*Ada* obviously comes to mind).

At ten, Edwin Mullhouse and Jeffrey Cartwright are classmates, friends and neighbours, but Cartwright – who pretends to be the only person aware of Edwin’s supposed literary genius – deplores his friend’s aloofness, which reminds one of Shade’s own. During the difficult composition of Edwin’s novel *Cartoons*, Cartwright constantly spies on his friend and strives to catch a glimpse of the work-in-progress, but to no avail. He secretly aspires to the condition of fiction as well, but the mediocrity of his literary talent forces him to concentrate on the ancillary genre of the scholarly biography, producing, just like Kinbote in the monstrous commentary to Shade’s poem, a story of himself wrapped up in the highly idiosyncratic account of Edwin’s brief but extraordinary life. The result is a double “portrait of the artist as a child,” the struggling artist being in this case both the imaginative writer of fiction and the meticulous biographer. Edwin Mullhouse and Jeffrey Cartwright form a hybrid figure in which dissimilar modes of writing are inextricably linked. Fiction and autobiography playfully inhabit biography – the two characters actually “play biography” (272) – and the humour of a childish approach is tainted by jealousy, frustration and eventually death. The fundamental strangeness of Cartwright’s Edwinian biography (which is the very book we are reading) consists in its being composed during its subject’s lifetime – it is a sort of archive of the present and of the recent past. In order to put an end to his book, Cartwright needs the death of the writer. Through a strategy of hints and insinuations, Cartwright manages to convince Edwin Mullhouse to commit suicide on his eleventh birthday, thus conferring the achievement of closure to the incomplete biography.

Millhauser's fictional universe is also characterized by a certain number of Nabokovian formal devices, among which the love for puns, games and word play reminiscent of word-golf, a special sensitivity to the visual and spatial quality of sounds and above all the fondness for details and miniatures – often similar though not overlapping projects engendered by sister-muses. Apart from the parallelism of situations and characters, *Edwin Mullhouse*, just like *Pale Fire*, explores the issues of creativity and genius, of madness and fantasy, focusing on the excesses of scholarly practices while adopting the defamiliarising stance of a precocious child. Millhauser's novel certainly differs from Nabokov's *Pale Fire* in many respects. In spite of that, the two writers seem to share a “family air” on common aesthetic grounds that remain to be defined.

Kinbote's new disguise

Jeffrey Cartwright clearly confronts us with a case of literary metempsychosis. (1) Leaving “the idyllic hills of New Wye” (*Pale Fire* 486) for the backyard of “a normal healthy intelligent American child” in Connecticut (*Edwin Mullhouse* 75), the spirit of Charles Kinbote seems to have returned, as he himself had prophesied: “I may assume other disguises, other forms, but I shall try to exist” (*Pale Fire* 657). Kinbote's yearning for mere existence, for a future of Protean forms, is granted an intertextual afterlife in the cunning person of Jeffrey Cartwright, who replays the neighbourly spying games, watching greedily over the writer of genius who happens to live next door. The first lines of “Pale Fire,” which reveal *in nuce* the specular strategies at work in the poem and in the commentary, seem to stage Kinbote's literary survival as well, his “living on” in the reflected skies of *Edwin Mullhouse*: “I

was the shadow of the waxwing slain / By the false azure in the windowpane; / I was the smudge of ashen fluff – and I / Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky” (457). The metamorphic and ecstatic nature of Kinbote’s intricate mind imperiously demands an *alter ego* to perpetuate the fluctuating movements of its restlessness.

Future recollections

A crossbreeding of biography, autobiography and *Bildungsroman*, *Edwin Mullhouse* candidly distorts the conventions of these genres, (2) referring to and departing from monumental achievements such as Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, Leon Edel’s biography of Henry James, Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*, *David Copperfield* and *The Apprenticeship of Wilhelm Meister*. The ten year-old biographer gathers material for his biography during his subject’s lifetime: he is therefore dealing with an unending avalanche of chaotic first-hand material which needs the blessing of closure in order to obey to the teleological designs of an achieved destiny. In the end, the biographer insidiously convinces the writer to commit suicide so as to permit the accomplishment of a remembered life in the book we are reading.

Jeffrey Cartwright is a seeing eye, “a hidden television camera” (6) documenting Edwin’s gestures and words felt to be pregnant with biographic latencies. This hybrid fusion of the present never experienced as present, but only as a past in the future, is a temporal consequence of Cartwright’s mental projection of the smooth flow of experience into the artifice of the book to be written. This brings to mind the “future recollection” in Nabokov’s “A Guide to Berlin” (*Collected Stories* 159-60) and the parodic biographic approach in *Speak, Memory* – the game of frozen retrospection played by Nabokov and his girlfriend (191-2) – with the difference that Nabokov himself actively contributes to the composition of his own biography and

mockingly records the banality of simple gestures or the tautology of hackneyed remarks masquerading as memorable aphorisms.

Caves and treasures

Seen from the outside, Cartwright appears as a teratological specimen opaque to daylight, stranded on earth from a dim underworld: his face shows “two round lenses aglow with light, the eyes invisible, as if he were some fabulous creature who lived in a cave or well” (vii). Interestingly, the cave is also Kinbote’s abode, a place of imposed scholarly exile where, deprived of books and of any contact with the real world, he unravels the riddle of Zembla concealed in “Pale Fire,” transmuting the Appalachian material of “sundry Americana” (654) into the magic reality of the northern kingdom: “Having no library in the desolate cabin where I live like Timon in his cave, I am compelled for the purpose of quick citation to retranslate this passage into English prose from a Zemblan poetical version of *Timon*...” (491). It is from a “cave in Cedarn” (447) that he writes Sybil Shade a letter requiring further information about incomprehensible spots in her husband’s last poem. The “rude cave” of the “humble biographer” (118) occurs once again in Cartwright’s own disgruntled description of his ascetic condition, which lacks the Romantic paraphernalia of the inspired poet, represented by “the golden wings of imagination” (118).

In the darkness of their respective grottoes, the annotator and the biographer – Cinderella-like ancillary subjects performing the menial tasks of the literary household, gnomes of the underworld serving their Apollonian poets – should obligingly empty themselves of their egos and let the authors of “Pale Fire” and *Cartoons* come to the fore. In a reversal of the Platonic myth of the cave, the chained

dwellers of the dungeon are metamorphosed from mere contemplators of elusive shadows issued by an invisible source into creators in their own right, projecting blinding lights of imposed designs (the narrative of Zembla, the closure of the triadic sequence – beginning, middle, end – of the writer’s life), from the darkness of the cave onto the outer world. The commentator and the biographer as cave dwellers eventually come to (illegitimately) absorb and adulterate the supreme light of the creative temperament, putting it to work in favour of ostensible promotions of their own selves and of their personal visions. In his rambling notes, Kinbote is “borrowing a kind of opalescent light from (his) poet’s fiery orb” (492) whereas Cartwright repeatedly flaunts false modesty, complaining that “the modest biographer on his humble slope cannot aspire to the heights of fiction” (8).

The astute or acute reader (a crucial character in both Kinbote’s annotations and Cartwright’s biography) is shamelessly led to focus, through a carefully orchestrated symphony of details, on the mad annotator and on the egotistical biographer rather than on the dead poets who, being dead, cannot have the last word: “but he is dead, and besides I was the one who had to listen to that drivel” (*Edwin Mullhouse* 44).

Intricate simplicities

We will now briefly approach the infinitely more complicated issue of the two writers’ aesthetic projects. If certain thematic aspects in *Edwin Mullhouse* are clearly identifiable as echoes of *Pale Fire*, the elusive nature of the “family air” that brings aesthetic creeds and practices together renders systematic comparisons highly problematic. However, a number of formal characteristics seem to emerge in a comparative perspective.

Nabokov and Millhauser share a special fondness for stylistic precision and illuminating details. Nabokov's lectures on literature, his interviews, his study of Gogol and, above all, his literary practice of reading and writing offer conclusive evidence of his constant attempt to keep the particulars of this world away from the haze of hasty generalization: "There is nothing wrong about the moonshine of generalization when it comes *after* the sunny trifles of the book have been lovingly collected" (*Lectures on Literature* 1). Symbols are banned, visual elements have a pronounced primacy over naked ideas, precise details over fuzzy generalizations: "As an artist and scholar I prefer the specific detail to the generalization, images to ideas, obscure facts to clear symbols, and the discovered wild fruit to the synthetic jam" (*Strong Opinions* 7). Nabokov's entomological interest led to intimacy with the microscope, to taxonomical tendencies and to a vision of scientific discovery as enthusiastic quest, elements which find their way into the composition of works of art, which are a merging between "the precision of poetry and the excitement of pure science" (*Strong Opinions* 10).

Millhauser is a composer of stylistic miniatures that function through accumulation of precise details animated by sheer delight in the infinite latencies of objects that invite to meticulous verbal explorations. The literary miniature – which is, in Millhauser's own words, "an attempt to reproduce the universe in graspable form" ("The Fascination of the Miniature" 128) – reveals its specific technique less in a scale preference than in a hint that anything, regardless of size, contains plenary worlds that could be widely extended in the verbal order of things and made to dilate in the next dimension of textual representation.

A principle of nominal atomisation underlies the attempt to completely master a confined area of reality. If everything has been already named, then forgotten labels

have to be dug out of dusty nomenclatures. If linguistic blanks exist in the texture of language, then they demand to be filled. In *Edwin Mullhouse*, the *wunderkind* wants to know the exact name of each component of the window frame or of the shoe, driving his parents to crude unconvincing generalizations or to careful study of the carpentry book. In *Ada*, the same atomisation principle is at work, transposed to the scientific discourse of botany and entomology practised by young geniuses, precocious in all respects.

In spite of their stylistic kinship, Nabokov and Millhauser soon appear to take leave of each other: in Nabokov's texts the significant detail always serves a larger web of echoing images and motifs planted throughout the text, whose coherence is carefully staged by the author. Laying bare the (already inscribed) overall pattern is the main task of the rereader, who needs the memory of apparently irrelevant textual recurrences and the patience to piece them together in order to gain access to the higher levels of the author's meaning. The idea of cerebrally premeditated riddles and solutions is totally foreign to the implied author of Millhauser's texts, who seems to like playing games infinitely more than he likes composing them. The backstage pleasures of the mastermind are nothing in comparison with the mastermind's enjoyment of the performance itself. In Millhauser, the detail is not subordinated to a higher systemic instance, it is simply gratuitous, an end in itself, certainly integrated in a larger design, but lacking the tightness and ineluctability of a necessary interpretive conclusion.

A sample of Millhauser's miniatures

“Behind the rich blue luminous curtain, rippling, the pale blue luminous letters ripple, mingling with bright luminous melodies jingling in an odor of salt and cardboard, mingling with jujyfruits, jingling with jujubes, in the black-crow licorice dark. In light, caught, the letters, transfixed, stiffen. Brighter than licked lollipops, livelier than soda in sunlight, lovelier than sunshine in cellophane the colors shine: popsicle orange and lemon-ice white, cotton-candy pink and mint-jelly green, cherry-soda red and raspberry-jello red. Cellophane crackles in the green-and-red-tinted dark. Thick with purple shadows, a dim room appears.” (*Edwin Mullhouse* 105)

This is the introductory part to a long cartoon description and a sample of the humble biographer's prose, which permits the unfolding of the various images constituting a cartoon. Several semantic and phonetic themes are ushered in, then are gently abandoned and later resumed in a dreamy dance advancing obliquely according to a loose *mise en scène* of slow pirouettes. Parataxis, alliteration, rhythmic repetitions and compounds animate a misleadingly mimetic passage, which creates a fairy tale effect rather than a realistic rendering of cartoon images.

Because of their occasional similar stances and in spite of their fundamentally diverging aesthetics, both Nabokov and Millhauser write “histories of the imagination” (*Edwin Mullhouse* 61), detailed cartographic accounts of the most elusive of inner territories, imagination itself, a gratuitous world of artifice and magic-carpet rides located far away from the arena of social issues and the politically relevant.

Notes

(1) In *Au-delà du Soupçon* (331), Marc Chénétier notes Millhauser's debt to Nabokov in the construction of Cartwright. He also points out that other intertextual voices can be traced in Cartwright's biography of Edwin Mullhouse, among which Boswell's *The Life of Doctor Johnson* and Leon Edel's biography of Henry James.

(2) For an analysis of Edwin Mullhouse and its relationship to the conventions of the scholarly biography and childhood narratives see Timothy Dow Adams. "The Mock-Biography of *Edwin Mullhouse*." *Biography* 5.3 (1982): 205-214 and John D. Boyd. "The Double Vision of *Edwin Mullhouse*." *Biography* 11.1 (1988): 35-46.

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