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“THE SHADOW OF FOOL-MADE HISTORY”

History as Narrative in Nabokov’s Work

Nabokov’s self-professed indifference to history and the political and social circumstances of his time is legendary. Indeed, it seems counterintuitive to talk about history in relation to a writer who famously proclaimed: “I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip” (Nabokov 1969, 109). With this notorious statement, Nabokov transforms his art into a vehicle (quite literally a fairy tale vehicle) to step out of linear time and onto his magic carpet, soaring into the air above the petty struggles, tedious politics and dull concerns of contemporaneous humanity. In a similar vein, Nabokov sought to keep his work pure and intact – “timeless” so to speak – untainted by the immediacy of contemporaneous events and developments. In the 1965 foreword to *The Eye* (1930), for instance, Nabokov speaks of his “indifference to [...] the intrusions of history [into his work]” (Nabokov 1968, 8) – a perhaps feigned “indifference” which would be translated into the frequent and forceful injunctions against historicist or political readings of his work. Yet despite Nabokov being such an evasive and ephemeral subject who developed various strategies to avoid capture by time and history, his works have a clearly historical dimension. Since the inception of Nabokov studies in the mid-1960s scholars have tended to heed his warnings and avoided overly political or historicist readings of his work. It is only recently that scholars have started to place greater emphasis on the reconstruction and analysis of the historical contexts of Nabokov’s work (see Dragunoiu 2011; Norman 2012; also Dolinin 1999 on the cultural context of Nabokov’s ahistorical stance). In these readings, Nabokov’s writing is no longer seen as the self-contained, self-reflexive art of a modernist, but as part of his engagement with the political, ideological and historical contingencies of his time. This paper does not aim to offer anything like a comprehensive analysis of the significance of the notion of history or of specific historical events and developments in Nabokov’s work. Rather, this paper presents a first attempt to examine Nabokov’s notion of the writing of history in relation to the overtly fictional narrative in *Prin*, noting Nabokov’s strategy of using

the inherently anti-historicist, self-reflexive mode of his work to engage with historical issues.

Given his extreme exposure to the vagaries of history in what, following Joseph Brodsky, could be called the century of “displacement and misplacement” (Brodsky 1988, 16), it is not surprising that, despite Nabokov’s insistence on the ahistorical nature of his writing and thinking, history seeps into his fiction which is less hermetically sealed than Nabokov wants us to believe. In contrast to Nabokov’s ideal of “timeless” art, his works are firmly anchored in the times and places where they were conceived. Already his very first full-length narrative work, the play *The Tragedy of Mr Morn* (written 1923-24) transposes the violence of the Russian revolution into a fairy tale realm, posing complex questions about political engagement, courage and escape from political struggles – issues which had a timely relevance for the Russian émigrés who had just fled the Russian Revolution and the ensuing Civil War (see Frank 2012, 106). The majority of Nabokov’s works from the 1920s and 30s, including *Mary* (1926), *The Man from the USSR* (written 1926), *The Defense* (1929-30), *The Eye* (1930), *Glory* (1931) and *The Gift* (1937-38), paint a detailed picture of Russian émigré life abroad, depicting the social, cultural, economic and political realities of the Russian exile community in Berlin during the first part of the century. From the end of the 1930s onwards, few of Nabokov’s works can avoid the imprint of contemporary political developments on their pages, or what Nabokov calls elsewhere “the shadow of fool-made history” (Nabokov 1969, 234), namely the rise of authoritarian states and fascism in Europe. Stories such as “The Leonardo” (1933), “Cloud, Castle Lake” (1937) or “Tyrants Destroyed” (1938) while addressing wider questions about the nature of individuality are also clear responses to the worrying developments Nabokov observed in contemporary society in Nazi Germany. Equally, works like *Invitation to a Beheading* (1935-36), the play *The Waltz Invention* (1938) and *Bend Sinister* (1947) rework the very essence of the two big European totalitarian systems of Nabokov’s time, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, into absurd fantasy states the protagonists are trapped in. There are also those works where history or historical events are not the focus of the work, but provide an essential background to the fictional events; for example the mass flight to the South from the German army invading France in the Second World War is the chaotic backdrop against which the confusing story of lost wives and dogs is played out in “That in Aleppo Once...” (1943). Later, the Holocaust adds yet another tragic dimension to “Signs and Symbols” (1948) where the mother remembers “Aunt Rosa, a fussy, angular, wild-eyed old lady, who had lived in a tremulous world of bad news, bankruptcies, train accidents, cancerous growths – until the Germans put her to death, together with all the other people she had worried about” (Nabokov 1997a, 601). The Nazi concentration camps recur unexpectedly in *Lolita*, tucked away in a nightmarish subclause, where Humbert dreams of “the brown

wigs of tragic old women who had just been gassed” (Nabokov 1995, 254).¹ The Holocaust is also a haunting memory in *Pnin* (1957) where Mira, Pnin’s first love, dies again and again a horrific imagined death in a German concentration camp. Even *Pale Fire* (1962), despite its celebration of metafiction and art as play, is actually unthinkable and largely incomprehensible without the wider context of the Cold War. This cursory list of examples is of course not exhaustive, but it indicates the way history and historical events have shaped Nabokov’s writing.

Key events in the turbulent history of twentieth-century Europe – the October Revolution, the rise of Nazi Germany and the Second World War – directly marked, disrupted and dislocated Nabokov’s personal life, transforming him and his family repeatedly into stateless refugees, at the mercy of their faceless host countries. Nabokov – in a rare admission of powerlessness – describes the concrete and frequent humiliations inherent in this politically, geographically and psychologically uncertain condition in his autobiography:

Our [the Russian émigrés’] utter physical dependence on this or that nation, which had coldly granted us political refuge, became painfully evident when some trashy “visa”, some diabolical “identity card” had to be obtained or prolonged, for then an avid bureaucratic hell would attempt to close upon the petitioner and he might wilt while his dossier waxed fatter and fatter in the desks of rat-whiskered consuls and policemen [...] The League of Nations equipped émigrés who had lost their Russian citizenship with a so-called “Nansen” passport, a very inferior document of a sickly green hue. Its holder was little better than a criminal on parole and had to go through most hideous ordeals every time he wished to travel from one country to another, and the smaller the countries the worse the fuss they made. (Nabokov 1969, 212)

The same events that condition his exile, are also closely linked with the violent death of close relatives and friends: his cousin Yurii Rausch in the Russian Civil War, his father in an assassination attempt on another émigré politician in 1920s Berlin, and his brother Sergey and dear Russian-Jewish colleagues and friends (including Ilya Fondaminsky) in Nazi concentration camps. Given this personal experience of the violent trajectory of the twentieth century, it is not surprising that history in Nabokov’s work emerges mainly as an impersonal destructive force which disrupts the even course of people’s personal histories (see Norman 2012, 58), robbing them of everything that

¹ Will Norman argues that “Humbert’s whole narration is shadowed by unspoken knowledge of the Holocaust” (Norman 2012, 119) and that Humbert’s “narrative positions him simultaneously as both Jew and Nazi, enmeshed disorientatingly in the oppressive historical networks of power, violence and victimhood associated with the Holocaust” (Norman 2012, 126).

is precious to them, their home, their country, their loved ones. “The history of man is the history of pain”, as Pnin, beset by a series of never-ending misfortunes, notes (Nabokov 1997b, 141). History appears regularly as an uncontrollable, violent force, which strips individuals of agency, subsumes individual fates and lives, and leaves wreckage in its path. *Pnin* can be read as a case study of the individual at the mercy of history – or at least at the mercy of a narrative of history. It is indicative of the central theme of the novel that it is neither Pnin nor Mira who decide to end their relationship. Instead the reader is informed, that “The Civil War of 1918-22 separated them: history broke their engagement” (Nabokov 1997b, 112).

History as sequential eruptions of violence then is, in Nabokov’s thinking, closely connected with loss. It is only through the deliberate re-creation of the past as narrative or written history that this loss can be resisted. Nabokov’s mother, the keen mushroom hunter prefiguring Nabokov’s own lepidopteral passion, is in *Speak, Memory* the key figure to insulate Nabokov against loss. “‘*Vot zapomni*’ [now remember]”, (Nabokov 1969, 33) she advises her son, encouraging him to catch and retain the beautiful details of his surroundings: “a lark ascending the curds-and-whey sky of a dull spring day, heat lightning taking pictures of a distant line of trees in the night, the palette of maples leaves on brown sand, a small bird’s cuneate footprints on new snow” (Nabokov 1969, 33). This collection of precious memories creates “an exquisite simulacrum – the beauty of intangible property, unreal estate – and this proved to be a splendid training for the endurance of later loss” (Nabokov 1969, 33). This understanding of history as a creation of personal memory is uniquely bound up not with the past but with the future and as a written narrative is directed towards a future readership, including Nabokov himself as a future reader of his own history. A parody of this transformation of the present into a future memory appears in a later passage where Nabokov describes a game he plays with his cousin Lidia after their flight from St Petersburg:

The idea consisted of parodizing a biographic approach projected, as it were, into the future and thus transforming the very specious present into a kind of paralyzed past as perceived by a doddering memoirist who recalls, through a helpless haze, his acquaintance with a great writer when both were young. For instance, either Lidia or I [...] might say “The writer liked to go out on the terrace after supper”, or “I shall always remember the remark V. V. made one warm night: ‘It is’, he remarked, ‘a warm night’” [...] – all this delivered with much pensive, reminiscent fervor which seemed hilarious and harmless to us at the time; but now – I catch myself wondering if we did not disturb unwittingly some perverse and spiteful demon. (Nabokov 1969, 191-92)

The actually harmless premise of the game takes on a sinister overtone as soon as it comes in contact with history, the “perverse and spiteful demon” who takes revenge for this subversion of history’s linear time-keeping, obliterating the Russia of Nabokov’s

childhood and youth, the details of which Nabokov had fortunately already safely stored away as future memories.

The impulse to historicize the fleeting moment of the present in the creation of future memories has profound implications for Nabokov’s concept of history as a narrative shaped and moulded by the observing writer: “If ‘history’ means a ‘written account of events’ (and that is about all Clio can claim), then let us inquire *who* actually – what scribes, what secretaries – took it down and how qualified they were for the job” (Nabokov 1990, 138). History exists for Nabokov neither as a logical progression of events in chronological order nor as a reliable record of past events. Instead history exists only in the process of being written. Elsewhere Nabokov denies an intrinsic meaning to historical events and facts, suggesting that facts only exist as part of a created context or narrative. Explaining another writer’s creative crisis, Nabokov claims that Gogol “believed that facts may exist by themselves. The trouble is that bare facts do not exist in a state of nature, for they are never really quite bare” (Nabokov 1961, 119). If we remember his famous statement that he does not believe in time, we should not be surprised that he has similar sentiments in regard to history: “I do not believe that ‘history’ exists apart from the historian. If I try to select a keeper of record, I think it safer (for my comfort, at least) to choose my own self” (Nabokov 1990, 138). In a typical sleight of hand, the perceived limitation of history, the unreliability of its scribes and secretaries, is turned into the writer’s gain. By reducing history to its narrative whose existence is dependent on the existence of its writer, Nabokov claims agency and re-establishes control over the arbitrary forces of history.²

This strategy of controlling history as a narrative, is entirely in accord with Nabokov’s general aesthetics which revolve around questions of authorial control. Despite Nabokov’s vehement opposition to any form of totalitarianism, his aesthetics are articulated through the vocabulary of autocracy.³ Presuming an ahistorical,

² The concept of historiography and by extension history as either a factual record (empiricist science) or a constructed narrative is a central question in the Philosophy of History. Hayden White’s groundbreaking and controversial work in this area in the 1970s sparked a wide-ranging and continuing debate about the very nature of history and history writing, one permutation of which emerged as the New Historicism in the 1990s. See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); Robert F. Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995); Hans Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Ann Rigney, *The Rhetoric of Historical Representation: Three Narrative Histories of the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1990). See also *Tropes for the Past: Hayden White and the History / Literature Debate*, ed. Kuisma Korhonen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006); *Philosophy of History After Hayden White*, ed. Robert Doran (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

³ Norman notes Nabokov’s “tendency to align authoritarian political power directly against the literary artist” (Norman 2012, 25).

contextless space, created by his consciousness alone, Nabokov is confident in his own powers, declaring himself the omnipotent dictator in his fictional universe with the fictional characters cast in the notorious role of the “galley slaves” (Nabokov 1990, 95) at the mercy of their God-like author. In this Chinese-box model of miniature worlds mirroring each other, the author becomes history or history becomes the author writing life stories. Nabokov then transforms the complex relationship between historical realities and narratives into a primarily aesthetic concern. It is at the juncture of history and narrative, that we find at least part of an explanation for Nabokov’s resistance to empiricist notions of history and his concern about the limits of historical narratives. If history is just another narrative, as Nabokov rather flippantly suggests, then Nabokov seeks to keep control of his own place in this history. Like in his fiction he retains his position as the creator of the narrative and resists becoming a character, a galley slave, in somebody else’s history. Defying any form of contextualization more generally, Nabokov denies artistic or literary influences and insulates his work and himself against the loss of (narrative) agency. And for Nabokov, “[a]gency is all”, as David Bethea reminds us (Bethea 1994, 38). It is the (unattainable) ideal of and desire for control, agency and autonomy which defines Nabokov’s various attempts in life and fiction to escape the shadow of history.

The limits of notions of history as narrative and narrative as the determinist history of the author’s “galley slaves” are probed in what might be Nabokov’s most historical novel, *Pnin*. Like Cincinnatus from *Invitation to a Beheading* and Vasilii Ivanovich from “Cloud, Castle, Lake” before him, Pnin is one of Nabokov’s quintessential victims, one of those small, child-like, vulnerable men whose inner world is constantly under attack by a hostile outside force. Pnin, pathetic and comic in his exile, has lost his country, his wife and is just about to lose his newly adopted home and academic job (“I have nofing left, nofing, nofing”, Pnin cries at some point in the novel (Nabokov 1997b, 51). Apparently insulated against loss is Pnin’s inner life, large parts of which remain untranslatable and illegible to his American surroundings: “Directing his memory [...] toward the days of his fervid and receptive youth (in a brilliant cosmos that seemed all the fresher for having been abolished by one blow of history), Pnin would get drunk on his private wines as he produced sample after sample of what his listeners politely surmised was Russian humour” (Nabokov 1997b, 11). The violation of this private space is equated with extinction: “Man exists only insofar as he is separated from his surroundings. The cranium is a space-traveller’s helmet. Stay inside or you perish” (Nabokov 1997b, 17). Pnin’s personal memories of pre-revolutionary Russia are a precious part of this inner world. In a beautifully nostalgic scene in the novel, a summer evening spent at a country house in New England with other Russian émigrés becomes submerged in Pnin’s intense memories of a summer evening several decades earlier in the Russian countryside when he was waiting for his first love Mira, creating the effect of a double-exposed photograph. Reminiscent of Nabokov’s collection of details for the creation of future memories, Pnin thinking of his first love, remembers small details

about her, like the “artistic snapshots she used to take – pets, clouds, flowers, an April glade with shadows of birches on wet-sugar snow, soldiers posturing on the roof of a box-car, a sunset skyline, a hand holding a book” (Nabokov 1997b, 112). The privileged status of private history created through the preservation of details is entirely in accord with Nabokov’s general memory aesthetics, but during the course of the novel, this very notion of personal memory comes under attack.

If taken as a realist novel, *Pnin* relates the tragedies of its hero as the direct consequences of historical events, the October Revolution, the German invasion of France which forces Pnin to flee to America, and the Holocaust. Yet during the course of the novel, the realist convention of the novel is made explicit and examined. Elements lingering in the background come gradually to the fore: the initially impersonal narrator emerges as a major player in Pnin’s life and tale, while concealed narrative structures underlying this – at first sight – straightforward story, become visible in the last chapter which transforms the seemingly realist narrative into a metafictional experiment in narrative control and story-telling. The reliability of the first-person narrator, Vladimir Vladimirovich, becomes predictably a principal concern at this point. The truthfulness of the narrator’s account of Pnin’s life in the first six chapters of the book, related in the manner of realist fiction, is undermined in the last chapter when the fictional character Pnin turns against his own narrator, accusing him of lying: “Now don’t believe a word he says, Georgiy Aramovich. He makes up everything. He once invented that we were schoolmates in Russia and cribbed at examinations. He is a dreadful inventor (*on uzhasnyy vidumshchik*)” (Nabokov 1997b, 154-55). The narrator on the other hand dismisses Pnin’s denials, explaining that the novel’s protagonist is “reluctant to recognize his own past” (Nabokov 1997b, 150). Pnin’s past becomes here the subject of rival narratives (a frequently used narrative structure in Nabokov’s novels), drawing attention to the novel’s narrative as an artificial construct and the precariousness of Pnin’s fictional existence at the mercy of the narrator.

As a Russian émigré writer and lepidopterist, teaching Russian literature at an American university, the narrator shares a number of notable features with the novel’s author, including his Christian name and patronymic. Nabokov explained that “at the end of the novel, I, V.N., arrive in person to Waindell College to lecture on Russian literature” (Nabokov 1989, 143). The blurring of the line between the narrator and the author – or this “impersonation of the author” (Wood 2009, 242) – suggests a high level of control over the fictional world on the part of the narrator (even if, outside the novel, this remains a narratological impossibility). Akin to the “anthropomorphic deity” (Nabokov 1974, 11) which comes into view at the end of *Bend Sinister*, the narrator plays an ambiguous role in the novel, portraying himself as Pnin’s friend while emerging

as an increasingly malicious force, who delights in relating Pnin’s numerous mishaps.⁴ Through the very act of telling Pnin’s story, the narrator appropriates his protagonist’s personal past and drags his private concerns, disappointments, desires and frequent humiliations into the limelight of a public narrative, ignoring Pnin’s pleas for privacy and private space (“Why not leave their private sorrows to people? Is sorrow not, one asks, the only thing in the world people really possess?” (Nabokov 1997b, 43). Entering the world of the novel in the final chapter, the narrator eventually takes Pnin’s position at the university, effectively re- and dis-placing Pnin from his new-found home and ultimately the novel. The narrator then emerges as one of Nabokov’s literary dictators, whose destructive invasiveness aligns him with Nabokov’s conception of history as a violent devastating force. In the overtly fictional world of *Pnin* then, history translates into narrative, which comes to determine its characters’ fate.

The metafictional framework of the novel raises complex questions about the ways history is instrumentalized, perhaps even manipulated by the narrator. Who is responsible for actual events and their impact on individual characters in fiction? In a world where everything is narrative does the distinction between narrator and author, fiction and history still matter? Is it the narrator’s appropriation of history, his writing of historical events that shapes Pnin’s life? Returning to the example of Pnin’s doomed first love, is it history that breaks off their engagement or does the narrator decide to have history end their relationship? The so far primarily aesthetic concerns relating to the nature of fiction and reality become complicated when set against an event like the Holocaust.

Pnin’s nostalgic recollections of his first love are interrupted by recollections of a different kind in a passage which, in its staggering juxtaposition of tenderness and brutality, is worth quoting in full:

In order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten years, never to remember Mira Belochkin [...] because, if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira’s death were possible. One had to forget – because one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart, into the gentle heart one had heard beating under one’s lips in the dusk of the past. And since the exact form of her death had not been recorded, Mira kept dying a great number of deaths in one’s mind, and undergoing a great number

⁴ Michael Wood argues that the function of the author’s persona is ‘to perform cruelty [...] so that we shall see Pnin’s own impeccable kindness – to Liza, to squirrels, to Liza’s son, to his students and his guests – for the artless thing it is’ (Wood 2009, 242-3).

of resurrections, only to die again and again, led away by a trained nurse, inoculated with filth, tetanus bacilli, broken glass, gassed in a sham shower-bath with prussic acid, burned alive in a pit on a gasoline-soaked pile of beechwood. (Nabokov 1997b, 112-13)

In the context of the Holocaust, memory is no longer nostalgic but traumatic. Memory inflicts a frightening wound which Pnin cannot ignore – strangely reminiscent of the dental trauma of his toothless mouth: “all there existed was a great dark wound, a *terra incognita* of gums which dread and disgust forbade one to investigate” (Nabokov 1997b, 32) – and which corrupts the formerly secure space of personal memory. As a response to the industrialized mass murder of the Nazis, the detailed creation of personal memory as a strategy of resisting history is inverted or even perverted. Forgetting rather than remembering becomes Pnin’s way of dealing with Mira’s atrocious death. It is the very attention to detail in this passage that creates an unbearably real memory of Mira’s death in its unrealized possibilities. Historical memory invades and irreparably corrupts Pnin’s personal history.

The unbearable horror of this imagined memory pierces a moment which is the closest Pnin comes to feeling, if not happiness, then at least a contented sense of belonging. Akin to the disruption of the Arcadian idyll in Poussin’s ambiguous painting *Et in Arcadia ego* (also known as *Les bergers d’Arcadie*, 1637-38), the shadow of Mira’s death (or the shadow tail of her name) or the “shadow of fool-made history” falls on the rural idyll, Pnin’s personal memory and by extension the whole narrative.⁵ It is significant that briefly before Pnin has given an impromptu lecture on the chronology of *Anna Karenina*, demonstrating Tolstoy’s tight control over history and time in his (realist) novel. The narrator’s description of Mira’s death is painful, but it is also another violent intrusion into Pnin’s private sorrow; through the very act of skilfully evoking our sympathy for Mira and Pnin, the narrator also defiles Pnin’s precious memories. The Holocaust as an integral part of narrative manipulation has a weirdly disorienting and disturbing effect and raises wider questions about the limits of literary representations of history.

Nabokov’s examination of a historical event which defies all ethical conventions and categories in a metafictional framework, is not an act of historicist relativism in which the historical knowledge of the Holocaust is reduced to just another narrative. The scene of Mira’s deaths is not an actual representation of her death, instead it is a triple-removed act of imagining her death: the reader imagining the narrator imagining Pnin imagining her death. The self-reflexive elements here mark the surrender of fiction as a

⁵ To Edmund Wilson Nabokov explained that “my source for understanding *et in Arcadio ego*, meaning ‘I (Death) (exist) even in Arcady,’ is an excellent essay in Erwin Panofsky’s *THE MEANING OF THE VISUAL ARTS*, Anchor Books, New York, 1955” (Nabokov, Wilson 2001, 354).

realist representation in the face of the Holocaust. Nabokov's self-reflexive narrative sets against the certainties of realist fiction the uncertainties of knowing and the approximation of knowledge. Nabokov suggests a way to negotiate the epistemological disparity between the reality and the unknowability of the experience of victims and survivors, between the events and their (always inadequate) representation. As such, *Pnin* participates in a historical enquiry, one in which historical knowledge becomes endlessly deferred and which in its admission of its own inadequacy finds an adequate and perhaps only possibility to remember the unimaginable.

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