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NABOKOV'S LITERARY LEGACY

Bridging Russian and American Postmodernism

> I often think that it is necessary to come up with a typographic symbol denoting a smile – some flourish or leaning closing bracket, which I could use to accompany my answers to your questions.
>
> Vladimir Nabokov

This paper aims to highlight the importance of V. Nabokov's oeuvre in shaping some aspects of selected Russian and American postmodern novels. Given the complex stratification of different narrative layers that characterises his prose, the extreme attention to details, the constant presence of doubles, linguistic puns and a general playful attitude toward the text, it is quite clear why Nabokov has been recently seen as a precursor and pioneer of the postmodern genre. Besides highlighting the postmodern elements in his works, and following the leitmotiv that secretly connects the characters within all his novels, we shall take a step further and extend this intangible but quite strong connection to the novels of two postmodern authors – Pelevin's *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* (Священная Книга Оборотня, 2004) and Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966). As we shall see, not only these two authors welcome in their novels characters space-travelling directly from Nabokov's world, but they even insert them in a new context, surrounded by postmodern elements which redefine their role as some sort of metafictional *émigré*.

Before proceeding, it is important to understand and briefly state the definition and borders of the postmodern novel. According to Currie, a postmodern novel "takes the issue of the relationship of fiction and reality as a central concern" and "constructs fictional worlds only to expose them as artificial constructions" (Currie 2011, 2). Postmodern novels often favor illusion-breaking devices, especially those which emphasize the presence of the author within the text, and particularly when this presence has the specific role of declaring the fictionality of the fiction. These novels are metafictions: fiction about fiction, or fictions which incorporate "critical and theoretical reflection into their fictional worlds" (Currie 2011, 2). Postmodern novels are above all intertextual novels: they cite, allude to, refer to and borrow from other texts, from other

representations and from other jargons, both real and fictional. The acts of recycling and reshaping, repeating and rewriting are typical of the postmodern novels which are also characterized by an inner intermediality: not only they borrow from different texts, but also from different media, inserting – for example – a TV script within the main plot. Last but not least, postmodern novels represent "a contemporary state of global culture, dominated by new technologies". They reflect aspects of globalization, represent worlds of simulation, and "of personal and collective archiving that belong to the contemporary phase of capitalism" (Currie 2011, 2). Moreover, they reflect a world in which simulations are inseparable form the things they copy and they represent "above all, issues of identity and cultural difference seen against a backdrop of global, cultural standardization". At the level of form, being immersed in the global village and globalized here and now of an eternal present, postmodern novels show "the loss of linearity in temporal experience, or the tendency to experience, in technologically assisted ways, the present as a future representation or recollection" (Currie 2011, 3).

As Hassan states in *The Postmodern Turn* (1987), modernism and postmodernism are not separated by "an Iron Curtain or Chinese Wall; for history is a palimpsest, and culture is permeable to time past, time present, and time future" (Hassan 1987, 88). It is highly difficult (and utterly arbitrary) to claim an inaugural date for the beginning of postmodernism, as for any other literary movement, thus, once we have created and defined in our mind a model of postmodernism, it is inevitable to frequently discover "antecedents of postmodernism" (Hassan 1987, 88) by rereading authors so far considered as belonging to a previous period, such as Kafka, Beckett, Borges and Nabokov.

But more specifically, let's now focus on the Russian response to this type of novel by addressing the first and most important question related to this subject: is there a "Russian postmodernism"?

Mikhail Epstein (in *Russian Postmodernism*, 1999) follows Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality and when approaching the concept of Russian postmodernism he proposes to:

> treat those laws of twentieth-century cultural development as shared by the West and Russia, in spite of the fact that Russia was isolated from the West and in fact set itself in vigorous opposition to it during this period. Indeed Russia's own "revolutionariness" is part of the global revolutionary paradigm of the twentieth century. (Epstein 1999, 3)

Thus, he explores the complex relationship of Modernism and Postmodernism as the two complementary aspects of one cultural paradigm. This paradigm may be designated by the notion of "hyper": Epstein plays with the prefix "hyper" taking its meaning directly from the original Greek etymology where it stands for "above, too much, in an excessive way".

In Epstein's opinion, therefore, a key factor in Russian postmodernism is the tendency to exaggerate, to represent reality through the lens of excess, to embrace a new form of addiction to redundancy: the concept of the "hyper" is, in Epstein's vision, a natural response of a new movement compared to the previous one. The temporal lag with which postmodernism manifests itself in Russia is mainly a result of the 'unnaturalness' of the Russian case: "as a result of decades of censorship and other forms of repression, Russian postmodernism presents a concentrated, intellectualized, and accelerated form of the phenomenon" (Epstein 1999, vii). Russian postmodernism, to a certain extent, may be seen as a piece of amber, where everything that happened in the twenty years of delay (compared to the rise of postmodernism in the U.S.A) is still perfectly understandable by looking at the first literary products of this new genre. Whether we decide to call it postmodernism, new sincerity, or hypermodernism, it seems quite clear from Epstein's words that this cultural movement has indeed deeply affected all Russian cultural subsets.

Lipovetsky (in *Russian Postmodernist Fiction*, 1999) states that Russian postmodernism came into being as "the simultaneous expression of two contradictory tendencies". While there was a certain inclination for a return to modernism and to the aesthetic model of the classics, at the same time it was also clear that decades of totalitarian aesthetics were impossible to ignore, and therefore that the return to the "restored" modernism was just incompatible with Russia's recent past. In Lipovetsky's view, the postmodernist potential of Russian modernism can be demonstrated by the evolution of Vladimir Nabokov, who witnessed the atmosphere of the Silver Age during his youth, and then, as an émigré in the twenties and thirties, was actively involved in the creation of two modernist (and at the same time metafictional) novels, such as *The Gift* (1970) and *Invitation to a Beheading* (1935), which are quite emblematic within his oeuvre. It was only a few decades later, after he moved to America, that Nabokov published, in 1995, *Lolita* which is currently considered to be a classic of the American postmodernist canon.

World War II showed, as Couturier argues, "not only the fragility of the old values and of the real, but also constituted a universal liturgy of the ultimate real, death" (Couturier 1993, 257). It is therefore in this historical event that we shall find the border dividing the modernist and postmodernist realms in Nabokov's oeuvre. His approach to postmodern aesthetics is based on the fundamental acknowledgement of his understanding of the "unreality of the real", and this leads Couturier to argue that *Bend Sinister* and *Invitation to a Beheading* represent "the militant stage of the late-modernism" or of the "pre-post-modernism" and to consider *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and *Ada, or Ardor* to be "archetypical postmodernist novels" (Couturier 1993, 258).

The "unreality of reality" is, as Lipovetsky states: "a fundamental part of Nabokov's metafiction in his Russian, thoroughly modernist period" because the author's playful attitude toward the text is expressed both "by constantly exposing the author's role in the constriction of the work" and "by drawing the reader into the creative game,

constantly undermining what little sense of reality and mimesis the novel has" (Lipovetsky 1999, 9).

Being able to observe Nabokov's entire oeuvre from a certain distance and perspective, it seems important to highlight to what extent the author has pushed the limits of the world he has created. Not only has he managed to bend the rules of narrative, but he has created an entire cosmos in which his characters still exist and coexist in perfect balance even after his death: for example, in *The Gift* there are elements and characters that may be also found in *Speak, Memory* (1951), which has a similar structure and line of events as *Pnin* (1957), whose protagonist is last depicted while driving his pale blue car, just to appear again in *Pale Fire* (1962) and *Lolita* (1955); *Lolita* partially includes elements of *The Enchanter* (1939) and both are partially included in *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974) and so on, in an endless game of cross-contamination. Thanks to his legacy, Nabokov's characters are still able to metafictionally travel across space and time, and materialize in yet another book, another story, another role, another "unreal reality".

Victor Pelevin seems to be continuing this game in his novel *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* where the protagonist A Hu-Li is a revised – supernatural – version of Lolita: she is the main character and unreliable narrator of the novel, a shape-shifting nymphet, a red-haired Asian girl who is 2000 years old but looks 14:

> I could be anything from fourteen to seventeen years old – closer to fourteen. My physical appearance arouses feelings in people, especially men, that are boring to describe, and there's no need – nowadays everybody read Lolita, even the Lolitas. Those feelings are what provide my living. (Pelevin 2008, 5)

Her name sounds like a Russian obscenity, "[s]omething like living in America and being called Whatze Phuck" (Pelevin 2008, 7), but it actually means "the fox named 'A'" in Chinese; when asked about her name, she explains:

> Why am I called 'A'? [...] He said it was the very shortest sound that a man could make when the muscles of his throat ceased to obey him. And it is true that some of the people over whom I cast my web of hallucination have just enough time to make a sound something like a muffled "A-a.." (Pelevin 2008, 7)

The book opens with a fictitious "Commentary by Experts" that strongly resembles the ones that open both *Pale Fire* and *Lolita*. Moreover, the first lines that the reader finds at the beginning of the book are an epigraph from *Lolita*:

> Who is your hero, Dolores Haze,
> Still one of those blue-caped starmen?
> Humbert Humbert

But Pelevin goes further on, by giving to A Hu-Li the pseudonym "Adele" which becomes shortly after "Ada": an explicit tribute to the Russian word for hell "ad", and obviously to Nabokov's novel *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969). Because A Hu-Li (which may be read with the same pace as "Lo-Lee-Ta") is 2000 years old, she has witnessed episodes of Nabokov's life, and gives proof of this by explaining the origin of some verses from Nabokov's "Paris Poem" (1943) which she feels particularly fitting for her existence as a shape-shifting fox:

> Life is irreversible –
> It will be staged in a new theatre,
> In a different way, with different actors.
> But the ultimate happiness
> Is to fold its magic carpet
> And make the ornament of the present
> Match the pattern of the past
> (Pelevin 2004, 49)

In fact, she explains:

> Vladimir Vladimirovich wrote that about us foxes. That's exactly what we do, constantly folding the carpet [...] And by the way, that carpet from "Paris Poem" was later inherited by Humbert Humbert: "Where are you riding, Dolores Haze? What make is the magic carpet?" I know what make it is. It was woven in Paris on a summer day sometimes around 1938, under gigantic white clouds frozen in the azure heavens, and it traveled to America in a roll [...] it took all the abomination of the second World War, all the monstrosity of the choices that it dictated, for the carpet to be hung up in Humbert's reception room. (Pelevin 2008, 49-50)

The carpet mentioned by A Hu-Li comes directly from Nabokov's "Paris Poem", then it travels safely to *Lolita* and it finally makes its last (official) appearance in *Speak Memory*, gaining more and more threads and patterns each time Nabokov decides to unfold it in his novels:

> 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. And the highest enjoyment of timelessness – in a landscape selected at random – is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. (Nabokov 2000, 109)

Thanks to A Hu-Li we can now pretend to know "what make" Nabokov's magic carpet is, and what historical events it has absorbed in the space-time travel it has

accomplished from a poem written in 1943 to Pelevin's book: it has unfolded once more, and Lolita's pattern is now superimposed upon A Hu-Li, the transfer is complete.

The word that Pelevin chooses for the Russian version of *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* to describe the type of creature that A Hu-Li represents, is "оборотень" which means shape-shifter, or, literally, someone who turns into something he/she was before (usually sorcerers turning themselves into animal, in Russian Folklore): it seems quite indicative that, instead of "vervolk" which he used for his earlier tale "A Werewolf Problem in Central Russia", Pelevin decides to choose this particular word. "Oboroten'" can also metaphorically indicate a person whose real nature is hidden. A Hu-Li is indeed a shape-shifting revised version of Lolita, or, if we are to follow Nabokov's instructions about folding the magic carpet after use "in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another" (Nabokov 2000, 109), we may see her as a "repatterned" version of Lolita, this becomes quite clear as she declares:

> I took Lolita's story very personally and very seriously. For me Dolores Haze was a symbol of the soul, eternally young and pure, and Humbert Humbert was the metaphorical chairman of this world's board of directors. Apart from that, in the line of verse describing Lolita's age ("Age: five thousand three hundred days") it was enough to replace the word "days" with "years" and it would more or less fit me. (Pelevin 2008, 51)

The threads added by Pelevin to the magic carpet are also dedicated to Nabokov himself, and his particular way of depicting the characters of his novels by lending them memories of his own past, but always keeping (and loudly declaring) a voluntarily unbridgeable distance between his own (real) life and the life he creates for them. A Hu-Li comments as follows:

> I feel insulted when someone confuses Nabokov with his characters. Or calls him the godfather of American paedophilia. That's such a profoundly mistaken view of the writer. Remember this – Nabokov isn't speaking for himself when he describes the forbidden charms of a nymphet at such length. [...] A writer's true heart speaks out very furtively. (Pelevin 2008, 50-51)

In this case Pelevin seems to be echoing the words that Nabokov used in a BBC interview, in 1962: "I'm very careful to keep my characters beyond the limits of my own identity. Only the background of the novel can be said to contain some bibliographical touches". (Nabokov 1990, 13-14). When, during the same interview, the interviewer asks him about the "almost extravagant concern" shown in his novels "with masks and disguises" as if "you were trying to hide yourself behind something, as if you'd lost yourself", Nabokov replies:

> Oh, no. I think I'm always there; there's no difficulty about that. Of course there is a certain type of critic who when reviewing a work of fiction keeps dotting all the i's with the author's head. Recently one anonymous clown, writing on *Pale Fire* in a New York book review, mistook all the declarations of my invented commentator in the book for my own. It is also true that some of my more responsible characters are given some of my own ideas. (Nabokov 1990, 18)

It seems that among his "more responsible characters" we may indeed find not just those Nabokov himself created in is oeuvre, but a joyful crowd of postmodern readaptations ready to be sent to play a role both in Russian and American contemporary literatures.

On the American side of the postmodern genre, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) shows signs of Nabokov's influence less explicitly (besides a direct reference to Humbert Humbert, as we shall see) than those in Pelevin's novel, but with effects on his narration that are nonetheless quite evident and relevant. The over-detailed reality described by Pynchon and his tendency to play with puns, acronyms and the characters' names are all elements considered as crucial in Nabokov's style.

In this novel, there is at least one explicit mention to *Lolita*, in chapter six, when Serge, the counter-tenor of the band "The Paranoids" who has lost his girlfriend to an older (middle-aged) lawyer, sings a song, which conveys his suffering and declares his intention to start dating younger girls, i.e. nymphets:

> Serge's Song
>
> What chance has a lonely surfer boy
> For the love of a surfer chick,
> Whit all these Humbert Humbert cats
> Coming on so big and sick?
> For me, my baby was a woman,
> For him she's just another nymphet;
> Why did they run around, why did she put me down,
> And get me so upset?
> Well, as long as she's gone away-yay,
> I've had to find somebody new,
> And the older generation
> Has taught me what to do –
> I had a date last night with an eight-year-old,
> And she's a swinger just like me,
> So you can find us any night up on the football field,
> In back of P.S. 33 (oh, yeah)
> And it's as groovy as it can be.
> (Pynchon 1996, 101)

As soon as we enter the world created by Pynchon we are immediately surrounded by voices coming from different media: television, radio, letters, magazines and plays. The protagonist of the novel, Oedipa, a quite Nabokovian name indeed, is completely immersed in this kind of reality, and she deals with the effects of the exposure to the information overload she is experiencing. We first meet Oedipa in her living room, "stared at by the greenish dead eye of a TV tube" (Pynchon 1996, 9), so that since the very beginning it is quite clear that, despite the fact that the television's eye is dead, this medium is nonetheless considered as an agent, staring at a passive object, the protagonist. The entire novel is narrated through Oedipa's eyes starting from the point in which she receives a letter from a law firm telling her that Pierce Inverarity, her former lover and a California real estate mogul, has died after naming her the executor of his estate. This is the MacGuffin of *The Crying of Lot 49*. From this point on, Oedipa's entire life will be devoted to the quest of gathering information regarding Inverarity's vast real estate holdings and in order to do so she will drive restlessly from one point to another of Pynchon's version of the U.S.A. This ride resembles in a certain way Humbert Humbert's own infernal road trip, or, if we unfold the magic carpet once more, one of Nabokov and Vera's summer trips, when Vera indulged Nabokov, by accompanying him hunting butterflies: while Oedipa looks for information, Humbert Humbert looks for an impossible elopement and Nabokov for rare butterflies, because, as he writes, "[t]he highest enjoyment of timelessness – in a landscape selected at random – is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love" (Nabokov 2000, 110).

It is in this precise timelessness that Oedipa, paradoxically enough for a world so full of media, will find it quite hard to understand how to process the information she obtains. She opens a Pandora's box, but finds herself unable to extract a logic or a meaning from the load of information she is dealing with: "[t]hese follow-ups were no more disquieting than other revelations which now seemed to come crowding in exponentially, as if the more she collected the more would come to her" (Pynchon 1996, 81). The more she struggles in order to find meanings and patterns, the more the surrounding world teems with new information. The novel itself mirrors Oedipa's state of mind, offering the reader a labyrinth of riddles, puns and apparently reliable hints for the solving of the mystery, something that Nabokovian readers are quite used to. The reader, in the end, is in Oedipa's exact situation, unable to decide if the clues provided by the unreliable narrator in the novel are true or misleading information. Reached the end of the story, Oedipa has the feeling that the urge to "see" beyond the mere signifier of each word inevitably creates a feeling of expectations in the reader, pushing him/her through an escalation of paranoia, a theme often present in postmodern literature, and a very familiar one for Nabokov's readers, as we can see in *Look at the Harlequins!* In this

novel, the protagonist slowly but inexorably starts doubting his own existence, and suspects to be the copy of a more famous writer:

> I now confess that I was bothered [...] by a dream feeling that my life was the non-identical twin, a parody, an inferior variant of another man's life, somewhere on this or another earth. A demon, I felt, was forcing me to impersonate that other man, that other writer who was and would always be incomparably greater, healthier, and crueler than your obedient servant. (Nabokov 1990a, 89)

While Nabokov's character experiences paranoia and identity loss by over-interpreting (or simply understanding) the misleading (or accurate) signs that the author scatters throughout the novel, it seems clear that Oedipa is experiencing the failure of the communication system. Whether to believe in Tristero or not is precisely what Oedipa has to decide when she tries to unravel the mystery: "[e]ither Tristero did exist, in it's own right, or it was being presumed, perhaps fantasied by Oedipa, so hung up on and interpenetrated with the dead man's estate" (Pynchon 1996, 75). But if we turn back and now focus on how it all started, we will only find Pierce's letter, full of meaning or totally useless. In this case letters, which should really be the clearest and most direct form of communication, are depicted as meaningless, invalidated by errata, omissions and inconsistencies. The W.A.S.T.E. (an acronym similar to L.A.T.H. in *Look at the Harlquins!*) delivery system, for example, requires each of its members to send a letter once a week even if there is no real need to communicate with the others. Her entire quest may in the end be based on nothing and the mystery may hold no mystery at all. The real question for Oedipa will be, in the end, the one related to her own identity: she will find herself metaphorically trapped in a tapestry and will have to gain and demonstrate her own independence, like the protagonist in *Look at the Harlequins!:* "Should I ignore the coincidence and its implications? Should I, on the contrary, repattern my entire life?" (Nabokov 1990a, 97). Like the reader, Oedipa feels completely disoriented, lost and alone in a world that keeps on shifting and oscillating: Tristero or Trystero, San Narciso, San Francisco or Saint Narcissus, Oedipa or, as her husband pronounces it, "Edna Mosh". Oedipa has to solve a far more complex riddle: finding out whether she lost her sanity and is now decoding a message that doesn't exist or if the message has been encoded with a distortion (encrypted) on purpose.

We have now folded and unfolded Nabokov's magic carpet yet again, to superimpose pattern after pattern in our road trip through space and time, across borders and novels, different languages and cultures. We have followed its path from a poem to Humbert Humbert, *Speak, Memory*, A Hu-Li, and A Hu-Li's revised version of the same carpet; we have now finally placed it in Oedipa's world as well, hidden between a cheap song and the mystery of W.A.S.T.E delivery system. Nabokov, we may say, is still here, and he is still creating new worlds, secret paths and riddles for his readers, thanks to the explicit tribute paid by Pynchon (a former pupil of his) and

Pelevin (considered nowadays as "the Nabokov of the cyber-age"). Nabokov's unique style, impossible to label, has allowed us to unveil where the "new Nabokov" lies and how he may indeed be seen as a literary Charon, who ferries the characters' souls across space (Russian and American) and time (modern and postmodern) and still lives within these novels, suspended in his adored "timelessness", "a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. [...] A thrill of gratitude [...] to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humouring a lucky mortal" (Nabokov 1990, 110).

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