



Riverrunning acrostically through “The Vane Sisters” and “A.L.P.,” or “genealogy on its head”

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Riverrunning acrostically through "The Vane Sisters" and
"A.L.P.," or "genealogy on its head"

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thanks [...] to Adam [...] for his beautiful *crossmess parzel* (FW, 619.3-5).

When "The Vane Sisters" was first published¹ in *The Hudson Review*² it did not differ in form from any other story, but some time later when it appeared in *Encounter*,³ it was offered to readers as a present and a puzzle, hence the epigraph, despite the later date (Christmas was already a few months past when the story appeared). In fact, *Encounter* readers were invited to participate in a contest and decipher the coded message that occurred on the last page of the story, for which the first five code-crackers would win a prize of one guinea. If I am dwelling on such trivial details, it is simply to underline the ludic dimension given to this story in its relation to its readers, just as Joyce intended his *Finnegans Wake* to be received as a beautiful "crossmess parzel" and to be enjoyed as such, that is, as a gift. However, even if there should not have been any question of understanding as he did not want the readers to be disconcerted by his text, Joyce was ambiguous about what he expected from his readers. At times, they were expected to feel the simple and direct pleasure its vocal quality would create, and Joyce did emphasize this musical dimension, but he also wanted his text to be understood on a more abstract, or abstruse level. He often boasted about the amount of purely lexicological meaning it contained. In the case of "The Vane Sisters," concluding the story on and with a puzzle relates the text to games but also incites the reader to go back to the beginning and try to sort out the meaning, starting from the acrostic at the end. And as the narrator puts it elsewhere: "I have always wished to stand genealogy on its head, and here I have an opportunity to do so, for it is the last scion, Cynthia, and Cynthia alone, who will remain of any importance in the Vane dynasty. I am alluding of course to her artistic gift" ("VS," 209). From Cynthia is to come the ultimate answer to the question of origin, just as it rested on Anna Livia's words at the close of her last monologue: "The keys to. Given! A way a lone a last a loved a long the" (FW, 628.15-16).⁴

Drawing attention to word-play as such, along with getting into a tale, immediately recalls Lewis Carroll's devices. If it is true that Nabokov was an admirer of Carroll who happily united science and literature, Joyce declared that "he had not read Carroll until he was well into *Finnegans Wake*, and then only because someone had commented on the similarity."⁵

¹ I wish to thank Andrew Norris who read this article for me, for his valuable comments and suggestions.

I also wish to thank Dmitri Nabokov for having allowed me to publish extracts from his father's diaries kept in the Vladimir Nabokov Archives in Montreux.

The italics are mine. Quotations and references to *Finnegans Wake* come from the following edition: London: Paladin, 1992, which respects the reference paging; "genealogy on its head" is a quotation from "The Vane Sisters", (composed in 1951, first published in winter 1958) *Tyrants Destroyed and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1981), p. 209; hereafter cited in text as FW and "VS".

² New York: Vol. 11, n°. 4 (Win. 1958-59), 491-503.

³ London: Vol. 12, n°. 3 (March 1959), 3-10.

⁴ The question of "origin" should bring us to the texts who inspired Nabokov. I deliberately chose not to mention Oscar Wilde's Sibyl Vane in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. For further information see 'Plagiatisme.' Nabokov's 'The Vane Sisters' and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, by Isobel Murray, Durham: *Durham University Journal* vol. 70 (Dec. 1977), 69-72.

⁵ Hart, Clive. *Structure and Motif in Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 163; with a reference to *Letters of James Joyce*, ed. S. Gilbert (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 255; hereafter cited in text as S&M.

Nevertheless both works, Nabokov's "The Vane Sisters" and Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, though in different terms, share with Carroll his "Invitation au voyage."⁶

Thus, in all three works we are taken into a dreamworld, we are invited to pass beyond fictional reality and to enter the world of fancy and art, and finally, our enjoyment would correspond to being suffused with the aura of the work of art. In "The Vane Sisters," Cynthia, the artist, has "evolved [...] a theory of intervenient auras" ("VS," 210), which could be discussed in relation to Sybil's personality who "had a rainbow edge as if a little out of focus" ("VS," 212); this could also be compared to Stephen Dedalus's definition of an epiphany: "Imagine my glimpses at that clock as the gropings of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus. The moment the focus is reached the object is epiphanized."⁷ As a consequence, Nabokov's "The Vane Sisters" and Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* may raise, in their own way, the problem of what Raymond Court names the crisis of the aura in modern art.⁸

It is obvious that *Finnegans Wake* is open, but it is only relatively so since the absence of closure is meant to bring the reader back to the beginning in an everlasting circular movement, comparable to the cycle of water. Consequently, the absence of conclusion to the plot, or rather the absence of plot, empties the text of any logical sense but it also hints at some other function, that is its ludic mechanism. So reading is one thing, understanding another, and playing another still; but in these three cases the text is puzzling, hence the need to try and go back to origins and find out how words, language and puns are articulated. In other words, in order to appreciate "the Mastery of Language and the Perfection of Form,"⁹ one has to proceed genealogically; this is, at least, what many critics did, and they help us very much. Joyce also used this technique, following Vico's etymological notions of history — i.e. words contain their own archeologies.

The situation of the "The Vane Sisters" is rather different, first of all, because of the genre: "[F]or a short story to succeed, the author must overcome the restraints of limited length and communicate not a segment, a tattered fragment, but a world,"¹⁰ and this story presents us with a complete and finite world, even if the riddle at the end does not close the text but calls for new developments in the characters' genealogy which directly depends on the text's. Referential approaches to textuality have to be treated with caution, because limits are not clearly set and the intertext has to be interpreted. Choices may be biased, depending on the importance given to specific details over others. Nevertheless an "archeological" reading of the text is also a kind of game between author and reader as it is a speculation on the self — one's self trying to find the other's self — a speculation on time since it takes us from the present to the past, just as the narrator wished to stand "genealogy on its head." In the same way, Alice tried to see through the characters she met and in her world time functioned quite differently.

Unfortunately — or is it because Joyce was particularly artful? — the waters of the Liffey are too muddy to allow in-sight, and the distance between the two washerwomen grows to such proportions that communication becomes almost impossible, or at least, particularly primitive. So, there are geological and geographical phenomena that prevent inter-penetration and interpretation. In Nabokov's case, the process is clear once the reader knows that the author often tried to mislead readers, and also characters and narrators: "My difficulty was to

⁶ "L'invitation au voyage", a poem by Charles Baudelaire, first published June 1st, 1855 in the *Revue des deux mondes*. This poem is particularly striking for its correspondences, its magical sense of rhythm and harmony that carry the reader away into fantasy, just as Joyce and Nabokov wish to do.

⁷ *Stephen Hero* (London: Four Square Books, 1996), p. 216.

⁸ Court, Raymond, *Sagesse de l'art* (Paris: Méridiens, Klincksieck, 1987); chapter IX: "l'art moderne et la crise de l'aura", pp. 141-163; hereafter cited in text as SA.

⁹ Hayman, David, ed., *A First Draft Version of Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp. 8-12.

¹⁰ Pasco, Allan H. "On Defining Short Stories," *Probings: Art, Criticism, Genre. New Literary History*, Vol. 22, n° 2 (Spring 1991).

smuggle in the acrostic without the narrator's being aware that it was there, inspired to him by the phantoms."¹¹ So the game is a competition the author organizes and takes part in and as in the acrostic "everything seemed blurred, yellow-clouded, yielding nothing tangible," or as he put it in his diary about the Exam in European Fiction: "By nine already one window completely mistified"¹²; a portmanteau word not used in the story as such but whose meaning is broken up to relate Sybil to water (the icicle and drip-dripping motif), to transparency (the "little hyaline veil" on her hat, behind which she is seen), as well as her impenetrability (she starts with a very pale pencil, which makes her writing almost impossible to read, then she continues "in a darker lead, gradually lapsing into the blurred thickness of what looked almost like charcoal" ("VS," 206), her hand being still as difficult to read as before). In this specific case, the narrator did not manage to decipher Sybil's message in time, this is why, like the window, he was "mistified."

The genetic element in Joyce also partly excludes the reader, as the manuscript's evolution depended on a sort of process of translation into "wakeese": multilingual puns were becoming so natural to him as the years passed that they appeared directly in the notebooks. If read too fast *Finnegans Wake* may verge on "white noise," but if read slowly enough two strata are revealed to the archeologist: the musical one, and the anagogic one. Then, it becomes easy to understand why Nabokov declared that *Finnegans Wake* was "a tragic failure and a frightful bore,"¹³ firstly because he had no musical ear and secondly because he hated everything that might come close to psycho-analysis.

In "The Vane Sisters," Anna's flowing rhythm turned to a markedly dripping rhythm: "There was a rhythm, an alternation in the dripping that I found as teasing as a coin trick." This rhythm is taken up in the acrostic, each initial letter being dropped and leading to another one to make up a meaningful phrase, just as the drops from the icicles led the narrator into meeting D. Moreover, the acrostic is made of thirty-two words, and as according to Anthony Burgess in his introduction to *Finnegans Wake*,¹⁴ thirty-two is one of the most important numbers of the book, which corresponds to the rate of acceleration of all falling bodies, including dripping drops from icicles; here is again an interesting correlation between these works, referring to the fall of man, and the ruin and control of woman. Nevertheless, the link between "The Vane Sisters" and *Finnegans Wake* is not so obvious in the text as in its genealogy. It does not lie in the stratum but in the substratum, as the riddle shows. The acrostic punctuates the end of the story as a paragraph of its own, an independent piece of writing whose sole existence rests upon its function within the story itself, and as a reflection of the whole story. It can be compared to A.L.P.'s monologue at the close of *Finnegans Wake* which "demonstrates beautifully the way earlier stories relentlessly wander and return in the Wakean dream, eschewing conclusion and closure, submitting themselves instead to the revisionary psychic exigencies of perpetual anxiety and desire."¹⁵ Although A.L.P.'s monologue, like all the separable "episodes" of the *Wake*, contains the germs of all the other episodes, and is anything but separable. Similarly the acrostic in "The Vane Sisters" contains the whole story and is anything but separable from it.

If a game is a means of communication, a dream is a moment of revelation, of communication with oneself. In 1931, Edmund Wilson already noted in *Axel's Castle*, that Joyce was "plunging us directly into the consciousness of the dreamer itself."¹⁶

¹¹ *Encounter* (April 1959), see note 5.

¹² 1951 diary, January 26, Vladimir Nabokov Archives, Montreux.

¹³ Answer to question James Mossman submitted on September 8, 1969, for *Review*, BBC-2, printed in *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 151.

¹⁴ Burgess, Anthony, *Here Comes Everyone* (Northampton: John Dickens & Co, 1968), p. 10.

¹⁵ Devlin, Kimberly J. *Wandering and Return in Finnegans Wake* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 163.

¹⁶ Wilson, Edmund *Axel's Castle* (1931) (London: the Fontana Library, 1961), p. 182.

Obviously, at that time Nabokov was preoccupied with the relation between the world of dreams, the unconscious and creation. This is where he comes close to Joyce. Dreams are the manifestation of uncontrolled brain-activity. They escape command and may be felt as links between the realm of the conscious and of the unconscious. They may also encourage some to establish contact between the tangible and the spiritual — an unacceptable inclination in Nabokov's eyes: "I am sorry to say that not content with these ingenious fancies Cynthia showed a ridiculous fondness for spiritualism." ("VS," 213) Nevertheless Nabokov built this leaning into his story from its very beginning, and illustrated it with a host of allusions to signs, shadows, ghosts and messages, so as to demonstrate how his characters were trying to set up communication with the hereafter. Sybil, whose name recalls the prophetesses of antiquity who could decipher coded messages for human beings, has "a rainbow edge" ("VS," 212), which reinforces her function as a link, or bridge, between the terrestrial and the celestial worlds,¹⁷ and her bridge is made of words. This obviously recalls Issy's rainbow consort who appears a number of times in *Finnegans Wake*, but most obviously in Book II, chapter 1: "R is Rubretta and A is Arancia, Y is for Yilla and N for greeneriN. B is Boyblue with odalisque O while W waters the fleurettes of novembrance."¹⁸ Sybil Vane brings men to inaccessible regions, just as the Cumean Sibyl conducted Virgil to the infernal regions (*Aeneid*, vi); therefore she is the guide, the essence of trans-lation. Her presence in these intermediate regions reinforces Benjamin's theory of the presence of auras in works of art as developed by Raymond Court (*SA*, 158-163), because divine creation comes to an end when things receive their names from man, thanks to God's gift of language to man. Consequently naming reifies what is named and from then on the name is the symbol of the thing which communicates itself to its environment. In this communication process, man is enlightened and the name, then radiating from the thing, becomes the *aura* of the thing. This definition can be compared to what Vladimir Alexandrov describes as "Nabokov's epiphanies."¹⁹ Altogether, it would amount to experiencing the essence of absolute communication — within and without, a privileged moment when self and universal self meet. Besides this may be read as an epitome of the relation between perception, vision and impression found in "The Vane Sisters," which should lead to the knowledge of the universal soul. Precisely, Brian Boyd records in *The American Years* that in his "diary [Nabokov] invented a fictionalized boarder [...] and day after day he tried out this character in various invented poses and imagined dialogues with himself." The content of these dialogues and various remarks about this character appeal to fancy and make us think that Nabokov might have been attempting to outline a prototypical universal self, just as Joyce was doing. Clive Hart contends that: "The essential, timeless figures of [Book IV], and especially Anna Livia in her last monologue, may fairly be said to express the Real Self of *Finnegans Wake*."²⁰ This may be where the Vane Sisters and Anna Livia meet. In his diaries, Nabokov worries about the control his boarder may have over his own self, as if when composing "The Vane Sisters," the story had such power over him that he felt weakened by the space "inspiration" occupied in his mind. Moreover he is afraid of being hypnotized and this makes him say: "We think not in words

¹⁷ In the Bible, the rainbow is the sign of the covenant between man and God: "I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of the covenant between me and the earth." (*Genesis*, 9:13). Similarly, Raymond Court argues that language is mimetic and cannot be reduced to its purely semiotic function within a specific linguistic structure. Thus signs cannot be emptied of referents and words are meant to correspond to things in a Baudelairean sense of the word *correspondance*. (*SA*, 158).

¹⁸ *Finnegans Wake*, p. 226.30-227.02. The "Rainbow" bridge functions both ways in the Joycean text: "And these ways wend they. And those ways went they. Winnie, Olive and Beatrice, Nelly and Ida, Amy and Rue. Here they come back, all the gay pack..." (227.13-15).

¹⁹ Alexandrov, Vladimir E, *Nabokov's Otherworld*. (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 7.

²⁰ This is what Clive Hart tries to demonstrate in chapter III "The Dream-Structure" of his book, more particularly developed pp. 96-104. For examples see *Finnegans Wake* (596.24), (601.11), (626.03).

but in shadows of words. This was Joyce's mistake — giving words too much verbal body."²¹ Nabokov is certainly preoccupied with the freedom of his mind. And both "The Vane Sisters" and *Finnegans Wake* deal with the control of the characters' minds by some external — or maybe internal — forces. Knowing that hypnosis is really one of the constituents of "The Vane Sisters" and knowing that it belongs to the realm of verbal communication — that is either facilitating or preventing communication with other beings or non-beings, it is easier to see how difficult it is for words to shape the communication-crisis taking shape between the narrator and Cynthia, Sybil, D. and his environment. Moreover, because of the gift of language that enables man to name things, the naming of things may be linked, in certain respects, to the hereafter: in the story, spiritualism consists in identifying ghosts, that is in naming them according to their material manifestations.²² This phenomenon is sometimes called "telepathy," a concept that corresponds to non-verbal communication which rests on the senses just as animal communication does. In this relation: "The eye and what is to be looked at form together a functional unit which is fitted together according to rules as strict as those obtaining between food and digestive organs."²³ Besides the potential presence of the other is only possible in so far as it becomes visible to the eye whether it be an immanent, latent or hidden thing, as described by Merleau-Ponty in working notes on visibility, telepathy and corporeity.²⁴ Then, the perception of intangible matter calls in supra-natural forces, which brings us right into what Raymond Court termed "the crisis of the aura." If we make a distinction between meaning — or communication in a univocal language — and information — which is supposed to carry us to an inexhaustible wealth of meanings — aesthetic communication should call for infinite interpretations. On the other hand, if words have "too much verbal body," as Nabokov stated in his diary, they may convey various meanings but those meanings are so pregnant and present that they prevent any further interpretation: the work of art is closed and gives off a fading aura of frustration and obscure disappointment. Besides, "too much verbal body" may be the result of an overabundance of elements which annihilate each other, thus corresponding to "white noise" and producing no information. Now if the aura is the radiance generated by the word itself and the symbol of the thing, its existence depends not on the thing but on the word. Consequently, the disappearance of the aura would liberate the thing, and enable more natural contact with the work of art, since the obsessive presence of "posthumous auspices and interventions were in the nature of parody." ("VS," 212). In these last words Nabokov gives us a clue as to the way his story should be read concerning the hereafter: as a scientist, he was so fascinated with mimicry that "satirical mimicry" was certainly the best manner for him to deride the use of Freudian psychology in literature. Notwithstanding what Nabokov may have thought of Joyce's devices, Clive Hart maintains that "[Joyce] despised psychoanalysis and used only so much of its techniques and *Weltanschauung* as he found useful" (*S&M*, 82) and Joyce gives us proof of his contempt for the analysts in Book I, chapter 5 of *Finnegans Wake*: "Be who, farther potential? and so wider but we grisly old Sykos who have done our unsmiling bit on 'alices, when they were yung and easily freudened, in the penumbra of the procuring room and what oracular comepression we

²¹ 1951 diary, January 18, Vladimir Nabokov Archives, Montreux.

²² All information about mediums, conjurors and supernormal phenomena alluded to in "The Vane Sisters" is provided by Tuuli-Ann Ristkok in "Nabokov's 'The Vane Sisters' — Once in a Thousand Years of Fiction", *University of Windsor Review* Vol. 11 (1976) 27-49.

²³ Portmann, A., *Animal Forms and Patterns* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952), p. 113.

²⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Le visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964); "Télépathie - Etre pour autrui - Corporeité", Avril 1960, 298-9: "[...] ce fait de la *présence* d'autrui ne serait pas lui-même possible si préalablement la partie du corps en question n'était *visible*, s'il n'y avait, autour de chaque partie du corps, un halo de *visibilité*. Or ce visible non-actuellement vu, il n'est pas *imaginaire* sartrien : présence à l'absent ou de l'absent. Il est présence de l'immanent, du latent du caché. [...] Cette visibilité de mon corps (pour moi — mais aussi *universelle*, et éminemment, pour autrui) c'est elle qui fait ce qu'on appelle télépathie."

have had apply to them!” (*FW*, 115.20 ff.). Therefore Cynthia’s theory of intervenient auras “presupposed a fairly conventional hereafter [...] she was sure that her existence was influenced by all sorts of dead friends each of whom took turns in directing her fate” (“VS,” 210). Conversely, in his diaries, Nabokov considers the hereafter in rather different terms:

From the point of view of evolutionary dialectics, the hereafter finds its beautiful proof in the following series:

1. Time without consciousness (the lower animal world)
2. Time with consciousness (man = celobek = conscious time)
3. Consciousness without Time (the future of the immortal soul)

The last term is really the thesis of a new series.²⁵

This theory opens a new perspective, the nodal importance of time, as the centre of all vibrations, but it also brings us back to the importance of the game as a succession of moves and of wanderings and returns.

It is in the play-relation between object and subject, the dream-relation between being and being perceived that *A.L.P.* and “The Vane Sisters” meet. *A.L.P.* being equated with Dublin’s Liffey flowing to sea in an everlasting cycle, can be compared to Sybil’s body and the frozen water of icicles slowly thawing and dripping. These two different, though contiguous metaphors, are not comparable in terms of language, but in terms of perception: they belong to the world of the senses and are expressed as a form of musical²⁶ or pictorial rendering of fact — the fact rendered by the music of *A.L.P.*’s monologue being perhaps the eternity of life and dream. The text is no longer meant to be a repetition of reality but a repetition of a certain perception of reality, in chaotic terms meant to bring us back to the original fall. This fall was the reason for Sybil’s death; it enables us to perceive it, it helps us to reconstitute it and to get back to natural forces and their mystery before being deciphered. This explains why the acrostic is to be found at the end of the story. Similarly, the end of *Finnegans Wake* might be seen as an implicit invitation to repeat reading and to start the cycle of reading all over again to decipher all the riddles or simply to enjoy the text on a surface level. A clue to this mystery may be found in *Transparent Things*: “When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object. Novices must learn to skim over matter if they want matter to stay at the exact level of the moment. Transparent things, through which the past shines!”²⁷ This is all the more convincing as one looks at Nabokov’s diary for January 24, 1951, and reads the notes for “Three Tenses” which was to become “a novella-within-the-novella in *Transparent Things*.”²⁸

²⁵ 1951 diary, February 16, Vladimir Nabokov Archives, Montreux.

²⁶ In an interview published in *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, vol. VIII, n° 2 (Spring 1967) conducted by Alfred Appel, Jr., and reprinted in *Strong Opinions*, p. 71, Nabokov declared: “*Finnegans Wake*’s façade disguises a very conventional and drab tenement house, and only the infrequent *snatches of heavenly intonations* redeem it from utter insipidity. I know I am going to be excommunicated for this pronouncement” (italics mine). Here Nabokov means that the musical quality of the text may save it, as a kind of grace.

²⁷ *Transparent Things* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 1.

²⁸ Boyd, Brian, *Vladimir Nabokov, The American Years* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), pp. 189-190.