Look At The Harlequins!

Fraysse Suzanne

Cycnos, études anglophones
revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice
ISSN 1765-3118 ISSN papier 0992-1893

Look At The Harlequins!

or The Construction of an Autobiography through the Reader-Writer Relationship

Suzanne Fraysse

Institut Charles V, Université de Paris VII

A passing remark at the end of *LATH!* [1] seems to reveal the autobiographical nature of the book by suggesting that the name Vadim Vadimych is a colloquial equivalent for Vladimir Vladimirovich (p. 194).[2] But the reader who identifies Vadim with Vladimir and cosily ascribes all the biographical data contained in *LATH!* to Nabokov makes a fool of himself in the eyes of those with even a limited knowledge of Nabokov's life and works. Some readers have actually been taken in.[3] But what I want to insist on is that their mistake was not due to a faulty reading of the book, but to their ignorance of the other texts written by Nabokov, and in particular of *Speak, Memory*,[4] granting of course that *Speak, Memory* is not a fictitious autobiography. In any case the many differences that seem to exist between the narrator's life and the author's do not challenge the notion that *LATH!* is autobiographical. After all, *LATH!* could well be the autobiography of a forgetful memoirist, or that of a dreamer with odds and ends culled from Nabokov's real life and works and reshuffled by the "clumsy plotter" who stages dreams, and that dream autobiography would aim at a different, perhaps deeper, type of truth than that of factual reality.

Still, because *LATH!* cannot be read without the rest of Nabokov's opus at the back of one's mind, critics have tended to dismiss the book as the protracted and tedious joke of a smug artist getting back on those who ignored his life and works. But my contention is that the book is much more than an exercise in self-flattery and that the intertextual game at stake is fundamental in the construction of what seems to me a strikingly original way of writing an autobiography.

The important point is that the many resemblances and differences between Vadim and Vladimir should oblige the reader to turn his attention not simply to the character in the book but to its author thereby involving the reader in a game of detection of the real writer in "the enchanting region situated just beyond" the text (p. 19).

By appearing as a shadow lurking beyond the confines of fiction, Nabokov manages to salvage himself from fiction, to avoid turning into a character in his own fiction. *LATH!* represents the triumph of the real man who rebelled against the fictionist in *Speak, Memory* in that by not figuring in his fiction, Nabokov succeeds in protecting his reality from the fictionalizing force of his narrative. And by producing the illusion that he stands beyond the text he still directs the reader's attention to himself. This is the reason why the network of self-referential allusions is essential to the dynamics of the text and cannot be regarded simply as self-conceit.

At this point one could wonder if the judgment passed by a professor in *Ada* on Proust's masterpiece does not apply here: "The professor concludes that a novel which can be

---

[1] V. Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!* [1974] (New York: Penguin, 1980).

[2] Accepting Lejeune's definition of autobiography as a text in which the names of the author, narrator and main character are identical, regardless of the differences and resemblances that may happen to exist between the narrator's life and the author's. Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

[3] See Dmitri Nabokov's anecdote about harried Italian journalists describing Nabokov as Vadim. In P. Quennell ed., *V. Nabokov, a Tribute* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979). The prototype of such readers figures in *LATH!* in the guise of the psychiatrist Moody who "lumps [Vadim] with a Mr V.S. who is less a postscriptum to the abridged description of my nimbus than an intruder whose sensations are mixed with mine throughout that learned paper" (p. 18).

[4] V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* [1966] (New York: Putnam, 1979).

appreciated only by *quelque petite blanchisseuse* who has examined the author's dirty linen is, artistically, a failure" (p. 135).[5] But *LATH!* does not invite its readers to "examine the author's dirty linen" but the clean white pages of the books which serve to construct his identity. In *LATH!* Nabokov originates in his fiction, a staggering reversal of Vadim's attempt to find in his real life "the roots and origins and amusing birth canals of many images in my Russian and especially English fiction" (p. 13).[6]

The invisible author thus seems to lie in what we could call after Vadim *The Invisible LATH!*, that is, all the novels and texts written by Nabokov that are necessary to the dynamics of *LATH!* but do not figure in *LATH!* Incidentally Nabokov carries here a step further a trick he had performed in *Pale Fire*[7] in which meaning also derived from the many resemblances and differences between two texts — Shade's and Kinbote's. Meaning in *LATH!* springs from the text written by Vadim and the texts written by his shade, Vladimir.

In other words, the "real Nabokov" is nothing more (or nothing less) than an intertextual illusion, an image reconstructed by the reader from other, supposedly more reliable sources. This has a crucial consequence in that the resemblances and differences in effect constitute a blueprint for the construction of Nabokov's autobiography *by the reader*.

Of course, one may well add that the reader's image of Nabokov may derive not simply from texts by Nabokov but also from texts about Nabokov, such as biographies, testimonies, interviews, etc... One of the latest examples is Brian Boyd's comparison between Vadim's four wives and Nabokov's Vera:[8] Boyd's text becomes yet another textual touchstone by which *LATH!* must be read. Boyd's text is part of *The Invisible LATH!* Thus *LATH!* may well be said to exert a magnetic force on all the texts by or about Nabokov. These texts, and all the texts yet to be published, are bound to become the satellites of that particular book. This has fantastic narrative consequences in that *The Invisible LATH!* appears as a polymorphous, ever-changeable and never-ending text written not simply by Nabokov but by his readers too.

And it is precisely because *The Invisible LATH!* is an open text, an unfinished and unfinishable text that the task of constructing "the real Nabokov" is bound to be frustrating.

All the more so as what text *LATH!* is to be referred to is not always too clear; Vadim's four wives for example may be compared to Vera (or rather to Boyd's text about Vera) but also to the four women V. examines in the course of his inquiry into the real life of Sebastian Knight[9], or again to the four women Nabokov discusses in his notes to *Eugene Onegin.*[10] In other words it is impossible for the reader to decide whether Vadim's four wives should be compared to Vladimir's works (*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Eugene Onegin*) or to Vladimir's life (as known through a biography). The result is that the distinction between reality and fiction tends to become blurred; the reader, just like Vadim, is invited to "give up following accepted distinctions" (p. 22).

This is hard to accept for readers of autobiographies who expect the writer not to confuse real life and fiction. One could argue that the blurring of the distinction may be intended not simply as a means of bringing into relief the narrative structure of life nor as a warning

---

[5] V. Nabokov, *Ada* [1969] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981). This judgment is echoed in *LATH!* when Vadim notes: "I was the kind of snob who assumes that bad readers are by nature aware of an author's origins but who hopes that good readers will be more interested in his books than in his stemma" (p. 93).

[6] In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov also mentioned some of the events and people that found their way in his novels.

[7] V. Nabokov, *Pale Fire* [1962], (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985).

[8] Brian Boyd, *V. Nabokov, The American Years* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991). Pp. 630-634.

[9] V. Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* [1941] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982).

[10] A. Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin, A Novel in Verse*. trad V. Nabokov. 2 vols. [1964] (Princeton: Princeton University Press/Bollingen, 1981). See Nabokov's notes to Part I Stanza xxxiii (II, 120-135 and 139-140) where he wonders whom Pushkin had in mind when he wrote about "the waves running in turbulent succession with love to lie down at her feet!" (I, 110). This very passage is alluded to at the beginning of *LATH!* ("when you started to recite that Pushkin thing about waves lying down in adoration at her feet" p. 28).

against over-inquisitive readers, but rather as an invitation to the reader to grasp reality in its very elusiveness. And this is perhaps why while Nabokov invites his readers to construct an image of "the real Nabokov" he also forces them to acknowledge the vanity of their attempt.

For however knowledgeable a reader may be, there are bound to be aspects of Vladimir's life that the reader will not know about. Nabokov seems to speak through Vadim when he writes: "Reality would be only adulterated if I now started to narrate what you know, what I know, what nobody else knows, what shall never, never be ferreted out by a matter-of-fact, father-of-muck, mucking biograffitist" (p. 178).[11]

One may wonder at such violence. For even Nabokov's affair with Irina Guadanini that the word "adulterated" seems unwittingly to point to makes a poor skeleton in the cupboard. In fact it seems to me that what matters is not the contents of the cupboard ("the dirty linen") but the illusion that Blue-Beard holds the key; the secret contents may then be regarded as the unwritten, unwritable part of *The Invisible LATH!*, the missing text that would be necessary for a thorough decoding of the anagram.[12] >From that viewpoint *Speak, Memory* matters not simply because of what it tells the reader but also because of what it does not tell the reader. Of course, the illusion that there is a secret text is part of a strategy devised to allow Nabokov to retain the upper hand in the construction of his image.

It is true that Nabokov manages to produce the illusion that he is privy to the secret of his own life but as often in his works he radically undermines — deconstructs — that illusion in several ways.

First of all by the very structure on which the book rests. For the way Vadim suspects the presence of his creator beyond the limits of the book may well reflect Vladimir's own concern that he may impersonate some "incomparably greater artist" standing beyond the limits of "real life". Nabokov's life and works would then figure as muddled testimonies, as anagrams to the life and works of that greater artist. *The Invisible LATH!* could then well be the invisible works written by that invisible writer for whose presence Nabokov would then be groping for book after book. So that perhaps Vadim and Vladimir are both someone neither of them knows.[13]

Second by the role the text ascribes to the reader: the reader is the one who creates Nabokov's image so that the "someone neither of them knows" is not necessarily a transcendental being but the imaginary creature created by the reader.

One can now understand why the control of the reader is so crucial in the dynamics of the text since it represents the sole way the writer can hope to retain some control over the image of himself created by the reader. And as a matter of fact *LATH!* leaves very little elbow room to the reader for the only freedom that the reader of *LATH!* can have is the freedom of making mistakes, of making a fool of himself. One may resent the rigidity of the interpretative route mapped out by Nabokov in a text where the reader can play only two parts — that of a "good" reader or that of a "bad" reader. At this point the enchanter definitely turns into a teacher grading his readers (an amusing reversal of the reader's privilege to assess the writer's performance).

What is a bad reader in this instance? A reader who is not sufficiently conversant with Nabokov's works to play the game, who will miss the point of the book and will be left with the lifeless corpse of a novel. The very structure of the book is meant to poke fun at the bad

[11] Incidentally this over-quoted sentence is a direct echo to *Speak, Memory*: "and presently nobody will know what you and I know" (p. 295).

[12] Nabokov had often hidden his name under the disguise of an anagram (Adam Von Librikov in *Strong Opinions*, Vivian Darkbloom in *Lolita* and *Ada*, Vivian Bloodmark and Klim Avidov in *Speak, Memory* or Vivian Badlook in *King, Queen, Knave*). But *LATH!* is in itself as an extended anagram of his whole life and works.

[13] To parody V.'s remark at the end of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.

readers who will create a character out of their own fantasies and call it Nabokov; I would even go as far as to suggest that the book is meant to bore bad readers off. These are vital protective devices against readers who threaten to destroy Nabokov's image, or at least, Nabokov's image of his own image. To Nabokov, the bad reader is a reader-killer, and one can only be struck at the recurrence of the reader-killer motif throughout Nabokov's works, in particular in his commentary to *Eugene Onegin* and of course in *Pale Fire*. And this is the reason why *LATH!* contains so many traps to kill the bad reader off before he can strike.

Conversely the good reader is a "servile" reader (as he argued in *Eugene Onegin*), and the servility that Nabokov demands of his readers is that of an actor faithfully acting the part of "a little Nabokov" on the lighted stage. In other words the reader more than Vadim himself impersonates Nabokov in *LATH!* And I have always been struck by the way Nabokov's "best" readers tended to forget quotation marks when using Nabokovian phrases as if Nabokov spoke through them, as if they had become Nabokov himself. If the prototype of the bad reader is the killer the prototype of the good reader is the thief. As Hermann put it in *Despair*: "a theft is the best compliment one can possible pay a thing" (p. 74).[14]

In other words, Nabokov creates the very readers that will in turn create him. The whole system rests on a system of mutual engendering the dynamics of which Nabokov had already exploited in *The Eye*[15] where Smurov was nothing but the image that the others had of him and they in turn were nothing but figments of his own imagination.

This I think is the reason why the pronouns "I" and "you" figure so prominently in both *Speak, Memory* and *LATH!* (and in the other books by Nabokov the inscription to Vera functions as an address to "you"). Of course in *Speak, Memory* "you" is Vera (as the index makes clear) and in *LATH!* is Vadim's last love. But both Vera and Vadim's last love are Vladimir's and Vadim's first readers (in *LATH!* "you" reads the manuscript of *Ardis* when Vadim has his stroke). And it is precisely because "you" remains anonymous that it can be regarded as a role that any reader may thereafter play. The fact that the part of "you" should be first played by the loved and loving one is crucial. For it is only out of love that readers could possibly accept to play the servile part of "a little Nabokov" that the text casts them into.

Obviously though, the best reader of *LATH!* can only be Nabokov himself, recreating himself in his own image. Nabokov remarked that "the best audience an author can have is the one he sees in his shaving mirror every morning"[16] and this applies particularly well to *LATH!* If Nabokov is the book's best reader then it means that the "you" in *LATH!* is in fact a disguised "I". One remembers how in *The Gift* [17] Fyodor tried to imagine his first reader and in effect played the part of that first reader in the opening chapter of the book.

Conversely if the reader puts on the mask of the author on the stage of the book, then the part of the "I" of the text is played by the reader.[18] The "I" of *LATH!* refers not simply to Vadim, not simply to Vladimir but also to the reader while the "you" refers to Vadim's love, Vladimir and the reader. In keeping with their grammatical function, the "I" and the "you" of the text are pronouns that may stand for any name: the writer's, the reader's, that of a character in the book. The "you" and "I" of the text must be regarded as roles that can alternately be played by

[14] V. Nabokov, *Despair* [1937; 1966] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987).
[15] V. Nabokov, *The Eye* [1938; 1965] (New York: Phaedra, 1965).
[16] V. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* [1973] (London: Weidenfeld, 1974), p. 18.
[17] V. Nabokov, *The Gift* [1952, 1963] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980).
[18] A statement taken quite literally in *Pale Fire* by Kinbote who assumes that Shade's autobiography is in fact his [Kinbote's] biography. Or to put it differently Kinbote refuses to play Shade's part and invests the "I" of Shade's autobiography with his own self, just as an actor might tell the story of his own life instead of that of the character he is supposed to be playing the part of.

both the reader and the writer.[19] *LATH!* constitutes a meeting place where reader and writer exchange their identities through the mask of the pronouns.[20] In other words the construction of the autobiography in *LATH!* implies the preliminary dissolution of the identities of both the writer and the reader. The autobiography in *LATH!* is a dramaturgy.

In *Invitation to a Beheading*[21] Nabokov had already played with the notion that pronouns and names do not refer to any presence and are therefore interchangeable: Rodion is at times different from Rodrig and at times the same as Rodrig. The fact that they are both characters on a stage is quite explicit in the text. *LATH!* invites us to consider that similarly the reader and the writer may also be both different and identical, a conclusion that the narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* had already reached when he remarked: "Whatever his secret was, I have learnt one secret too and namely: that the soul is but a manner of being — not a constant state — that any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations"(p. 172).

To conclude *LATH!* may read as an invitation to the reader to invent Nabokov; in the same way Nabokov invented a Chernyshevski, a Pushkin, a Gogol of his own.

And yet, interestingly enough, Nabokov did feel the need to swear that Gogol had really existed apart from his portrait in his biography: "I can only place my hand on my heart and affirm that I have not imagined Gogol. He really wrote, he really lived" (p. 150).[22]

For that Gogol really existed is not so self-evident. After all did Shaskespeare really exist? In *Bend Sinister* Nabokov imagined that the illusion of the existence of Shakespeare had been produced by hoaxmen "having invented *in toto* the works of William Shakespeare" (p. 77).[23] Thus the belief in the existence of the author is ultimately a matter of faith.

LATH! represents an attempt to convince the reader that Nabokov really existed by referring him to the only testimonies of his existence, the books he really wrote. *LATH!* is an autobiography in the sense that it manages to produce the illusion that Nabokov really existed, whatever the secret of his existence.

Thus the elaborate game to be played in *LATH!* is far from gratuitous. As Vadim puts it at the end of the book in a statement that seems to sum up the artistic aim of *LATH!* : "Problems of identity have been, if not settled, at least set. Artistic insights have been granted. I was allowed to take my palette with me to very remote reaches of dim and dubious being" (p. 190).

---

[19] In *Despair* Hermann writes Felix's autobiography after killing him (chapter 10). And perhaps the writer has to die first before the reader can play his part, just as Shade must die before Kinbote can start reading "Pale Fire".

[20] In "Good Readers and Good Writers" Nabokov magnificently described that meeting place: "That mist is a mountain — and that mountain must be conquered. Up a trackless slope climbs the master artist, and at the top, on a windy ridge, whom do you think he meets? The panting and happy reader, and there they spontaneously embrace and are linked forever if the book lasts forever". V. Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, F. Bowers ed. [1980] (London: Pan Books Ltd, 1983), p. 2.

[21] V. Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading* [1959] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980).

[22] V. Nabokov, *Gogol* (Norfolk: New Directions, 1944).

[23] V. Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* [1947] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964). The narrator expatiates: "One day Ember and he had happened to discuss the possiblity of their having invented *in toto* the works of William Shakespeare spending millions and millions on the hoax, smothering with hush money countless publishers, librarians, the Stratford-on-Avon people, since in order to be responsible for all references to the poet during three centuries of civilization, these references had to be assumed to be spurious interpolations injected by the inventors into actual works which they had reedited; there still was a snag there, a bothersome flaw, but perhaps it might be eliminated, too, just as a cooked chess problem can be cured by the addition of a passive pawn" (p.77).