The Deconstruction of Autobiography: Look at the Harlequins!

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> I heard strangers discuss in droning voices all the books I had written, for everything they mentioned, titles, the names of characters, every phrase they shouted was pre-posterously distorted by the delirium of demonic scholarship.[1]

Happily, this isn't Nabokov speaking in his own character — no; and even when he confers his auditory illusion on his parodic double in *Look at the Harlequins!,* it is further reduced to "solid fantasy,"[2] due to a fit of madness. And yet this mad illusion may come true, for it was Nabokov, after all, who also endowed Vadim Vadimych with the experience that "art, at least artifacts, had preceded, not followed, nature,"[3] deeming it possible to let fantasy turn into fact. Having fallen into the "delirium of demonic scholarship" some decades ago, and having been unable to escape that predicament, I (and you, for that matter) had better face the fact that whatever I will voice here concerning Vadim's autobiography (or Nabokov's last novel) can be nothing but a preposterous distortion. If this nightmare of an insight has obviously not condemned me to silence, this is due partly to our more recent theorists' comforting reminder that all reading — not only that of the demonic scholar — is misreading, and partly to the fiendish last word of another of Nabokov's madmen that "for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word."[4]

Thus pitting the word against the word in a time-tested commentarial tradition, I will act according to the similarly venerable principle of "Pecca fortiter!," of distorting audaciously, if distort I must, even — as you may have already noticed — to the point of resembling that mad Nabokovian Botkin who, with his Danish stiletto, cut to pieces a famous author's creation in order to construct his own tale.

Yet "how should I begin?,"[5] being as a critic still no more than "an attendant lord," haunted by the master's verdict "That is not what I meant, at all;"[6] how should I begin to deconstruct an autobiography that is already a deconstruction of autobiographical writing? How can I escape becoming a cheap and boring imitation, an even more inferior sibling of an already inferior double who turns the life of a great writer into parody? If parody reverses the serious into the ludicrous, to avoid repetition I shall have to reverse the reversal and look for the serious in the clownery of the harlequins; if Nabokov deemed it suitable to hide his auto-biography behind the distorting mask of a novel featuring the fictitious autobiography of a parodic double, I will obviously have to do some unmasking, though preferably without undoing the game.

Now, *Look at the Harlequins!* is, in the eyes of sober rather than demonic scholarship, Nabokov's last novel, a fictitious biography and not, as *Speak, Memory,* an autobiography proper or improper. That one thinks of it in terms of autobiographical writing is due to the ostentatious likeness between the fictitious autobiographical narrator and his authorial creator, between Vadim Vadimych N. and Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov. Being not only near-identical in name and born on the same day in the same town of the same country, Vadim like Vladimir flees from post-revolutionary Russia, studies in Cambridge, lives as a Russian émigré writer first on the Côte d'Azur and in Paris, then in the United States, where he also

[1] Vladimir Nabokov. Look at the Harlequins! (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 246.
[2] Look at the Harlequins!, 246.
[3] Ibid., p. 244.
[4] Pale Fire (London: Corgi Books, 1966), 31.
[5] T.S. Eliot. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," in Collected Poems 1090-1935 (London: Faber & Faber, 1958), 13.
[6] Ibid., p. 15.

becomes for a time a college professor and acquires an American passport before returning to Europe; and these are only the most glaring instances amongst a host of similarities that reveal him as a fictitious double of the author. This role of double, of course, entails with a writer of fiction that Vadim's artistic productions neatly presented in the introductory book-list as "Other Books by the Narrator" are by title and later description merely parodies of Nabokov's own works. Nor is the poor creature condemned to a parodic existence spared his becoming aware of his fate, — his artist-creator repeatedly reveals to him in a dream that his

> 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.[7]

And later, when Vadim desperately tries to remember his name in order to assure himself of his real identity at the end of a fit of madness, this demon (which here is rather that of demonic authorship than of demonic scholarship) gives him the impression that he is "but a figment of somebody's — not even my own — imagination."[8]

Thus reduced to a fictitious state, as an autobiographical writer he cannot escape imitating — or rather representing — his creator's style. Beginning with the either mad or frivolous or over-sophisticated statement "I met the first of my three or four successive wives in somewhat odd circumstances,"[9] he obviously delights in exploiting the ambiguity latent in language, be it in word play (the name of his dentist was "Molnar with that *n* like a grain in a cavity"[10]) or in pun ("Did that girl get in touch with you at your office?"[11]), and the sensual appeal of alliteration ("... I would have lost my reason long before finding my rhymes"[12]), and, above all, the curious comparisons and mannered metaphors hyperbolizing the trademarks of his master's works. Thus on one occasion he has an old admirer of his mother sit "in his easy chair as in a voluminous novel,"[13] while on others he cannot refrain from referring to racing cyclists as "hunchbacks on wheels,"[14] or to stereo, TV, and video sets as "singing furniture."[15]

He is self-defeating to the point of self-parody when consciously shaping his style

> "Through the prose of sun blisters came the poetry of her touch —," thus in my pocket diary, but I can improve upon my young preciosity. Through the itch of my skin, and in fact seasoned by that itch to an exquisite degree of rather ridiculous enjoyment, the touch of her hand on my shoulder blades and along my spine resembled too closely a deliberate caress not to be deliberately mimicry ...,[16]

and — like all the other fictitious biographers and autobiographers in Nabokov's work — he constantly reflects on the problems of linguistically transforming a life into a work of art without distorting it into mere fiction.

Yet all this likeness seems only to function as a solid background for the glaring differences in a game of parodic inversions. While Vadim intends to, and actually does, shape his autobiography into "an account of his illnesses, marriages, and literary life,"[17] a *biographie romancée*, thus centering on his repeated and increasing fits of madness, his "three or four successive wives"[18] and "roots and origins and amusing birth canals of many images in my

[7] Look at the Harlequins!, p. 89.
[8] Ibid., p. 249.
[9] Ibid., p. 3.
[10] Ibid., p. 18.
[11] Ibid., p. 140.
[12] Ibid., p. 117.
[13] Ibid., p. 11.
[14] Ibid., p. 116.
[15] Ibid., p. 186.
[16] Ibid., p. 27.
[17] Ibid., p. 27.
[18] Ibid., p. 3.

Russian and especially English fiction"[19] (Iris' palm on the cheek of the teapot having gone into Ardis[20] or her brown back into *A Kingdom by the Sea* [21], for example) was already deemed by the biographer in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* as "the worst kind of literature yet invented,"[22] and certainly not appropriate to the life of a writer whose saneness has as yet not ever been questioned, who was married to the same woman all through his life, and who never disguised his utter contempt for all biographical or even Freudian critics who tried to establish links between his private life and his art. Nor can the contrast between Vadim's books and their Nabokovian models be overlooked, and just a few examples must suffice here. The master's *Real Life of Sebastian Knight,* which is meant to replace an inept biographer's distorted account, has been transformed into an ever increasing critical apparatus to an edition of that biography;[23] *Lolita,* famous for its rendering of unquenchable and unfulfilled desire, has been turned into a trite love story ending happily like an XVIIIth century novel in a church wedding,[24] and Ada, perhaps the most sensuous of Nabokov's novels, has in Ardis become "a stylized memoir dealing with the arbored boyhood and ardent youth of a great thinker,"[25] epitomized in a philosophical discussion of the very problem that causes the narrator's madness. Even more obtrusive, however, is the contrast between the self-ironical stance of the narrator Nabokov and the occasionally satirical, but mostly dead serious, if not pathetic stance of his fictitious double — a conceited autobiographer who constantly refers his readers to one or other of his own books and who does not flinch from openly congratulating himself on his achievements: "Was I an excellent writer? I was an excellent writer."[26]

Considering all this, I see myself faced with the question of why the indeed "incomparably greater, healthier, and crueler" writer Nabokov created such a "non-identical twin, a parody, an inferior variant"[27] of himself as a person and a writer when dealing with autobiographical material. Had he not already shown twenty-three years earlier with *Conclusive Evidence* alias *Speak, Memory* that in narrating his own past he was well able to avoid nostalgic sentiment running rampant or his stance turning larmoyant or pathetic without the distancing device of parody? There must be some other reason, then, some advantage not yet touched on, an aged author's desire to no more but obliquely return to his earlier life and letters, obliquely to the point of self-parody. Being sympathetic with Nabokov in his aversion to cheap psychologizing, I will refrain from offering any individual explanation. What can be assumed, however, is that for a writer so eminently successful it must, towards the end of his career, have been difficult, indeed, to write about his own achievements without becoming, if only according to his own standards, at least slightly pathetic. The massive understatement of self-parody, however, will meet the demands of the most self-ironical temperament and allows the writer to address all and everything without any danger of ever becoming pompous.
What, then, does Nabokov make of the unbounded liberty granted by the irresponsible stance of the parodist? What is it that he addresses in such an oblique manner? His own past as a man and as a writer, yes, — what else in a writer's autobiography? And some examples of the correspondences between the fictitious narrator's and his creator's life and work have been given. Yet what beyond that? An answer to that question obviously entails interpretation, and

[19] Ibid., p. 8.
[20] Ibid., p. 26
[21] Ibid., p. 40.
[22] Vladimir Nabokov, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 17.
[23] Ibid., pp. 121-122.
[24] Ibid., pp. 215-216.
[25] Ibid., pp. 231.
[26] Ibid., p. 234.
[27] Ibid., p. 89.

it is here that my deconstructive reading of the book in terms of a reversal of the parodic reversal really begins. Look at my harlequins!

The space within which my further critical commentary moves is opened up by the firm suspicion that *Look at the Harlequins!*, despite its parodic surface, is a quite serious summing-up — as far as seriousness can go with a deeply self-ironical writer —, an oblique presentation of the most central themes of the most puzzling intellectual and existential problems and the most intensive likes and dislikes in Nabokov's life and work. In short: a spiritual, emotional and artistic autobiography. To appear as such, the book strongly relies on the reader being closely acquainted with the author's previous works, and it is thus a special gift to you and other Nabokov-enthusiasts; but let me be more specific.

One of the recurrent themes taken up by Nabokov in *Look at the Harlequins!* has already been mentioned, though not in this context — nor can it be overlooked. It is the coincidence of identity and difference, of the same and the other, as this becomes visible in the phenomena of mirroring, doubling, twinning, symmetry, in the veritable double, in the doubling of roles, in physical, spiritual or emotional twins, in incestuous love, in the symmetrical shape of objects and bodies and butterflies in particular, and last but not least in the doubling of sense in puns and metaphors. Besides its pervasive stylistic manifestation, this coincidence of identity and difference appears and reappears in almost all of Nabokov's works, from the family resemblance between the fictitious biographer and the dead writer in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* to the "false azure in the windowpane"[28] and the various possibilities of identity between John Shade, Kinbote, Bodkin and the King of Zembla in *Pale Fire,* through the incestuous love in *Ada,* to the fatal doubling of situations in *Transparent Things* and the paralysing of Vadim in symmetrical patches in *Look at the Harlequins!,* all examples taken from his English novels.

And now, a surprising coincidence: when in 1990 the Nobel Prize winning physicist Steven Weinberg was asked in an interview "What's the most arresting insight you've gained into the universe?," he answered:

> It has to do with the simplicity of nature. The simplicity of nature is very often expressed in terms of principles of symmetry, the symmetries of laws of nature. ... They're probably the deepest thing we know about in physics.[29]

Without turning Nabokov into a natural philosopher this surely throws another light on what may look like mere infatuation or at best a purely aesthetic principle.

This conjecture becomes even stronger when we include repetition, the temporal equivalent of spatial symmetry or doubling. We know that Lolita appeared so overwhelmingly attractive to Humbert Humbert only because she had a "precursor" in Annabel, and Vadim is infatuated with his last love above all because she looks like his daughter Bel when a schoolgirl, and these are perhaps only the most obvious examples of Nabokov's fascination with recurrence, a fascination expressed stylistically in his predilection for the repetition of sound in rhyme and alliteration.

The search for a coincidence of identity and difference in spatial symmetry or temporal repetition is, however, only part of a much larger quest. Being a "literalist," Nabokov shares with Vadim the infatuation with sensual and sensuous detail, with the specificity and uniqueness of visual, auditory and tactile sensations:

> The poems I started composing after I met Iris were meant to deal with her actual, unique traits — the way her forehead wrinkled when she raised her eyebrows, waiting for me to see the point of her joke, or the way it developed a totally different set of folds as she frowned over the Tauchnitz in which she searched for the passage she wanted to share with me.[30]

[28] Pale Fire, p. 1.
[29] Dialogue 89 (3, 1990), 31.
[30] Look at the Harlequins!, 24.

For anyone reasonably well acquainted with Nabokov's work it needs no stressing that such minute rendering of sensuous detail, found in all his novels and tales and epitomized in *Ada,* is one of the most typical and most attractive features of his narrative prose. If "reality" is thus rendered in terms of the uniqueness of spatial configurations and temporal situations, the phenomenon of recurrence in spatial symmetry and temporal repetition seems the more astounding. Is it coincidence, or evidence of a pattern, concealed behind the multiformity of appearance, to speak with John Shade:

> ... not text, but texture; not the dream
> But topsy-turvical coincidence.[31]

Again, I need hardly demonstrate at length that this hovering between the interpretation of recurrence as mere coincidence and as evidence of a structured universe, implying even a hidden 'plotter' or creator akin to the author of a novel, is itself a recurrent phenomenon in Nabokov's work. Almost obtrusive in the coincidences directing the biographer's search for "the real" life of Sebastian in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* or Humbert Humbert's life presumably directed by "McFate" in *Lolita,* it becomes a paramount theme in *Pale Fire* and *Transparent Things,* and, of course, in *Look at the Harlequins!,* where Vadim reflects upon the role of coincidence in his autobiography:

> Coincidence is a pimp and a cardsharper in ordinary fiction but a marvellous artist in the patterns of fact recollected by a non-ordinary memoirist,[32]

and where the title can be read as an invitation to register the "harlequins," the unique inventions of the writer's imagination and where its repeatedly used contracted form of "LATH" points to the hidden structure underlying the seeming arbitrariness of the "factual" and the imagined.

The most spectacular and nearly "fatal" pattern of recurrence in that "LATH" consists of Vadim's repeated fits of madness, of "flayed consciousness" resulting from his inability to perform — at first only imaginatively and then also physically — a total turn-about in space. This must be sheer madness, because the possibility of such a reversal of direction is implied in the relativity of position in space and is thus part and parcel of the whole concept of space. It seems therefore quite proper that at the very end of the book his last love, appropriately addressed as "Reality," should tell Vadim that he has merely "confused direction and duration,"[33] space and time, for, as he must painfully realize towards the end of his life, "Time is not reversible."[34]

Thus the tract on the "Substance of Space" contained in Ardis is just a mad reversal of Van's book on "The Texture of Time" in *Ada* — and of Nabokov's life-long fascination with that peculiar texture. What Van (and Nabokov) are infatuated with is not clock time, the spatialized kind of time depending on motion; it is subjective time, time that is "but memory in the making,"[35] and if any proof is required that memory is one of the most central themes in Nabokov's whole work one need only point to his continuous grappling — fictitious or otherwise — with the writing of biography or autobiography.

It is, of course, an epitome of self-parody to deal with this most treasured subject in terms of a madman's senseless grappling with space; yet there seems to be some truth in Vadim's retort to Verity's sober explanation that it is time, not space, which is irreversible:

> Your explanation, however, is merely an exquisite quibble — and you know it; but never mind, the notion of trying to twirl time is a *trouvaille*. It resembles (kissing the hand resting on my sleeve) the neat formula a physicist finds to keep people happy until (yawning, crawling back into bed) until the next chap snatches the chalk.[36]

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[31] Pale Fire, p. 67, lines 808-810.
[32] Look at the Harlequins, p. 225.
[33] Ibid., p. 252
[34] Ibid.
[35] Vladimir Nabokov, Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 559.
[36] Look at the Harlequins!, p. 253.

If "Memory", to let Van speak again, "is a photostudio de luxe on an infinite Fifth Power Avenue,"[37] the irreversibility of clock-time is suspended in the synchronic spatial display of the consecutive past. Thus — a *trouvaille* indeed — it is possible to change direction, to take turns when moving — as any "memoirist" or autobiographer does — inside the space of memory, and it is, indeed, quite mad that Vadim should constantly return to his past in this metaphorical space whilst he has problems with turning, imagined or physical, in literal space. Given the irreversibility of actual time and the process of actual life, it seems an even madder feat to write an autobiography, trying to take a turn to the past inside that irreversible process and "at the same time" continuing it in living and writing. Particularly in writing; for a depiction of the vast treasures of the spacious "photostudio de luxe" of memory enforces selection, otherwise one will never come to terms with the plenitude of life — as Tristram Shandy woefully demonstrates. Selection, however, necessarily implies distortion, a "miswriting" added on to the unavoidable misreading of past events in the book of memory. For an artist, however, there may be the redeeming grace of turning this unavoidable distortion into another work of art. Thus Nabokov chose to present his own past in terms of another novel, a fictitious autobiography of an inferior double, against whose parodic reduction and inversion the magnitude and opposite quality of the "original" can be imagined. In this way, life and art become reversible. It is not only that art, for Vadim, precedes life, as he tries to turn his memories into a topical autobiography, a "*catalogue raisonné* of the roots and origins and amusing birth canals of many images in my Russian and especially English fiction"[38] — although, of course, those roots in life precede their images; Vadim himself is but a character in a novel, his life necessarily based on the precedence of artistic creation. Yet, being his creator's double, this creation is again based on life, in as oblique a way as ever, and thus life precedes art when one reads Vadim's narration as his creator's autobiography as an artist. This is what I have been doing, perhaps deforming as much as deconstructing. But — to repeat myself and a madman — "for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word."[39]

[37] Ada, p. 103.
[38] Look at the Harlequins!, p. 8.
[39] Pale Fire, p. 34.