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The Distinguished Writer vs the Child

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"I think like a genius, I write like a distinguished author, and I speak like a child."[1] In the foreword of *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov explains that, because of his incapacity to speak in public, he wrote all his lectures and most of his interviews beforehand. When he was interviewed on French television in 1975, few people realized that the display of his works translated into French, on the camera side of his desk, had been devised to conceal his cards, a gimmick echoed in the trompe-l'œil teapot. In the same foreword, he explains how he edited all the interviews to remove "the floating decor" and eliminate "every element of spontaneity, all semblance of actual talk."[2] To most of us, these interviews still represent the best written transcription of his actual talk; yet there are mostly, in his own words, "neatly paragraphed essay[s]."[3]

Nabokov's communication with his audience was always tangential, not only in his novels but also in his interviews and in his so-called discursive texts. No wonder some of his interviewers grew terribly restless, even in the written questions they mailed to him. At the end of a 1969 interview, Allene Talmey asked Nabokov, in writing of course: "Is it right to give interviews?" as if to cudgel him in advance for answering her questions.[4] In his oft-quoted answer, Nabokov makes a very strange use of the word "colloquy": "What I really like about the better kind of public colloquy is the opportunity it affords me to construct in the presence of my audience the semblance of what I hope is a plausible and not altogether displeasing personality."[5] The distant and mute audience is important for the image of the author as a "not altogether displeasing personality" to register somewhere, but an interview of this kind is obviously not a proper exchange between two speakers. He perverts the meaning of the word "colloquy". In one of his letters, he has the following sentence: "We were in the midst of an animated soliloquy when you telephoned."[6] Dmitri Nabokov was naturally puzzled by this sentence and he commented in a note: "It is possible that VN meant to write 'colloquy.' It is also possible he meant, tongue-in-cheek style, that a soliloquy was going on."[7] This anecdote testifies to VN's own son's difficulty to distinguish between the slip of the pen and self-irony which is a fictionalization of a kind. Wayne C. Booth would probably have begged Nabokov, as he did Joyce, to insert an irony-marker, like Alcanter de Brahm's inverted question mark. In oral discourse, there would be non-verbal signs to do the job, but not in writing. Sorry, Mr. Booth!

To analyze the difficulties experienced by the reader when he tries to respond to the author's challenge, I am going to examine a text which was alternately presented by Nabokov as autobiography and fiction, "Mademoiselle O". The problem I am trying to tackle here is a problem of genres, not as it is studied in the structuralist tradition but in the way I tried to address it in my book *Textual Communication: A Print-Based Theory of the Novel*.[8] The critics who, like Philippe Lejeune in France, have tried to define autobiography have all been confronted with the same difficulty: there are no decisive criteria in terms of style and even of plot structure to make the distinction between the two. It is the reading contract which

[1] *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. XI.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. XII.
[3] *Ibid.*
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 157.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 158.
[6] *Letters* (San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), p. 206.
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] *Textual Communication* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

changes the nature of the text or rather the way we read it and interact with its author. The problem with Nabokov, of course, is that the contract is not always stated at the start, or that it keeps changing, as in "Mademoiselle O"; and sometimes an autobiographical text, like *Speak, Memory,* reads like a novel whereas a novel like *Look at the Harlequins!* reads like a caricature of Nabokov's own autobiography, which naturally puts the reader off-balance.

The Real Mademoiselle 0

Before writing and reading "Mademoiselle O", Nabokov had already written and published *"Les écrivains de l'époque"* in French in 1931 but did not really have a French audience. He read "Mademoiselle O" for the first time in Brussels and the second time in Paris in 1936, in Mme Ridel's salon after being introduced by Gabriel Marcel - the leading representative of Christian existentialism in France.[9] It was after that reading that Jean Paulhan decided to publish the text in *Mesures.* As far as I know, the status of the text (autobiography or fiction) was not stipulated either at the reading or in the periodical. But when, in 1964, Véra Nabokov established a bibliography of her husband's works for *L'Arc,* she put this text under the heading: *"Nouvelle écrite en français"*[10], which means that Nabokov intended his text to be heard and read as fiction.

The status of the text, which always depends on the reading contract, is vital to determine the reader's attitude towards the style, the story and, of course, the author. If, as it is likely, Nabokov did not specify the status of his text in Mme Ridel's salon, the members of his audience probably wondered all along whether to identify the first-person narrator of the text, who is himself a writer, with the author-reader. Here is the first paragraph of the French text in my translation:

> In one of my books, I have lent to the childhood of my hero the schoolteacher [*institutrice*] to whom I owe the pleasure of understanding French. I say: "I lent," but it would be more accurate to say: "My hero took her from me." For it is pitiful to see how those pale characters who have come out of the black moonlight of the inkwell abuse the beautiful things and the dear faces we provide for them, to the extent of gradually depopulating our own past.[11]

The English version of this opening as it appears in *Conclusive Evidence* and *Nabokov's Dozen* is slightly different: "I have often noticed that after I had bestowed on the characters of my novels some treasured item of my past, it would pine away in the artificial world where I had so abruptly placed it."[12] This opening is much more general and decontextualized than that of the French text and for very good reasons: the first French translation of *The Defense* and *Camera Obscura* had come out in 1934, two years before Nabokov's reading of "Mademoiselle O". Nabokov had at last a French audience and could afford to make a reference to his books. In the 1963 foreword to the English translation of *The Defense,* he said: "I gave Luzhin my French governess."[13] It is more than likely that some or most of the people attending his public reading had read the novel in French and spontaneously identified the speaker-author with the narrator of the text and were therefore tempted to hear the text as autobiographical fiction or even as straightforward autobiography.

The audience is indirectly referred to in the French text which contains a long development about the French language, absent from the English translation. The narrator explains that, having never lived for a long period of time in a French-speaking country, it is extremely difficult for him to write in French: "I feel a very painful breathlessness, with the added fear of bungling things, that is of making do with words I was lucky to snatch as they passed by -

[9] Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (London, Chatto and Windus, 1990), p. 426.
[10] *L'Arc*, N° 24, spring 1964, p. 88.
[11] *Mademoiselle 0* (Paris: Julliard, 1982), p. 7.
[12] *Nabokov's Dozen* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1958), p. 177.
[13] *The Defense* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1970), p. 11.

instead of digging with love for the radiant term which is pining away behind the haze, the vagueness, the rough approximation where my mind wavers [*oscille*]."[14] Under cover of his narrator, Nabokov was begging his French audience to forgive him for the way he used their language, a superfluous precaution considering that his French, though a little ponderous at times, is on the whole marvelously poetic. This passage doesn't prove that the text is an autobiographical fragment, simply that there is a strong kinship between author and narrator.

The fiction process begins for good in the French text with the long paragraph about the name, Mademoiselle O:

> I have just called her by her real name, for "Mademoiselle O" is not at all the abbreviation of a name beginning with an O. This O, open to all the winds of the hiatus, is not the capital letter of Oliver or Orosius or again Oudinet, but indeed her complete name; a round and naked name which, written, seems unsteady without a full stop to support it; a wheel which has come out of its axle and stands alone, about to keel over; a round mouth; a world; an apple.[15]

We know that her "real name" was not "Mademoiselle O" but Cécile Miauton as Nabokov explained in his interview with Bernard Pivot in 1975: "Miauton, it's a Vaudois name. She was born in Vevey and was educated in Paris; but she was more Parisian than Vaudois… Because in the Vaud canton, it is pronounced M-I-AU-TON; there is a slight difference. She stayed in our family until 1915. We began with *Le Cid, Les Misérables.*"[16]

A pity, by the way, that Mademoiselle did not read all of Ronsard's poetry to him. He would never have claimed, as he did in a letter, that he had invented the French word "*nymphette"* : "I am informed that a French motion picture company is about to make a picture entitled *'The Nymphets'* (*'Les Nymphettes'*). The use of this title is an infringement of my rights since this term was invented by me for the main character in my novel *Lolita* and has now become completely synonymous with Lolita in the minds of readers throughout the world."[17] The French word appeared in the late fifteenth century and was later used by Ronsard in one of his *"Chansons":*

> Petite Nymphe folâtre,
> Nymphette que j'idolâtre,
> Ma mignonne, dont les yeux
> Logent mon pis et mon mieux…[18]

The opening lines could be translated as follows: "Little gamesome nymph,/ Nymphet I idolize." It is always tricky to claim one's rights upon a word, especially a foreign word which is easily derived from a very common one. Nabokov knew his Ronsard, of course, and he quoted him in *Lolita,* but apparently he did not know this *"chanson"* which was set to music by Clément Jannequin. It is thanks to him, though, that the word got a new lease on life in French in the very special meaning we know.

Let's turn back to Mademoiselle's "real name." In the French text translated above, Nabokov makes every possible effort to convince his audience that this name, though hardly plausible, is yet her real one. The long passage about this single vowel is a beautiful piece of poetry which begins to fictionalize the character. Strangely, this fictitious name, which seems to have been invented through a process of phonetic distillation of Cécile Miauton's name, bears an uncanny relationship to the appearance and the character of the protagonist as described in the text. It epitomizes Mademoiselle for Nabokov whose own name also had a few samples of the same vowel.

As we see with other names like Colette or Tamara, Nabokov started to fictionalize his childhood and youth fairly early, not only to protect the living apparently but to keep for

[14] *Mademoiselle 0* , pp. 8-9.
[15] *Ibid.,* p. 9.
[16] Antenne 2 interview, May 30, 1975.
[17] *Letters,* p. 312.
[18] Pierre de Ronsard, *Les Amours* (Lausanne: Editions Rencontre, 1968), p. 443.

himself the real names of those he had known and loved, in order to keep his childhood, which he was sorry he couldn't replay as he said in his interview with Bernard Pivot, intact, that is, I suggest, fiction-free. This is the strategy adopted by Vadim McNab in *Look at the Harlequins!* in connection with "you", his fourth and we assume, his present wife: to prevent his reader from stealing her from him, he never surrenders her name, always referring to her as his addressee, a trick also used by Nabokov in *Speak, Memory*. Keeping the real names of his loved ones for himself and inventing new ones in his fictional and non-fictional texts, be they simple pronouns like "you", was obviously a way for Nabokov to protect his life and his past from being contaminated by his fiction and plundered by his readers. There is no evidence, as we are going to see now, that the strategy worked, since writing is itself a process of fictionalization, even when it claims to be discursive and/or autobiographical.

Inconclusive Evidence

While he was putting together the texts he had already written and turning them into a book, *Conclusive Evidence*, he explained in his letters that he intended to write a new kind of autobiography: "This will be a new kind of autobiography, or rather a new hybrid between that and a novel. To the latter it will be affiliated by having a definite plot. Various strata of personal past will form as it were the banks between which will flow a torrent of physical and mental adventure."[19] He was experimenting with a new genre rather than trying to dig up his own past. He also toyed with various titles for this book: "'Clues', 'The Rainbow Edge', 'Speak, Mnemosyne!' (this one is my favorite), 'The Prismatic Edge', 'The Moulted Feather' (from Browning's poem), 'Nabokov's Opening' (a chess term), 'Emblemata'."[20] One recognizes in this list real or almost real titles: "Speak, Mnemosyne" will become *Speak, Memory* in the British edition of the book, "The Prismatic Edge" is reminiscent of Sebastian Knight's *Prismatic Bezel*, "Nabokov's Opening" of *Nabokov's Dozen,* etc. A paronomastic deconstruction of "The Moulted Feather" offers a number of possibilities, with a stubborn "father" at the end. This book ends with a chapter addressed to Véra which deals mostly with their son.

We also learn from the *Letters* that Nabokov wrote another chapter which he described like this to Katharine A. White of *The New Yorker:*

> The last is, from my point of view, the most important one of the series (indeed, the whole book was written with this conclusion and summit in view) since therein are carefully gathered and analyzed (by a fictitious reviewer) the various themes running through the book — all the intricate threads that I have been at pains to follow through each piece.[2]

One recognizes here a narrative trick used by Nabokov at the end of *Ada.* In a letter to John Fischer written in 1950, he explained that he was sending this chapter "mainly because it contains, among other matters, all that is necessary to say in the blurb."[21] Some publishers, like Penguins, used the phony review at the end of *Ada* as the blurb. Naturally, this last chapter if it had been included at the end of *Conclusive Evidence* would have greatly boosted the fiction status of the book and forced the reader to reread it as a genuine novel.

By promoting a discursive text to the rank of fiction or near-fiction, Nabokov was also preventing his readers from getting too close to him. His intrusions as author at the end of *King, Queen, Knave* or *Bend Sinister* had a similar effect on us, though they worked the other way, the real author coming onto the stage of his fiction. It seems that he was constantly poised on the "prismatic edge" between fiction and autobiography, a precarious stance which in a lesser poet and ill-balanced man like Vadim McNab led to insanity. Nabokov could

[19] *Letters*, p. 69.
[20] *Ibid.*, pp. 118-9.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 105.

afford to brush shoulders with fictional reincarnations of himself without running such risks. He says for instance to one of his corespondents about his switch from Russian to English: "After going through that atrocious metamorphosis, I swore I would never go back from my wizened Hyde form to my ample Jekyll one."[22] He was identifying himself with a fictional character in both cases and yet he still knew perfectly well where he stood.

This tricky stance poses tremendous problems to the reader. Not only does it induce us to wonder all the time whether or not the author shares the turpitude of his characters like Hermann, Humbert and Van Veen, as much bad criticism suggests, but it also leads us to question the good faith of the author of *Conclusive Evidence* or the pen-holding speaker of *Strong Opinions* who often expresses himself in the style of Nabokov's first-person narrators. The floating status of all these texts puts us in a paradoxical situation akin to that described by Bateson, Watzlawick and their teams; it generates in us a genuine double bind, which probably accounts for the aggressiveness sometimes triggered by Nabokov's works in the public and among the critics, and also for the contrast between what Brian Boyd calls "high praise and extravagant abuse."[23]

This stance may also help understand what happened between Nabokov and his first biographer. At the beginning of *Nabokov: His Life in Parts*, Field quotes a conversation he claims to have had with Nabokov who was asking him to entitle the book *Nabokov — His Life and Parts;* Field says that Véra took his defense in the following words: "Volodya, leave him alone. It's his book. Let him call it what he wants."[24] This may be a totally apochryphal conversation but it is terribly instructive. Nabokov was a superior artist and thinker, and he knew exactly how he wanted his books to be read, and also his life as a book. He was the "perfect dictator"[25] not only for his characters but also for the readers of his books and the rereaders of his life. With his unquestionable talent and authority he could afford to play games with his selves and with his readers.

In the case of Field, whom he probably allowed to become too intimate with him, this generated something close to a neurosis. One must not forget that Nabokov had badly mauled Field's novel, *Fractions,* in a cruel letter written in 1969. Field, when sending him the book, had apparently taken the precaution to say that it was nothing very pretentious, but he had naturally taken a big risk.[26] He is not the only one, by the way, to have tried his hand at fiction-writing after studying Nabokov's masterpieces. Fiction-writing is the boldest but perhaps the most thankless device to pick up the gauntlet. When we read Nabokov's works we can't help being jealous of his jubilation and artistry, and some of us may be tempted to write fiction for Nabokov looking over their shoulders, just as Stanley Elkin claimed that he wrote for Faulkner looking over his shoulder.[27] But this response is bound to be as inadequate as the learned annotations we can concoct or the elaborate structuralist, deconstructionist, or post-post-ist criticism we can write. Reading his works is not a game of chance but a game of competition as he repeatedly said:

> It should be understood that competition in chess problems is not really between White and Black but between the composer and the hypothetical solver (just as in a first-rate work of fiction the real clash is not between the characters but between the author and the world [a word he claimed he never used, by the way, as he obviously meant "reader"]), so that a great part of a problem's value is due to the number of "tries" — delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray.[28]

[22] *Ibid.,* p. 149.
[23] *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years,* p. 351.
[24] *Nabokov: His Life in Part* (London: Hamish-Hamilton, 1977), p. 6.
[25] *Strong Opinions,* p. 69.
[26] *Letters,* p. 452.
[27] "Nothing but Darkness and Talk?" *Critique,* Vol XXXI, #4 (Summer 1990), p. 237.
[28] *Speak, Memory,* p. 290.

While a real chess game would imply the co-presence of the players, writing naturally puts a tremendous distance between the composer/writer and the solver/reader. Nabokov's refusal to speak spontaneously is obviously linked to his desire to remain out of reach, out of the book. His beloved Sterne claimed that writing was a kind of conversation, but with many restrictions:

> Writing, when properly managed, (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation: As no one, who knows what he is about in good company, would venture to talk all; — so no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding, would presume to think all: The Truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself.[29]

Sterne is suggesting that the matter is not really halved amicably, that the reader will never converse with him on an equal footing. Try as we may to be counted among Nabokov's good readers, we often brush shoulders with those bad readers whom he scornfully called "mere lip-moving ghosts and amnesiacs."[30]

Conclusion

Despite Derrida's denunciation of the phonocentric fallacy,[31] the reader of an autobiography like *Speak, Memory* and to a lesser extent of a novel like *Look at the Harlequins!* can't help fleshing out the "trace" in order to overhear the voice of the absent, dead author. He is aware that, most of the time, he only hears the echo of his own voice ricocheting against the white wall of the page, yet he keeps trying in the hope that some day he may overhear the author's voice and elicit a response. I even sent Vladimir Nabokov a fax to the Montreux-Palace Hotel in the spring of 1992 begging him to make an "apparition" at this conference (the French word *"apparition"* means either "appearance" or "apparition"). Dmitri, to whom, of course, the fax was addressed, answered back saying that his father was not staying there anymore. I should have known: a few years ago I left a cyclamen (not his favorite flower, I am afraid, but my wife and I could not find an orchid or an edelweiss) on the black slab of his grave.

[29] *Tristram Shandy* (New York: Norton, 1980), p. 77.
[30] *Strong Opinions*, p. 183.
[31] *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), p. 24. My translation.