WHEN THE EYE REFUSES TO BLIND ITSELF: NABOKOV'S WRITINGS ON LITERATURE

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It would seem to us that perhaps it
was really not literature but painting
for which he was destined from
childhood…
Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*

After all we should keep in mind that
literature is not a pattern of i d e a s but
a pattern of i m a g e s.
Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*

Sight is both image and word;
the gaze possible both because of the enunciations
of articulate eyes a n d because the subject
finds a position to see within the optics
and grammar of language.
Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*

In the narrative realm, the Oedipal myth or the radical negation of the ocular truth demands at least two violent changes of the protagonist's view: first by self-punishment for the act of incest (made possible by Oedipus' inner blindness; regardless of his otherwise healthy eyes), and then by the "recognition" of a new ethical and political order (made possible by Oedipus' inner insight; regardless of his actual loss of sight). In other words, the Theban hero is the king of paradoxical anti-visual violence presented as "necessary" for attaining liberty and knowledge, as well as the king of i n - s i g h t "paid for" with v i o l e n c e. Oedipus stands for a cruel (representational) revolution; a change that was communicated by homicide and suicidal self-mutilation. However, the ethical twist in the story is connected with the hero's gain of the ontological "hearing" (comprehension); hearing as final acceptance of himself as the Other. And an absolute other at that – the enemy of the whole community. Through the ear Oedipus also attains feminisation, since the ear has been traditionally considered as a substitute for the dis-

placed female uterus as well as for the "passivity" of mere listening (Phelan 1993: 55). The narrative symmetry therefore follows the pattern: when Oedipus stops being a Penetrating Eye, he becomes a Receptive Ear. Economy of this painful transfer saves his – now androgynous – identity. Another important character included in the Oedipal fiction, wise Tiresias, serves as a model for androgyny equally "paid for" with blindness. As we know from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (book III), Tiresias, who has experienced sexual intercourse with both men and women, lost his sight as a punishment by Juno for disagreeing with her judgement that men enjoy sex more than women.

Thus it is possible to say that blindness turns Oedipus into Tiresias' *Doppelgänger*; into another ambivalent, doublesexed self. Feminist criticism justly had a lot to say about "male gaze" and the historical "masculinity" of vision that objectifies women's body (Mulvey 1975; Lauretis 1984; Irigaray 1985; Williams 1989; Freedman 1991; Kaplan 1996), but the veil of silence still hovers over an unacknowledged semantic capability of patriarchal gaze to turn *against* itself and become self-reflexive and therefore self-critical. And this consciousness of "others" *audible* within ourselves, and here I agree with Emmanuel Lévinas (Lévinas 1996), is the utmost ethical and the most responsible identity-position. But is it possible to let the others be *visible* within ourselves, with equal ethical reflections and consequences?

II

Let us examine the face behind the masks of this particular analytical investigation: Nabokov's literary theory, expressed in his seminal writings on literature. It has already been sufficiently proven (most recently by Thomas Seifrid, 1996) that Vladimir Nabokov in all his literary works favoured visual over aural: it is his "visual absolutism" that establishes the link between Nabokov and both the Russian Symbolist movement and the Leo Tolstoy's "to see is to be" kind of aesthetic. In *Strong Opinions* explains his elementary aversion to aural art of music and listening:

> I have no ear for music, a shortcoming I deplore bitterly. When I attend a concert – which happens about once in five years – I endeavour gamely to follow the sequence and relationship of sounds but cannot keep it up for more than a few minutes. Visual impression,

> reflection of hands in lacquered wood, a diligent bad spot over a fiddle, these take over, and soon I am bored beyond measure by the motions of the musicians (Nabokov 1990: 35).

Deliberately ambiguous artistic images in the case of Nabokov's writing style are so much privileged over the discourse and over verbal and philosophical explanations that this craving for the intense pictorial polysemy becomes a literary method:

> As an artist and scholar I prefer the specific detail to the generalisation, images to ideas, obscure facts to clear symbols, and the discovered wild fruit to the synthetic jam (*id*., 7).

In Nabokov's story *Sounds* (Nabokov 1995a [1923]), fictional dramaturgy includes the hero's journey from agitated listening of Bach's music towards peaceful silence. Bach (and all m u s i c) is presented as beautiful, divine, exciting, but none the less as a f a l s e l y u n i f y i n g f o r c e, against which we have the contrast: the *image* of the tears from the face of the hero's friend – a v i s u a l O t h e r that breaks the aural harmony of music and self being "one". Sight is therefore constructed as a principle of metaphysical deferring and differentiation (*différance*, in Derrida's glossary). Music is furthermore equated with erotic love and "unity in sound" and "unity in love" are both seen as a threat of total assimilation/identification, from where the hero escapes into the silent, and not very open relationship with his male friend. In the story *Music* (Nabokov 1995 [1932]) the concert is only a golden opportunity for the protagonist Victor to stare at performers and mysterious faces in the audience. The Nabokovian cult of images shapes the very specific ontological situation: Oedipal stare into the taboo of some sort of an Unpenetrable Secret; "silenced" visual scene that finally outroars the *concerto* itself. This is the author's filmic imagination at work – *Lolita*'s prolonged life on the large screen supports our thesis sufficiently enough.

But *Ada* (Nabokov 1990c [1969]) is probably the most elaborate Nabokov celebration of the visual primacy over the word: "Ad" is the Russian word for "hell", while "ardor", from the the subtitle of the novel and from Ada's nickname, connotes the hero's passion and sexual ecstasy. It is the chronicle of all the *infernal pleasures* at Ardis Hall generated from Van's visual fascination with Ada's

childlike physical beauty and described with the designer's eye for the details of her body shape, her ardour, hairstyle, taste and way of dressing. Just as Lolita was prey to Humbert Humbert's visual fixation, so Ada is submitted to Van's constant scopic scanning. Nabokov/lepidopterist is here to observe his favourite "insect" (and his favourite *incest*) and Nabokov/painter is here to copy his favourite model. As if displaying wilfully under the full blow of feminist criticism, or maybe engage personally in the deconstruction of the male gaze, Nabokov provides Ada with a career in the film industry: she plays the role of the "dancing girl Dolores" (homage to Lolita's full name) in the movie called *Don Juan's Last Fling*. Not only does Van get pleasure from objectifying Ada into *moving pictures*, but the whole movie-audience is casted as scopic collaborator as well. The main part of Van's intense sexual excitement therefore arises from the fact that Ada is "the most perfect" visual object. She is also a sexy and "forbidden" Jocasta-like variation, only without the incestuous *guilt*.

There is no punishment for Ada's and Van's obsessive sensual symbiosis – the novel ends with the two of them *looking at* their own *photographs* (again, privileged images take over the narration). At that point, Ada is ninety five and Van is ninety seven years old. Lifelong "perversion" (or should we conclude that "true love" always remains somehow unlawful and manneristically insane?) hence becomes panegirically sanctified; Nabokovian Oedipus remains happily blind to the societal order. His vision not only escapes the Oedipal matrix of Western literary heritage (by *mimesis* triumphing over any painful *catharsis*); it lashes out at Biblical or the Eden narrative content just as fiercely. *Ada* brings no punishment, no shame and no eternal Fall. Bodies are happily naked and the magical garden of childhood imagination is at their disposal.

Ada also contains many references to the Proustian subject of the nature of time, especially in Van's study called *The Texture of Time*. As we know from *Speak, Memory* (Nabokov 1969) and *Strong Opinions* (Nabokov 1990 [1973]), Nabokov's relationship with *pater tempus* focused on the art of memory as the art of *visual* memory:

> I would say that imagination is a form of memory. Down, Plato, down, good dog. An image depends on the power of association, and association is supplied and prompted by memory (*id*., 78).

To remember is the same as to see, to see (in our mind's eye) is to remember. With so much attention given to the eyes, there is no doubt that Nabokovian Platonic villains suffer from a listening disorder – being enslaved to the visual leaves one almost indifferent to other people's voices. A paradigmatic example is Humbert Humbert's "deafness" to Lolita's cries.

But Nabokov is never *simply immoral*; his iconophilic and educated literary criminals more often than not "lose" or are defeated on symbolic and ethical grounds. As far as *Ada* goes, if there is any human or godly disapproval or objection to Van's and Ada's incestuous community (maybe even a motion to expel the lovers from the heavenly site), nobody is there to *hear* it.

In my opinion, *Ada* is the only Nabokov novel that transcends the ethical through the acclamation of aestethical: love and the love of art are presented as fantastically victorious over the plagues of *plain* everyday existence and common law. To wit, the theme of painful Oedipal combination of exile and blindness *does* reappear often in Nabokov's other Russian and American novels as well. For instance, art gallerist Kretschmar in *Camera Obscura* (1932) loses his sight in a car accident, and the object of his adulterous gaze, cheap prostitute Magda who dreams of becoming a celebrated movie star, "punishes" the blinded one even further. Still visually obsessive, Kretschmar ends being murdered by Magda.

His most significant fault, however, has nothing to do with his sexual *persona*. In Nabokov's mind, Kretschmar is guilty of being "competent, but not brilliant" (Nabokov's Russian version of the novel quoted according to Medarić 1989: 123). He is condemned for being *mediocre*. As we know from Nabokov writings on Gogol (Nabokov 1961), the frame of mind the writer despised the most is exactly "the average" or "the common" type; just as he considered *poshlost* or triviality the greatest possible evil. In other words, Nabokov's *credo* might be formulated as follows: daring to shift the inner or social boundary while still communicating with the Other within oneself results in *protection* of the hero's sight (case study: hermaphroditic play as part of Ada's and Van's metonimical and metaphorical relationship in *Ada*); and to fear the consequences of

one's eccentricity brings the peril of blindness and death (case study: Kretschmar in *Camera obscura*).

Just like Ada and Van, each other's doubles, Kretschmar too has his own "opposite twin", Horn. Unlike the mirroring reflections exchanged between the incestuous lovers, Kretschmar is unable to address Horn as his braver, more eccentric and daring side. In Nabokov's *oeuvre* there are many novels that narrate the disability of hero's eye to blind itself in the sense of becoming Oedipally self-critical or self-reflexive (cathartic). In *The Defence*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Lolita*, *Bend Sinister*, *Pnin*, *Pale Fire*, *Transparent Things* and *Look at the Harlequins!* visual obsessions capture or ruin the protagonist because he is trapped in endless, monolithically and monologically obsessive repetition: frames within frames of the same visual representations; *Referential mania*, as Nabokov (Nabokov 1997: 599) names the disease of a character from the story *Signs and Symbols*. Using different scholarly terminology, it has been noted that Nabokov as a storyteller, chess-player or lepidopterist usually works through limitless visual observation and pattern variation (cf. Alter 1970: 45). But the usual way for Nabokov to break the Oedipal pattern of self-denial leads to the submission of his literary protagonist to self-scrutinising even *before* the outer and/ or inner catastrophe (the plague) has demanded it. Images are not mute, languageless objects: they are subjects that constantly call for translation into the verbal interpretation, being unseparable from the language semiosis (Boehm 1997: 67, 74, 76, 77). Nabokov develops the theme of excessive attention given to the translation process called "images to memory" that soon becomes another "prison cage" for the hero; a confusing, deceitful game of autistic self-reflections. First Nabokov's novel, *Mashenka*, portrays the hero's fear of direct confrontation with the object of his obsession: throughout the whole novel Ganin is gathering strength to confront his first love Mashenka (Mary in English translation), but at the very end of the story he nevertheless decides *not* to meet her face to face at the railway station. Ganin refuses to meet the concrete Mashenka because, as Nabokov (1988: 91) says, "he exhausted his memories" and what he was in love with were only *his own* lonely visions; not the real girl, Mashenka. Maybe we could conclude that Nabokov's *œuvre* begins with the visually obsessive hero who prefers desire supplements (and infinite prolonging of the desire consumption) over the real/

actual meeting-point with the Other, though, in a much later novel, *Ada*, similarly visually obsessive protagonist gathers some strength and faces the fantastic kaleidoscope of his imaginary "otherness", thereby parting with the emotional and intellectual economy of the isolated self.

III

In Nabokov's lectures and/or writings about literature, where "literature" is synonymous with *novels* of the XIXth and early XXth centuries, s i g h t is again and again praised as the most precious means of penetration into the work's meaning. *To see* all, *to visualise* every detail: that is what Vladimir Nabokov repeatedly demanded from his students. The method hence resembles "close reading" in a sense that it requires an absolute attention to be paid by the reader to the details of the novel's setting. Nabokov opens his *Lectures on Literature* (Nabokov 1980), a book devoted to European literary heritage, with the account of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. For the openly chauvinistic Nabokov, Austen's novel is given as "the lowest" point of European literary spectrum. In the famous *Nabokov-Wilson letters* (Karlinsy 1978), Nabokov's entry of 5 May 1950 (reply to Wilson's suggestion that Austin should be included in the soon-to-be-started Nabokov's Cornell lectures) reads like this:

> Thanks for the suggestion concerning my fiction course. I dislike Jane, and am prejudiced, in fact, against all women writers. They are in another class.

While discussing Nabokov we must never forget the writer's misogynist stripes, a trade that makes him a far inferior thinker, ethically speaking, to some of his own literary favourites, and by that I mean authors such as Shakespeare or Pushkin (both of whom are capable of admitting and expressing women's intellectual power). However, by the May 15th 1950 Nabokov did change his mind slightly about Austin, but only to include *Mansfield Park* at the beginning of the course and to describe her to the students with comments like:

> *Mansfield Park*, on the other hand, is the work of a lady and the game of a child. But from that workbasket comes exquisite needlework art,

> and there is a streak of marvellous genius in that child (Nabokov 1980: 10).

In patriarchal imagination, women are simply not capable of having a *grown-up* mind. It is kind of entertaining to think of Nabokov's misogynist philosophy while keeping in our adult minds the comment made about another great women-hater, Plato. "The philosopher wants to forget – wants to prove – his female origins – illusory" (Diamond 1997: XI). But does he succeed? Well, judging by the female titles of Nabokov's novels (*Mary*, *Lolita*, *Ada*) we can safely say he does not. Now back to lectures.

What emerges as impressive from Nabokov's descriptive pedantry is the fact that the Russian emigrant and Cornell professor is very careful to treat *every* novel as an *über*-historical document; as a "higher truth"; t r u e f i c t i o n. This is his typical formalist approach:

> The ball at Mansfield Park is held on Thursday the twenty-second of December, and if we look through old calendars, we will see that only in 1808 could 22 December fall on Thursday. Fanny Price, the young heroine of the novel, will be eighteen by that time. She arrived at Mansfield Park in 1800 at the age of ten. King George III, a rather weird figure, was on the throne (Nabokov 1980: 11).

In other words, novels are not "social luxury" nor "mere lacking in imagination"; novels are *serious matter*, where every detail is of utmost importance. Personally, I also choose to think that the lecturer without the belief in the power of fiction should never take a step toward a university rostrum. The effort Nabokov makes to persuade his students that all great novels are in fact "fairy tales" (cf. *id*., 2, 10, 125, 133, 270; Nabokov 1981: 103; Nabokov 1983: 1) also springs from the trust in transformative *emotional* power of fairy tales world: we are reminded that our chilhood feelings of delight about fiction were wise, long-lasting and *proper*. In Clarissa Pincola Estes' anthropological study on fairy tales, called *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (Estes 1997), we find very similar faith in the healing power of a story framed as a fairy tale, which paradoxically makes Nabokov even closer to the feminist revaluation of the sensual and corporeal aspects of literature.

Besides encouraging his own and his students' emotional participation in the work of art, Nabokov as a lecturer also liked to play

the part of a Holmes-like expert in "pure and rational logic" of literary analysis. He literally sees himself in a role of a "detective" ("My course, among other things, is a kind of detective investigation of the mystery of literary structures"; Nabokov 1980: 1) and the Holmesian magnifying glass is meant to discover the greatest possible number of visual traces in the story. A good novel is expected to be a rich and minute image-painting. That is why Jane Austin is not a teacher's pet.

> Her imagery is subdued. Although here and there she paints graceful word pictures with her delicate brush on a little bit of ivory (as she said herself), the imagery in relation to landscapes, gestures, colours, and so on, is very restrained *(id*., 56).

No wonder Virginia Woolf is a non-existent entity for Nabokov: it would probably lead to a complete revision of his chauvinist poetics of vision to admit that a visually hyperevocative writer *could* actually appear in the *female* gender. Dickens, on the other hand, wins Nabokov's literary contest (*id*., 63):

> In our dealings with Jane Austen we had to make a certain effort in order to join the ladies in the drawing room. In the case of Dickens we remain at table with our tawny port (…). If it were possible I would like to devote the fifty minutes of every class meeting to mute meditation, concentration, and admiration of Dickens (*id*., 64).

What stands at the centre of Nabokov's interest for Dickens are, as we might expect, the older writer's visual feasts.

> Weevle complains to Guppy about the atmosphere – mental and physical – in that room. Mark the candle heavily burning with a great cabbage head and a long winding sheet. No use reading Dickens if one cannot visualise that (*id*., 79).

And than the explosion of admiration for Dickens' descriptive talent:

> The first thing that we notice about the style of Dickens is his intensely sensuous imagery, his art of vivid sensuous evocation (*id*., 113).

Here we also find Nabokov's "translational" definitions of visuality as literariness, and literariness as visuality. I apologise to the reader for the considerable length of the coming quotation and humbly promise it to be pregnant with significance:

> Literature consists, in fact, not of general ideas but of particular revelations, not of a school of thought but of individuals of genius. Literature is not about something: it is the thing itself, the quiddity. Without the masterpiece, literature does not exist. The passage describing the harbor at Dealoccurs at the point when Esther travels to the town in order to see Richard, whose attitude towards life, the strain of freakishness in his otherwise noble nature, the dark density that hangs over him, trouble her and make her want to help him. Over her shoulders Dickens shows us a harbour. There are many vessels there, a multitude of boats that appear with a kind of quiet magic as the fog begins to rise. (…) Let us pause. Can we visualise that? Of course we can, and we do so with a greater thrill of recognition because in comparison to the conventional blue sea of literary tradition these silvery pools in the dark sea offer something that Dickens noted for the very first time with the innocent and sensuous eye of the true artist; saw and immediately put into words. Or more exactly, without the words there would have been no vision; and if one follows the soft, swishing, slightly blurred sound of the sibilants of the description, one will find that the image had to have a voice in order to live (*id*., 116, emphasizing NG).

Other than chauvinistic "theory of the genius" (Romanticism never entirely left the author of demonic erudite and mastermind Humbert Humbert), what Nabokov offers here theoretically amounts to a revelatory connection and equation between two representational media: the image and the word. What connects them is the dialogical abundance of meaning; intertextual protest against any *purism* or determinism of representational institutions. As Roland Barthes (1977: 38-39) taught us, "all images are polysemous: they imply, underlying their signifiers, a 'floating chain' of significants, the reader is able to choose some and ignore the others." To *translate* or *transform* the image into a text hence always means to "fix" the floating chain; to stop the endless relay of coherent semiosis. Furthermore, text is necessary to elucidate images, but text plays a *repressive* value – text "tames" the images and

invests morality and ideology into their meaning (cf. Barthes, 1977: 40). This process Barthes calls "anchorage". Nabokov's lectures from the Fifties could not certainly be familiar with any of the Barthes' later theoretical constructs, but Nabokov's insistence on the ontology of the image bears close resemblance to the post-structuralist insistence on the permanent ecstasy of finding the playful, a c t i v e meaning of the text:

> The poetic or the ecstatic is that *in every discourse* which can open itself up to the absolute loss of its sense, to the (non-)base of the sacred, of nonmeaning, of un-knowledge or of play, to the swoon from which it is reawakened by a throw of a dice (Derrida 1997: 261).

Nabokov's interpretative priority is similarly not with the character, nor the structure or the plot; he despises sociological or psychological analysis of literary work and he avoids adopting any of the fashionable literary theories of his time, including close reading. Nabokov understood lecturing on literature to be an ecstatic, playful, autonomous and idiosyncratic art of persuasion of students about *his own* concept of literary value, hence his students most of the time are, in fact, lacking any *other* interpretative voices besides Nabokov's. No pluralism, but activism: students are invited to develop *their own* response, understanding and passionate commitment to literature. Nabokov's apprentices are not learning to be servants to any academic machinery of interpretation; they are learning to be artists themselves (is that *allowed?* – I certainly hope so).

As long as we are still in the company of Dickens, let us mention that Nabokov selected "childhood" as "the striking theme" of *The Bleak House*. And regression into interpretative pre-Oedipal childhood ambivalence/polysemy, as we know from brilliant Vadim Linetsky (Linetsky 1996), shapes many of the poststructuralist analyses, once again leaving Nabokov in the company of Derrida. Pictorial escapism or childhood regression serve the same purpose: irresponsible aesthetisation of communicative reality. But Linetsky relies too heavily on psychoanalysis. In Derrida's *The Truth in Painting* (Derrida 1990 [1978]: 195) artistic images – just as much as written texts – are not deterministically ambivalent, as Linetsky would have it, but they show a productive "surplus of meaning".

They are always *more* than ambivalent. In Derrida's opinion (*id*., 110), and he walks in Kant's footsteps, visual beauty is never free of "ideas", since ideas are cognitive ideals by which we understand the beautiful. Since the beautiful is necessarily judged by *inner* criteria, what is art remains morally grounded in the invisible (*id*., 116). And this is also how images, Nabokov's images, become a guide into the ethics of facing out interior *alterity*. They are always translating process between the social laws of "(re)presentation" and the *parergon* of the inner "deconstruction". The dialogism of their interplay continues *to maintain* both (or more) *positions* of the communicative event and therefore we can not say that Derrida's deconstruction is "childishly unable" to attend any fixed or "grown-up" perspective. The *genre* trouble for Linetsky is that Derrida likes to *enumerate* and try out "too many" subjective positions, without accepting to subject himself to only one. And that is just one of the ways by which Derrida mocks the false security of interpretative roles we are "supposed" to wear as prescribed by psychoanalytical guidebook. But now kind Mercury signals I should *really* get back on the track of Nabokov's images.

When talking about Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Nabokov never gets too tired to lose sight of the visual details:

> And one should not forget that, later, the poisonous arsenic was in a blue jar – and blue haze that hang about the countryside at her funeral (Nabokov 1980: 162).

On Flaubert's iconography:

> Another aspect of his style (…) is Flaubert's fondness for what may be termed the unfolding method, the successive development of visual details, one thing after another thing, with accumulation of this and that emotion.

Robert Louis Stevenson's treatment will not differ from Flaubert's: the novel *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is compared by Nabokov to a detective movie (*id*., 179) and the precise *hand-drawing* of Jekyll/Hyde's reconstructed "apartment" is presented to the students. No moral is extracted from the story; Nabokov enjoys retelling the plot-game of "hide and seek" in all its haunting details. Proust enters Nabokov's book on European writers without the Dickens-like pomp, but he is probably Nabokov's

dearest guest, subjected to extensive quotation after quotation. Proust's *The Walk by Swann's Place* is compared with the *generosity of the dreams* (*id*., 214) and at one point Nabokov draws the orchid as described by Proust (*id*., 243). Kafka's *Metamorphosis* gives Nabokov a chance to dazzle his students with zoological knowledge: judging by Kafka's description, the beetle that Gregor Samsa turns into is scholarly discovered to be a flying one. Nabokov, after the usual minutely drawn image of the creature:

> Next question: what insect? Commentators say "cockroach", which of course does not make sense. A cockroach is an insect that is flat in shape with large legs, and Gregor is anything but flat: he is convex on both sides, belly and back, and his legs are small. (…) Apart from this he has a tremendous convex belly divided into segments and a hard rounded back that can be expanded and than may carry the beetle for miles and miles in a blundering flight. Curiously enough, Gregor the beetle never found out that he has wings under the hard covering of his back (*id*., 258-259).

What follows is the neat and vivid description of all the family cruelties done to Gregor the insect. Nabokov insists on complete equality between Kafka's story and zoological reality:

> Gregor, or Kafka, seems to think that Gregor's urge to approach the window was a recollection of human experience. Actually, it is typical insect reaction to light: one finds all sorts of dusty bugs near windowpanes (…) (*id*., 269).

Fiction is throughout Nabokov's book placed higher that any document or real-life testimony; fiction is the realm of presence, complex order and truthfulness. The last author from *Lectures on Literature*, James Joyce, receives by now the classical Nabokovian interpretative gift: maps upon maps of Bloom's and Stephen's travels around Dublin. Action, time and place are arranged with scientific logic and precision, as if the reader would end up forever lost without the exact picture of the front and the back of Bloom's house in 7 Eccles Street. Data abounds. Many levels of stylistic parody are listed. But there is no "explanation". Works observed remains to be understood as work in constant semantic/interpretative openness. It is in fact interesting to see Nabokov treating the work of art as a minutely *closed*, deterministic and fixed system of

words and images (any misquotation would amount to fatality), while at the same time that very work receives the boon of very indeterministic, open-ended and authority-free interpretation. It is a productive clash of concepts. The shift into free interpretation is "paid for" with the absolute respect for the almost bodily confined "closure" of the textual *corpus*. Again, saving the texts also means saving the ethics of respect for the detail.

IV

In my experience of reading Nabokov's prose in both Russian and English, his English sentences are much lighter and more covertly humorous than the grave and sardonic tone of his Russian ones. It is not the matter of difference between the languages, since there are several Russian writers who are capable of both political daring and light linguistic playfulness, Pushkin being the master of that school and Sokolov only his more recent successor, but it is a result, in my opinion, of Nabokov's "fortunate" exile and the contextual change from Russian metaphysical and political tradition to English metaphysical and political tradition. As we shall see, no matter how much Nabokov loved Gogol, he could not help accusing one of his dearest literary ancestors of sacrificing "individual art" in the name of the "common good". Here the razor of Nabokov's criticism of religious blindness combines with the criticism of political sightlessness. When the eye does not have absolute freedom, but submits to any "higher vision" or any compulsory observing, it is immoral, impotent and dangerous. Nabokov's constant disapproval of the deeply castrating, typically Russian cult of suffering and self-negation (palpable in Orthodox religion as well as in Communist and Fascist ideology) is, for him, most vivid in the works of the talented Russian writer Nabokov hated the most: Dostoevsky. Brilliant parody of both "humiliated heroes" so characteristic for Dostoevsky and the all-present communist spectral surveillance is given in the Nabokov's novel *The Eye* (Nabokov 1990b [1930]). Not even in death is the Dostoevskian or socialist hero Smurov freed from internalised persecuting eyes. This is his final statement:

> I have realized that the only happiness in this world is to observe, to spy, to watch, to scrutinize oneself and others, to be nothing but a big, slightly vitreous, somewhat bloodshot, unblinking eye (*id*., 130).

In other words, it is the huge difference between individualistic liberalism and mass psychosis of socialism, of which Nabokov preferred the first, that shaped the works of an artist who much preferred *to look at* the Harlequins, than to lower his eyes before the army officers. I find it extremely fascinating the fact that the Yugoslav edition of Nabokov's *Lectures on Russian Literature*, translated from English and published during the high socialist era of the pro-left Yugoslav years (Belgrade 1986), did *not* include Nabokov's essay *Russian Writers, Censors and Readers*, included at the beginning of the English edition of the Russian lectures. Nor did it include any of Nabokov's other *intra*textual comments against the Soviet regime, which abound in the English version. While we are on the subject of ex-Yugoslavia literary ideology and Nabokov, even more curious than that is the fact that Aleksandar Flaker, the most celebrated Yugoslav Slavist, in his book *Nomadi ljepote* (Flaker 1988), dedicated to visual aspects of Russian literature, fails to admit or analyse Vladimir Nabokov's visual poetics. It is therefore clear that Flaker, as an expert in Russian literature (but viewed only from the perspective of the Left), although reporting on *images* in Russian modernism, plainly refused to see Nabokov's very persistent and strong criticism of Soviet politics. Which gives a whole new meaning to the politics of the theoretical *view* and the analytical eye. It was much more convenient to claim that Nabokov was an "apolitical" writer. The only book on Nabokov to appear in Croatian so far, with the deceivingly broad title *From Mashenka to Lolita* and written by Magdalena Medarić (1989), readily discusses only the elements of literary structure in Nabokov's Russian novels. Not one of his English novels is analysed, and his lectures on literature are not even mentioned. In the Medarić's study, ideological aspects of Nabokov's *œuvre* do not even exist; Nabokov is a "pure" artist. That kind of ignorance, luckily, never shaped Nabokov's writings. And here his description of the political as well as personal hell:

> (…) the Soviet government, the most philistine organisation on earth, cannot permit the individual quest, the creative courage, the new, the original, the difficult, the strange, to exist (Nabokov 1981: 8).

So we see that the "mere" *individual quest*, as usual, is perfectly capable of political subversion.

V

Nabokov's *Lectures on Russian literature*, where the author, besides novels, also discusses one of Chekhov's plays and several other short stories, are no less iconophilic than his lectures on European writers. Nevertheless, we should emphasize a change in hermeneutic perspective – on Russian literary ground Nabokov exercised a more traditional approach: not only are we invited to analyse the given work, but also to ponder the writer's biography. Now even the ever so disliked psychology and sociology ("I hate tampering with the precious lives of great writers and I hate Tom-peeping over the fence of those lives"; *id*., 138) enter the interpretative arena: despite the large warning "Do not watch the private life of the poet!" and in spite of Nabokov's persistent distrust of social sciences, visually unrestricted Nabokov makes us peep eagerly into Gogol's *private* relationship with the Greek Orthodox Church. Like some sociology freshman, Nabokov assumes that Gogol's "writing impotence" is caused by his religious fanaticism (*id*., 43). Then we are introduced to Turgenev's personal and literary biography; after which comes Dostoevsky's portrait – loaded with "psychological" insights about the writer's pathological mental instability (again presented as a path to religious dogmatism and ur-Fascism; cf. *id*., 101, 118-119). Tolstoy is spared the full blow of Nabokovian anti-utopian and anti-socialist criticism by the sheer fact of "count Leo's" visual abundance and visual intelligence, which again leads Nabokov the teacher to drawing: as additional praise of *Anna Karenina*, Nabokov's students are presented with the professor's drawing of the "costume such as Kitty wore when she skated with Lyovin" (*id*., 219) and with the "tennis costume that Anna wore in her game with Vronsky" (*id*., 235). The novel *War and Peace* is not commented upon. It is probably too "didactic" for Nabokov's taste. The last two writers in the book on Russian and Nabokovian literature are Chekhov and

Gorky. They are deliberately contrasted. This is evaluation of the first one:

> Chekhov was in the first place an individualist and an artist. He was therefore no easy "joiner" of parties: his protest against existing injustice and brutality came in an individual way (*id*., 246).

Whatever Chekhov lacks in "vividness" (cf. "Thus Chekhov is a good example to give when one tries to explain that a writer may be a perfect artist without being exceptionally vivid in his verbal technique or exceptionally preoccupied with the way his sentence curves"; *id*., 252), our professor forgives him because of Chekhov's intellectual strength and "deepest human decency" (*id*., 253). Nabokov even makes a visual gift to Chekhov by comparing him with "dim light and the same exact tint of grey, a tint between the colour of an old fence and that of a low cloud" (*ib*.). Gorky is presented as the bottom, the lowest point of the Russian literature. The decision to include him in the cycle of lectures could have been motivated politically: it was a way of saying that literature is not beyond the grasp of ideology. On Gorky's style:

> Schematic characters and the mechanical structure of the story are lined up with such dead forms as the *fabliau* or the *moralité* of medieval times. We must note the low level of culture – what we call in Russia "semi-intelligentsia" – which is disastrous in a writer whose essential nature is not vision and imagination (which can work wonders even if the author is not educated) (*id*., 305).

What Nabokov cannot stand are always *generalia*; he insist on The Specific (cf. "[…] the art is always specific"; *id*., 117). And images are the medium able to capture the detail in its most minute. When we hear Nabokov's account of Gogol's vividness:

> The picture starts living a life of its own – rather like that leering organ-grinder with whom the artist in H.G. Wells's story *The Portrait* struggled, by means of jabs and splashes of green paint when the portrait he was making comes alive and disorderly (*id*., 22),

we are reminded of an ancient attitude that pictures are "divine"; that they have "power" beyond human measure. Where does Nabo-

kov get this idea? In his study *The Power of Images*, David Freedberg says:

> Painting makes the absent present and the dead living; it aids memory and recognition; it can inspire awe; it rouses piety; and it transforms the value of unfigured material (just like sculpture does) (Freedberg 1989: 44).

Freedberg (*id*., 50) quotes Horace on "what the mind takes through the ears stimulates it less actively than what is presented to it by the eyes" and Erasmus "who repeated Aristotle's view of the need to regulate paintings and sculptures, on the grounds that 'painting is much more eloquent than the speech, and often penetrates more deeply into one's heart'." Similar *iconophilia* persists until our times; Gadamer (1975) has chosen to talk about the image as "the ontological event" of identification. But the main thesis of Freedberg's study states that humans adore images because images have huge *emotional impact* on them. Moreover, since humans have been told repeatedly to *repress* their emotionality (more often than not on both the religious and the political grounds), and to avoid reinstating the emotion as a part of cognition, images are unfortunately connected with forming a guilt mechanism. But Nabokov is too smart to fall into the described imaginary guilt-trap: he proclaims that Russian literature had been "purblind" before the literary vision of Pushkin and Gogol (Nabokov 1981: 24); he mocks the Greek Orthodox Church "who deplored the 'sensuousness' of his [Gogol's] images" (*id*., 41). This is Nabokov's image of Turgenev:

> These quotations are good examples of his perfectly modulated well-oiled prose which is nicely adapted to the picturing of slow movement. This or that phrase of his reminds one of a lizard sun-charmed on a wall – and the two or three final words of the sentence curve like the lizard's tail (*id*., 69).

And this is the visualisation of Dostoevsky's novel:

> The novel *Brothers Karamazov* has always seemed to me a straggling play, with just that amount of furniture and other implements needed for the various actors: a round table with the wet, round trace of a glass, a window painted yellow to make it look as if there were

> sunlight outside, or a shrub hastily brought in and plumped down by a stagehand (*id*., 104).

When Nabokov describes the pitiful hero from Dostoevsky's *Memoirs from the Mousehole*, he encapsulates the hero's cowardice in the fact that "he could not look into a person's eyes" (*id*., 119). Avoiding the gaze of others therefore becomes a political act of not facing up to the world or to the fellow humans. All in all, Nabokov's Russian lectures show a much higher level of politicisation and incorporated political theory than the English lectures. Ethics of precise description are another issue that gets confused with Nabokov's formalism, but the surplus of data is the writer's debt to an almost scientifically attentive observation and precision. It is my view that Nabokov did not preach the separation of the aesthetic from the ethical; on the contrary – he never missed the opportunity to paint the destructiveness of this disunion. Nor did he separate literature from science. Nabokov praised the "madness" of "being several" at the same time (himself being a writer, biologist and a literature teacher). Let us invite Jacob S. Fisher (Fisher 1999) into discussion and his account of Derrida, Foucault and Shoshana Feldman's understanding of literature as a realm of discursive "madness". In the circle of these French philosophers, says Fisher, *madness* is metaphor for what is "excluded, invisible, silent, yet always working on the edges of discourse. It can refer only obliquely – or, rather, figuratively – to itself". In the case of Nabokov, *the madness* of visual ecstasy refuses to exclude anything; it borders on myth of total inclusion. Contrary to Foucault, who thought that *panopticum* always connotes the will for surveillance and control, in Nabokov's writing the quest for *omnivisuality* is a feast of disorder and disobedience; it is impossible to "translate" plural messages of the quoted image of *Turgenev as a lizard* into some sort of "fixed" theoretical frame. This Nabokovian *madness*, however, remembers, has a memory, just as much as for Foucault the *madness* "saved" socially subversive meanings.

> Literature may be a "counter discourse" as Foucault argues, and it may even constitute a kind of Nietzschean "counter-memory" (…); but counter-discourse and counter-memory function here exactly as memory and discourse have always been supposed to function: to

> recover what has been forgotten, to restore what has been lost, to perpetuate the presence or being of words and things (*id*., 187).

VI

Nabokov's *Lectures on Don Quijote* (Nabokov 1983) repeat the interpretative methods of two previous books: long quotations from the novel serve the purpose of detailed visual scanning of the work in question, and literary characters are, in fact, introduced as part of Nabokov's inventory of literature as *moving pictures*. This is a summary of how Don Quijote is described:

> I have listed Don Quijote's physical features such as the big bones, the mole on the back, the iron tendons and the ailing kidneys, his lanky limbs, his mournful, gaunt, sun-tanned face, his fantastic assortment of rusty arms in the somewhat molish moonlight (*id*., 27).

The ideal Nabokovian student is described as an "energetic and excited s i g h t s e e r" of the fictional scenes, and the professor paints himself as a "word-happy and footsore guide" (*id*., 110). Far from tourism, Nabokov's eye during the whole literary tour around Quijote landscapes remains focused on moral and political *injustices*, and the more Quijote is mentally and materially humiliated, the more Nabokov rages. During the *journey*, Quijote is specified as "fantastic, lovable madman of genius" (*id*., 81), comparable to King Lear and Jesus (*id*., 73), and both comparisons include physical, social and political violence performed upon the martyr figures. Nabokov sides completely with Quijote and against "reason"; at least against "reason" as understood by Foucault or a reason that became a legitimate means to discipline and punish (read: hurt and destroy) humans for relying on fiction and play.

> Let none think, however, that the symphony of mental and physical pain presented in *Don Quijote* is a composition that could be played only on the musical instruments of the remote past. Nor should anyone suppose that those strings of pain are twanged nowadays only in remote tyrannies behind iron curtains. Pain is still with us, around us, among us (*id*., 56).

Not really a Nabokov scholar, though a very influential philosopher, Richard Rorty (1995) understood Nabokov as a dubious liberal: on the surface opposed to any kind of physical or metaphy-

sical cruelty, but deeply incapable of understanding that his own poetics of sharply distinguishing "literary form" from the "literary content" leads to new epistemological violence. First of all, in all my readings, I have never come across Nabokov's separation of form and content without it having disastrous consequences for the protagonists involved. Secondly, although Rorty does not discuss *Lectures on Don Quijote*, nor does he mention Nabokov's cult of images and imaginary, there is a hint of Rortry's being interested in the same agenda that shadows this paper as well. Namely, Rorty claims that Nabokov fits into a cognitive orientation called "idiosyncratic iconography" and that Nabokov is both believer in "true art" and, through art, in immortality (*id*., 167). For Rorty, this is a sure sign of a pseudoliberal, theological and elitist point of view. But in my opinion, Nabokov's i c o n o p h i l a *never parted* from Nabokov's i c o n o c l a s m. It is worth commenting on the notion of iconoclasm in the sense of Camille Paglia (Paglia 1991: 33). She marks the way in which images were so often historically proclaimed sacrosanct and "pagan", that every paganism in return became "eye-intense". We might add: therefore there is no "theology" in "images": images have always been so anti-hierarchical and hyper-inclusive that regimes of different religions, including Christianity (Shlain 1998: 71, 80-83, 100-156), Buddhism (*id*., 177) and Islam (*id*., 288), managed to proclaim images as "inherently dangerous" and "antireligious". We can hear the echo of same "arguments" from certain contemporary secular intellectuals, first among them Jean Baudrillard. For Baudrillard (1993: 194), images are essentially "immoral" because they mask "the absence of the real"; they are *fakes*. But is writing any more "real"? Or should we go even further and state that a chair is "ethical", because it is "real", and Dürer's series of self-portraits is "unreal", because they are paintings? How could it be that Baudrillard never distinguished between two *particular* images, but always, and now we see Nabokov smilingly nod in agreement, talked about "images" *in general*? If Baudrillard meant that images are immoral *when* they become an exclusive substitute for the real experience (and we have discussed this phenomenon with regards to Nabokov's *Mashenka*), it still does not mean that *all* images are *always* immoral or that *simulacra* is *per definitionem* "evil". Nabokov proves that images are so essentially connected with emotional meaning and with ethics of nuanced inner evaluation that they

cannot be devaluated, suppressed or erased without the significant damaging of what we could call "whole representational reality". Furthermore, Nabokov's descriptive pedantry of catching the *almost* invisible acts of violence is again a very strong protest against the "pain" understood only as something reduced to mere physicality. As I have said before, what Nabokov shared with Dostoevsky was the eye for detecting images of humiliation, but, contrary to Dostoevsky, Nabokov also had a way of demistifying them into symptoms we *can* do something about.

> What exactly do these irrational standards mean? They mean the supremacy of the detail over the general, of the part that is more alive than the whole, of the little thing which a man observes and greets with some friendly nod of the spirit while the crowd around him is being driven by some common impulse to some common goal (Nabokov 1980: 373).

This care for the particular places Nabokov inside the tradition of uncompromised political liberalism. We might add that his persistent interest in psychotic characters and vividness of madness frees him from further allegations of either *politics of snobbery* (there could be no snobbery among lunatics) or of aestheticism of *pure form* (madness confuses form and content in more than a thousand ways). Humbert Humbert is the perfect example of *a tragedy* that springs from the psychotic separation of form (visual obsession with Lolita) and content (Lolita's feelings and thoughts out of Humbert's reach). Nabokov, we obviously must repeat and repeat, is *not* Humbert. Criticism that tries to prove that Nabokov was a moral monster like Kinbote or Humbert Humbert forgets that literature is not a police dossier; there are no "facts" about Nabokov that match the "facts" about Kinbote or John Shade. Literary *fiction* may match autobiographical *fiction*, but that is a whole new affair. I have no idea who Vladimir Nabokov was, but I can see that his visual particularism has an ethical and an aesthetic impact; unique both in his literary teachings and in his literary writings. What we must nevertheless borrow from Rorty (Rorty 1995: 171) is the notion that Nabokov, in his lectures or autobiographical writings, had not been capable of feeling/expressing any decrease or loss in personal self-esteem, nor any form of guilt. It is true that Vladimir Nabokov's basic mask of subjectivity is the one of the

all-powerful child/artist, but this is not yet another proof of Nabokov's egoism or narcissism: it is, rather, an extremely healthy philosophy of love and respect for one's creative self as *a condition* of love and respect for others. What so many readers find so hard to accept about Nabokov is his sensual delight in art, science, and the capabilities of the human mind and body. Nabokov says: you *don't* have to be a social, religious, family, professional or psychological *victim*; just do *what makes you particularly happy*. And how could any thorough and well-rehearsed Christian (or any kind of communist or communitarist) ever forgive him for that?!

VII

What is madness? Is Quijote mad? The i m a g e s that he sees, are they real? Are they moral? Why does Quijote see all that heroic, kind and sublime other-realities? Wouldn't it be better if he could remember what "common sense" is?

> Commonsense has trampled down many a gentle genius whose eyes delighted in a too early moonbeam of some too early truth; commonsense has back-kicked dirt at the loveliest of queer paintings because a blue tree seemed madness to its well-meaning hoof; commonsense has prompted ugly but strong nations to crush their fair but frail neighbours the moment the gap in history offered a chance that it would have been ridiculous not to exploit (Nabokov 1980: 372).

I agree that commonsense is absolutely the worst teacher of literature, since literature is the madness of being an other. Nabokov says: "[L]et us bless the freak; for in the natural evolution of things, the ape would perhaps never have become man had not a freak appeared in the family" (*ib*.). As Oedipus the Freak, Nabokov refuses to blind himself, because he believes one could practice self-criticism with eyes wide open and one could share the glaze with (his/her own) monsters or criminals and thereby understand them. I think Nabokov hated Freud for the same reason that Deleuze and Guattary (Deleuze; Guattari 1990 [1972]) refuted him: it is not fair to submit all unlimited production of strangeness to the universal paternal trauma called the "Oedipal complex". The story of Oedipus is far more fertile than the interpretation psychoanalysis suggests. While still on the subject of singular and plural gazes, I

would like to quote the anti-castrative art historian and visual theorist Donald Kuspit:

> Malignant artistic and intellectual narcissism, involving a "consistent attempt to exploit, destroy, symbolically castrate, or dehumanise significant others", that is, faciliative cultural others – others with expressive (re)creative gazes – has become almost *de rigeur* in today's postmodern academics (Kuspit 1996: 311).

VIII

I suggest we part with the question about the eye's imaginary gender. Is Nabokov so fond of images because he is that prototypical "aggressive misogynist male" who, through gaze, controls and objectifies the world and women around him? Or is he a good ironist, who mocks the very same chauvinism his characters artfully enact? As Steven Bruhm says:

> In the specifically heterosexual memories of *Speak, Memory*, women are either isolated and presented for their particular, individuating characteristics (see for example page 86), or all collapse synecdochicly into the idea of one: "all would merge to form somebody I did not know but was bound to know soon" (Nabokov 1969: 213). These aspects of narcissistic remembering, what Nabokov ultimately calls "a bothersome defocalization" (*id*., 240) that we might as easily attribute to Ovid's Narcissus, either isolate or erase female subjectivity altogether, whereas the passage describing male tutors moves in and out of male subjective space (Bruhm 1996: 299).

Furthermore, Bruhm (*id*., 300) is ready to conclude that Nabokov's aesthetic "is delicately homosexual". I absolutely agree, but how about acknowledged psychological and sociological data that proves that we *all* are "delicately homosexual" and that there are no "clear cuts" between gender identities (cf. Butler 1993)? So the question becomes: Why do we want to erase contradictions of sexual identity, or: How are we dealing with the multitude of passions we are capable of? Do we pretend we don't have them, or do we face them with all the frightening power of recognition we have? This is again the Oedipal dilemma in a nutshell. And if we *cannot* repress polymorphous sexuality, if *she* continues to manifest in our lives, do we punish ourselves for that (Oedipus), or do

we pay attention to her and present her with different – imaginary – gender performances (Nabokov)? It seems to me that Nabokov was a very passionate man:

> Obsession is, of course, a recurrent theme in Nabokov's work, be it the Humbertian lust for Lolita, the Kinbotean passion for John Shade's text, or Martin Edelweiss's ultimately fatal desire to impress Sonia in *Glory* (Stowe 1999: 67).

Helmuth Plessner (Plessner 1994 [1983]: 25) suggested differentiating between two kinds of passions: one that *enlarges* our personality and *enhances* our inner abilities (through passionate devotion and learning about something), and the other that *reduces* us to slavery and loss of identity (because it is so escapist and addictive that we lose both ourselves and our freedom because of it). Nabokov had a lot to say about both kinds. His lectures on literature and *Ada* certainly explore Plessner's "life-enhancing passion", while many other novels deal with perils of obsession and its enormous energy of deceit. Here we may also find a reason why the visual and sensual pleasures Nabokov explores in his work are not easy to explain/classify. We have no problems in detecting his public hostility towards the idea of intellectual equality between genders, visible in his lecture on Jane Austin. But there are problems in deciding what kind of *cultural* gender Nabokov has chosen for himself when he emphasised the very poetics of visuality and particularity. In his book *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image* (Shlain 1998), Leonard Shlain insist that images, because they are holistic, simultaneous, concrete and synthetic, have always been culturally connected with feminine creativity. Its cognitive complement is the masculine world of words, the alphabet, abstract and sequential thinking that "selects" and thereby produces hierarchies, linearity and authority of the Revealed Word. History, moreover, has been *written* by men who preferred Word to Image. And Nabokov is not one of them.

This leads us to doubt twice as strongly the idea that gaze is "immanently" male. As for Oedipus, couldn't we say that this hero of Western civilisation "in committing regicide, patricide, and incest, became 'the slayer of the distinctions', has abolished differences and thus contravened the mythical order" (Lauretis 1984: 119)? Could it be that *abolished differences* also include the break

in gender distinctions? With Nabokov's eyes, we are also out of any "structural" order, because they do not divide the reality into proper/improper, high/low, past/present, image/word, mind/body, etc. In such eyes, a particular "image" is much more semantically rich than any set of "ideas" associated with it. Ideas, as Derrida has shown earlier, are possible frames for understanding images, but images still have their silent ways to mingle out of the abstract petrifications. The same is true for images in both poetry and visual arts. The final example, by Nabokov:

> One of the many reasons why the very gallant Russian poet Gumilev was put to death by Lenin's ruffians thirty odd years ago was that during the whole ordeal, in the prosecutor's dim office, in the torture house, in the winding corridors that led to the truck, in the truck that took him to the place of execution, and at that place itself, full of shuffling feet of the clumsy and gloomy shooting squad, t h e p o e t k e p t s m i l i n g (Nabokov 1980: 376-377).

Nobody who ever received the gift of this image, who formed the inner picture of Gumilev's smile, will never forget it, no matter how the theoretical or ideological or philosophical interpretations turn out.

In the Oedipal world of identity attained through victimhood or self-punishments, the eye that refuses to blind itself is the eye that never lost connection with his/her imaginary power. As a result, we now have Nabokov's I/eye and Nabokov's art, not the eternal Oedipal fear of images. We see without guilt.

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