

NARRATOR AUTHENTICITY PROBLEM IN ENGLISH PROSE BY V.V. NABOKOV

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Abstract: This article attempts to study narrative strategies of V. Nabokov's English prose. This issue was previously addressed by J.W. Connolly, P. Tammi, G. Shapiro, who tried to come up with explanations for this phenomenon. This work exploits existing conceptual leads to analysis of specifics of the narrative in Nabokov's texts. The author reviews "The Real Life of Sebastian Knight", "Pnin", "Lolita", "The Original of Laura" novels. We established that author's strategy is growing more complicated: from building fictitious narrators as portrayers of author's masks within quasiepic narration pattern, often taking exaggerated and grotesquely attenuated forms, the prose writer moves on to manipulations with narrators' authenticity, showing their gradual self-oblivation. We have proved that the goal behind narrative strategy of Nabokov's English prose is resolution of a self-identification problem.

Keywords: V. Nabokov, narrator, author's mask, narrative strategy.

1 Introduction

The twentieth century was seeing a growing complexity of relationships between creators and reality depicted by them. Narrative techniques of prose, both Russian and Western, feature rather narrative play with several participating storytellers, rather than immovable and solid nature of epic omniscience of the author-narrator. Such techniques employ varying speech positions, shifting and relocating horizons of the author and the protagonist (Kozhevnikova, 1985; Shepherd, 1992; Schmid, 2003). This entails a wide presence of fictitious authors in texts, distinctly expressed narrative inversions and a multitude of narrative strategies. V. Nabokov's English prose seems most remarkable in this respect, where we see the narrative gaining not only aesthetic, but ontological status as well: the writer, while breaking an illusion of fine art, corroborates its independent existence through denial. By exposing technical tricks, he emphasizes integrity of the ideal aspect of fine art and brings together reality and imagination. Starting from "The Real Life of Sebastian Knight" and "Pnin" all the way to "Lolita" and "The Original of Laura", all English novels by V. Nabokov expose a very keen interest of the novelist to the narration process itself and to various narrative forms (Connolly, 1992; Tammi, 1985; Shapiro, 2001), as well as to the "personality" of the story teller.

2 Methods

Principles of Russian comparative-historical literary studies put forth in works of M. Bakhtin, V. Vinogradov, B. Uspensky (Bakhtin, 1976; Vinogradov, 2005; Uspensky, 2000) are assumed as fundamentals of the research methods used herein. We also applied typological method that allows for revealing narrator's typical patterns as part of Nabokov's authorship strategy. Where Nabokov's English prose is viewed as reflection and introspection of his personal life experience, the writer also uses biographical method; in particular, protagonists of his novels are seen as his literary masks (Osmukhina, 2014). Other methods include elements of narrative analysis (Tammi, 1985; Schmid, 2003), since, as we will note further, narrative strategy is considered one of the subjects of our research as well as the method for comprehensive analysis of literary writing, which looks at literary text as a system of mutually linked elements.

3 Results and Discussions

When one contemplates about narrator authenticity problem and even wider – a problem of mimicry of writer – in Nabokov's writing, there is a quite remarkable phrase belonging to the writer himself: in preface to Stanley Kubrick's "Lolita" he ironically referred to himself as "the placid profile of a stand-in for Hitchcock" (Appel, 1974). A reference to Hitchcock is totally not accidental, since "presence" of a major movie director of the 20th century in his cinematographical works is quite comparable

to "residence" of a major Russian-American prose-writer in his own novels, which apparently was the feeling of Nabokov himself. That said, the prose writer was most probably making allegations not so much to actual episodic appearances of Hitchcock in any of his "major" works, but to his experimental title sequence to 1955 "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" TV show, where a simple line-drawing caricature of Hitchcock's profile was first made and then his silhouette walked to center to eclipse the profile. But literary text space, unlike cinematographical text space, features a greater scope for experiments with representation of the author-creator: all the way from auto-coding techniques, including anagrammatic play, up to revelation of the author under masks of characters, storytellers, narrators, often burlesque and exaggerated. But Hitchcock never concealed but always revealed himself, showing up in supporting cast either as a bystander or as a rubbernecker (in TV show that we already mentioned, he appeared as a cynical storyteller, furnishing sarcastic comments at beginning and end of every episode and thus expanding author's influence) (Tryuffo, 1996). On the contrary, Nabokov was quite controversially playing with the idea of "carving out" the character of the author and identifying the "real" author against his writings. He has emphasized a relative nature of this idea throughout his writing career – from earlier stories and "Mashenka (Mary)" to "Lolita", "Ada" and fragments of "The Original of Laura" novel.

Unlike Sirin the writer, after Nabokov moved to the US in 1940, he did not change his narrative strategy of "breeding" his counterparts, of dissolving the author's ego in the play of narrators, storytellers and characters (Osmukhina, 2009; Osmukhina, 2014; Shapiro, 2001), continuing to move towards expansion of such strategy. Nabokov's novels retain a unique feature – an image of a meditating character, endowed with not just nostalgic reminiscences but with an ability to submerge into imaginary worlds and, as a consequence – a dual world in aesthetic (world of art in an opposition to the reality), gnoseological (character's perception of reality as a dream and dream as a reality) and existential aspects (majority of protagonists lead "dual" existence). Practically all English works of Nabokov use intertextual techniques, parodies, self parodies, author's mask: the "real" author, the one behind the text, consistently arrives at the character – "the other one", tries on various masks, by demonstrating hidden play on autobiographism, aesthetical and intentional mingling of the author's voice with the voice of the narrator. All of the above builds up mystery around the reader of self-parody forewords, self-comments and self-allusions.

Same as in Russian, the author-narrator-character triad in his English works is expanded by creating an intricate system of masks the author is wearing. However, now it is not only the "real" author who transforms into characters and narrators, but also many narrators impersonate the "true" author by means of a mask. It is the masks that do not just destroy the illusion of verisimilitude, but overdrive the artificiality, fictional nature of both the world created and the authentic author's image invariably manifested therein. Almost for fifteen years, Nabokov was at the periphery of US literary life, mostly teaching, but even in his Lectures on Literature he used to draw attention of the audience to different forms of author's mimicry within one or another literary text. Contemplating on the character of the Man in the Brown Macintosh in Joyce's Ulysses, Nabokov emphasized: "Do we know who he is? I think we do. The clue comes in Chapter 4 of part two, the scene at the library. Stephen is discussing Shakespeare and affirms that Shakespeare himself is present in his, Shakespeare's works. "He has hidden his own name, a fair name, William, in the plays, a super here, a clown there, [...] and this is exactly what Joyce has done – setting his face in a dark corner of this canvas. The Man in the Brown Macintosh who passes through the dream of the book is no other than the author himself" (Nabokov, 1998).

The "Real Life of Sebastian Knight" is the first English novel, where topics of transfiguration are manipulated at different levels and the writer develops quite an intricate narrative model by intermingling masks of the author-narrator and a character. The author grants autobiographical traits to the main character. Sebastian's studies at Cambridge ("he disliked a lot at Cambridge" (Nabokov, 1991)), detailed description of the character's life at the university correspond to Nabokov's actual biography, who attended the same Trinity College. Sebastian also inherits from Nabokov his juvenile affection to three leading English poets from 1890-1910 – R. Kipling, R. Brooke and A.E. Housman: "I had my Kipling moods and my Rupert Brooke moods, and my Housman moods" (Nabokov, 1991). Apart from that, F. C. Burnand's collection of short novels and satires "Occasional Happy Thoughts: About Buying a Horse", W. Caine's novel "The Author of Trixie" in the Knight's list belong to "inferior", joking literary genres that have a lot of significance in poetry of both Sebastian and Nabokov himself. Recurrent comparisons of artwork with performance, tricks, clownery throughout the novel, or Knight's assertion that harmony for him is in combination of a picture in *Punch* and a purple passage in *Hamlet* may be associated with a problem of creating something like a clownish mask of the narrator, which was so important for Nabokov.

Same as Nabokov, Sebastian Knight feels an outcast and transforms his sorrow for "paradise lost" into a source for creative activity: as Nabokov laments his childhood and adolescence left behind in Russia in his "Other Shores", Knight's overwhelming sorrow is reflected in his autobiographic work "Lost Property": "I always think that one of the purest emotions is that of the banished man pining after the land of his birth. I would have liked to show him straining his memory to the utmost in a continuous effort to keep alive and bright the vision of his past" (Nabokov, 1991). Both the author and the character escaped Russia in rejection of "gruesome" communist regime.

Intentionally confusing the reader, the "real" author, as part of his subjective narrative, figuratively speaking, raises the extent of his "remoteness" from created reality and characters to the square: the narrative is carried by Sebastian Knight's half-brother, whose fate interlaces with the pattern of his character's fate, whereas Sebastian's search for his own self leads not only to revelation that his novel corresponds to reality of V., but to loss and then "discovery" of his own identity. The "author" is gradually being bonded to his "character", clearly realizing unmatchedness to his own self and in finale – we see his fusion not only with Sebastian, but with some "third party", which is illustrated by anagrammatic play of names of the narrator-character: "I am Sebastian Knight. I feel as I were impersonating him on a lighted stage, with the people he knew coming and going... They move round Sebastian—round me who am acting Sebastian. [...] And then the masquerade draws to a close. [...] They all go back to their everyday life [...] but the hero remains, for, try as I may, I cannot get out of my part: Sebastian's mask clings to my face, the likeness will not be washed off. Try as I may, I cannot get out of my part [...] Sebastian's mask clings to my face, the likeness will not be washed off. I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows" (Nabokov, 1991). Dropping well-known explanations into the name of the main character – Sebastian Knight, covering Shakespeare and chess based allusions; we shall only note one thing: according to English pronunciation rules, the first letter in the name of the main character Knight is mute, thus deriving an initial "N". Thus, narrator V. is writing a biography of writer N. and, consequently, when narrator and character merge into someone called V.N. in finale, who possesses an "outlook" of his own, that of a narrator and that of a character combined.

In "Lolita" the connection between the "real" author and the image of Humbert, the narrator-character is not quite so definitive, as psychoanalytically oriented literary scholars believe (Proffer, 2000). But the fact that Lolita's tradition itself is quite established in Nabokov's mind and works way deeper than the author would like to acknowledge it (and it is not just

"The Enchanter", or a dirty little story of Schegolev in "The Gift", but also pretty transparent allusions to the topic of lolitas in "The Original of Laura"). With all seeming authenticity of the main character – narrator, as surprising as it may be, Nabokov himself points to the artificial nature of the main character, as part of unrealistic, "made" world in the narration: reading the "Who is Who on Stage" guide (Nabokov, 1999), the main character finds references therein not only to Clare Quilty and Lolita, but to Vivian Damor-Block, an anagrammatical mask of the "real" author, self revealing and again coming forward like W. Thackeray as the puppet master in "Vanity Fair". We will also note that given well known Nabokov's unacceptance of Freudism and his more than skeptical attitude towards various psychological perspectives, the appearance of yet another narrator, doctor Ray, in foreword to the novel seems very justifiable – fictitious narrator represents an author's mask, which the "real" author hides behind and mocks ponderings and diagnoses of psychoanalysts. Apart from that, Ray the narrator becomes a means for the "real" author to once and for all distance himself from a chance of being identified as the main character of the book, as apparently was foreseen by the writer.

Complication of the narration with plenty of masks can also be found in "Pnin" novel, which, basically, becomes a statement of informal progress review and closing books not only on university activities (in 1941 Nabokov was a professor at Wellesley, then in Cornell), but on American life in general. While maintaining neutral-ironic third person narrative manner, the last chapters of the novel are written by Vladimir Vladimirovich, one of the characters of the novel. A "fascinating lecturer", a Russian writer who moved to the US in the 1940-ies, passionate about entomology, a prose writer who is quite popular among the expatriates with a reasonably well established career, who exchanges correspondence with "a famous emigrant writer Sirin" and who happens to be a complete namesake of the "real" author on top of that. The image of the "real" author in the novel is flaking: apart from biographical counterpart of Vladimir Nabokov, here we can see a parody mask of professor Pnin, featuring quite a number of autobiographical traits. Moreover, description of Pnin's appearance in the novel corresponds to the actual look of the author and the portrait of the character turns out to be the self-portrait of Nabokov himself, although exaggerated, but easily recognizable. "Ideally bald, sun-tanned, and clean-shaven, he began rather impressively with that great brown dome of his, tortoise-shell glasses (masking an infantile absence of eyebrows), apish upper lip, thick neck" (Nabokov, 1997). The speech of the character interlards with literary quotes of Nabokov himself. In particular, the "real" author grants the character a number of his personal observations about "The Death of Ivan Ilych" novella and "Anna Karenina" novel, which can be found in Nabokov's lectures on Leo Tolstoy.

Quite an unexpected mask also appears in the novel, directly related both to Nabokov and Pnin – an American ornithology professor Thomas Wynn (Tvin or 'twin', as the character refers to him). "A lanky, bespectacled old fellow with scholarly strands of steel-grey hair falling over the right side of his small but corrugated brow, and with a deep furrow descending from each side of his sharp nose to each corner of his long upper-lip" (Nabokov, 1997). An "owlish" person, whose path Pnin "would cross every other day at different points of progress" is a reflection of the character. Multipolarity of Nabokov's perception promotes Wynn and Pnin with their "disconcerting likenesses" and thus a number of Nabokov's masks appear in the novel. But Vladimir Vladimirovich is only a biographical twin of the writer, a sort of a lightly done sketch, whereas Pnin is Nabokov's alter ego, another consciously created self-parody mask, meditated with self-irony. This mask reflects in a "false mirror" of intricate interlacing of author's fiction and Russian-American reality featured in actual life of the author.

The technique of the author's mask becomes more and more accentuated and grotesque in Nabokov's later works. When examined closely, seemingly fictional autobiographicalism of "Ada", "Look at the Harlequins!" and, especially of

“Transparent Things” turns into quite the real one, and the writer’s “mask play” converts into an obvious, sometimes obsessional contemplations about the outcomes of his own literary career and life pilgrimage. For example, the image of Baron R. in “Transparent Things” novel is the author’s mask and is quite well recognizable. Even the name “R” itself is nothing more than a mirror image of a Russian single character word “Я” translated as “me”. It is quite notable that Baron R. has been given many traits of the author himself: from physical resemblance (“Baron R. had coarse features, a sallow complexion, a lumpy nose with enlarged pores, shaggy bellicose eyebrows, an unerring stare, and a bulldog mouth full of bad teeth” (Nabokov, 1999)) to habits and hallmarks typical of Nabokov the writer – “immune to politics”, famous (“most valuable author”), willful, writing on index cards, living in Switzerland, a master stylist: “On contact with paper it [his English] acquired a shapeliness, a richness, an ostensible dash, that caused some of the less demanding reviewers in his adopted country to call him a master stylist. Mr. R. was a touchy, unpleasant, and rude correspondent” (Nabokov, 1999).

Nabokov’s narrative strategy aims at “multiplication” of narrators as his own doubles and at conscious disguise of his author’s “self” behind their masks practically in all novels. So we can see the prose writer play with authenticity of his narrators in his unfinished “The Original of Laura”. He shows their gradual self-withdrawal from the scene (in case of Wild the withdrawal is quite real, in case of Flora it is fictional, in the book of which she is a character). Throughout the very first chapter not only the narrator, but also the character is concealed, which is preset by oblique speech in the first sentence: “Her husband, she answered, was a writer, too — at least, after a fashion” (Nabokov 2010). It is obvious that oblique speech, normally used after presentation of the character, suggests presence of a “speaker” – the narrator, who despite that, remains unrecognized for several more paragraphs – until the character (“she”) ends up in bed with him. The narrator continues to conceal his name, appearance, and steps back from his own actions, describing them with impersonal verbs. A reader can only guess that the narrator is the very same writer who inebriated Flora just met at the party (she asked what his profession was and pronounced the first phrase of the novel in reply to his answer). Nabokov keeps complicating the structure of the narrative, by “smudging” the figure of the narrator, who is destroying himself. The character speaks with dislike about both her writer husband who receives her back from her lover at the end of the chapter, and about the profession of a writer itself. And at the same time she seduces another writer who is prone to self-destruction and who writes that scene and his novel “My Laura”, where he at least fictitiously destroys Flora and himself in the end, overcoming his own “self”. Possibly, the following remark of the narrator can be considered the quintessence of Nabokov’s narrative strategy in his last text: “Would the letters of my name do? Its recurrent “i” coinciding with our favorite pronoun suggested an elegant solution: [...] in an instant, [...] I could mark lightly by transverse marks the three divisions of my physical self: legs, torso, and head” (Nabokov, 2010). Considering Wild’s remark about recurring “i” in his name – Philip Wild – and its meaning “I”, we could suggest that “self-obliteration” of Philip Wild is metaphorically related to self-deletion of not only the narrator’s “self”, but also, the writer’s “self” in the text.

4 Summary

Therefore, it is obvious that the Nabokov’s narrative strategy in his English prose is getting significantly more expanded and complicated from “The Real Life of Sebastian Knight” to “The Original of Laura”. In all Nabokov’s novels, we can see that his narrative strategy aims at “multiplication” of his own doubles and deliberate concealment of the author’s “self” behind their masks. However, from creating fictitious narrators as portrayals of author’s masks within quasiepic narration pattern, often taking exaggerated and grotesquely attenuated forms, the prose writer moves on to play with narrators’ authenticity, showing their gradual self-obliteration. Thus, the writer is not only playing with his reader, but also playing with the concept of

possible “segregation” of the author’s image itself and identification of the “real” author based on the one present in the text.

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