

***Despair* by Vladimir Nabokov: the Transcendental Nature of the Narrative and Power of a Symbolic Language**

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Abstract

*The article aims at providing critical analysis of reviews related to the study of the novel *Despair* by V. Nabokov. It is stated in this article that the idea of “the murder of the double” doesn’t correlate with concrete action, psychological perversion, or the irony of the writer towards Dostoevsky. “The murder of a double” is in reality a metaphor for a complex and non-linear process of the creation of literary work. The encounter with a double could be considered a manifestation of an event related to mystical experience. The encounter of Hermann and Felix (and a further elimination of this encounter) correlates with an attempt to actualize in the text the extraordinary Different allusions, aesthetics and means allow to generate numerous extra meanings in the text which are related to the historical and cultural context of the time. An important research result is the study of a symbolic language developed by Nabokov which is manifested by lexical density, use of numerous homogeneous and heterogeneous attributes, multilingualism, precise attention to the sounds, eco-elements, and mirror-like elements, etc. This language is the basis of Nabokov’s art almost in a Heideggerian way, allowing the reader to generate a number of meanings, simultaneously being absorbed, in the process of reading and interpretation.*

Keywords: Nabokov, symbolic language, anti-narrative practices, irony, free reported speech, artistic value

1. Introduction: the plot and the research aims

Despair (in Russian “*Otchayaniye*”) is a novel by V. Nabokov that was first published in Russian in 1934 (the English version *Despair* appeared much later, in 1936). It is a 1st person narrative. The plot of the novel, as often happens with Nabokov’s prose, is strange, yet quite ordinary for the detective genre. The main character, Hermann, a Berlin entrepreneur, meets in the woods, quite by chance, a tramp called Felix, who he immediately considers to be his double. The affairs of the main character don’t go well and he decides to use the similarity with Felix in a criminal way. Hermann kills Felix, believing that Felix’s death will be taken by the authorities as his own death, and this could be used to his, Herman’s, benefit. Suddenly, it turns out that Herman and Felix have very little in common¹.

The aim of the article (based on research carried out with the use of biographical, semantic and structural analysis) is above all, a) to show the ability of Nabokov to create a feeling of mystical experience in the reader by means of introducing the Otherworld (mystical, trance-like border world), b) to analyze how the rigid structure of the novel corresponds to the general meanings generated by it. It is also important c) to view the structure of the novel related to the use of a symbolic language that the writer is composing. This language (characterized as free-reported speech, being lexically and syntactically dense) allows the reader to generate different meanings that work simultaneously. The reader gets fully absorbed by the text experiencing its powerful effect. The murder in the novel is related, as will be argued, less to the psychoanalytical domain, yet allows the reader to trace the process of human interaction as such, artistic creation, as well as specifying limitations of the

language, its inability to express certain meanings. It is also important to mention that the critique analyzed in the article at the beginning will be related to Nabokov's contemporaries, and later we shall refer to some of the contemporary English-speaking and Russian critics.

2. Literary criticism of *Despair* by Nabokov's contemporaries and some contemporary critics

It is important to mention that most of Nabokov's contemporaries criticized the novel, or interpreted it in a weird, or unusual way. The main interpretation of the novel was given by critics, the contemporaries of Nabokov, such as V. Veydle, Vl. Hodasevitch, G. Adamovitch, P. Bitzilli, and Jean Paul Sartre. O. Dyubankova points out that "even such delicate critics and writers of the Russian émigré world like Adamovitch, Georgy Ivanov, and Hodasevitch, didn't accept Nabokov's literary works, didn't acknowledge him" (Dyubankova 2008: 36) (translated by N.S.). And even "Hodasevitch is among his literary enemies from Montparnasse, a shrewd critic Adamovitch, as well as Ivanov, the creator of libel" (ibid.) (translated by N.S.) Very strong criticism of Nabokov was expressed by Amfiteatrov, in his letter to Mark Aldanov (18 February 1936). In this letter he states that he has read *Despair* by Sirin:

I didn't like it. Too pretentious, and is not convincing. His talent is evident, without any doubt, but the invalid has twisted too much, difficult to get back into the straight position.

(Melnikov 2013: 38) (translated by N.S.)

From different positive reviews in which Nabokov's complexity and non-linear perspectives are manifested, one could mention the article written by V. Veydle "*Sirin. Despair*". In his review V. Veydle points out the positive characteristics of the novel by Nabokov, as well as the evident and precious traits that characterize Nabokov's prose. For instance, he mentions that "the topic of Sirin's literary works is the artistic act", the main characters of his novels (*Despair*, *Luzhin's Defense*, *Invitation to the Beheading*) are "diverse and similar symbols of the creator, the painter, the poet" (Veydle 1936: 185-187). "Sirin's attention is not focused on the world around him, but on his own ego, which is doomed, as its artistic destiny dictates it, to reflect images, visions and apparitions of this world" (ibid.). "The unconscious or conscious sufferings of this ego, its powerless domineering role, its undesired power over things and people, (which in reality are neither things nor people, but the results of one's powerful creation), the vision of which he can't escape from), all of these factors (despite the differences) constitute the main subject matter in all his short stories and novels" (Veydle 1936: 187). The full commentary continues:

The visions of adolescence and the opposed soulless tumult of the city one could encounter in *Luzhin's Defense* and in *Despair*, but here, in *Despair*, they are connected with some sort of spiritual experience, which gives Sirin's literary work its own, almost sacred and private experience.

(Veydle 1936: 185-187) (translated by N.S.)

A positive assessment of the novel is also given by V. Hodasevitch who believes that *Despair* is a literary work that has a high level of meaningful significance as its content is the

description of the artistic act in any of its manifestations. The murder is a metaphor for literary work. That is what the critic writes about the main character Hermann, who is working on his idea of murder in the same fashion as “the painter is working on his creations”: “Hermann is an author and an artist”, “he is genuine and extremely critical to himself”, “and he dies from a unique mistake that he makes in the process of his creation, the work that takes all his effort”. “In the process of literary creation he allowed the audience, to understand and assess his creation”, “and was proud to suffer from the lack of acknowledgement”. “Despair arises as he is guilty of his mistakes himself, as he is just a talent, not a genius”. “Sirin called his character Hermann, but he could have called him more openly and sincerely - Salieri, instead” (Hodasevitch 1937: 120) (translated by N.S.). What is meant here is that Hermann is the character like Salieri feeling envious of Mozart’s (Felix’s) talent.

A famous interpretation given by Bitzilli in his articles “Renaissance of Allegory” is memorable and interesting. He compares Nabokov’s novel with literary works by Saltikov Shchedrin:

What if Hermann is Iudushka? Iudushka is a moral idiot in the direct sense of the word (“idiot” is a man who exists without anyone, without the milieu around him, in empty space, he is not a human being). For such a human being – not a human being – there is no difference between real people and the fruit of his imagination. Everyone and he himself are in the same place, where rules of logic just don’t exist.

(Bitzilli 2000: 213)

In his review of the French translation of *Despair* by Nabokov, J. P. Sartre, a famous philosopher writes a far stricter and illogical, as well as rude commentary about *Despair*. First he describes the plot of the novel in detail:

This author has plenty of talent, but he is the child of old parents — by which I intend to refer only to his spiritual parents, and specifically to Dostoevski: the hero of this strange miscarriage of a novel bears a less close resemblance to his double Felix than to the characters of ‘A Raw Youth’, ‘The Eternal Husband’, and ‘Notes from Underground’ [...] The difference is that, whereas Dostoevski believes in his characters, Mr Nabokov no longer believes in his, or for that matter in romantic art.

(Sartre in Page 1982: 65)

One should not trust cruel critique or, the other way round, far-fetched interpretations (which very often have little ground) of Nabokov’s prose. The freedom of interpretation is often determined by specific interests of researchers themselves, their experience and professional interests, regardless of the historical period.

G. Adamovitch writes that *Despair* is the best novel by Nabokov in which the “scheme of the storyline is appropriate and correct yet it exists separately from Hermann’s wonders, both existing in isolation” (Adamovitch 1931: 2) (translated by N.S.). Adamovitch believes that “the prose of Nabokov is similar to the sound of the wind whistle, that brings with itself a strange lightness” (ibid.) The observations given by G. Adamovitch are precise, yet he balances on the border of “positive” and “negative” assessment, opting for the negative one. However, in his descriptions one won’t find any attempt to interpret only the plot. G. Adamovitch finds in Nabokov’s prose what other critics just ignore, his lack of an ordinary

approach, strangeness, and complexity. (This tradition of interpretation is continued by contemporary critics and is discussed further in the article)

It is important to mention that literary allusions spotted in the text sometimes significantly limit the interpretation. More recent research by Dematagoda (2017: 89) and especially the work by Tselkova (2011: 126-147) attempt to argue that the novel is a conscious critique of Dostoevsky, a combat with the *Crime and Punishment* tradition. This interpretation limits Nabokov's writing and makes it deductive, which would be too much of a simple tool. However, to deny references to the literary works by Dostoevsky in Nabokov's prose, would be incorrect. The Dostoevsky theme was introduced by Boyd (1990: 382-390) who states that original title of the novel was *Zapiski Mistificatora (Notes of a Hoaxer)* (ibid.: 383). "Self is the key word. Where Hermann sees his crimes as work of art, imagination passes as it were beyond the boundaries of the self to enter into other life: another time, another place, another mind" (ibid.: 384). Therefore, the motive of an artist intruding the reality of another person for the sake of art creation is obvious here.

A similar assessment could be attached to research that attempts to boil down the novel to the psychoanalytical domain (Orisheva 2011: 92-107), as this interpretation will always be questionable. However, it is impossible not to take the literary psychoanalytical view into account. The language and the plot are the means of revealing the subconscious, and though "combat with the Other" is only one of the topics developed in the novel, it is unavoidable that the Austrian or German tradition will come into play when having a closer look at the text (Orisheva 2011: 92-99). The novel and the precision with which the author writes about the murder give rise to a number of culturally determined topics (related to Freud and Lacan), especially if one takes into account the fact that Hermann is German and the action takes place in Germany. The shadow of psychoanalysis therefore is another dimension of the novel that is seen through the references to Felix, and the murder being the core intrigue of the book.

B. Boyd (1990) provides a classical, most elaborate account of Nabokov's texts. J. Connolly (1992) addresses the reader and discovers more beyond the plot. A. Field (1977) opts for biographical details. V. Alexandrov (1991), A. Dolinin (1995, 2004), S. Davidov (2004) (who famously wrote more about the structure of the novel and gave a detailed account of its symmetric structure) are very attentive to every detail of the text, they attempt to see much beyond it. For instance, some of the critics introduce the notion of the Otherworld (Alexandrov 1991) and view the multi-world phenomenon as incorporated in the novel. This multi-world forms the gnostic nature of Nabokov's texts, reveal the metaphysical dimension behind any manifestation of the author's genius.

3. The structure and the meaning

3.1. The narrative and the novel structure

Indeed, for Nabokov the "organizational structure" of the novel, as well as "its sound and hue" (the "sound of the wind whistle") are very important. In his lectures on Russian literature, Nabokov often talked about such peculiarities. He wrote that one of the short stories by Chekhov is based on the syntax of the waves, on the hues of their mood. Yet the world of Gorky for Nabokov seemed to consist of molecules. Nabokov also mentioned that

the world of waves is far closer to contemporary scientific understanding of the Universe structure (Lectures on Russian literature) (Nabokov 1999: 337-338).

Following A. Dolinin and other researchers, one could talk about different connections between literary works by Nabokov and modernist literature. Yet the connections are isomorphic, eco-like, as they are similar in form, and have similar “hue and sound of the narrative”.

For instance, one could see similarities between the prose by Nabokov and short stories by A. Chekhov and I. Bunin. Anton Chekhov’s famous short story we are about to analyze is called *At Christmas Time* (*Na svyatkah* 1900). In it the main idea is to show that understanding occurs or could occur without words. In the same way, one finds references in the prose by Nabokov to stories written by Bunin (*Shrove Monday, Light Breathing, Dreams of Chang*). In these stories the domineering motives are the encounter with eternity, “the third truth”, the breath of the unknown that “flies from the pages of the book”. Bunin, for the first time in the Russian history, actually developed the narrative (as opposed to the plot and stated by Vigotsky). Nabokov writes in a similar tradition, discussing the problems of one’s connection to eternity, being its humble “witness” and never an intruder. Therefore, to analyze the meaning of the novel, it is highly important to consider the hue of narration, the sound of it, the texture, the volume of interpretation, the myriad of extra meanings that come into play in the process of reading, and even the sounds of the wind.

The most famous classical research on Nabokov’s texts, including B. Boyd (1990), J. Connolly (1992), A. Field (1977), V. Alexandrov (1991), S. Dolinin (1995)² and many others generally point at a far more philosophical view of the novels by Nabokov. The combination of the cosmic structure, the special “hue of the narrative”, the twisted plot, the language and experiments with it. account for the multi-level hierarchy of Nabokov’s texts, their complexity and well thought out organization.

The research on Nabokov carried out by E. Pivanova and published in the book *Harmony of fiction in meta-poetry by V. Nabokov* (Pivanova 2008: 70), continues the tradition of S. Davidov who expressed his views in another famous research book *Teksti matreshki Vladimira Nabokova* (2004). S. Davidov’s dwells on the structural assembly of Nabokov’s texts, the structurally determined play of doubles, and mirror-like prose features, etc. Following the tradition of structural analysis, extending its scale, E. Pivanova points out the cosmic structure of the works by Nabokov. Pivanova’s ideas about a vicious circle which is a symbol of vicious practice, advocate Nabokov’s views about the spiral concept. This is how Nabokov writes about the spiral:

Spiral is far more spiritual than the circle. In it, having been freed from the two-dimensional world, the circle stops being vicious. An idea came to my mind when I was a student, that such a famous Hegelian triad, so popular in Russia, is in reality the natural spiral nature of things in relation to time.

(Cited in Pivanova 2008: 134)

As E. Pivanova mentions, the vicious nature of circles is related to the lack of dynamism, characteristic of the spiral which in mathematics belongs to the transcendental. The idiom “vicious circle” is borrowed from logics, in which it is treated as a logical mistake, as any idea is proven by means of the other, also to be proved. For Nabokov, his ideas and prose are the harmony of creation, as life is also about the harmony of the world: “How one could talk about labour of the author, when one talks about the mathematical harmony, movement of planets, natural laws?” (Nabokov 1990, Volume 3: 406).

The mystical nature of Nabokov's novels, the rigid text organization, and elaborated language are described and analyzed in the dissertation by R. Sardi (2013) in which the author also assembles a marvelous collection of possible intertextual references in Nabokov's texts. The author refers to Victorian British allusions and makes many other interesting discoveries (including allusions to Khubla Khan, etc.). A very strong point of the dissertation is the quest for (and further rejection of) what is coined the Otherworld (Alexandrov's term developed in *Nabokov's Otherworld 1991*). Sardi finds the Otherworld as having limitations and introduces the concept of "cosmic synchronization" which is "clearly the most fundamental element scattered throughout Nabokov's prose, though the term itself is first introduced in *Speak, Memory*" (Sardi 2013: 32-46).

3.2. Narrative of total memory recall and mystical experience

Following the tradition of Alexandrov (1991) and Dolinin (1995) (in a sense of being profoundly absorbed with the text and the cultural heritage), B.V. Averin (1999) in his article "Recollections in Nabokov and Florensky" (chapter in the book *Dar Mnemozini (novels by Nabokov in the context of Russian auto-biographical tradition)*) writes that childhood for Nabokov was heaven that had been lost with his Motherland, the happiest, best time in his life, the object of constant zest and craving, that "rolled above the abyss". The most important things to consider about Nabokov's prose is the "acuteness of his visual and hearing memory", and the importance that he attached to this natural peculiarity. The acuteness of impressions, the ability to use the language and fix its richness in its diversity, the abundance of nuances. It is quite natural that the narrator in *Despair* says that, "what the artist perceives is, primarily, the difference between things. It is the vulgar who note their resemblance". Such acute impressions help to understand why for Nabokov the direct address to the "last or remote questions of existence" were impossible. B.V. Averin (1999) gives an example from *Real Life of Sebastian Knight* in which the main character comes to his dying brother to listen to the last death-bed secret, but he doesn't see his brother alive. "Not getting to hospital on time the character understands that the desire to find out about this secret or mystery has passed away, as it is not important any longer". "He understands that the secret is not necessary before he finds out it is also unattainable". "According to Nabokov, in this internal refusal from his desire to pursue the secret, there lies the chastity of the character. The substitution of the secret is the understanding of something important (which is not stated directly or explicitly in the text), this is the idea that comes to the character's mind when he sits by the bed of an ill person". Therefore, Averin (1999) points out a very important moment of the "obscenity" of a direct view of the secret foundations of existence, and the preference for an indirect view, a "witness-like" participation in the event.

Averin compares the ideas of Pavel Florensky to those of Nabokov:

The existence in its essence has a mystery and it doesn't want to be revealed by means of someone's work. The surface of life that is allowed to talk about. is thin and transparent, most important things should not be seen in light. It is very tempting to get to know this world but one is allowed to do it only by means of ear dropping, eye catching, by means of "illegitimate discourse", the term that Plato used to describe the cognition of the primary darkness of the matter, but not with explicit syllogisms.

(Averin 2003) (translated by N.S.)

For P. Florensky and for V. Nabokov, the validity of the person could be seen only through the validity of his identity. This validity is not given at different moments of a person's life yet revealed when one finishes one's life (on a macro-level). On the micro-level though, there is a principle of repetitions in the novel, that Nabokov is so fond of: "The construction of the majority of Nabokov's narratives repeats this chaotic picture of reality... Only in the course of reading, the plot reveals itself" (Averin 2003: 296). The connection between the idea of eternity and the repetition pattern is revealed in the episode with the dream. Hermann sees a dream which gives a certain understanding of the novel. The dream repeats itself, and in the dream he sees the room:

For several years I was haunted by a very singular and very nasty dream: I dreamt I was standing in the middle of a long passage with a door at the bottom, and passionately wanting, but not daring to go and open it, and then deciding at last to go, which I accordingly did, but at once awoke with a groan, for what I saw there was unimaginably terrible; to wit, a perfectly empty, newly whitewashed room – not as a first item of furniture but as though somebody had brought it to climb upon it and fix a bit of drapery.

(ibid.)

When analyzing this dream B.V. Averin states that in the Russian tradition there are only two definitions of the eternity. One is given by Leo Tolstoy in relation to Andrey Bolkonsky ("to die means to wake up"), and the other one is given by Svidrigaylov, the famous character invented by Dostoevsky, it is about eternity that is like a small room, "reminding one of the Russian "bathhouse".

The main character in the novel by Nabokov is confronted not only with the criticism of literary works of the century, but becomes a witness of a mystical experience, a mysterious event that reveals itself when the main character confronts the supernatural. People's relationships adhere to the movement of planets Nabokov has never been a very religious person, yet for him, as it was relevant for all the poets of the Silver Age, mystical experience became very important. In the case of *Despair*, the narrator is hinting at something that exists beyond this world, as if it is light "at the end of the tunnel, or something beyond the text itself". Following the plot, you find out that two people (Herman and Felix) meet and then at some point the main character is left on his own. Some critics even mention the dates of their meetings with precision (9th May, 1st October, 9th March). For instance, Davidov (2004) explains that the plot is based on the mirror-like reflections of dates that correspond to encounters between the characters and that Hermann structures his story as having 10 chapters and a happy ending, which in a way is similar to having a solitaire game (cards) readily made (Davidov 2004: 120).

The spiral is a constant movement, it requires change, and the meaning is in dynamics. The idea of murder is the idea of elimination, that puts an end to the vicious circle on the metaphorical level, the character gets to the new stage of development after his encounter with Felix (something important, something that takes all Hermann's thoughts). In a way there is no murder in the book. Hermann might be seen as a Pushkin character (the one who looks with attention at playing cards, and to whom at the end of the play the card is talking to!) This is the play of meanings and allusions. But if for the characters the game is about the beginning and end, for the Creator everything is co-existing and almost unified, undivided. The Creator can't divide (the way that Adam and Eve are separated in the context of the subject and the object existing separately). The Creator overwhelms everything. And the

narrator (the author) partially takes the responsibilities of the Creator. He can't deny his character eternity, and, thus, he eliminates the character from the text. The murder therefore is not a massacre, just a textual and structural trick.

3.3. *Developing a symbolic language*

Language and its capacity

By using the term “symbolic language” I will refer, firstly, to its polyphonic capacity to generate different (sometimes self-exclusive meanings) and, secondly, to the term introduced by Charles Peirce (Kiryushenko 2008) who in his semiotic theory talked about three types of signs (indexes, symbols and icons). The term “symbolic”, therefore, refers to the arbitrary nature of language. He basically refers to any possible or imagined referent which could then obtain any possible meaning, thus “behaving” in the post-structural fashion. The overwhelming power of Nabokov's language is in its so-called “seesaw principle” which refers to the capacity of the phrase to be read “from left to right” and “from right to left” (Ryaguzova 2002: 480-481). The language developed by Nabokov is used to convey even more than the author originally intended: the allusions and multi-language principle allow the texts to become multi-dimensional and relate to the universal laws.

On language “distortions” in Nabokov's texts

For Nabokov it is not only the structure of the narrative that resembles or adheres to cosmic synchronization, it is the language itself that possesses unique qualities. Nabokov consciously distorts some of the norms of the English language in his later novels (for instance, uses many non-verbal sentences, introduces non-existing word combinations, combines roots of words from different languages in the fashion that Joyce does in his *Finnegan's Wake*, and operates with a number of languages (multilingualism). Nabokov's language is characterized by high lexical density. He uses punctuation marks in a special way attaching more importance to them than it is done usually and breaks or distorts the rhythm of the narrative as composers of post-avantgarde music do. It is highly important to mention here that language distortions or modifications are used by writers in a similar fashion as icon-painters use the reverse perspective, to allow the Otherworld to be seen and manifested by means of language modifications (see Lavrova, Shcherbak 2015). Nabokov pays special attention to details which otherwise would have remained unattended.

Let us consider the example:

He was a man of my age, lank, dirty, with a three days' stubble on his chin; there was a narrow glimpse of pink flesh between the lower edge of his collar (soft, with two round slits meant for an absent pin) and the upper end of his shirt. His thin-knitted tie dangled sideways, and there was not a button to his shirt front. A few pale violets were fading in his buttonhole; one of them had got loose and hung head downward. Near him lay a shabby knapsack; an opened flap revealed a pretzel and the greater part of a sausage with the usual connotations of ill-timed lust and brutal amputation. I sat examining the tramp with astonishment; he seemed to have donned that gawky disguise for an old-fashioned slumkin-lumpkin fancy dress ball.

(Nabokov 1981: 9-176)

In the above extract, we see that the author is using a number of homogeneous attributes (lank, dirty, with a three days' stubble on his chin), he not only uses specific details

(there was a narrow glimpse of pink flesh between the lower edge of his collar), he also specifies the way the collar feels (soft, with two round slits meant for an absent pin) and the upper end of his shirt). Then the author continues with precision describing Felix (his thin-knitted tie dangled sideways), he uses certain echo-elements and repeats consonants ("n", "nt", "ng", mirror-like repetitions in "thin-knitted"). The further details not only reveal the shape of objects but their colour also, the touch, their general view (a few pale violets were fading in his buttonhole; one of them had got loose and hung head downward). The next bit of the text is aggravated by a vibrant "a shabby knapsack" which "revealed a pretzel and the greater part of a sausage with the usual connotations of ill-timed lust and brutal amputation", that is a description in which the word is already treated as an important tool of the author's world creation, introducing the metalinguistic dimension into the text.

Special optics and focus on detail, exophoric reference

One more characteristic of the symbolic language used by Nabokov is seen in the description of details, for instance, in the extract about the post the main character is observing. What is revealing about the description? What is shown in the text is certainly not the image of a post, yet something else, very important, as if "hidden" behind the post mark:

That yellow post [...] Erected by the man selling the allotments, sticking up in brilliant solitude, an errant brother of those other painted posts, which, seventeen kilometers farther toward the village of Waldau, stood sentinel over more tempting and expensive acres, that particular landmark subsequently became a fixed idea with me. Cut out clearly in yellow, amid a diffuse landscape, it stood up in my dreams. By its position my fancies found their bearings. All my thoughts reverted to it. It shone, a faithful beacon, in the darkness of my speculations. I have the feeling today that I recognized it, when seeing it for the first time: familiar to me as a thing of the future. Perhaps I am mistaken; perhaps the glance I gave it was quite an indifferent one, my sole concern being not to scrape the mudguard against it while turning; but all the same, today as I recall it, I cannot separate that first acquaintanceship from its mature development.

(ibid.)

In this extract it is clearly seen that, firstly, the narrator is simultaneously occupying different positions in time and space (realized in the text as "first acquaintanceship", "a thing of the future", "have a feeling today", "as I recall it", "mature development", "my thought reverted to it", "17 kilometers father"). The narrator is located a) in the time and space subsystem from where he is recalling events, and b) he is at the time and space subsystem in which those events occurred. Secondly, the narrator refers to the time and space subsystems that exist **beyond** the text (exophoric reference), as "the yellow post" could refer to any object, view or idea, perceived by the character as unique.

Free indirect speech, the separation and union of the character and the narrator

One more example of the special type of discourse that Nabokov's prose is characterized by is coined by critics as "free indirect speech". According to the opinion of Paducheva, a famous Russian linguist, Nabokov uses this type of discourse very often: it is the narrator in the 3d person who partially allows the character the right of the speech act, as in the example from a later novel *Ada or Ardour: A family chronicle* "Does he remember the elms?" (Nabokov 1969: 40) or from *Despair* "And then, thought I, was not I, who knew and liked my own face" (on "free reported speech" see Paducheva 2005: 2). This type of discourse allows

us to separate and unite the character and the narrator making them one entity and then dividing them into two isolated instances, which contributes to the notion of heterogeneity of Nabokov's texts and explains how different time and space subsystems (possible, invented, imagined) work in practice. The relative nature of time and space subsystems is a post-modern technique which was rarely present in the traditional narrative and serves as a special tool to develop a new type of discourse (coined by us as "symbolic language" property).

Characters are like words and signs

Another example of the process of the conscious development of a symbolic language by Nabokov is in the author's ability to use main characters as if they were letters or symbols (or even signs). Characters in Nabokov's novels are like playing cards, they do not develop or have any dramatic attributes, but they act as if they are symbols or signs themselves that could be assembled in any possible combination.

This is how Hermann, the narrator, is talking about his wife at the beginning of the novel. He is describing her with an attention of a scientist, an entomologist. In this description one could see not only the statement of numerous drawbacks, but manifestation of warmth and tenderness, yet the vector of his tender attitude might be pointing in any direction, referring to almost anyone. The referent becomes vague³. The image of Lydia, Hermann's wife is similar to the image of Lolita's mother, who is one of the possible manifestations of Lolita herself. Lolita's mother gets knocked down by a car at the beginning of the novel *Lolita*, to leave the main character with Lolita. Any female image in *Lolita* is related to the image of Lolita, as the image of Humbert is much better seen against the image of Quilty. Thus, any image or character in *Despair* is related to the image of Hermann and his wife.

Nabokov assembles his characters into different kinds of combinations. His characters are connected to one another, and then they again become separated from each other like atoms, sometimes they could split again! Their energetic potential is similar to that of the wind or the movement of waves. Common mechanisms of image creation do not work when analyzing the prose by Nabokov, because all of his characters are related to each other like water molecules, or water drops in sea air. Characters like feelings are characterized by fluidity and could interact with each other and get into different patterns.

The narrator is introducing his wife to the reader:

And, there, in my world of neatness and cleanliness, the disorder Lydia spread, the sweet vulgar tang of her perfume. But her faults, her innocent dullness, her school-dormitory habit of having the giggles in bed, did not really annoy me. We never quarreled, never did I make a single complaint to her – no matter what piffle she spouted in public, or how tastelessly she dressed. She was anything but good at distinguishing shades, poor soul. She thought it just right if the main colors matched, this satisfying thoroughly her sense of tone, and so she would flaunt a hat of grass-green felt with an olive-green or eau de Nil dress. She liked everything to be echoed". If, for instance, the sash was black, then she found it absolutely necessary to have some little black fringe or little black frill about her throat. In the first years of our married life she used to wear linen with Swiss embroidery. She was perfectly capable of putting on a wispy frock together with thick autumn shoes, no, decidedly she had not the faintest notion of the mysteries of harmony, and this was connected with her being wretchedly untidy.

(Nabokov 1981: 9-176)

What does this extract refer to? Having “deceived the reader” (as if stating Hermann doesn’t love her as she is not good at distinguishing shades, poor soul!), the text occupies the reader’s attention again, drawing attention to endless detail, including the colour of the hat, the smell and the brand of the dress, and the inability to match clothing in a proper way. The author continues further, as the narrator explicitly admits the feelings towards his wife:

I sometimes used to ask myself, what on Earth did I love her for? Maybe for the warm hazel iris of her fluffy eyes, or for the natural side-wave of her brown hair, done anyhow, or again for that movement of her plump shoulders. But probably the truth was that I love her because she loved me. To her I was the ideal man: brains, pluck. And there was none dressed better. I remember once, when I put on that new dinner jacket, with the vast trousers, she clasped her hands, sank down in a chair and murmured: “Oh, Hermann...” It was ravishment bordering upon something like heavenly woe.

(Nabokov 1981: 9-176)

The fragment shows clear correlation of opposing feelings, “similarity and difference”, “love and not love”, “trust and deceit”. It is far more difficult to see similarities than differences, it is more difficult to see the drawbacks and yet to accept them to the full, instead of admiring the other, like it was in the times of Romanticism. It is more difficult to render the dynamics of feelings, not their stone-like stability. Hermann is not a romantic, yet he is precise in his understanding of love, as opposed to those who believe that one could love only the handsome and the wise. Why isn’t the character who is confessing so sincerely worthy of the reader’s attention? Because the author hinted himself he didn’t like him? What if he lied?

The text continues:

I took advantage of her confidence and during the ten years we lived together told her such a heap of lies about myself, my past, my adventure, that it would have been beyond my powers to hold it all in my head, always ready for reference.

(ibid.)

The narrator confesses that he is not sincere with his wife. At times you get the feeling of how sinister the main character is. And then the mystery reveals itself again, this time it is almost mentioned by Hermann explicitly:

Her love almost crossed the boundary limiting all the rest of her feelings. On certain nights, when June and moon rhymed, her most settled thoughts turned into most timid nomads. It didn’t last, they did not wander far, the world was locked again; and a very simple world it was, with the greatest complication in it amounting to a search for telephone number which she had jotted down on one of the pages of a library book, borrowed by the very person whom she wished to ring up.

(ibid.)

In this extract Hermann analyzes his wife’s love. The text could have been taken as describing the quite primitive world of Hermann’s wife, if not for the phrase that turns the whole passage upside down. It lies in the words “almost crossed the boundary”. The attitude of Lydia to Hermann, or the attitude of Hermann to Lydia cross the boundaries of the text, or breach the norms of ordinary feelings (the author states this implicitly by merely metaphorically stating that there are certain boundaries!) And though any critic might well

argue that the text states the opposite. That is the mediocrity of Hermann's wife. It is far more fruitful, we believe, to consider the narrator as person who describes, above all, an ideal world of the two, their illogical yet well existing harmony, their occasional "get away from the harmony", and "peaceful return there" (the words about "the telephone number disappearing being jotted down in a book that was given to someone else" hint at the lack of constant order, manifesting the intrusion of other forces, well beyond this world organization).

A parallel to the description of Hermann's wife is this reference to Felix:

May passed, and in my mind the memory of Felix healed up. I note for my own pleasure the smooth run of that sentence: the banal narratory tone of the first two words, and then that long sigh of imbecile contentment. Sensation lovers, however, might be interested to observe that, generally speaking, the term "heal up" is employed only when alluding to wounds.

(ibid.)

The narrator recalls or recollects something (in my mind the memory of Felix healed up). Something very important? Eternal? Event? Felix is somebody so important for Hermann that he even can't express why. Is he his double? His happy reincarnation? The fact of the encounter is more important than any details or explanations. The encounter with Felix left a wound that is what Hermann states, it is some sort of connection to the matter of a more refined kind. That is why Hermann can't tell his wife about this important event.

There are a few other episodes in which, for instance, Hermann understands that a letter he wrote to Felix was written to himself. It is again a manifestation of co-existence of one character in the other. On a different level, this is, above all, about the problems of any creative act, successful or unsuccessful communication, and ability to talk about events, etc. One's personal experience is unique, yet for other people it could be "just a letter from your tax inspector"⁴.

Writing is art

One more important point. Why the formula "killing the Other" and how does it relate to the notion of "symbolic language? The quotation from the text follows:

And vous – and you?" – the doctor was saying to me, "what do you think of this subject?" "What subject?" I asked. "We were speaking", said the doctor, "of that murder, chez vous, in Germany. What a monster a man must be" – he went on, anticipating an interesting discussion – "to insure his life and then take another's –

(Nabokov 1981: 9-176)

The interpretation of this extract should be on multiple levels. The one that comes to mind immediately is related to ideas expressed by Derrida in his work *the Gift of Death* (1996). According to the famous poststructuralist, "gift of death" is the only instance of gift that doesn't demand anything in return. Derrida was not writing about a murder or evil, yet expressed his idea that the Gift of Death seems to be a metaphor of delicate balancing on the edge of existence, in many ways similar to the polyphonic nature of sign.⁵ Death which Hermann experiences with Felix or might experience hypothetically with anyone else in a different dimension. The context is not important. The play of life and death and the balancing between the two states, on the border of understanding, close to the failure of

communication, winning and losing. The idea of coming into a different state and the manifestation of a myriad of endless possibilities – these are the main motives of the novel *Despair*. Related to that, is the idea about the difficulties of constructing any art object (or writing a novel). Different media (a film) seems to be a different form of the narrative explored. The process of film shooting is similar to the murder act. The photograph takes away the subject, as it aims at stopping the moment and getting full possession of it. It allows us to substitute one person for another (or the other). The film also allows the creator to “jump out” of the character and look at oneself at a distance.

4. Conclusion

Nabokov builds up a landscape of the character’s experience. One could see in it what can’t be expressed but what could be hinted at. Anti-narrative practices developed by Nabokov (that is a symbolic language, slightly distorted or aggravated, different from the norm, with a use of seesaw principle and endless connotations that it allows for) could be compared to meeting the Other, hence, and above all, yourself. The idea of a murder takes the reader’s attention and is nothing more than that. However, implicitly, the story turns into a narrative about art creation, or any attempt to develop discourse. *Despair* is not about being upset, and it might be interpreted as an aspiration for the resurrection (as in a famous prayer “Aspire to the Resurrection of the Dead”). The meaning does not lie in sadness. It is a possible encounter with the eternal, the revisiting of the eternity, an instance of isolation and then re-acquisition of the body and soul. The language developed by Nabokov contributes to this notion. By using highly detailed descriptions, complex syntax, and drawing attention to unpredictable details Nabokov constructs a world in miniature that adheres to its complex, fundamental laws. This allows is to completely absorb the reader’s attention and generate new meanings. Characters introduced by Nabokov are often of simple nature (yet described in detail) and act as cards or symbols (or signs) that the narrator (as if a conjuror) is playing with.

Notes

¹ Nabokov wrote an introduction to the American edition of *Despair* in 1965. He writes that the novel *Despair* was written in Berlin, in 1932, and in 1934 it was published in *Sovremenniy Zapiski*, in 1936 it was published by the Berlin editing house “Petropolis” as a separate edition. Nabokov notes that “at the end of 1936, while I was still living in Berlin – where another beastliness had started to megaphone – I translated *Otchayanie* for a London publisher”. “*Despair*, in kinship with the rest of my books, has no social comment to make, no message to bring in his teeth. It doesn’t uplift the spiritual organ of man, not does it show humanity the right exit. It contains far fewer ‘ideas’ than do those rich vulgar novels that are acclaimed so hysterically in the short echo-walk between the ballyhoo and the hoot”. “The book has less White-Russian appeal than have my other émigré novels, hence it will be less puzzling and irritating to those readers who have been brought up on the leftist propaganda of the thirties. Plain readers, on the other hand, will welcome its plain structure and pleasing plot – which, however, is not quite as familiar as the writer of the rude letter to Chapter Eleven assumes it to be. There are many entertaining conversations throughout the book, and the final scene with Felix in the wintry woods is of course great fun”. Then Nabokov writes that Hermann and Humbert (the main character of the novel *Lolita*) are similar and that both of them are “neurotic scoundrels”, and he also mentions that in the novel “the line and fragments of lines Hermann mutters

in Chapter Four come from Pushkin's short poem addressed to his wife in the eighteen-thirties". The poem in the text of the Introduction is given at its full length, the introduction to the American edition is written in Montreux, on the 1st March 1965. Nabokov finishes the introduction with the words referring to the question of whether Hermann was successful in shooting the film: "I cannot even recall if that film he proposed to direct was ever made by him".

² B. Boyd (1990) generally gives a classical interpretation of Nabokov's texts. For instance, the treatment of *Despair* is considering the allusions to Dostoevsky and his style, as well as treating the subject of "art for the art's sake" or "art is murder". J. Connolly (1992) generally looks at the philosophical content of Nabokov's novels, whereas A. Field (1977) is famous for his biographical details of Nabokov's life. V. Alexandrov (1991) generally combines the study of the philosophical meanings of the texts as well as its structure, in this research we refer to his notion of Otherworld, that allows to see the mystical side of Nabokov's texts, though Averin's comparison of Nabokov's texts to Florensky seems to me more profound and closer to the Russian tradition. Dolinin's (1995) view of *Despair* is very similar to that of Adamovitch in the sense that he is very careful about finding out the only motive or the only way of interpreting texts, opting for more complex approach.

³ By saying "referent becomes vague" I consciously compare the character of the novel with a letter or a word (sign), as the character (Lydia) could refer not only to the wife of Hermann but to any other characters including Felix. This endophoric quality of Nabokov's words and characters becomes evident when you take into account endless play of doubles, mirror-like reflections of letters and words, general tendency of characters to reflect, resemble and at the same time oppose one another.

⁴ Similarly, in the novel by Ezhi Sosnovsky "Apokryf Aglai" the author is describing the main character, the musician, who believes to have found the woman of his dream, who fits all his wishes, and is surprised to find out that during their love scenes she was manipulated at a distance by 10 professionals as in the reality of the novel she is just a mechanical doll – thus the author stating the impossibility of our dreams fulfillment in real life.

⁵ Derrida and his idea of "difference" is the key to the theory of Deconstruction. *Gift of Death* is a philosophical work that refers to fundamental issues of existence, like Death and Life, but this view is in many ways related to the idea of "difference" that states the unstable nature of sign, and its ability to refer to different object. Nabokov unites the plane of life (ethical) when describing the actions of characters as well as the plane of the text (meta-textual, aesthetical) when playing with the language ability to signify many things and refer to different motives simultaneously.

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Роман «Отчаяние» Владимира Набокова: трансцендентная природа постмодернистского нарратива и символический язык

Аннотация: В статье проведен анализ критических работ и рецензий, связанных с исследованием и изучением романа «Отчаяние» Вл. Набокова. Нам представляется, вслед за рядом других исследователей, что основная идея сюжетного хода – «убийство двойника» соразмерно вовсе не с конкретным действием, психологической подоплекой, иронией в отношении Достоевского, а является метафорой «комплексного, неоднозначного процесса создания художественного произведения», или может считаться манифестацией «события», связанного с мистическим опытом, «приоткрытием завесы бытия». Встреча Германа и Феликса (и дальнейшее устранение этой встречи) соразмерна попытке актуализации в тексте чудесного, чудного, божественного, космического. «Встреча», «слияние», «расхождение» главных героев является одним из способов передачи мистического опыта, тайна которого реализуется имплицитно. Богатство аллюзий, художественных средств выражения позволяет генерировать множество дополнительных смыслов, связанных с общеисторическим контекстом.

Ключевые слова: нарратив, анти-нарративные практики, манифестация события, творчество Набокова, символический язык

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