

Transnational Nabokov: Romanian Appropriations

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Résumé: On est d'accord que si tout écrit est dans son essence un testament (Derrida), les lecteurs participants à la lecture s'engagent à découvrir ce que l'écrivain a imaginé pour chacun d'eux. Cela devient plus évident dans les nombreuses appropriations transnationales des écrivains qui sont entrés dans l'inconscient collectif. Dans cet article nous nous proposons de discuter trois appropriations roumaines de Nabokov (adaptation pour la scène de *Lolita* en 2002 par Catalina Buzoianu), le roman *La jeune fille* par Mihai Zamfir, 2003 et la nouvelle de M. Cărtărescu *Nabokov à Brasov*, 2005). Ce sont des exemples qui nous montrent comment l'écriture des grands écrivains se situe entre le culturel et l'esthétique. Notre position est que ces appropriations sont bénéfiques car elles constituent un double - code pour comprendre le présent puisqu'elles font possible la rencontre entre l'esthétique et l'éthique à travers l'histoire et la politique. Le roumain Nabokov, tout comme l'original, pose des questions incommodes sur le changement temporel et historique, globalisation culturelle, fluidité, ambivalence et indécidabilité.

Mots-clés : appropriations transnationales, l'inconscient collectif, l'esthétique

Introduction: Nabokov vs. the materialists

On Foucault's account of Deleuze and Guattari's project in *Anti-Oedipus*, any idea of system (genre included) would be 'fascist' in so far as the ultimate aim of systems is to discipline human desires by subjecting them, subtly or otherwise, to regimes of prohibitions. We can then read Nabokov's novels as an indirect response to Foucault's insistence to "[p]refer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems", "to believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic" — which Foucault, in fact, considers to be the political lesson or the ethics of *Anti-Oedipus* (Preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, 109). Such views crisscross Nabokov's whole work which can well read as an indictment against any authoritarian control of language or personal life, thus yielding light on his 'politics of truth vs. power' he understood to play in the face of all cultural materialists and new historicists. Nabokov's celebration of the apolitical, ahistorical "twinkle" of true creativity may be part of the writer's game to resist the gloomy views that art and artist are necessarily determined by the encompassing world. In "The Art of Literature and Common Sense," Nabokov admits that, "there is nothing dictators hate so much as the unassailable, eternally elusive, eternally provoking gleam," only poets can be capable of (*Lectures on Literature*, 377-8). Paradoxically, while a declaration of independence from culture through culture, Nabokov's writing continues to tell the story of political inventiveness as ultimate form of terrorism in this precarious world economy of ours. Just as in his Berlin days he saw that the return of émigrés to the Soviet Union was a "tragedy of errors," so during his years in the USA, Nabokov never succumbed to the influence of those American intellectuals whose attitude to the "torture house" (*Pnin*, 113) of Stalinist Russia was a mixture of cover-up, apologetics, and self-imposed blindness. So, very much like Pnin, Nabokov would rather "believe... in a democracy of ghosts...attend[ing] to the destinies of the quick" (*Pnin*, 113), than in one proposed by those American intellectuals William O'Neill's book *A Better World* (1983) will discuss. His horror of cruelty and violence looming all around is the basic structure of the huge aporia of sadness his work unravels. Nabokov's every novel, not unlike Adorno in his aesthetic theory, is a preserver of beauty, goodness, fragility, enigma, as an admonitory testimony to the eloquence of suffering as well as its powers of horror. His ethical awareness comes to an understanding that life in the other world is only significant insofar as it affects those living in this world. That is why the Nabokov option is always for an intricate design meant to project a vision of liberty from beneath the bars of a world of cages. The 'banality of evil' is, in Nabokov's case, the "aesthete's shudder," since the one capable of debating evil, which is unspeakable, can only be morally lost, "adrift in a limbo of ethical abstraction," as Michael Wood observes (1995: 64).

Politics with Nabokov is evidence of ‘interruption’ of life, while art is evidence of continuation. As his style bears witness, Nabokov insists throughout his work, on the capacity of consciousness to dart about, to question any convention or assumption, to see things from some other side. And that has its own political value: Nabokov proclaims allegiance to democracy as a way of life that defends the individual from the pressure of politics; he declares himself on the side of “other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (“On a Book Entitled *Lolita*,” 315), allowing “curiosity [to be] insubordination in its purest form” (*Bend Sinister*, 47).

Nabokov in Romania or a magician’s dream of himself

When actuality goes astray, fiction is there not to discover, or cover the facts, or even console anyone, but rather uncover distinctions/differences/details that generally pass unnoticed. When in the 1980 Romania, a handful of critics dedicated the World Literature Magazine *Secolul 20/ The 20th Century* to Nabokov, irrespective of text choices in the magazine, they smuggled in normality/ liberty/ defiance in front of a totalitarian/ authoritarian/ criminal regime which was then in full swing. Did we then feel accomplice to the critics’ enterprise? Did we then feel the aesthete’s shudder in front of the trauma humanity has kept aggravating? Such rhetorical questions are not of those times, these times, all times. They belong with an ‘ironist culture’ (Rorty’s term), and share the same prerequisites with Elias Canetti’s question from *Die Blendung/ The Deception* (1935) about whether there is one specimen of all the critics, theorists, academics-at-large who might have ever been ashamed of their having made a comfortable living out of the life of a poet/writer whose life was just misfortune and deprivation. The question is as legitimate as troubling in its legitimacy.

Out of the answerable questions connected to the subject, in what follows I shall address two, with reference to Nabokov’s heritage and the collective unconscious: the first refers to the price great writers pay for having become hard currency world-wide; the second, to the ways in which these writers manage to double-code our understanding of an ever more etherealized present.

For the first question, suffice it to mention Nabokov’s last novel *The Original of Laura* left unfinished, and, nevertheless, published by Alfred A. Knopf at Random House, Inc., New York, in 2009, thirty two years after the writer’s death. Albeit, according to the writer’s son, Nabokov impressed upon his wife that if *Laura* remained unfinished at his death, it was to be burned, Dmitri Nabokov, in the long run, decides to have his father’s wish disrespected and have it published: “I decided at this juncture that, in putative retrospect, Nabokov would not have wanted me to become his Person of Porlock or allow little Juanita Dark—for that was the name of an early *Lolita*, destined for cremation—to burn like a latter-day Jeanne d’Arc” (*The Original of Laura*, xvii). And so, well advised by the best Nabokov exegetes (G. Barabtarlo, B. Boyd, to mention only two), Dmitri Nabokov, who signs the “Introduction” to the book, has *The Original of Laura* published in a most original editorial formula reflective of the writer’s famous novel *Pale Fire* (1962), wherein language/literature is irrevocably divided against itself, at each moment different from itself, turned against itself in the temporal folds of ‘error’ and ‘irony.’ With *The Original of Laura*, the editor—Dmitri Nabokov—chooses, as we find out from his note on the text, to preserve Vladimir Nabokov’s original markings from the handwritten index cards (i.e. nonstandard spellings, punctuation). The originality consists in the display, on the same page next to the computerized text (below the page), of the photos of the handwritten cards that are perforated so that they can be removed and rearranged (this time by the reader), as the author likely did when he was writing the novel. So, what are we to make of such an originally intelligent editorial experiment? Two things: (1) Strong writers do speak inspiringly to us beyond the grave

proving the provisional subtitle “Dying Is Fun” right; (2) P. Valéry’s say that inspiration is no longer the state of the author, but the state in which the author hopes to bring his readers, holds true today as ever.

Whether the cost of the *Laura* experiment is high or low I wouldn’t pronounce myself, since I have been lately involved in reading a Nabokov text more with the mind, the brain, than the “tingling spine” as the writer would ask for from his devoted readers. I will just say that the reading of the *Laura* text felt to me like the author’s making certain “decodable signals on behalf of stranded spirits” (*Pale Fire* 289) whose story has long become ours—which can be a good reason for making the publication of the book cost-effective all through.

As far as the second claim (about the ways in which Nabokov manages to double-code our understanding of the present) is concerned, I shall refer to three Romanian appropriations to show how a great writer’s works/ views shuttle between cultures and aesthetic positions. The first appropriation, I shall scantily evoke, is the 2002 stage adaptation “*Lolita*” at *The Small Theatre* in Bucharest, by Mihaela Tonitza Iordache, after Nabokov’s screenplay (*Lolita*, Great Britain, director Stanley Kubrick, 1962). The play was directed by Cătălina Buzoianu and cast the late Ștefan Iordache as Humbert Humbert, Ștefana Zamfirescu/ Ana Ularu as Lolita, and Mihai Dinvale as Claire Quilty. The theatre reviews of the period were laudatory, first, at C. Buzoianu’s subtle understanding of the Nabokov text which allows for an equally profound meditation on the nature of good art, writing within a self-generating narcissistic culture; and second, at the actors’ performance, especially that of Ștefan Iordache whose sophisticated interpretation could not escape notice (see Eugen Comarnescu, *Cronica română*, 21 ianuarie 2003; Irina Coroiu, *Gazeta Teatrului National*, nr.1, serie noua, 2003). The Romanian spectator’s response to such an assault-performance upon the axis of a differently expressed reality—which trades apparent pornography for the metaphysics of love/life/death, aesthetics for ethics—is certainly worth discussing. The Romanian *Lolita* play—a success in 2002 (considering the reviews and box-office)—, eight years after, has remained memory, no other occurrences of the performance being recorded; which may point to the capacity of the Romanian audience to distance themselves from issues whose parabolic representation seems immanently disturbing, or alarming—a fact which makes the “defusing of subjectivism” (Bernard Williams’ [1972] concept and theory on how the emphasis of distinction leading to a rejection of the supposedly disquieting consequences comes to something which is both not alarming and essential to morality) impossible in present-day Romanian society.

The second Romanian appropriation of Nabokov’s *Lolita* belongs to the professor, critic and writer Mihai Zamfir (b. 1940), whose novel *Fetița/ The Little Girl* (2003) is a lesson about how re-writing allows the forging of new insights into both the cultural/literary past and the cultural/literary present. By rethinking the interrelationship of history, self, cultural memory, and meaning via the idea of fictional narrative/autobiography, Zamfir’s novel facilitates the fuller recognition of the profound continuities between ethics and aesthetics as well as life and literature. In an earlier study on the subject of *Lolita*’s avatars (“*Lolita*’s Take on History: A Romanian Perspective,” 2008), I devoted ample space to the levels of textuality in the two novels, Nabokov’s *Lolita* and Zamfir’s *Fetița*. Here, I shall just insist on how Zamfir’s novel veers towards what I have called cultural exorcism, in the way it constantly activates its subversive potential to appeal to our cultural memory.

Ioan Pavel, the poet-narrator of the novel, in telling his story of unwarranted love towards Raluca, Lolita’s counterpart, unleashes the ‘narrative unconscious,’ that is, those culturally-rooted aspects of one’s history that usually remain uncharted and, consequently, still await to be incorporated in one’s story. By making the narrative unconscious conscious through the work of autobiography, Freeman (“Cultural Memory” 289-90) explains, “there

exists the opportunity to discern the relationship between those manifest narratives that are often told and those more disruptive counter-narratives that sometimes surge into reflection, infusing one's history with new meaning, complexity and depth." The manifest narratives of our recent history spell out what the 'humanist-socialist' and 'national-communist' regime of Ceausescu's epoch has signified for the Romanians: Dispossession, colonization of people's minds and affect, axiological upset, brainwashing, annihilation of elitist individuals, economic/social/political deprivations. The more disturbing counter-narratives that have yet to be incorporated into each and every one's story concern the insidious ways of mutilation of the spirit due to the substitution of the 'ethos of freedom,' as a way of caring for oneself and others for the psychology of the tyrant, who, out of insufficient care for the self (as *arkhē*, i.e., mastery with respect to oneself), abuses others, imposing unwarranted power on them. Ioan Pavel's autobiography is then less about his *self* than it is about his/our world, his/our existence as a social and cultural subject. In *The Little Girl*, Zamfir forces the reader first into noticing how cultural/literary texts, once woven into the fabric of memory, compel the writing-subject to move beyond personal life in telling one's own story, into the shared life of culture; and next, into acknowledging that there exist even more disruptive narratives infusing one's history than one is willing to admit—a good lesson in defusing subjectivism, indeed.

The third Romanian appropriation of Nabokov as a concept this time, I propose, refers to Mircea Cărtărescu's short story "Nabokov in Braşov" from the volume *De ce iubim femeile/ Why We Love Women* (2005)—a collection of stories the author has previously published in women's magazines. The claim occasioned by Cărtărescu's story reiterates the claim I advanced in connection to Zamfir's novel: autobiography, fictional or not, allows the self to function as an instrument for rendering the world rather than just being a source or a subject. It is a venture into the cultural memory of a nation whose course of history the self wittingly or unwittingly re-produces. Cărtărescu then, in his allegedly autobiographical stories, concerns himself, not unlike his illustrious predecessor, with articulating the complexities involved in thinking through the relationship between life and the narratives we tell about it. Cărtărescu, the non-realist/thesis writer, admits, however, that life can be exceptionally generous with providing the staple of stories, not even the most imaginative writer can come up with. The reflection is occasioned, in the story "Nabokov in Brasov", by his accidental learning that a former beau of his (Irina, an English teacher with a liking for postmodernist writers such as V. Nabokov, D. H. Lawrence, R. Coover, J. L. Borges, and a Securitate recruit in the 80s, with a hand in the stifling of the workers' strike from Brasov against Ceausescu's economic policies, in 1987) lives leisurely in Brussels as the wife of a European Parliament member. Cărtărescu's hardly subdued frustration ("...for that's how history is written", p. 36) is a combination of humanly visceral revulsion against what Securitate came to signify for ordinary Romanians before 1989, and the writer's naïve, illusory fate-resolution ("McFate" as Nabokov would say), he has destined to those perverse entities belonging to Securitate. The writer confesses he has had pains in envisaging Irina other than "an alcoholic, haunted by an irrepressible past. A putative homeless, like the many ones who stink horribly in trams...". But, reality/contingency, as always, in disregard of commonsensical judgements, imposes its own resolutions, and "naturally, even necessarily" writes its own ending to a story, as in the case of Cărtărescu's buried-for-many-years story about Irina—"a pathetic enigma of pathetic times" ("Nabokov in Brasov" 37). The narrative or rather counter-narrative—which could have been entitled "Robert Coover burning files at Berevoiesti", or "D. H. Lawrence stigmatizing the intellectuals" ("Nabokov in Brasov" 48-9)—is just another story about how the apocalyptically horrible, monstrous Securitate has been mutilating our lives, and how illusory the articulation of any recovery-project is.

Cărtărescu, in “Nabokov in Brasov,” like Zamfir in *The Little Girl*, carefully attends to creating the ‘narrative unconscious’ as an implicit growing tension between what-could-have-been sort of life, as normalcy (a society which sees to its members like a dedicated teacher sees to her/his students), versus what can-be-seen-and-felt around, as abnormalcy (the sordidly dehumanized outskirts of Bucharest vs. the blooming Securitate offspring). Freeman (‘Cultural Memory’ 294) calls the same feeling ‘the presence of what is missing’, ‘absence’, in the way ‘whatever was *there* existed in relation to what was not’.

The three Romanian appropriations of Nabokov’s work and genius, while addressing the contemporary anxieties related to a precarious globalization of culture, manage to double-code our understanding of the present in a memorable way: by making aesthetics meet history, and ethics meet politics, they make, in fact, aesthetics meet ethics, and, in so doing, they raise pending problematic and polemical questions, many of which Nabokov also addressed.

Literature as the epiphany of truth

Azar Nafisi, a former university teacher and writer, published, in 2003, a revolutionary book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. The book unfolds the personal and intellectual privileges of a private literature class Nafisi started in Tehran after she left her teaching post at the University of Tehran as she was refusing to wear the veil. The reading group consists of seven young women of diverse religious and political beliefs and backgrounds, who gather at the writer’s house every Thursday morning for two years in the mid-1990s, take off their scarves, and talk about the books Nafisi has selected: *Lolita*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Daisy Miller*, *Pride and Prejudice*. What is thrilling about the experience recounted by Nafisi is the fact that literature can, if not completely change, at least shake the most inflexible dogmas and thus contribute to defusing the reader’s subjectivism, which, as B. Williams would put it, “does not leave everything where it was, but that it does leave more where it was than we might have thought when we started” (1972: 50-1).

Nafisi’s memoir, like Zamfir’s novel, like Cărtărescu’s story, reenacts the story of the transformative power of literature all the great masters of literature proffer: “What we must search for in fiction,” Nafisi tells her interlocutors in the book, “is not so much reality but the epiphany of truth” (*Lolita in Teheran: A Memoir in Books* 3) — which is the same as saying that fiction helps us to remain free, since, to borrow from Nabokov again, “Readers were born free, and ought to remain free.”

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