

МИРЈАНА ЛОНЧАР-ВУЈНОВИЋ

NABOKOV'S IMPRESSIONISTIC EXPRESSION OF FREE CONSCIOUSNESS

Abstract: *The most interesting thing about Nabokov's narrative technique is the way in which he always manages to impress the presence of the implied author on the reader's consciousness without making direct intrusion intonation. Narration through the confined consciousness of an individual is really, it seems, only a springboard for Nabokov. He takes an impressionistic device (consciously or unconsciously, it makes no difference) and pushes it to its limits without technically violating the point of view to which he has committed himself.*

Key words: *impression, consciousness, unconsciousness, expression, narration, memory, image, reality, dreamlike hallucination, cosmic synchronization.*

Vladimir Nabokov is an important writer for his stylistic subtlety, deft satire, and ingenious innovations in form, which have inspired postmodern novelists. He was aware of his role as a mediator between the Russian and American literary worlds. His tone, partly satirical and partly nostalgic, suggested a new emotional state of mind making the new impulsive bond of Nabokov's expression of his free consciousness and his unique impressionism at the same time.

But composing puzzles and debunking conventional thinking are only a part of Nabokov's art, and to consider him as primarily a prankster is to ignore the beauty of his language, the originality of his imagery, the grotesque comedy of his fictional world, and the incredible skill and intelligence that manipulate the combinations. He combines the opposing notes of wit and fear. Jokes, parodies, conjuring—these are essential aspects of Nabokov's genius. His greatest achievements are rhetorical, and he will continue to be read for the brilliance of his language and sharpness of his observation, for his impressionistic rendering of reality. One comes away from a Nabokov novel awed by many things, but chiefly by the dazzling display of verbal skill (often used to create simply pictorial meaning) that combines objects and experiences in an entirely original use of metaphor. His great achievement, to my mind, is a mastery of the English language which perhaps no other writer in this century except Joyce has matched.

Nabokov's art has been described in a variety of terms and he, as artist, has been seen in many roles: as „anarchic tragi-comedian, as satirist, as joker, as anti-realist.“ Conrad Brenner calls his fiction „the art of the perverse“ and claims that „as practiced by Nabokov, it has no familiar antecedents.“ (Nabokov, Sebastian Knight: 1955, vii)

The weakness of these labels is that they are flabby. They are not inaccurate but they are only vaguely helpful to an understanding of what kind of fiction Nabokov writes. There are different forms of satire and perversity, and there are many kinds of anti-realists. His expression of the subjects helped introduce expressionist 20-th century European currents into the essentially realist American fictional tradition. Nabokov is, without question, a part of the impressionistic novel tradition (usually European) which begins with Sterne, but with which we most closely associate Proust, Conrad, Woolf, James, and Faulkner.

„Philosophical Impressionism, an outgrowth of empiricism and the romantic movement, establishes reality entirely in the stream of sensations.“(Hauser 1958:167) Fundamentally, impressionism is a statement of the subjectivity of reality and the variety of individual responses to collective experience. Memory, imagination, and emotion guide the mind in its ordering of individual consciousness and become the basis for artistic representation of experience. Reality is primarily the images and impressions in the mind. As Arnold Hauser says, the impressionists' worlds are equal to „the phenomena which are in a state of constant flux and transition, produces the impression of a continuum in which everything coalesces, and in which there are no other differences but the various approaches and points of view of the beholder.“(Hauser 1958:169-177)

Virginia Woolf put it a different way but the meaning is essentially the same.

„Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?“(Woolf 1925: 212)

The idea of associational thinking and the emphasis on the imagination, on the internal, as the primary reality are essentially philosophic aspects of impressionism. But there are particular literary devices that writers in the impressionistic mode use to express their view of subjective reality. Narration through a limited consciousness, often an irrational or morally eccentric consciousness, is perhaps the most important, but there are others equally well reflected in Nabokov's fiction that should be mentioned even though they are less in need of explication. An associative order of narration, for example: that is, events, images, impressions, treated as they suggest themselves and not in a chronological progression. Or what Virginia Woolf noted in Joyce's fiction: a concern „at all costs to reveal the flickering of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain, and in order to preserve it (a disregarding of) whatever seems . . . adventitious, whether it be probability, or coherence or any other of these signposts“. (Woolf 1925: 214) and a spontaneous, informal, colloquial language that creates an intimacy between narrator and reader and gives plausibility to the pictorial, imagistic wanderings of the imagination.

Narration through a limited consciousness seems generally to imply that the reader's central concern is to be with the education of the narrator; Marlow's journey into the *Heart of Darkness* is a learning process through which he arrives at certain moral judgments. But

in Nabokov's fiction it is seldom the narrator who learns anything (except perhaps *Humbert Humbert* and *V.*); it is rather the reader, and what he learns is generally what the narrator fails to recognize. For example, the search for identity in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, as far as *V.* is concerned, ends in as much confusion as it begins in. His discovery that any soul can be yours if you chase it long enough is all well and good, but a little unsatisfying if we leave it at that. Fortunately, *V.*'s intelligence as well as his consciousness is limited, and once this becomes apparent we no longer rely on him for our ultimate perceptions about Sebastian's reality and its inseparableness from his art. Nabokov's purpose in placing the point of view in a confused observer, however original his methods, seems clearly intended to break down the reader's conviction that reality and truth are scientific facts, to point out that reality is an infinite variety of perceptions and impressions that are conditioned by an infinite variety of intelligence, mental attitude, health, and so on.

In *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* the point of view rests not only within a limited consciousness but within a morally eccentric consciousness. Both Humbert and Kinbote are highly intelligent (though perhaps mad), and Humbert, in particular, demonstrates through his admissions and omissions a carefully calculated directing of the effect his narrative will have on his readers. Because the author's voice is absent in these books there is no dramatic distance between the creator and his creations. Moral judgment is internal, and were it not for an occasional ironic tone and heavy satire of states of mind (Freudianism, for example) the difference between the narrator's and the implied author's intellectual and moral norms would be virtually impossible to distinguish. Again, the limited point of view is used to emphasize the reality of the subjective consciousness and to explore the moral and philosophical complexity of experience without having the author's personal values being passed as judgment on his character's attitudes and actions. In a way this amounts to objectivity on the part of the subjectively creative consciousness, for, as Chekhov says (and Nabokov would most likely concur), "The artist should be, not the judge of his characters, and their conversations, but only an un-biased witness." (Chekhov 1948: 134) Let judgment come from the characters themselves—and from the reader.

Indeed, the most interesting thing about Nabokov's narrative technique is the way in which he always manages to impress the presence of the implied author on the reader's consciousness without making direct intrusions into action and without switching into any kind of comment. Except in *Bend Sinister*, where the hero's interior monologues, dialogue, and the point of view are always character's, while Nabokov makes the reader conscious of an external hand controlling the direction the novel takes. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* he appears in the transparent aspect of Paul Rechnoy, chess-playing exile living in Paris with his wife and child. It is primarily through the elaborate conjuring that takes place in the novels that one is reminded of Nabokov behind the limited consciousness telling the story. But also the narrators' awareness of themselves as writers (they all are self-consciously writing a book) serves to remind us that a distinction is being made between art and life, between the reality of the imagination and the reality of daily existence. Narration through the confined consciousness of an individual is really, it seems, only a springboard for Nabokov. He takes an impressionistic device (consciously or unconsciously, it makes no difference) and pushes it to its limits without technically violating the point of view to which he has committed himself. It is almost as if he were once more intentionally playing with convention: perhaps, indeed, he is.

It is perhaps because Nabokov is so aware of the infinite deceptions in nature, so aware of an external force that is conjuring life. He continually stands between sun and scene so that his shadow will be cast over the action. In *Bend Sinister*, to take a single example, the point of view shifts from an omniscient author, to the hero's interior monologues, to direct comments by Nabokov that remind one of the artist's control. ". . . Krug ran towards him, and just a fraction of an instant before another and better bullet hit him, he shouted again: You, you—and the wall vanished, like a rapidly withdrawn slide, and I stretched myself and got up from among the chaos of written and rewritten pages, to investigate the sudden twang that something had made in striking the wire netting of my window." (Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, 1958: 210)

The effect that such an intrusion would have in a realistic novel, or even a novel in which the point of view remained constant throughout, would be disastrous. But in *Bend Sinister* one is aware from the outset of a kind of fluid, amorphous consciousness that floats around where it chooses directing the actors: „Now he (Krug) found himself running (by night, ugly? Yah, by night, folks) down something that looked like a railway track through a long damp tunnel (the dream state management having first used the set available for rendering 'tunnel' . . .).“ And even more obvious Nabokovian arrangement occurs when the hero, Krug, is lying in prison after his son has been killed. Feeling pity and desiring to relieve him from „senseless agony“ Nabokov steps in on „an inclined beam of pale light“ and makes him mad.

Nabokov's narrative technique obviously differs in certain ways from most other impressionistic writers. Henry James, for example, would consider his intrusions an unpardonable sin and would undoubtedly condemn his fiction as presenting a slice of imaginative fancy rather than a slice of life. But in other ways (narration through a limited and often eccentric consciousness, associative progression, etc.) the methods are quite similar. Philosophically, it seems to me, Nabokov's attitude toward truth and appearance and reality is entirely impressionistic. While some knowledge is possible, and while we can get closer and closer to truth by examining a subject from a variety of angles and depths, we can never know everything about that subject, and our judgments, moral and otherwise, will always be based ultimately on subjective impressions.

Throughout our discussion we have noted Nabokov's structural and thematic concern with the infinite levels of perception, and his attempt to escape the spherical prison of time by creating in his art a subjective world which is built by the limitations of consciousness. His remarks on the role of memory in artistic development further demonstrate the impressionistic, almost Proustian, direction of his creativity.

The distinction that Nabokov makes between the intensity of kinds of memories reminds one of Proust's varying distinctions, from „the memory of facts, which tells us: 'You were such,' without allowing us to become such again“ (Proust 1970: 197) to the cup of tea and the Madeleine that produces in him the supreme happiness of returning to the moment of original impression, of becoming again.

Speak Memory is, of course, a long testimony to Nabokov's recollection of the past, and the influence that it had on the development of his imagination and artistic creativity. He remarks at one point, „in regard to the power of hoarding up impressions, Russian children of my generation passed through a period of genius, as if destiny were loyally trying what

it could for them by giving them more than their share, in view of the cataclysm that was to remove completely the world they had known.“ (Nabokov, *Speak Memory*, 1948: 7) Perhaps destiny gave Russian children more than their share; perhaps an exile's nostalgia for his country intensifies the memories of that which is lost.

The impressionist's emphasis on sensations, images, and the primacy of imaginative reality tends to lead to an emphasis on the intense happiness produced by moments of vividly perceived beauty, moments in which practical reality is left far behind. *Speak Memory* is to a great extent a record of the delight Nabokov and his family took in the active pursuit of natural beauty; in capturing butterflies, picking mushrooms, gardening, walking in the country, painting, reading, and so on. In a very fine passage describing trips to the woods that his mother used to make on August afternoons, Nabokov captures an instance of this spontaneous and unique enjoyment of the moment. „On August afternoons, all alone in the drizzle, my mother, carrying a basket (stained blue on the inside by somebody's whortleberries), would set out on a long collection tour. Toward dinner time, she could be seen emerging from the nebulous depths of a park alley, her small figure cloaked and hooded in a greenish-brown wool, on which countless droplets of moisture made a kind of mist all around her. As she came nearer from under the dripping trees and caught sight of me, her face would show an odd, cheerless expression, which might have spelled poor luck, but which I knew was the tense, jealously contained beatitude of the successful collector. Just before reaching me, with an abrupt, drooping movement of the arm and shoulder and a „Pouf!“ of magnified exhaustion, she would let her basket sag, in order to stress its weight, its fabulous fullness.“ (Nabokov, *Speak Memory*, 1948: 23-24)

There is nothing interesting about a woman coming home from the woods, but Nabokov makes it not only interesting, but immediate and dramatic, through his imagery. The passage is remarkable not only for its rendering of a sensitive mood, but for the visual impressions it conveys in the whortleberry stains, the greenish-brown wool, and the drizzling grey afternoon. It is, in short, a painting in words, an impressionistic translation of phenomena. The intense enjoyment of the moment reflected in the passage is not only Nabokov's (and, at second hand, the reader's); it emanates from the actress herself. „For a moment, before they [the mushrooms] were bundled away by a servant to a place she knew nothing about, to a doom that did not interest her, she would stand there admiring them, in a glow of quiet contentment.“ (Nabokov, *Speak Memory*, 1948: 24)

The intense mood produced by an essentially passive scene is everywhere in Nabokov's fiction as well as his memoirs.

„A colored spiral in a small ball of glass, this is how I see my own life,“ Nabokov writes in *Speak Memory*. It is equally implicit in the tone that the narrator interjects into his memory of the past. The narrator's associations revolve, and the passage in its entirety becomes an effectual symbol for that moment of timeless beauty which Nabokov so loves.

The kind of imagery that we have so far discussed in connection with the impressionistic rendering of a moment of intense beauty by no means exhausts the limits of Nabokov's metaphoric and imagistic prose. For Nabokov all poetry and prose is an attempt to „try to express one's position in regard to the universe embraced by consciousness.“ (Nabokov, *Speak Memory*, 1948: 155) The fleeting moment, the state of flux, the fragmented world of the impressionist becomes a Nabokovian world in which all phenomena are thematically

linked in a spiral relation to time, and which the author attempts to represent by extending the „arms of consciousness“. This appearance is the most obvious again in Nabokov's *Speak Memory*. „... a car (New York license plate) passes along the road, a child bangs the screen door of a neighboring porch, an old man yawns in a misty Turkestan orchard, a granule of cinder-grey sand is rolled by the wind on Venus, a Doctor Jacques Hirsch in Grenoble puts on his reading glasses, and trillions of other such trifles occur—all forming an instantaneous and transparent organism of events, of which the poet (sitting in a lawn chair, at Ithaca, N.Y.) is the nucleus.“ (Nabokov, *Speak memory*, 1948: 155)

The foundation of this „cosmic synchronization“ is the poet's ability to observe and register instantly and almost unconsciously the variety of his surroundings, and it is an ability (the artist's unique sense) that enables Nabokov not only to recreate images but to transform them into a completely original vision of the phenomenal world. He achieves what Conrad calls the aim of art: „To arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and colour, of sunshine and shadows. . . .“ (Conrad 1926: xvi)

Images, from the dreamlike hallucinations of the mind and from the physical surroundings we call reality, compose Nabokov's world, and his language is a continual attempt to find fresh metaphors, original similes, to unite objects that appear to be totally unlike; to bridge the gap, as he says, between thought and expression.

These different objects through metaphorical and personified imagery become almost a Nabokovian convention, and can be found everywhere in his fiction. While a few examples can adequately demonstrate the originality and, one might add, frequent humor of its extensive use, what the following passages and others like them show is Nabokov's „esemplastic“ (to use Coleridge's word) ability to perceive in distinct particulars interrelating qualities, and through metaphoric language to initiate a new perspective of them.

As Proust once remarked, „Style [of which imagery is an important part] is in no way an embellishment... it isn't even a question of technique...“ (Proust 1949: 27) It is like a painter's colors; it expresses the quality of his perception and reveals a personal world that others do not see. „The pleasure an artist gives is to make us know an additional universe,“ says Proust.

The dream imagery that so pervades *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister* arises, perhaps, from Nabokov's own mental excursions into the timeless and space less world of visual and acoustic impressions. Although he might dislike being called a mystic, he says that as far back as he can remember he has been „subject to mild hallucinations,“ some acoustic, some optical, and by none has he profited very much. (Nabokov, *Speak Memory*, 1948: 14) Like the optical phantoms that come and go during mystical hallucinations, Nabokov's visions pass before his closed eyes without his assistance or participation, but they differ from dream visions because he is still in control of his senses. The product of these trances, Nabokov says, was a „miserable concoction“ with a good many borrowings from other poets, but the experience, mystical or otherwise, of transcending ordinary consciousness and time-space dimensions is everywhere reflected in the imagery and themes of his fiction. „I confess I do not believe in time“, he says. „I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern on another. Let visitors trip.“ (Nabokov, *Speak Memory*, 1948: 92)

Nabokov uses impressionistic devices in his own private way for his own anti-realistic, anti-naturalistic ends- to create a world in which images, language, magic flights of illusion and allusions, and imagination constitute reality. The pain of finite consciousness, the suffering produced by ignorance, vulgarity, cruelty, conventional patterns of thought that inhibit imaginative perception of timeless beauty; all are escapable only through art, and it is this escape, the finding of one's immortal soul through artistic creation, that is the central concern of Nabokov's fiction. An illusion in art has its parallel in the illusions that are everywhere in nature. „The chameleon changes his color, the butterfly imitates a leaf, the fawn blends into the underbrush; life itself may very well be an illusion“, as Nabokov frequently suggests. „Only the recorded impressions of life are unlimited by the time-space boundaries of existence. Only art is everlasting and immortal“, Nabokov said.

The Nabokovian phenomenon and his ingenious, innovative ability to make an impulsive bond between his unique, sensational impression and free consciousness would be simply expressed by these words: „Oh my Lolita, I have only words to play with.“

Vladimir Nabokov has been thinking about his own life and work in the relation of the time and writing in general: „The spiral is a spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, any unrolled and stretched circle stops being charmed and becomes free. I've been thinking about that since I was pupil, and I've also found out that Hegel's *Triad* (very popular in old Russia) expressed the essential spirituality in the relation of time... If we considered about the simplest spiral, actually we're going to recover in it three levels equal to the triad levels: small curve in the middle part of spiral could be named „thesis“, „antithesis“ is a bigger curve opposite to the first in the process of its appearance, while the „synthesis“ is the biggest one which makes the connection between the previous curve and next, and so on.“(Nabokov 1990: 6)

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МИРЈАНА ЛОНЧАР-ВУЈНОВИЋ

НАБОВКОВЉЕВО ИМПРЕСИОНИСТИЧКО ИЗРАЖАВАЊЕ СЛОБОДНЕ СВЕСТИ

Резиме

Владимир Набоков је значајан романописац због своје стилске истанчаности, веште сатире и иновација у форми и техници писања, које касније инспиришу постмодернистичке писце. Он је био свестан своје улоге посредника између руског и америчког књижевног света. Тон у његовим делима, делом сатиричан и делом носталгичан, указује нам на ново, другачије емоционално стање свести истичући слободну свест као незаобилазну спону између експресионизма и импресионизма у Набоковљевом стваралаштву. Набоковљево уметничко стваралаштво означавано је различитим терминима, а он је као уметник, био виђен као анархистички трагикомичар, као сатиричар, као анти-реалиста и слично. Конрад Бренер његову прозу назива „*перверзном уметношћу*“. Многи су у жељи да дефинишу Набоковљево стваралаштво помињали мноштво утицаја на његову уметност, наглашавајући да он у ствари не припада ниједној врсти традиције. То, наравно, није тачно. Његов експресионизам и тематика творе карику између европског експресионизма 20-тог века и реалиста, творца америчке прозне традиције, комбинујући набоковљевски импресионизам и тзв. слободну свест као један од сегмената технике тока свести. Набоковљевски феномен, његова генијална иновативност у формирању споне између јединствене, сензационалне, набоковљевске импресије и слободне свести могли би бити изражени речима: „Ах, моја Лолита, ја само још речима могу да се играм!“

Кључне речи: утисак, свест, подсвест, експресија, нарација, памћење, лични израз, реалност, сновиловне халуцинације, космичка синхронизација