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A POETICS OF MOBILITY IN *THE GIFT*

Soles of the feet, blithe as often they were, blissful
with walking across everything, across earth, blissful
with primal knowing, pre-knowing, complicity of
awareness beyond knowing itself!

*Rainer Maria Rilke to
Marina Tsvetayeva (May 10, 1926)*

T*he Gift* is the narrative of a two-fold quest:¹ the quest for authorship and the quest for the past or, more precisely, the quest for authorship *by way of* the quest for the past. The protagonist, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, like Nabokov, is a Russian writer exiled to Berlin who has been tossed into the Proustian question to rediscover the past, a daunting and painful undertaking, but also a rewarding one because it allows him to shape and to refine his prose. Yet, the major pitfall that threatens the young writer is immobility: the immobility of a memory frozen by language, by the hieraticism of reverence for the great Russian writers, the fossilization of a nostalgic feeling that transforms its object into a stereotype, the risk of permanently setting in stone an unfaithful portrait of his late father.² In opposition to all of this, Fyodor strives to keep a “*chaud et vivant*” (Nabokov 2010a, 658) past alive, to replace the monologic homage to the great Russian writers with a dialogic critical report on this literature, to

¹ One could thus suggest that the novel belongs to the category “novels of writerly quests,” following the terminology that Hubier proposed in 2004.

² A renowned Lepidopterist, Konstantin Kirillovich Godunov-Cherdyntsev, led eight expeditions over the course of eighteen years and never came back from the last one, to Tibet in 1917. Fyodor decides to write his biography but gives up on his project and instead writes a satirical counter-biography devoted to the Russian populist ideologue Nikolai Chernyshevsky.

cultivate a dynamic relationship with a lost homeland, to abandon the biographical monument and to distribute the narrative portrait of his lost father in the form of a fragmentary presence-absence. Mobility thus appears as the antidote to rigidity and constitutes one of the novel's essential paradigms: the mobility of bodies that pass through thresholds and hunt butterflies, the mobility of living thought that tirelessly tracks down the stylistic means for writing about the past "in precise, weighty words" (Nabokov 2001, 101), to use two adjectives that *The Gift's* protagonist, Fyodor, uses to describe his father's prose.

Traversal and transgression in Berlin

If, in the novel, Berlin is often associated with crudeness and ugliness—whose emblem is the pale, yellow wallpaper with bluish tulips on the walls of the bedroom that Fyodor is renting—then, for the protagonist, the stakes are to replace this unattractive setting with the vivid images of an idealized childhood or the imagined images of the far away steppe that he promised to describe in composing a biographical narrative of his father's zoological expeditions. The city therefore not only functions as a foil, but also constitutes the necessary counterpoint to a world threatened with extinction. Far from a straightforward setting, Berlin makes it possible to put a waking dream into words: it is not Fyodor who seeks to describe Berlin, but Berlin that gives itself to his consciousness where it can be singularly assembled—Fyodor's artistic eye revealing the city's fantastic mobility. In this way, the entire beginning of the novel is carried along by a movement that makes it possible to subtly introduce the book's theme—the artist's instrument is in the process of being fashioned, referred to in chapter 5 as "the maturing of his gift" (Nabokov 2001, 325)—which is the movement of thought. From the moving van that turns up in Fyodor's consciousness as he wanders through Berlin through to the first mention of the interior of his bedroom (where, for a moment, he allows himself to be immobile), the first pages are a succession of mobile images whose cinematic quality is sometimes made explicit ("as across a cinema screen," Nabokov 2001, 4). Through Fyodor's consciousness, the city of Berlin comes alive, stores cross the street and reassemble themselves like letters in an advertising spot, the reflection of the sky roams around in the mirror of a dresser that is being moved, etc. Utterance itself is characterized by its shifting and unstable nature: "narrative switches" (Connolly 1992, 197)—the frequent and abrupt passages, sometimes within a single paragraph, from "I" to "he" or even to the literary critic's "we"—

immediately place the reader in an uncomfortable situation since it is impossible to give a univocal answer to the question “who’s speaking?” This hesitation contributes to the narrative’s dynamism and, in terms of enunciation, to Fyodor’s “mental vagrancy” (Manolescu 2010, 45): just as Fyodor’s consciousness gives life to a seemingly inert world, play with pronouns creates a kind of enunciative nomadism.

Despite his “energetic idleness” (Nabokov 2001, 81) and his disgust with the urban bourgeoisie, Fyodor does not live as a recluse. He is irresistibly attracted by the outside—interiors are so unsatisfying—which supplies him with what he needs to shape his prose. This is, however, only possible under the condition that space constantly be traversed. The city is ambivalent, circumscribed by obstacles that put the brakes on dreaming, but that are also thresholds³ for passing from one state to another, from one dimension to another. One can also count how frequently Fyodor crosses the street, an action that gives rhythm to Fyodor’s daydreams. This is particularly the case at the beginning of chapter 1, when the protagonist is wandering through Berlin in a state of dreamlike bliss because his collection of poems has just been published:

my collection of poems has been published; and when, as now, his mind tumbled like this, that is, when he recalled the fifty-odd poems that had just come out, he would skim in an instant the entire book, so that in the instantaneous mist of its madly accelerated music one could not make any readable sense of the flicking lines – the familiar words would rush past, swirling amid violent foam (whose seething was transformed into a mighty flowing motion if one fixed one’s eyes on it, as we used to do long ago, looking down at it from a vibrating mill bridge until the bridge turned into a ship’s stern: farewell!) – and this foam, and this flickering, and a separate verse that rushed past all alone, shouting in wild ecstasy from afar, probably calling him home, all of this, together with the creamy white of the cover, was merged in a blissful feeling of exceptional purity...

(Nabokov 2001, 4)

³ For an in-depth study on the theme of boundaries, see Blackwell 1999.

The inaugural first-person utterance is the theme that then becomes the object of a commentary in the form of a third-person mental exploration. In this exploration, the style mimes its object and the mental storm becomes visible through an acrobatic exercise in style: the somersaulting mind is sonically translated, dominated by fricative and occlusive consonants, and by syntactic capering—changing pronouns, broken-up rhythms, the use of parentheses, the repetition of “and.” Here, the writer appears as if flooded with images that are pushed into his mind and recollection takes on the power of a real mental tsunami, a manifestation of the intensity of this moment of newfound joy, far from the apparently trivial routine that led Fyodor from one shop to another.

Later on, in the second chapter, one finds an example of the ability that Fyodor’s creative mind has to move from one reality to another, from one temporality to another, within the long idealized description of the realm of childhood and its ecosystem that ends like this: “and straight out of his reminiscence [...] straight from the hothouse paradise of the past, he stepped onto a Berlin tramcar” (Nabokov 2001, 4). The brisk and mobile narration is characteristic of this intertwining of discourses and temporalities: while, for many pages, the child Fyodor was strolling on a path in the Leshino property in Russia around the turn of the century, his walk ends in a 1920s Berlin streetcar.

The narrative’s dynamism thus immediately hits upon and foreshadows Fyodor’s major preoccupation: bringing his past back to life through an attempt to not solidify memories into language. The words themselves are bearers of dynamism: the narrator describes the Russian word *srazhenie* (battle), which “suggests remarkably the sound of springy compression when one rammed into the toy gun its projectile” (Nabokov 2001, 12) or the word *zemskaia* (rural district) which contains a phonetic bump (“what a bump in this designation,” Nabokov 2001, 75). The disruptive element in the first chapter—the publication of a collection of poems by Fyodor followed by the publication of a laudatory review—leads to a narrative in motion based upon shifting utterance and frequent intrusions of metanarrative.

“What am I doing?” (Nabokov 2001, 4): in Chapter 1 Fyodor asks this question, by all appearances insignificant, after noticing how absent minded he is while in a store where he forgot what he came to buy. This question actually contains an utterance of the novel’s essential question and draws attention to the reflexive and dynamic nature of writing about the past. So being, the young man’s traversal of urban space accompanies this movement of transgression—from the

Latin *transgredior*, meaning to traverse, to step beyond—which allows him to gradually take on a role of authorship in the present through the development of a paradoxical writing of the past. It is paradoxical because the evocation of childhood in Russia in his first collection of poems will end up being corrected, clarified, and adjusted through a series of comments written in prose that comprise the concerto that is Chapter 1. Indeed, the prose incorporates lines of poetry from the collection published by Fyodor, which then leads into several enunciative experiments. One of these enunciative experiments consists of the quotation of lines of poetry that recall a childhood memory followed by that memory's rewriting: like, for example, when the narrator is denouncing the incompleteness of the recalled memory or when he calls into question a choice of epithet—and in doing so averts the fixity of language by remodeling memory. Elsewhere, the narrative incorporates lines of poetry using prose syntax, creating a hybrid text that features the dynamic nature of recollection. In this way, a continuity of the creative process is established out of the infinite possibility of repeatedly summoning an image from the past that has become malleable and mobile. Elsewhere still, the narrator has fun transforming himself into his own critic, taking pleasure in a hunt for biographical information (“the author”...) and even in the most hollow remarks (“the book’s exterior appearance is pleasing,” Nabokov 2001, 27). This is how, in an nth blurring that translates the complexities of Nabokovian metanarrative, the narrator makes himself into a critic of the critic that he invented (“In a whole set of poems, disarming by their sincerity... no, that’s nonsense – Why must one “disarm” the reader? Is he dangerous?” Nabokov 2001, 9); the critic detects inauthenticity even in set phrases that he then exhausts at his leisure. All these attempts to bring memories to life and to carry on with dynamic recollection contribute to an unremitting quest for the exact formula that will be able to grant access to “the original source” (Nabokov 2001, 9), and avoid the ever so dreaded pitfall that is petrifying a living memory into a “wax figure” (Nabokov 2001, 15).

Movements of life, movements of prose

In his attempt to describe the process of literary creation, the narrator very often imitates his object. This is the case, for example, in the analogy between writing and exploration. Describing himself as “a mere seeker of verbal adventures” (Nabokov 2001, 137), he conceives of the book that he is attempting to write as an object “hiding in this inky jungle” (Nabokov 2001,

136). The prose's rhythms—these “wings” that the narrator says he borrows from the magic surrounding the paternal character—seem to imitate the explorer's range of tempos: just like the explorer's slow caravan, writing is sometimes caught up in a laborious movement on account of its very object—unraveling the paternal mystery—but it also undergoes exhilarating accelerations. Writing is thus magnetically drawn forward, in search of an idea, like the entomologist drawn into a hunt from one cabbage white butterfly to another until one is successfully captured. One could dwell, for example, on one of these passages in which, through writing, one attempts to discover some truth about Konstantin Kirillovich:

And now I continually ask myself what did he use to think about in the solitary night: I try fervently in the darkness to divine the current of his thoughts, and I have much less success with this than with my mental visits to places which I have never seen. What did he think about? About a recent catch? About my mother, about us? About the innate strangeness of human life, a sense of which he mysteriously transmitted to me? Or perhaps I am wrong in retrospectively forcing upon him the secret which he carries now, when newly gloomy and preoccupied, concealing death as something shameful, he appears in my dreams, but which then he did not have - but simply was happy in that incompletely named world in which at every step he named the nameless.

(Nabokov 2001, 117)

Here, and again after several pages devoted to his father's journey through Tian-Chan, the narrator allows himself to take a break and reflect on the preceding passage, shedding doubt on how suited he is to comprehend what his father really was and what he lived through. Yet, it is at the end of this long trial and error, made up of answerless questions and expressions of uncertainty, that he manages to formulate what is perhaps the most powerful characterization of his father (“he named the nameless”).

In this way, the narration assumes the same transgressive attitude as the one that led the entomologist to his downfall: while the latter “ignored the rule of mountain hunting: never to

follow a path of no return” (Nabokov 2001, 117), Fyodor’s prose also diverts from the comforting paths of a linear narrative or of a stable utterance, at the risk of hitting a dead end.

Apart from the analogy between writing and exploration, another metaphor runs through the narrative, which integrates creation into an unfinished metamorphic process. In the unpublished appendix to *The Gift*, entitled “Father’s Butterflies,” the evocation of creative gestation, of the slow movement out of which words are born, makes use of the same epithets as those used to describe butterflies: “the inchworm progress of a sentence – and even some embryos of my own parentheses” (Nabokov 2000, 210). Novelistic writing is an ongoing metamorphic process, slow and incomplete. For the link that ties Fyodor to his father, and that unites the writing of the past and the naturalist’s writing, is awareness of this never-ending process of metamorphosis at work in nature, that is, of the movement of life as it transforms. The connection between Fyodor’s gift and the scientific writings of his father (a creator *par excellence* since he is endowed, *at each step*, with the power of naming) is explicit: “I suddenly recognize in my father’s words the wellsprings of my own prose” (Nabokov 2000, 210).

Another image is revelatory of creation as a setting in motion and as a hunt: Fyodor declares himself to be “in pursuit of the innumerable beings that flashed inside him, as if at dawn in a mythological grove” (Nabokov 2001, 81). When the writer starts the *Life of Chernyshevsky*, the pen shakes and flies away: “his pen stirred and started to fly” (Nabokov 2001, 203).⁴ And one of Fyodor’s still unfinished poems is described as “strong, twitching with avid life” (Nabokov 2001, 54): in this image that recalls the process of molting, literary creation is the movement of life that is aspiring to be born.

This life that aspires to be born constitutes a major part of Fyodor’s childhood, during which his father passed on enchanting knowledge to him. The familiar environment is teeming with evidence of life that the untrained eye does not detect. Moreover, it is remarkable that the descriptions of Lepidoptera—quite the opposite of the mentions of Asian fauna and flora that contribute to the narrative’s exoticism⁵—are always tied to a familiar universe: that of St.

⁴ Ironically, Fyodor’s flight constitutes the counterpoint to the stagnancy of Nikolai Chernyshevsky who strove to invent a perpetual motion machine that is meant to do away with physical work. In Chapter 4, Chernyshevsky is thus depicted as an inventor of junk, paralyzed within his own contradictions, and whose experiments are doomed to be “an eternal motor going in reverse” (Nabokov 2001, 215).

⁵ For an in-depth study of explorations in Asia and exoticism, see Manolescu 2010.

Petersburg and that of the Leshino countryside. For example, the moth specimen that Fyodor's father thinks he discovered in Siberia also exists in the garden of the Leshino property, and the Englishman Tutt observes a butterfly specimen in the Alps that the explorer observed in central Asia. Throughout the profuse recollections of his past, the narrator develops a genealogy of the observation and capture of butterflies, describing the ecosystem of sites once shown to him by his father where, "in his own childhood he had caught this and that" (Nabokov 2001, 107). One of the most remarkable passages of zoological description is the one pertaining to "the caterpillar of a Blue which had concluded a barbaric pact with its inhabitants" (Nabokov 2001, 107-108), that is, the *Phengaris arion* (large blue), observed on the banks of a local pond:

'I have never laughed so much', said my father, 'as when I realized that nature had supplied her with a sticky substance which caused the feelers and feet of those zealous ants to get stuck together, so that they rolled and writhed all around her while she herself, calm and invulnerable, let her wings strengthen and dry.'

(Nabokov 2001, 108)

A genuinely epic spectacle with Mock-heroic elements unfolds before the eyes of an attentive observer as well as for he who possesses knowledge of his environment. While an untrained eye only picks up on what is visible (a butterfly in the imago stage), an expert eye can successfully delight in the spectacle that is playing out more discretely. At his father's side, the child Fyodor learned to pay attention to the nearly imperceptible movements of nature—one could dwell on the many instances devoted to the movements of light along the trails or to the swaying of tree branches in *The Gift*. He also learned to access time: not the time of calendars, but the time of nature, which imparts knowledge of seasons and habitats.

Powers of walking

In the novel's second chapter, the narrator recalls a long, silent, practically telepathic mental stroll, that he takes with his mother in the form of a private game: each of them must mentally travel down a long path at their country home, from one point to another, a stroll that

must be carried out with the rhythm of a “human footstep” (Nabokov 2001, 87), a step that resembles a beat, after which they must observe together where they have ended up:

And sometimes they would play like this: sitting side by side and silently imagining to themselves that each was taking the same Leshino walk, they went out of the park, took the path along the field (there was a river to the left behind the alders), across the shady graveyard where sun-flecked crosses were measuring something terribly large with their arms and where it was somehow awkward to pick the raspberries, across the river, to the Pont des Vaches and farther, through the pines and along the Chemin du Pendu – familiar nicknames, not grating to their Russian ears but thought up when their grandfathers had been children. And suddenly, in the middle of this silent walk being performed by two minds, using according to the rules of the game the rate of a human footstep (although they could have flown over their whole domains in a single instant), both stopped and said where they had got to, and when it turned out, as it often did, that neither one had outpaced the other, having halted in the same coppice, the same smile flashed upon mother and son and some through their common tear.

(Nabokov 2001, 86-87)

The result of this experiment comes to reveal a fabulous synchronization since the authentic memory leads the mother and son to the same place at the same time. The movement of thought is here no longer a simple metaphor, it is both a playful and deeply moving experience. The repeated success of this game (“as it often did”) arises from precise, mutual knowledge of each acre of the past, which makes it possible to restore a memory and attest to its truthfulness. By contrast, to throw words onto paper is also to take the risk of contaminating the perfection of the memory that the writer carries in him by “dirtying it with a flashy phrase” (Nabokov 2001 136).

Another walk, this time a silent one, plays a crucial role in the narrative: the walk that Fyodor completes just before a certain Misha brings him news of his father’s death. This announcement, which is never expressed during their walk (though it will be a few moments later) appears as a foresight: while walking alongside Misha, Fyodor prepares himself for the foregone

conclusion (which will never be one, since no trace of Konstantin Kirillovich will ever be found), as if walking could still prevent the news of this death from solidifying:

I sometimes meet this Misha in the Russian bookshop in Berlin where he works – and every time I see him, although we talk little, I feel a hot shiver run down the whole of my spinal column and my whole being relives our brief road together. [...] We walked along the street quickly and silently, he slightly ahead of me. I looked at the masks of the houses, at the humps of the snowdrifts, and I tried to outwit fate by imagining to myself (and thus destroying its possibility in advance) the still uncomprehended, black, fresh grief which I would carry back home.

(Nabokov 2001, 133-134)

Movement therefore brings misfortune with it and it takes beings far away: the father's passing is still the image of the car heading away—and the retrospective knowledge that Fyodor draws from this, that the car was taking away his father for ever and ever, accompanied by its ephemeral palimpsest, the fading sound of the motor.⁶

But walking takes on an absolutely unique significance in *The Gift* insofar as that narrator makes it so that his feeling of Russianness reside in the sole of his foot⁷:

For a long time he had wanted to express somehow that it was in his feet that he had the feeling of Russia, that he could touch and recognize all of her with his soles, as a blind man feels with his palms. And it was a pity when he reached the end of that stretch of rich brown earth and once again had to step along the resonant sidewalk.

(Nabokov 2001, 61)

⁶ "...the red back of the car disappeared round the bend and then, from behind the fir trees, on top of a rising whine there sounded the sharp change of gears, followed by a comfortably receding murmur; all was still, but a few moments later, from the village beyond the river came again the triumphant roar of the engine, which gradually faded away – forever" (Nabokov 2001, 130).

⁷ At the end of chapter 5, Fyodor leaves the Grünewald forest unclothed, but the first sensation described is the pleasant sensation of his bare feet on the asphalt.

Walking on silent ground, far from the noisy city sidewalks, becomes a kind of demonstration of a personal feeling of Russianness that is Fyodor's own. Treading the ground is a means of knowing and of remembering, of bringing with oneself—the gift is “an illegal treasure” (Nabokov 2001, 78) that he takes away with him—of carrying in oneself inheritance of the past in a sort of phenomenology of the sole and the arch of the foot that enters Fyodor into the lineage of figures like Rimbaud or Rilke.

Despite his attachment to an idyllic past, Fyodor still gradually abandons his plaintive tone of nostalgia—more characteristic of his poetry than his prose—and particularly does so by distancing himself from the circle of emigration and its regular recitations of laments of the lost homeland. For the collective celebration of nostalgia can only come about through clichés, and clichés always strip the Nabokovian character of his personal connection to his own Russia. It is therefore not surprising that in *The Gift* one finds a change in the nature of patriotic feelings: “Ought one not to reject any longing for one's homeland, for any homeland besides that which is with me, within me, which is stuck like the silver sand of the sea to the skin of my soles, lives in my eyes, my blood, gives depth and distance to the background of life's every hope?” (Nabokov 2001, 173) The only homeland that survives is one that is no longer associated with a geographical territory but is tied to the mobile sole of a shoe and the the living power of interiority, which transforms loss into creative thought.

The dread of immobility

If one leaves out Zina's moments of expectation—of desire—then immobility in *The Gift* is almost always a synonym for stupidity and anxiety. Consider, for example, the “clumsy sluggishness” (Nabokov 2001, 78) of the Berlin streetcar, or the heaviness that he imparts on urban existence. The bunching up of Berlin streetcars at their stops, their “inert agglomeration” is a sign of “the disastrous imperfection of the world in which Fyodor still continued to reside” (Nabokov 2001, 82).

More fundamentally, immobility is also found in the anxious expectation of the father's return, even though the father also constantly yearns to leave. Konstantin Kirillovich possesses a dread of settled life, which his family members are sadly aware of even if his character fascinates them. In fact, the father is portrayed by his sudden appearances, his untimely departures, or by

those that are planned well in advance. He is the one that we watch leave and whose return we await. In the novel's preface, written in Montreux in 1962, Nabokov summarizes the content of chapter 2 as Fyodor's "attempt to describe his father's zoological explorations" (Nabokov 2001, viii). This expression actually encourages a shift in perspective: the father becomes an object to be observed and Fyodor becomes the observer. Yet, the scientific description of a specimen implies that it has been captured in advance, observed and maybe even dissected. The object that Fyodor is studying, on the contrary, is an elusive one, since the death has not been proven. If the hunter of butterflies is on the lookout for a presence, for Fyodor it will always entirely be a question of hunting down an absence. In this way, the book about his father can only be understood as a cenotaph, a funerary monument without a body.

We must mention yet another form of fixity that is inherent in the process of taxonomy—in the creative process that links Fyodor to his father (like whom, he also names "the nameless"). Indeed, naming, which grants authorship to the inventor—this is what one calls a naturalist who is the first to describe a species—also forecloses what was possible, since there is no longer any possibility for another scientist to achieve this primacy. Yet, it can happen that two naturalists discover the same species in places belonging to different worlds, each one giving the species a name and thus creating what naturalists call synonyms. It is in this way that Konstantin Kirillovich loses authorship of the discovery of a specimen: "only a few days later his father learned that this new moth had just been described from St. Petersburg specimens by a fellow scientist, and Fyodor cried all night long: they had beaten Father to it!" (Nabokov 2001, 93) Fyodor's sorrow is not only a product of the realization that his father can fail, but also of a personal knowledge that the name, because it establishes an object in the world, is deadly.

Finally, immobility is also one conception of literature, a rigid and paralyzing attitude that reigns over a number of Russian emigrants in the context of debate surrounding the future of Russian literature. This posture is staged by Nabokov in the form of a short comic scene, an episode dealing with a meeting of emigrant poets at the end of the first chapter. A character named Busch, the author of an unsuccessful tragedy, gives a public reading. The dichotomy movement/immobility resides in the heart of this passage. This salon's space, both personal and public, stages a conventional and codified immobility, which is the source of a deep worry for Fyodor. Yet, this immobility is unsettled when the author's grandiloquent tone becomes intolerable

and, for the audience, it becomes a question of holding back laughter. The first movement, introduced as “little landslides began among the audience” (Nabokov 2001, 65), is followed by Vassiliev falling from his chair, and ends in collective hilarity. The scene’s seriousness is swept away, any solemnity in the tragic posture held with regard to the lost homeland is crushed by human comedy.

Yet, it is precisely in the aftermath of this scene that the narrative delivers an antidote to false solemnity: the conversation about literature that Fyodor has with the poet Koncheyev reestablishes the movement of critical and dialectical thought. Koncheyev is a two-sided character: on the one hand, he is Fyodor’s literary rival and, like him, he spends time in the milieu of Russian emigrants in Berlin; on the other hand, he is the ghostly twin that Fyodor invents at the end of the first chapter and that he summons again in the final chapter for a friendly sparring match that distorts Fyodor’s eagerness find a place among the great Russian writers. In the second conversation, which is also dreamt by the young man, the text that Fyodor wrote about Chernyshevsky is the object of discussion. There, one discovers Koncheyev’s emphatic praise, but also the shortcomings that he detects in the budding writer’s style. It is therefore through him that the young writer constructs a dynamic image of himself and a fruitful self-criticism, far from the categorical and distorted judgement of the salons.

Conclusion

Mobility is therefore at the heart of Nabokovian prose in *The Gift*: there, a thought in motion unfolds, paradoxically supported by enunciative instability and intertwining of discourses, by the transgression of boundaries between past and present. Writing about a past that has vanished, about a Russia that has gone up in smoke, is a way of setting in motion a variety of qualms and narrative apparatuses. This is a way of leaving space for non-linearity, for a de-structured novelistic composition, for rewriting, up to the point of even abandoning the project of writing. Philosophically speaking, it is a way of replacing heritage with reflexivity, posture with thought in motion, settled life with nomadism, a monological attitude with the dialogical expression of thought.

One can thus speak about an authentic poetics in the sense of a stylistic challenge that consists in hunting down and tracking the movements of life that are both abundant and revelatory

of the essential function of Nabokovian prose: averting the specter of death even when the father haunts the text to the point of making a ghostly appearance in the last chapter. The novel is carried along by an uncontrollable urge, and the forever unresolved dilemma of the writer might be formulated as follows: how to catch ideas in midair without fossilizing them into the artifice of language? Captured and pinned up, words become inert objects. Like the watercolorist who always adds another layer of paint, “layer after layer to retain its beauty” (Nabokov 2001, 77), one writes over sentences, runs them back through ink so that they are not left to dry and so as to avoid seeing oneself forever dispossessed of them.

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