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THE ORIGINS OF “THE POTATO ELF”

The *Potato Elf* (from here on, P.E.) was written in 1924 and was soon published in parts in several issues of Berlin’s weekly *Echo*¹. Later in 1924, the story was re-published (also in parts) in the Berlin magazine *Rul’*, and was then included in Nabokov’s collection of stories and poems *The Return of Chorb* (1930). P.E. was prefigured by Nabokov’s work on the film script of *Love of a Dwarf*.

The problem of literary sources in respect to P.E. has already been explored by scholars. The following works were considered among possible sources: Thomas Mann’s *Little Herr Friedemann* (1898) [Maar 2009: 10–18] and Ivan Bunin’s *Son* (1916) [Shrayer 1999: 259]. Indeed, there are certainly some thematic similarities between P.E. and the two short stories, but these are definitely not enough to speak of reminiscences or allusions. In other words, it is quite logical to pose a question about the role that *Little Herr Friedemann* and *Son* played in the formation of Nabokov’s conception, but not about their function as subtexts.²

¹ A misleading name, *Russkoe Ekho* has been established in Nabokovian studies. In reality, that was the name of the publishing house that published the weekly journal. This mistake is pointed out in the publication: [Lavrinet 2006: 34–35].

² The term “subtext” here is used with the meaning assigned to it by the scholars of Mandelstam’s poetics: “an already existing text <...> reflected in a new one” [Taranovsky 1976: 18].

At the same time, a P.E.'s reader is given a variety of intertextual clues that intentionally send him back to familiar texts. The very word *Elf* points to the fairy tale genre in which the main subtext of the story belongs to. Gleb Struve observed in his 1930 article that the affinity between P.E. and Sirin's "Fairy-tale" is based on the fact that both works have "elements of Hoffmann" [Struve 2000: 184]. In this remark, he poignantly traces P.E.'s roots, masked under British couleur locale, to the German Biedermeier style.³ A layer of German-Scandinavian mythology is equally present in the story. In particular, in the analysis of P.E., N.K. Teletova referred to the epic motif of the elf Alberich of a child-like height and appearance, who, feeling sorry for a childless royal couple, impregnates the queen and becomes the father of Ortnit, the future king of Lombardy [Teletova 1999: 119]. However, the central subtext of P.E., as I hope to demonstrate, is Wilhelm Hauff's *The Dwarf Nose* (*Zwergnase*, 1826); more specifically, its first part, where a little boy, Jacob, is kidnapped by an evil witch for offending her, and sentenced to serve her for seven years. Thinking that the experience was a mere dream, Jacob, upon awakening from this somnambulism returns to his parents and discovers that neither his mother nor his father recognize him as he has turned into a dwarf – a laughing stock without home or family.

Nabokov wittily transforms the scheme mentioned above. Nora, the childless wife of Mr. Shock, the conjuror, once cheats on her husband with his circus act partner – the dwarf Fred Dobson, whom Shock carries home after an incident. Shock habitually plays a hoax on his wife, this time pulling the strings of her maternal instinct: "[...] Shock appeared [...] with a little creature all screwed up in his arms. [...] Nora thought fleetingly: child. Lost. Found. Her dark eyes grew moist. |⁴ 'Must be adopted,' softly added Shock [...]" [228]. The next morning, looking at Fred, Nora

³ In the annotation to the English translation, Nabokov noted: "[...] Another aspect separating 'The Potato Elf' from the rest of my short stories is its British setting. One cannot rule out thematic automatism in such cases, yet on the other hand this curious exoticism (as being different from the more familiar Berlin background of my other stories) gives the thing an artificial brightness which is none too displeasing [...]" [220]. – Hereinafter P.E. is cited by [Nabokov 1973].

⁴ Hereinafter new paragraphs in the original text are denoted by a vertical line. – E. S.

tried to imagine that it was not an adult dwarf sitting there, but her non-existing little son in the act of telling her how his schoolmates bullied him. Nora stretched her hand and stroked his head lightly – and, at that moment [...] she called forth something else, a curious, vindictive vision [230].

The sexual experience turns Fred's life upside-down – he leaves the circus, departs from London and settles down in a small town. At the same time, this experience leaves Nora with a feeling of disgust: “The image of the dwarf himself she dismissed. The dwarf was a nasty little worm” [237]. Nevertheless, Nora gives birth to a boy, remarkably, without any abnormalities in height.

At seven years old, the boy dies. Nora comes to Fred, who has spent all these years in provincial solitude. The goal of her visit is to look into his dwarf features and recognize the traits of her dead child, and bring the beloved ghost to life: “Nora took him by the shoulders, turned him to the light, and with eager, sad eyes examined his features” [247]; “[...] she sat down [...] and kept staring at him with odd intensity” [247]; “She turned her head in the doorway and for the last time, avidly and mournfully, she examined Fred's features” [249]. Nora tells Fred about his paternity. The past tense of this announcement (“The fact is I had a son from you” [248]) clearly indicates that the son is no longer alive, but Fred, stupefied by the news, ignores this grammatical detail. Not to dispel his delusion, Nora hurries to leave. “[...] after she had gone, Fred [...] kept trying to imagine his son, and all he could do was to imagine his own self dressed as a schoolboy and wearing a little blond wig. And by the act of transferring his own aspect onto his boy, he ceased to feel that he was a dwarf” [249]. The aforementioned inner change rounds-up the motif, introduced by Shock's mystifying remark (“Must be adopted”) and founded on the recurrent theme of Fred's infantile nature,⁵ his semblance to a child⁶, penchant on the part of the others to exaggerate this semblance,⁷ and, especially, the habit of the aging Fred to imagine himself as a boy:

⁵ He “conquered the heart of a stupid and glum giant [...] by stretching up to him the first time he saw him and pleading like an infant to be taken up in Nurse's arms” [222].

⁶ “[...] had there not been those wrinkles on his round forehead and at the corners of his narrowed eyes, as well as a rather eerie air of tension (as if he were resisting growth), our dwarf would have easily passed for a gentle eight-year-old boy” [221–222]; in the English translation by the Nabokovs, father and son, Shock calls the beaten Fred *old boy* [225] instead of the original *ōpam* [brother].

“The housekeeper [...] would answer the casual questions of neighbors by explaining that Mr. Dobson was an aged paralytic, doomed to vegetate in curtained silence. [...] The mysterious old man was thought to have a grandchild – a quiet fair-haired little boy who sometimes, at dusk, used to come out of the Dobson cottage [...]. [...] Drowsians missed the fact that the supposed grandson of the supposed paralytic did not grow as the years went by and that his flaxen hair was nothing but an admirably made wig; for the Potato Elf started to go bald at the very beginning of his new existence, and his head was soon [...] smooth and glossy [...]. Otherwise, he had not much changed: his tummy, perhaps, had grown plumper, and purple veins showed through on his dingier, fleshier nose which he powdered when dressed up as a little boy” [241–242].

When Nora leaves, Fred, dumfounded, runs after her having decided to see his son without delay. Upon catching up with Nora, Fred dies at her feet – his dwarf heart, weak after receiving a letter from Nora eight years ago refusing to continue their relationship, cannot bear such a strain. Nora listlessly looks at the tiny body. “Leave me alone,” Nora tells the crowd, “I don’t know anything. My son died a few days ago” [251].

The central conflict for both “The Dwarf Nose” and P.E. is a mother’s failure to recognize the son she has lost in a dwarf she is faced with. But if Hauff’s dwarf is an enchanted boy, Nabokov’s boy, as we will see, is, contrastingly, an enchanted dwarf.

Fred leaves London for a little town with telling name *Drowse*. It is said that the town “looked, indeed, so somnolent that one suspected it might have been somehow mislaid among those misty, gentle-sloped fields where it had fallen asleep forever” [241]. Drowse is an enchanted sleeping kingdom. Like Jacob, who is put to sleep and spends seven years in the witch’s house, Fred spends eight years in Drowse (the difference in the figures can be explained, firstly, by the fact that seven years would have been an irrelevant explication of the fairy-tale genre, and, secondly, by the addition of the pregnancy term, rounded-off to a year, to the seven years). Nora’s arrival at Fred’s signifies the replacement of a lethargic night with a bright day, which is contrasted by her mournful dress: “The doorbell tinkled. | ‘Doctor Knight,’ reflected Fred indifferently, and

⁷ In the park “a rosy nurse [...] offered him for some reason a ride in the pram she was pushing” [232–233].

[...] went to open the door [...]. | Sunlight poured in. A tall lady all in black stood on the threshold” [246]. In the English translation, the doctor, who is already familiar to the reader, precisely at this moment is given the last name *Knight* (in the original the doctor has no name). This name is a homonym to the word *night* and rhymes with *sunlight*, which increases the contrast between the inner twilight and the blinding light outside. Avoiding to leave his house during the day so as not to raise suspicion, Fred assimilates with gnomes, whom sunlight turns into stones. But when, for the first and last time, Fred breaches his rule and leaves the house during the daylight (“The sun made him feel a little queasy” [250]) to catch up with Nora, his escapade forces all the inhabitants of Drowse to wake up from lethargy (“[...] the drowsy town was coming to life [...]” [250]). The bicycle shop – one of the static attributes of the sleepy town – transforms into the figure of a cyclist, who rides alongside running Fred, encouraging him. Women, attracted by the noise, come to the porches, *shading their eyes*. It is said that “[a]ll the dogs of the town woke up” [251].

The image of an enchanted town is absent from Hauff’s tale. It goes back to the fairy-tale motif in the adaptations of folk stories by Perrault, the brothers Grimm, and Zhukovsky. What connects the aforesaid motif with Hauff’s tale is that the magic comes from a vengeful old woman (directly or indirectly), and the central or only object that submerges into a long-term sleep is a beloved and only child.

For Nabokov, an additional basis for combining the two central themes could have been Blok’s 1905 poem (by itself not connected with either tale), in which the child’s departure to a deadly sleep is followed by the apparition of a dwarf in his bedroom who stops the clock:

В голубой далекой спальне
Твой ребенок опочил.
Тихо вылез карлик маленький
И часы остановил.
[...]
Стало тихо в дальней спальне –
Синий сумрак и покой,
Оттого, что карлик маленький

Держит маятник рукой.
[Blok 1960: 83]

[In a distant blue nursery
Your child fell asleep.
Quietly came out a little dwarf
And stopped the watch.
[...]
Everything grew quiet in the distant nursery –
Blue darkness and quiet,
Because the little dwarf
Holds the pendulum with his hand.]

In the late 1910s – 1920s, the poem became popular as one of the “sad songs” of Alexander Vertinskii. The writing of P.E. coincides with Nabokov-the-poet’s overcoming the imitation of and dependency on Blok. “If Nabokov’s poetry of this period remains stylized, it is directed towards other, anti-Blok models [...]” – notes Dolinin [2004: 335]. Possibly, P.E. contains an early example of implicit and functionally-motivated employment of the elements of Blok’s aesthetic in Nabokov’s prose.

Street boys, the instigators of the tumult around Fred, follow him with laughter and hooting. The motif of jeering goes back directly to Hauff’s text. Jacob, who does not suspect that he is no longer a boy or that he was turned into a dwarf, leaves the witch’s house and enters a big crowd:

...the boy thought to himself that there must be a dwarf to be seen somewhere in the neighborhood, for he heard cries everywhere about him of, ‘Ho! see the ugly dwarf! Where does this dwarf come from? [...]’ At any other time he would have lingered to follow this creature, for he liked nothing so much in his life as to see giants and dwarfs, and similar monstrosities; but now he was in too great a hurry to get home to his mother [Hauff 1858: 159–160].

In a similar manner, Fred, who ceased feeling like a dwarf before leaving the house and transferred his own image onto his son, doesn’t think the bullying is directed at

him: “One of the lads darted in front of him to have a look at his face; another yelled something in a rude hoarse voice. Fred [...] ran on, and abruptly it seemed to him that all those boys crowding in his wake were his sons, merry, rosy, well-built sons – and he smiled a bewildered smile [...]” [250].

It seems that there are details in P.E. that are included within the text with the main purpose of pointing out the key subtext and ensuring its verification. For example, such is the role of the adjacent professions of the central heroes’ fathers: a shoemaker in Hauff’s text; a tailor in Nabokov’s (with an addition of a characteristic that hints at the leitmotif of Fred’s child-like nature: his father was a *children’s* tailor⁸). Another example: Fred erroneously explains to himself the tears that Nora sheds after telling him about their common child; – for him, it is the expression of fear that he will take his son away from her; – and later recalls: “silly goose – to fear he would snatch him away!” [249]; in the English version the idiom *silly goose* substitutes the original adjective *глупая* [silly], possibly, to draw a contrast with the wise goose Mimi from *The Dwarf Nose* – an enchanted princess, and Jacob’s friend in peril.

However, the main hints are focused on the organ that, contrary to Jacob’s other body parts, was augmented. For instance, the circus nickname of Nabokov’s protagonist can be regarded; the noun *elf* serves as an euphemism for *dwarf*, and the adjective *potato* comes up because of his nose: “[...] his very first manager deemed it wise to weight the notion of ‘elf’ with a comic epithet upon noticing the fat nose [...]” [222]. In this manner, the nickname Potato Elf is equivalent to Dwarf Nose. The nickname *Potato Elf* also contains a hint at magic that dominates over Fred and his literary prototype, due in relation to the magical being – *Elf*; the adjective *potato* actualizes the demonic semantics of a potato.⁹ Moreover, the fact that Fred’s nose resembles a vegetable refers to the source of all the troubles of Hauff’s protagonist: Jacob, the son of a greengrocer, scolded

⁸ According to Fred’s version, he became a dwarf after his pregnant mother had been scared at his drunk father’s joke, who put in her bed “wax-work cherubs, you know – sailor suit, with a lad’s first long trousers” [221]. It would be logical to ascribe the making of the trousers to the father-to be, who in this case surpassed the frames of his specialization by making an article of clothing that signifies the end of childhood. As if to punish the children’s tailor, his professional sphere is eclipsed by the birth of a dwarf, who, figuratively speaking, will never need long trousers.

⁹ For example, let’s recall Lermontov’s *Asmodeus Feast*: “[...] И вот лакей картофель подает, / Затем что самодержец Мефистофель, / Был родом немец и любил картофель” [“[...] And so the lackey serves potatoes / Because the tyrant Mephistopheles / Was German and loved potatoes.”]

the old woman for bringing his mother's produce close to her long nose and thus repelling customers, hearing in response: "Sonny, sonny! So my nose displeases you, hey; my long, handsome nose? Then you shall have one yourself hanging down to your chin" [Hauff 1858: 153].

The factor that intensifies the dwarf's ugliness and is metonymically connected to his long nose is an act of sneezing, which overcomes Jacob in the decisive moment of his fate. Lulled to sleep and transformed into a squirrel with the help of a special herb *Niesmitlust* (or, *Sneeze-with-pleasure*), he finds the plant, smells it and starts sneezing so hard that he wakes up, metamorphosing from a squirrel into Dwarf Nose. Later on he finds and smells the herb again, which helps him regain his normal appearance.

Sneezing often overcomes Fred as well, but in his case it highlights his semblance to a small domestic animal and a child: "[...] the Potato Elf would meekly roll up and start to sneeze softly and whimper" [221]; "[...] Fred woke up early, inspected the unfamiliar room [...] and after a quiet sneeze or two, settled on the ledge of the bay-window like a little boy" [229]. At the same time, it bespeaks of his awakening, but of a special kind – the sexual awakening:

Latterly Fred had been growing gloomy, and sneezing a lot, soundlessly and sadly, like a little Japanese spaniel. While not experiencing for months any hankering after a woman, the virginal dwarf would be beset now and then by sharp pangs of lone amorous anguish [...]. [...] That same night, as Fred, after his number, snuffling¹⁰ and grumbling, in bowler and tiny topcoat, was toddling along a dim backstage passage, a door came ajar with a sudden splash of gay light and two voices called him in. It was Zita and Arabella, sister acrobats [...] [224].

Of course, the dwarf's nose, prone to sneezing, stands for a sublimated phallus while the symmetrical shapes of Nora's nostrils hint at vaginal outlines – Nora has a habit

¹⁰ In the Russian original – *почихивая* [to let out frequent and quiet sneezes]. – *E.S.*

of blowing cigarette smoke through her nostrils¹¹ (which, along with other qualities, made her less attractive to men).

The symbolism of a thick nose is emphasized by the fact that it was bequeathed to the dwarf by “his plethoric and naughty father” [222]. This information also sheds light on the first and last name of the Potato Elf – Fred Dobson. As the very first phrase of P.E. demonstrates, this choice of name is far from random – “Actually his name was Frederic Dobson” [221]. The ending of the dwarf’s last name (-son) is simultaneously a sign of familial succession and an inversion of the word *нос / nos(e)*. In this context, it would not be a stretch of imagination to interpret the name *Fred* as an inversion of the word *dwarf*. Arguably, the first letter of the last name is chosen to merge with the last letter of the first name. Thus we end up with the combination *FReDobSON* – an inversion (both on the level of letters and words) of the phrase *DwaRF NOSe*. The intentional conflation of the two Ds and, consequently, the accuracy of decoding *FReD(D)* as *DwaRF* are proven by the fact that in the English version the initial R is added to the name *F. Dobson*. In the first letter of the last name, “R” highlights the last letter of the first name: “a certain F. R. Dobson” [241]. Thus, the principle behind the choice of Fred’s name is clear: it is the only non-exotic name that, firstly, is isosyllabic to the word *dwarf*; secondly, begins with two last letters of this word; and, thirdly, ends with its first letter (that is, almost fully represents its mirror reflection). The last name Dobson is equally natural: between the first letter D and the ending -son, Nabokov inserted a minimal number of letters and syllables (2 and 1, respectively) to form a banal and semantically neutral English last name.¹²

A problem is posed by the motives that guide Shock. For Nora, who loves him and whom he also loves in his own way, Shock, nevertheless is merely an illusory

¹¹ Gerda von Rinnlingen from Thomas Mann’s *Little Herr Friedemann* has the same habit. M. Maar does not note this coincidence, but simply points out the fact that both characters smoke [Maar 2009: 14].

¹² The name of Nabokov’s protagonist could have been inspired by Ibsen’s Nora from *The Dollhouse*, who at the end of the play, upon leaving her husband, is also leaving her children behind. One can also recall the protagonist of the ballad *Queen Eleanor’s Confession*, who unwillingly confesses to her husband that her beloved son is fathered by a lover. Finally, one can remember the dwarf’s mouse-gray spats and hear a scabrous allusion to a mouse burrow (*nora* in Russian); also consider the reference to Fred as a “nasty little worm”.

husband. The ephemeral character of Shock's fulfillment of his marital duties can be discerned from the description of his dinner together with Nora:

[...] he amazed her by his unusual gluttony: he smacked his lips juicily, sucked chicken bones clean, again and again heaped up food on his plate; then he departed after giving his wife a sorrowful glance; and a little later the maid, giggling into her apron, informed Nora that Mr. Shock had not touched one scrap of his dinner, and had left all of it in three brand-new pans under the table [226].

The sad glance, which he sends to his wife before leaving, can be explained by Shock's inability to share not only a meal, but also other bodily pleasures with her. The marriage of Nora and Shock is a union of an earthly woman with an ethereal creature: "It is hard to be happy when one's husband is a mirage, a peripatetic legerdemain of a man, a deception of all five senses" [227]. By entrusting Fred, who has just experienced sexual humiliation and is overcome with desire, to the motherly care of the childless and sexually frustrated Nora, Shock intentionally provokes them both, as he provides the dwarf with an opportunity to nestle next to her longed-for body parts under the guise of an innocent child, who inspires others to nurture him. At the same time, the conjurer was clearly not interested in such an outcome of his provocation, since it would have then turned him into a perverse procurer. Certainly, Shock considered the dwarf physically incapable of possessing Nora. His mistaken belief is communicated to the reader through several roundabout images. First, we learn that Fred "sang with a *castrato*-like silvery voice [...]" [223]. In this manner, the theme of the dwarf's sexual impotence is established. In the episode, where Shock picks up Fred, who has been thrown out by an acrobat from the room of his partners, silver is mentioned again in the same semantic context: "'What you need is a female dwarf,' said pensively Shock, producing with a familiar flick of finger and thumb a silver coin from the ear of the dwarf whose little arm went up in a brushing-away curve as if chasing a fly" [224]. When Fred, who has grown to believe that he loves Nora and Nora loves him, meets Shock at a restaurant and tries to reason with him, the latter seems not to hear him and tells him things that have obviously nothing to do with the subject matter. Paying no heed to Fred's confession, Shock stretched out his hand – "no doubt he intended to snip out a coin from Fred's ear – but for

the first time in years of masterly magic, the coin, not grasped by the palm muscles firmly enough, fell out the wrong way. He caught it up and rose. | ‘I’m not going to eat here,’ said he, examining curiously the crown of the dwarfs head. ‘I don’t care for this place’” [235]. Shock’s habitual manipulations with a coin (a silver one, indeed) has a solid semiosis: Shock convinces himself that Fred is impotent as a man. However, a failed trick tells him that he has underestimated the dwarf. The sudden interest in Shock’s eyes testifies to the fact that he has come to believe Fred.

In the next episode, Shock is dining with Nora at his house. Having added some drops to his wine, as if for digestion, Shock starts writhing and makes a confession: “I’m not feeling well, Nora. That was poison I drank. You shouldn’t have been unfaithful to me” [239]. Not feeling any guilt, Nora is merely vexed at Shock for discovering her secret. She is almost confident that all the fidgeting are but another trick. Shock’s marital humiliation is signified by the triumph of the vaginal symbol (necklace) over a phallic one (knife): “Nora sprang up; the amber beads of her long necklace caught at the fruit knife upon her plate and brushed it off” [239]. In the original, the knife was characterized as silver, rather than a fruit one, which denotes Shock’s impotence. (The old writer, while working on the translation of his early story, must have tried to retouch obvious Freudian connotations of this moment and to substitute the symbolic attribute of a knife with a different, perfectly random one). The humiliated Shock has nothing left to do but to gain revenge not as a man and husband, but as a conjurer and hoaxer. His agony, interrupted with words of forgiveness and farewell, continues until his trick reaches fruition:

“[...] Nora with a wild gesture dashed into the next room, where there was a telephone, and there, for a long time, she juggled the holder, repeated the wrong number, rang again, sobbing for breath and hammering the telephone table with her fist; and finally when the doctor’s voice responded, Nora cried that her husband had poisoned himself, that he was dying; upon which she flooded the receiver with a storm of tears, and cradling it crookedly, ran back into the bedroom.

The conjuror, bright-faced and sleek, in white waistcoat and impeccably pressed black trousers, stood before the pier glass and, elbows parted, was meticulously working upon his tie. He saw Nora in the mirror, and without turning gave her an absentminded twinkle [...]” [240].

Nabokov took measures to force us not only to watch Nora's reactions, but also to tensely participate in deciding whether to believe in the conjurer's suicide. In the previous episode, before Fred tries to explain himself, Shock "was talking in undertone to an obese old man of an American type" [233]. "By the way," announces the conjurer to Fred after the departure of the fat man, "tonight I appear together with you for the last time. That chap is taking me to America. Things look pretty good" [235]. We have to recall these plans as soon as Shock tells Nora that he has taken poison and to compare the whole collision with the central intrigue of the novel, *What is to be done?* The reader has to be reminded that Chernyshevsky's protagonist Vera Pavlovna, like Nora, finds herself in an illusory (fake) marriage, which is meant to guarantee her social freedom, with Dmitrii Sergeevich Lopukhov. Having guessed that his wife loves another man and not wishing to be a hindrance, Lopukhov stages a suicide (the event that serves as an entanglement of the plot), and leaves for America. His wife, as well as the reader, discovers that Lopukhov's suicide was staged only by the middle of the book. It might seem that with this early reference to Chernyshevsky's work, Nabokov hints that Shock's suicide is a conjuring trick. However, in another classic Russian novel, written shortly after *What is to be done?*, the motif of leaving for America instead of a fake suicide is mocked by the mirrored motif of suicide instead of a fake departure for America. Of course, this novel is *Crime and Punishment*, in which the impending departure to America is used by Svidrigailov as a euphemism for suicide.¹³ The real suicide of Svidrigailov, to whom his beloved woman preferred another man, makes us think that the conjurer is not joking either. We are also led to this conclusion by the final stage of

¹³ For the first time, Svidrigailov mentions his departure to Sonia Marmeladova: "I may be going to America, Sofya Semyonovna," said Svidrigailov, "and as I am probably seeing you for the last time, I have come to make some arrangements. [...]" [Dostoevsky 2010: 334]. Before Svidrigailov goes away, Sonia says: "How can you... how can you be going now, in such rain?" He replies: Why, be starting for America, and be stopped by rain! Ha, ha! Good-bye, Sofya Semyonovna, my dear! [...]" [Ibid.: 335]. Before shooting himself next to the gates of the fire station, Svidrigailov has the following conversation with a Jewish guard: "I am going to foreign parts, brother." | "To foreign parts?" | "To America." | "America." | Svidrigailov took out the revolver and cocked it. <...> "I say, this is not the place for such jokes!" | "Why shouldn't it be the place?" | "Because it isn't." | "Well, brother, I don't mind that. It's a good place. When you are asked, you just say he was going, he said, to America." | He put the revolver to his right temple. | "You can't do it here, it's not the place" [...] Svidrigailov pulled the trigger" [Ibid.: 342].

Chekhov's *Seagull*, where an invitation to discuss some letter from America masks the real news of Treplev's suicide¹⁴:

D o r n (*leafing through the magazine, to Trigorin*). About two months ago an article appeared... A letter from America. Among other things, I wanted to ask you... (*Push his arm around Trigorin's waist and leads him to the edge of the stage.*) ...as I'm very much interested in this question... (*Lowering his voice.*) Get Irina Nikolayevna away from here. The fact is, Konstantin Gavrilovich has shot himself... | *Curtain [Chekhov for the stage 1992: 69]*.

The manipulation of the reader's expectations in the episode of Shock's suicide is determined by the reader's ability to discern contradictory intellectual clues. In other words, Shock's trick is duplicated on the level of direct communication between the author and the reader. Thus Shock's function as a diegetic agent of the author is explained – it was not for nothing that before the wedding Nora took him for a lyric poet, and even after “understood that nevertheless conjuror Shock was, in his own way, a poet” [227]. The trick with the suicide, performed by the author under Shock's mask, is a mirror reflection of the trick of childbirth performed by Shock under the author's mask. The inner logic of the events in the story insinuates the idea that the birth of a son is an illusion – the act ends at the moment when it is time for the boy to outgrow the dwarf. The boy's death is as illusory as Nora's pregnancy. Disguising himself as a boy, Fred, without realizing it, continues to assist Shock; in reality, this masquerade is intended for Nora, and not for the inhabitants of Drowse. In Drowse, Fred dreams of Shock's and his circus performance from time to time:

Rarely did he recollect his past life. Only in dream did he sometimes see a starry sky come alive with the tremor of many trapezes while he was being clapped into a black trunk: through its walls he distinguished Shock's bland singsong voice but could not find the trap in the floor of the stage and suffocated in sticky darkness, while the conjuror's

¹⁴ I owe this observation to S. Karpukhin. For the recurrent theme of the “abroad” as the underworld in Russian literature, see M. Bezrodnyj's blog: <m-bezrodnyj.livejournal.com/380474.html>; <m-bezrodnyj.livejournal.com/506736.html>.

voice grew sadder and more remote and melted away, and Fred would wake up with a groan on his spacious bed, in his snug, dark room [...] and would stare for a long time, gasping for breath and pressing his child's fist to his stumbling heart, at the pale blur of the window blind. [243]

A dream within a dream, which is taken for reality is, of course, not a dream, but reality taken for a dream: Fred really became the victim of a conjurer's trick of disappearance, the prisoner of a black chest and the hostage of another trick – the trick of childbirth, which Shock showed to his wife. As Shock had promised him, on the evening of the day when the dwarf possessed Nora, they were performing for the last time, but that time was stretched to eight years and ended simultaneously with Fred's life.¹⁵

When the dwarf loses his virginity, he is granted “the swift¹⁶ day” [236], full of happiness and the anticipation of happiness. After he ends up in an enchanted place, he starts to age rapidly. This motif is based on German mythology, as well as on the physiological reality (which was discussed in the article on dwarfs in *The Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary*). It is foreshadowed by Fred's likening to a little dog and – in contrast to his ceased development – the increased speed of processes related to him (for example, it is said that he “rapidly became accustomed to people” [223]). When Hauff's protagonist, after awakening from lethargy, turns into a dwarf, his father tells him: “I had a son once, named Jacob, who ought to be now a slim, strong lad of twenty [...]” [Hauff 1858: 162]. Similarly, Fred, at the moment of his immersion into a magic dream, is, in a way, transformed into a boy who “was twenty” [221]. At the end of the story, Fred is twenty-eight years old, but in the mirror “a stately elderly gentleman” [250] looks at him. It is possible that Nabokov's remark on P.E. that “its structure and recurrent pictorial details do have a cinematic slant” [220] is directly connected to this rapid

¹⁵ See rationalistic interpretation: “[...] Apparently potent only in the world of imagination and appearances, Shock has not physically produced a child for his frustrated wife, but his tricks finally result in one”; “[...] Fred literally destroys himself [...] in attempting to ‘realize’ (make real) his now purely illusory child” [Evans 1982: 79, 81].

¹⁶ There is an allusion in the English version to *Swift's Gulliver* – a protagonist, who was both a Lilliputian and a giant. – *E. S.*

metabolism since, in 1924, when this story – based on a film script¹⁷ – was written, the era of silent cinema had not yet ended and as well the established film-frame rate (16 fps) produced an effect of accelerated time. Notably, in the English version with its programmatic augmentation of the “cinematic slant,” Fred’s death is described with a cinematographic term which signifies a slowed-down movement (the technique that became a part of the cinematographic language only in the era of sound-film¹⁸): “[...] he [...] collapsed in slow motion on the sidewalk” [251].

In the annotation to 1973 English translation of P.E. Nabokov dated the story 1929 – the year of its publication in *The Rul’*. It is thought that Nabokov simply made a mistake. It is highly probable, since the matter at stake was half-a-century old. However, another opinion has been expressed that Nabokov intentionally put the wrong date to conceal P.E.’s connection to another story written in 1924 – *The Dragon*¹⁹ (although it was not published during Nabokov’s lifetime), as well as its hypothetical origin in the medieval German tale of Tidrek (*Die Geschichte Thidreks von Bern*), reprinted in 1924 [Teletova 1999: 115, 126]. These conspiracy speculations cannot be taken seriously. Yet there is a clear correlation between the wrong date, indicated by Nabokov, and the content of the story – but only in its English version in which a note (rather a vague one) that refers to Fred’s age is added. Speaking of himself, Fred notes: “Some time around 1900, a few months before I was born [...]” [221]. One can imagine that if Nabokov had remembered the right date of P.E., he would not have verified Fred’s date of birth in order to let his protagonist live until 28 years of age.²⁰

¹⁷ That is why Nabokov did not formally violate the truth by insisting in his annotation: “[...] I never intended the story to suggest a screenplay [...]” [220].

¹⁸ Already in the early stages of its use, this device acquired a connotation of the last moments of life. Among famous examples of its use is the suicide by jumping into the river in *The Deserter* (1933) by Vsevolod Pudovkin.

¹⁹ The parallelism of the two stories is based on the concept that the two protagonists are creatures of unusual sizes (one is a dwarf, the other – a giant dragon), who leave their long-term havens, end up in the center of unsolicited public attention and finally die.

²⁰ I am grateful to Sergei Karpukhin and Ilya Kukuy for discussing my article and helping me find bibliographic sources.

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