The Poetics of Subliminal Awareness:
Re-reading Intention and Narrative Structure in Nabokov's "Christmas Story"

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"The Christmas Story" was not included in the collections of Vladimir Nabokov's stories published in his lifetime.[1] Nabokov, it has been thought, considered it was too avowedly political or didactic in aim for it to qualify as a first-rate story.[2] It contains, indeed, a caricature of the Soviet (soon to become official) social-realist aesthetic, and a denunciation of its simple-minded version of reality through a case study of bad faith in a writer. The value of the story, I will be arguing, goes well beyond Nabokov's polemics with the Soviet régime and with *poshlost'* (vulgarity).[3] Still, the story is intrinsically linked to those polemics. It reveals the deepest groundings of Nabokov's rejection of regimented writing as it takes us on a tour through the inner workings of imagination, memory and desire. Showing the way in which this work is more complex than may seem at first sight will involve tackling some characteristics of Nabokov's narrative poetics which account for his elaborate representations of consciousness. It will also involve going beyond the consciously designed aspects of the story as an aesthetic construct, in order to relocate the intended aesthetic effect within a wider interpretive frame.

The first hermeneutic step in criticism, though, requires an interpretation of the story as a conscious aesthetic construct. This involves reconstructing the author's designs, both experiencing (at the level of reading) and describing (at the level of critical metalanguage) a number of semiotic structures and relationships. For instance, the title places the story within an intertextual framework: the genre of Christmas stories, well known to readers through such paradigmatic works as Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* or *The Bells.*[4] "The Christmas Story" ("Rozhdestvenstkii rasskaz") is not the only Christmas

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[1] "Rozhdestvensskii rasskaz" (signed by "V. Sirin"); *Rul'* 25 December 1928: 2-3. The English translation by Dmitri Nabokov appeared in the *New York Review Of Books* 42.18 (November 16, 1995): 18-29, and in the 1995 collection *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*. Boyd notes that it is the last of Nabokov's stories that he did not later publish in book form or have translated (1993: 287).

[2] Tolstaia and Meilakh (1995: 647-48); Kuzmanovich (1993).

[3] To this extent I agree with Kuzmanovich's contention that "the story possesses levels of complexity beyond its condemnation of Soviet typology" (1993: 87), although I will argue that the story is far more complex in ways not calculated by Kuzmanovich—or even Nabokov.

[4] Naumann (1978: 114) notes a further intertextual echo of two stories by Dostoevsky, "The Christmas Tree and the Wedding" and "The Boy at Christ's Christmas Party"; the latter provides an intertextual analogue for the starving figure looking through a window at an expensive Christmas symbol. Actually, the window motif is somewhat of a trademark for Christmas fictions, as seen for instance in some of the promotional posters for the Nicholas Cage film *Family Man,* a recent filmic specimen of this genre. Incidentally, this film also brings out quite explicitly the motif of the doubling of possible worlds which is another of the potentialities of the genre underpinning Nabokov's story.

story written by Nabokov, as he had already published "Christmas" ("Rozhdestvo") in the Christmas 1924 issue of *Rul.*[1] R. W. Dillard has compared as follows the gist of each of the two stories:

> Two men on Christmas Eve, one in pre-revolutionary Russia, the other in the Soviet Union: both of them are distracted by the events in their lives and do not realize what day it is, and even when it is brought to their attention, neither of them reflects on the spiritual meaning of the day. One rejects the Christmas tree that is set up for him on a table, while the other is concerned only with the way he might write a Christmas story to enhance his pallid literary reputation. Both men are given providential gifts of great importance that lead one to open his eyes, to see, and the other to turn away with chagrin from what he has seen. (2000: 33).

In the latter work ("The Christmas Story") the conventions of the sub-genre are upheld: the protagonist is an emotional Scrooge (Dillard 2000: 51), thirsty for petty fame not for his happiness or his soul. But these conventions are also given a metafictional twist, since this is a Christmas story about the writing of Christmas stories, and ultimately about writing and (spiritual) insight.

Reflections in an I

A brief summary may be in order. The setting is the Soviet Union, some years after the 1917 revolution.[2] Novodvortsev, a third-rank writer and would-be pride of Soviet letters, receives in his room an aspiring proletarian writer, Anton Golïy, who is being introduced to him by a Communist critic. Golïy, like Novodvortsev, writes run-of-the-mill socialist realism, that is, politically correct Communist Party propaganda (I will refer to such writing as PCCPP).[3] Novodvortsev scarcely pays any attention to the beginner, being completely engrossed in a self-aggrandizing view of his oeuvre, which he feels lacks adequate recognition. The critic, far from acknowledging Novodvortsev's significance, taunts him with a reference to the Christmas stories he and other writers would have been writing on a day like this before the Revolution. Novodvortsev rejects the critic's insinuation that he is a turncoat, but once he is alone he abjectly clings to the critic's suggestion that he should write a "new-style" Christmas story depicting the class struggle—he fantasizes to the effect that such a story might consolidate his literary reputation (and his political one too, one gathers). As he faces the blank page struggling

[1] Actually on 6-8 Jan. 1925, as the émigré community kept on using the Julian calendar.

[2] Possibly not later than 1922, curiously enough, if we take seriously the reference to Neverov as a living writer (*Stories* 223). Neverov (the pseudonym of Aleksandr Skobelev) died in 1923. Otherwise, the story would rather seem to be set in the late 20s—or even later!

[3] Kuzmanovich points out that Nabokov cannot have been satirizing Socialist Realism, as that doctrine became official only in 1932, but "the dialectical-materialist creative method" (1993: 94 n.1). Actually, the stage for the political implementation of PCCPP was set at least since Lenin's article "Party Organisation and Party Literature" (1905), and its aesthetic rationale harks back to the critical writings of Chernyshevsky, Dobroliubov and Pisarev in the previous century—all three would be mercilessly lambasted by Nabokov in *The Gift,* with Chernyshevsky being given pride of place.

with several Christmas motifs, his concentration is interrupted by his neighbour, a card-holding Communist, who drops in to ask for a pen. Alone again, Novodvortsev is distracted by an involuntary flash of memory as he fiddled with the idea of Christmas trees (a motif first mentioned by Golïy): he remembers one particular Christmas long ago, and

> the woman he loved in those days, and all of the tree's lights reflected as a crystal quiver in her wide-open eyes when she plucked a tangerine from a high branch. It had been twenty years ago or more—how certain details stuck in one's memory...."[1]

The memory flash has an ephiphanic vividness well described by Boyd (with reference to another Nabokov story): "the unique complex of particulars becomes an instant unbearably vulnerable and poignant, fading even now from memory—but surely, surely, preserved in the past?" (1990: 238). That is the effect produced on the reader. But Novodvortsev rejects this memory and tries again to concentrate on his story. As he hits upon an adequate PCCPP theme involving Christmas trees, Nabokov's story is brought to a conclusion:

> With triumphal agitation, sensing that he had found the necessary, one-and-only key, that he would write something exquisite, depict as no one had before the collision of two classes, of two worlds, he commenced writing. He wrote about the opulent tree in the shamelessly illuminated window and about the hungry worker, victim of a lockout, peering at that tree with a severe and somber gaze.
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> *"The insolent Christmas tree,"* wrote Novodvortsev, *"was afire with every hue of the rainbow."* (*Stories* 226-27)

Eye-rony

The aspect of the story which immediately strikes most readers is its dimension as political satire. As such, the story is a merciless attack on the clichés of Soviet-sponsored social "realism." It drives its point home by offering itself as a specimen of writing which is far more complex aesthetically, and provides a more complex and intelligent approach to reality, than social realism. Some satirical points are overt enough. Thus, the critic works for the Communist-sponsored periodical *Red Reality*.[2] The insolent Christmas tree, lighted up with all the colors of the rainbow, stands thus as a fit emblem of the reality which is overlooked by those who only see red. It is also adorned with God's plenty, while the name of Anton Golïy ("naked", "bare", "cropped") suggests the impoverished notion of reality, realism and writing the "new times" have brought along. The protagonist began his writing career in the old régime, but it is now that he has come into

[1] *Stories* 226. In the Russian text, *melochi*, 'details', carries a stronger suggestion of contempt: 'small change', 'knicknacks', 'trivialities'.

[2] *Krasnaia Iav',* a jibe at the Soviet journal *Krasnaia Nov',* as noted by Naumann and Kuzmanovich.

his (scant) own and has really become *novodvortsev,* the "new courtier" within a new system of privilege.[1]

Novodvortsev's point of view is presented through psychonarration, merging with the narratorial description and re-emerging from it only to be held up for the reader's ironically detached contemplation. Consonant psychonarration often opens the way to narrated monologue.[2] Which is what happens here—only, the consonance between narrator and character is ironic. The character's subjective distortions become all the more flagrant as his point of view is reconstructed and ascribed to him by the reader within the framework of an authorial narrative, for instance in this passage in which Novodvortsev overestimates his influence on Golïy and others:

> This was not the first time he had been subjected to such glum, earnest rustic fictionists. And not the first time he had detected, in their immature narratives, echoes—not yet noted by the critics—of his own twenty-five years of writing; for Golïy's story was a clumsy rehash of one of his subjects.... (*Stories* 222)

This opinion, for all the apparent objectivity of its consonant psychonarrative form, is loaded with authorial irony. Irony upon irony, since the ironic stance towards Golïy is shared by Novodvortsev and the consonant narrator's discourse. But from the implied authorial viewpoint, the question of whether Golïy and the other rustics have been inspired by Novodvortsev is a moot one, as both the master and the hypothetical disciples are mere mouthpieces for the official "spirit of the age" (cf. Kuzmanovich 1993: 87). Far from being a conveniently impartial peephole for the omniscient narrator's account, Novodvortsev is shown here to be a vain and pompous focalizer. Such reflectorial coloring of a seemingly-authorial psychonarration may be easily misread by those not attuned to Nabokov's irony—as is the case with Naumann, who interprets descriptions like the foregoing as the kindly portrayal of Novodvortsev by an omniscient narrator, and describes the language of the story as being "direct and neutral" (1978: 113, 115).

The reader's correct understanding of Novodvortsev's distorted perception is thus a central constructive principle in the story, and is also reflexively thematized in it—what is at issue in the story both as narrated action and as aesthetic construct is the need for critical clear-sightedness and an adequate recognition of the mainsprings of writing and of perception. Part of the satirical effect of the story consists in Novodvortsev's failing to note that the image he chooses for the opening of his story expresses his own frustration and nostalgia, in a self-defeating way that only readers (and the implied author) note. This crucial aspect of the story's intentional construction is recognized by Boyd. I will quote his comment in full:

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[1] There may be as well in this name an echo of the name of Nabokov's onetime lover Novotvortseva, an émigré would-be poet who inspired the figure of Alla in *Glory*. Perhaps a displaced and unwanted memory of "the woman he loved in those days" may have contributed to the genesis of the story?

[2] Cohn (1978: 25ff). Cf. also the analysis of subjectivized third-person narrative in Collier (1999).

> Although unusually tendentious for Nabokov, 'A Christmas Story' fortunately has more to it than its dismissal of Novodvortsev's crude concoction. Nabokov limns with uncanny accuracy the petty egoism and self-centered ambition of a writer without talent and contrasts that with what Novodvortsev expects will be read as the noble altruism of his theme. In a subordinate line of the plot Novodvortsev rejects as irrelevant the memory of a Christmas tree reflected in the eyes of a woman he loved, as she reached for a mandarin on the tree, but he fails to realize that the first words of his story spring from that very memory. The pretended transcendence of the self in the social struggle, Nabokov's story suggests, is a lie. (Boyd 1990: 287)

Still, that intended ironic effect fails to account for the overall effect of the story. As Derrida and other (post-)structuralists hold, authorial intention is a necessary element in the text's machinery but there are unintentional meaning structures as well. This is so even in the case of a preternaturally conscious author like Nabokov.[1] A failure to grasp the story's structure beyond the satirical elements may account for the surprising neglect and the generally low critical estimate of the story. Even Boyd, who at least has grasped Nabokov's satirical plan, sounds dismissive. Field (1967: 173) praises the story as a portrait of philistine writing, but does not elaborate on the aesthetic complexity of the portrait.

In a recent monograph on Nabokov's stories, Shrayer provides readings of many stories which are both aesthetically acute and historically informed. However, his passing comment on this story is surprisingly short-sighted: "Nabokov's short fiction makes a leap between the loose texture of 'Rozhdestvenskii rasskaz' (A Christmas Story, 1928) and the astounding power of 'The Aurelian' (1930)" (1999: 122). As I hope my reading will make clear, "A Christmas Story" is about as loose, structurally speaking, as a Swiss watch, and the otherworldly subjects which are elsewhere the object of Shrayer's suggestive analyses are equally inscribed, if ever so subtly, in this story.

Other readings of the story are equally unsatisfactory. Naumann tentatively points to the polemical dimension in the story and argues that "this is one of Nabokov's least satisfying stories" (1978: 116)—and it is clear from her account that she does not grasp the basic "point" of the story as described by Boyd. Dillard's article on Nabokov's Christmas stories ignores previous discussions of the story and is biased by a Christian perspective which tries hard to bring out the covert Christian in Nabokov. Dillard does not seem to grasp the intentional structure of the story as described by Boyd, the ironic vantage position that author and reader enjoy over Novodvortsev in being able to relate his flashback memory and the central image of the tale he writes—the point of the story

[1] Shrayer (2000: 134) voices perhaps the opinion of many "friendly" critics of Nabokov when he argues that "Nabokov's artistic experience ... puts into question the validity of the Poststructuralist views of the author and authorship"—a claim which sounds naive to me, aiming, as such claims routinely do, at a straw man ('Post-straw-cturalism' might be a convenient shorthand for such cases).

for Dillard being merely the rejection of the spirit of Christmas. It is no wonder, therefore, that he should consider that the story "does not approach the artistic complexity of 'Christmas'" (2000: 47).[1]

Zoran Kuzmanovich's reading stands out as possibly the most critically informed, though perhaps it is not as aesthetically percipient as Boyd's. It teases out many dimensions of the story's involvement with current debates on art and imagination, but is less satisfactory in dealing with their role in the structural dynamics of the story. For instance, Kuzmanovich traces the image of the tree reflected in an eye back to other Nabokovian satires of naive materialism. According to the "Life of Cheryshevsky" Fyodor writes in Nabokov's novel *The Gift,* "Chernyshevsky explained, 'We see a tree; another man looks at the same object. We see by the reflection in his eyes that his image of the tree looks exactly the same as our tree. Thus we all see objects as they really exist'" (*The Gift* 490). This intertextual link accounts for the satirical element in the reflected tree image, but not for its concrete narrative articulation in "The Christmas Story" as an epiphany which opens an otherworldly vista into the character's experience.[2] The tree image performs in the story an experiential role (the refutation of materialism) contrary to the one ascribed to it by Kuzmanovich. Overall, Kuzmanovich's article on the story stays within the bounds of 'friendly criticism,' mostly following the interpretive moves of the implied reader inscribed by the author in the story (his subliminal treatment of the proxemics in the story, I will shortly argue, is symptomatic of the limits of his reading).

We face here the problem of defining which is a work's 'main' subject, as different truths may exist at different planes of the story and depend on the reader's level of critical engagement with the story. Nabokov's writing seems to forestall critical reading in that it articulates translucent planes of superimposed subjects. Many elements which are perceived subliminally by the reader are consciously intended by the author (according to some of his best critics). It appears, though, that given this principle of construction no clear limit can be established between the inferences stemming from the deliberate and conscious semiotic relationships and those based on the subliminally intended relationships. To this we must add the wider issues of interpretation, the ones we might characterize as 'unfriendly' criticism or 'resisting reading,' which identify themes or structures beyond the author's intention or in opposition to it.

Some of the issues concerning intentionality can be exemplified through an analysis of the work's focalization. Internal focalization is restricted to Novodvortsev. As we have seen, the stream of his consciousness is directed by a smug egolatry; his thoughts betray his thirst for recognition, and he is shown to misinterpret other people's attitudes, as if everybody were as attentive to him as he himself is. In this sense the character is

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[1] On "Christmas," the other Christmas story by Nabokov, see García Landa (forthcoming).
[2] On the importance of such 'otherworldly' windows in Nabokov's writing, see Alexandrov (1991) and Shrayer (1999).

mercilessly exposed through a narrative equivalent of dramatic irony, a structural irony which does not necessitate the narrator's overt judgment. The presence of irony is not a matter of interpretive choice: a reading which ignored this level of the character's depiction would be a misreading (which is not to say that there may not be further complications in the character's presentation). We need, therefore, to establish a well-defined implied authorial voice design in order to make sense of the satirical/ironic aspect of the story. This strongly defined implied author is part of what Couturier has called Nabokov's "tyranny."

I am aware that the concept of "implied author" has been criticised by some narratologists as unnecessary.[1] In my view, an implied authorial attitude potentially exists as a constructive element in narrative, although it may be more or less clearly defined in a given work. Both consciously communicated authorial intention, and the wider interpretive inferences which make up a reader's image of the implied author, must be granted a structural role. They cannot be discarded as non-existent or irrelevant, most particularly in the cases in which they are strongly defined, as in satirical works generally or (closer to hand) in the present story by Nabokov.[2] The implied author is not an equivalent of "the whole textual structure" or of abstract and collective norms, as some definitions would have it. The reader's image of the author cannot account for all textual effects or stylistic traits—still less the reader's notion of the author's conscious intention. Being an aspect of composition and, in the last analysis, an illocutionary element, the communicated implied authorial attitude cannot dictate the overall response to the work, a matter which belongs to quite another communicative plane (perlocution, reception, reading, critical activity). Finally, the critique of ideology necessitates the concept of an implied author, since a resisting reading must resist something or someone.

Reading irony, therefore, is an interactive exercise in consciousness which requires establishing the mutual limits of at least four consciousnesses: that of the ironist (the implied author here), that of the butt of irony (the character), that of the ideal witness necessary to conjure up a laughing party (the implied reader) and that of the actual witness (the reader). But there exist other intentional elements in composition which need not be read as consciously designed in order to function within an intentional aesthetic framework.[3] This is the case, for instance, of specular textual models, of proxemic or paralinguistic notations, or of symbolism. We will examine each of these in turn.

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[1] See e.g. Genette 1983; Nünning 1997. Darby (2001) provides an overview of the debate and defends the necessity of this concept. See García Landa (1998: 391-408) for a preliminary approach to the question of the implied author on the interface of narratology and pragmatics.

[2] To be more precise, it is an even more limited rhetorical phenomenon that is at issue here—not every (implied) aspect of the author that the reader may construct from the story, but merely *the relevant part of the author's attitude and intentions invoked by the author for the reader to construct as a reliable regulative device in literary communication.*

[3] For a preliminary discussion of the differences between (modes of) intentionality and consciousness, see e.g. Searle (1983).

Specularity (I)

The story includes several *mise en abyme* structures. Some are works inside the work. In Novodvortsev's story "The Verge" we find the intellectual Tumanov, who, unbeknownst to Novodvortsev, mirrors some of his attitudes—e.g. "He recalled that, in 'The Verge', Tumanov felt nostalgia for the pomp of former holidays" (*Stories* 225). Observe, too, Novodvortsev reflecting contentedly on a critic's use of the word "Tumanovism"—"there was something infinitely flattering about that 'ism', and about the small *t* with which the word began in Russian."[1] Which is, presumably, a practical exercise in Tumanovism.

A similar *mise en abyme* is noted by Kuzmanovich: "the plot of the story [Golïy] has just read becomes mirrored in what transpires in Novodvortsev's room" (1993: 88). According to Kuzmanovich, this mirroring is then reversed, since Novodvortsev the *sputnik* intellectual triumphs over Golïy the "proletarian writer." Or perhaps, rather, the two are manipulated by the critic who is in ironic control of the situation (—a weak control, though, and one structurally subordinated to the implied author's).

Non-verbal communication

Nabokov's fiction is uncommonly rich in its use of kinesic, proxemic and paralinguistic elements (see e.g. the opening sections of *King, Queen, Knave* describing the characters' attitudes in a train compartment, or the episode in *Pnin* about the home movie of typical Russian gestures). The use of proxemics is one more element contributing to the rich structure of the unsaid in "The Christmas Story."[2] One of the story's constructive principles and themes is, as a matter of fact, what happens in the back of our minds as we perceive, create, invent, and symbolically associate elements of experience. Nabokov's treatment of non-codified body semiotics evinces an awareness of proxemics and of the unconscious kinesics of the body as being cognitively motivated. Thus Novodvortsev walks to the window "as if following in the critic's recent footsteps" (*Stories* 224). His bodily movements, of which he is unaware, show his imaginative and ideological subordination. But they are significant not as an allegory but as an "organic symbol," in the sense that the symbolic meaning is cognitively grounded on the bodily semiotics shared by character, author and reader.

Poyatos (1994) has attempted a general theory of the functions of proxemics, kinesics and paralanguage in narrative. Many useful indications are provided there, but

[1] This "T" resurfaces a few lines later in Dmitri Nabokov's English translation, establishing a further link between Novodvortsev and Tumanov, when we are told that Novodvortsev's new life "suited him to a T" (*Novaia zhizn' byla dushia ego vprok i vporu,* 'his new life was, to his mind, advantageous and it suited him'). 'Tuman' means 'fog' in Russian.

[2] According to Andrew Field, "Nabokov acknowledged to me that Pnin's interest in gestures was really his own. A book on gestures was yet another book he had considered writing but put aside" (1986: 289).

the framework suggested by Poyatos should nonetheless be extended: a continuum of interpretive cooperation between author and reader fleshes out the textually schematized interaction from the level of the represented action (the object of Poyatos's main attention) to the level of the author's implied descriptions and judgements. The concepts of dialectic interaction (Goffman 1981) and the pragmalinguistic theory of politeness (e.g. Leech 1983) would be indispensable in order to establish adequate foundations for narrative pragmatics to bridge the gap between what is verbally and non-verbally communicated. Here, of course, we can provide only a few practical indications of the directions such an analysis might take.

Let us examine more proxemic notations: "The critic lit a cigarette. Golïy, without raising his eyes, was stuffing his manuscript into his briefcase. But their host kept his silence...." The characters' movements are all interactional markers (the critic and Golïy are waiting for Novodvortsev to evaluate the story). At the level of the author-reader interaction, the use of the conjunction 'but' shows that the author is aware of the communicative-interactional import of the characters' actions. This conjunction does not join two propositions at the same semantic level; instead, it joins two proxemic descriptions which thanks to the conjunction are made to stand for the unstated propositions the reader is then forced to construct. The "but", then, goads the reader into perceiving the descriptions as interactive moves—whether at a conscious or at a subliminal level on the part of the readers, it activates their own intuitive proxemic strategies. As I argued before, Kuzmanovich's reading could be used in this respect as a test case of Nabokov's "creating wit in others"—like Falstaff—in the area of proxemics and unvoiced intuitions. Kuzmanovich's accounts of Nabokov's proxemic and paralinguistic notations show that this critic is subliminally aware of their importance, but that awareness never rises to the surface of the critical discussion in an explicit theoretical formulation.

The "making explicit" of nonverbal communication is, then, structurally similar to other hermeneutic dimensions of the work, such as the retroactive creation of coherence or intertextuality through rewriting and interpretation.[1] —Or the more commonly acknowledged fact that "The writer himself is one quarter unaware as to whither he is steering. It is the critics who will afterwards discover 'tendencies' and rules and method and hidden implications."[2]

More speculations

Nabokov's fiction thus ties in with much contemporary work in psychology which studies the activity of the brain as an 'interpreter' which constructs reality, rather than pasively

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[1] Cf. my analysis of thie phenomenon on the subject of Nabokov's "Christmas."
[2] Gerhardie (1974: 86), qtd. in Sell (2001: 42).

recording it (Gazzaniga 1998). Our conscious, self-aware mind, acting deliberately in the world, the world itself appearing as a transparent instrument for our deliberate action on it, are not the unmediated basis of reality, as the cogito and positivism would have it. They are representations, elaborately resting on perceptual processes and symbolic structures which remain unconscious. By ‘unconscious’ I do not mean, of course, ‘repressed’ through the deliberate action of an all-perceiving, all-controlling self or a social super-ego. ‘Unconscious’ means that consciousness is an effect, a superstructure which needs much scaffolding and machinery in order to exist at all, and that the scaffolding and machinery remain by definition outside the subject’s field of perception, just as an eye is meant to observe whatever lies in front of it and not what lies behind it—the retina, optical nerve, muscles, bone socket and brain which enable the phenomenon of vision.

A scientific rationale for this conception of consciousness may be found in the work of contemporary cognitive neuroscientists. The (post-)structuralist conception of the subject and consciousness as structural *effects* and not as originating (transcendental) prime movers may therefore be further theorized with reference to some neuroscientists’ conception of the interpretive activity of the brain. Among the functions performed by the brain, the system Gazzaniga calls the *interpreter* constructs our ‘reality’ for us, organizing the information provided by other neurological sub-systems whose activity remains outside conscious awareness:

> A special system carries out this interpretive synthesis. Located only in the brain’s left hemisphere, the interpreter seeks explanations for internal and external events. It is tied to our general capacity to see how contiguous events relate to one another. The interpreter, a built-in specialization in its own right, operates on the activities of other adaptations built into our brain. These adaptations are most likely cortically based, but they work largely outside of conscious awareness, as do most of our mental activities. (Gazzaniga 1998: 24).

The ‘interpreter’ allows us to account for many oddities of perception and behaviour, such as blindsight, false memories or déjà vu. The brain ‘automatically’ organizes responses and patterns of behaviour, and then projects (part of) these as deliberately produced by ‘someone in charge’— the conscious self; some are given a fully conscious elaboration, others remain subliminal (or are retroactively perceived as subliminal when a conscious reelaboration is constructed). Thus, as I drive home from work I feel that I am in full control of my choice of route along the way, although quite often my thoughts have been busy with other matters and I may well realize that I didn’t *choose* at any point to take a given lane or turn rather than another. No matter: my brain did the work for ‘me’, as usual, and usually ‘I’ get the impression that ‘I’ am in charge. The interpreter creates a conscious order out of subconscious materials. Among other things it creates a sense of self:

> The interpreter constantly establishes a running narrative of our actions, emotions, thoughts, and dreams. It is the glue that unifies our story and creates our sense of being a whole, rational agent. It brings to our bag of individual instincts the illusion that we are something other than what we are. It builds our theories about our own life, and these narratives of our past behavior pervade our awareness. (Gazzaniga 1998: 174)

Nabokov's story dramatizes precisely such a cognitive gap between action and interpretation: as the story ends, Novodvortsev's consciousness is shown to be building an *ad hoc* 'objective' narrative to bolster his sense of self with materials whose subconscious origin is quite another. The story is therefore, among other things, a story about consciousness and about the circumstances and processes that contribute to the making of a sense of self (here emotional self-censorship is the *primum mobile* that allows some of the character's memories to become conscious while others can surface only subliminally or in a symbolically displaced version).

The much-loved Nabokovian image of reflection, thematically and compositionally central to this story, stands out as a crucial instance of the narrative appropriation of subliminal cognitive processes. Reflection is a natural symbol for awareness and consciousness: thus, we speak of the reflexive quality of conscious processes in the brain, of reflexive fiction, etc. The reflected image of an object has to be processed with greater intensity than the direct visual image of this object. It is my contention that a reflection, even a *represented* reflection, makes us (subliminally) aware of the working of the mind as an interpretive re-projection: we need to construct the reflected image, mapping it onto a conceptual-perceptual pattern, in order to make sense of it. The active projection of conceptual patterns which is characteristic of conscious experience thus becomes more evident in the cognitive processing of distorted images, reflections, etc.[1]

Another neurological excursus. According to Weiskrantz, the generation of 'thoughts about thoughts' may be *constitutive* of conscious awareness, rather than simply a heuristic device for the representation of awareness. In the case of visual awareness, these commentary thoughts may—perhaps—be neurologically realized as *back projections,* from neurological subsystems specialized in particular types of visual processing back to the main cortical area for visual input (Weiskrantz 1999: 216-17; cf. 75-76). That is to say, the brain acts, already at the level of basic neurological processes, as a projective apparatus attuning itself to specific types of input, and not merely as a receptor. It is a long way from such explorations of the workings of neural paths to a

[1] I therefore disagree with Couturier on the psychological significance of Nabokov's imagery. Nabokov's images have a strong psychological and perceptual anchoring, which provides a cognitive basis for the reader's construction of central narrative elements (point of view, epiphany, etc.). Of course, the imagery may perform additional functions as well.

neurological explanation of the retroactive and projective processing of conceptual information, but there are promising signs that the constructivist theories of knowledge and perception (frame analysis, for instance) may eventually tie in with the work of neurologists. My suggestion that the processing of reflections is itself reflective or conducive to awareness must remain, for the time being, neurologically speculative (from *speculum,* mirror). At least, neurologists like Weiskrantz are now facing the study of consciousness as a scientific issue, instead of dismissing it as a metaphysical pseudo-problem. As to the relevance of all this for the study of Nabokov's writing, let us just remember the emphasis he placed on "the marvel of consciousness" in an interview (quoted as the epigraph in Boyd 1990). The suggested existence of an inherent relationship between the intensification of the theatre of consciousness and the processing of distorted images and reflections would certainly do much to explain the role of the latter in Nabokov's fiction.

This might be, then, one reason for Nabokov's taste for perceptually complex images in his intensely visual fiction. In the *Christmas Story*, one such image has a pivotal role. The reflection in an eye is used to convey—to make us aware of—an intensity of re-cognition which suddenly opens up a glimpse of the character's past as a *terra incognita.*

Symbols, riddles and memories

The dramatization of (un)consciousness combines in Nabokov's aesthetics with game-like symbolic problems set for the reader to experience—or to solve (I am referring here to a more reflective or critical level of intended readership). Let us examine a few instances.

1). *Subliminal religious intertextuality.* Novodvortsev is negating the spirit of Christmas, with an amount of bad conscience which surfaces only between the lines, for the reader to perceive, and which remains altogether beyond the character's conscious awareness. The critic from *Red Reality* teases him by observing that it is Christmas Eve, and that "[i]n the old days, on this date, you and your confreres would be churning out Christmas copy." Now it turns out this is also an Easter story, as, like a second St Peter denying Christ, Novodvortsev promptly replies "Not I." At a pre-conscious level, though, he is aware of the Biblical parallel, and that is why the expression "Golgotha of the Proletariat" used by his neighbour comes to his mind. Here Nabokov is subtly leading the reader's textual memory[1] toward a coincidence with the character's subconscious processes. Therefore, this intertextual indication will be active to some extent whether or not the reader identifies it in a fully conscious way.

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[1] I borrow this notion from Couturier (1993). It is essential for an adequate description of Nabokov's narrative poetics.

The notion of a textual memory may be further theorized in terms of the 'implicit memory' described by Tulving and Schacter (1990, 1994). According to Pillemer's account, the perceptual representation system (PRS) underlying implicit memory can function apart from explicit memory:

> The PRS is an early developing system that is involved in the identification of specific perceptual objects. Access to the stored information is inflexible, or 'hyperspecific'; expression of implicit memory is tied to specific cues. Once an implicit memory is expressed, however, it is potentially accessible to explicit memory. (Pillemer 1999: 103)

'Priming effects', or nonconscious cognitive memories, can also be conceptually driven as new information is added to semantic memory, resulting in "the acquisition of new associations between unrelated words" (Tulving and Schacter 1990: 304). Nabokov's use of the reader's textual memory involves the stimulation of text-specific webs of word connections—thus, the intertextual allusion to the "Golgotha of the Proletariat" generates its own text-internal web of subliminal associations as the reader goes through the text.

2.). *Literary intertextuality: Setting the stage for an elusive vision.* The neighbour who was said to use the expression "Golgotha of the Proletariat" surfaces later in the story in the (paper) flesh, performing a new intertextual role. This time he is, implicitly, a "Person from Porlock" who interrupts Novodvortsev's pathetic attempts at finding a suitable Christmas subject within the bounds of PCCPP—the neighbour's presence serves, therefore, to suggest a parodic inversion of the ideal of a free creative imagination epitomized by Coleridge's "Kubla Khan."

It is worth noting that Dillard calls Novodvortsev's neighbour "his own Person from Porlock." The phrasing suggests that Dillard has been subliminally following here the reading path devised by Nabokov, in which the Person from Porlock motif is a carefully calculated item. That is, my Dillard believes the parallel with Kubla Khan is an analogy generated by himself as a critic, rather than by the implied author, as is the case. (In the 1940s Nabokov would use *The Person from Porlock* as a working title for *Bend Sinister,* a novel in which interruption plays a prominent role).

3). *Color symbolism and reflexivity.* Novodvortsev's fame is "pallid, pallid" in contrast with the multicolored beads of the abacus and with the bright colours of the Christmas tree,[1] just like his life has become a pale simulacrum of the one he expected at the beginning of his career, before the Revolution, during the Christmas he remembers "twenty years ago or more." Colour symbolism is also significant elsewhere. Novodvortsev has a "thick, white hand" which shows he is a fraud by Soviet standards, a bourgeois rather than a proletarian. His emotional life is, clearly, as pallid as his fame. It is obvious he lives alone (although he shares a flat) a bleak, loveless life of frustration and

[1] The Russian adjective *tusklaia* suggests dimness, lack of brightness, as well as weakness or pallor.

petty ambition under a façade of relative social success and intellectual disinterestedness. Novodvortsev is subliminally attracted to the colored images which symbolize the inaccessible otherworld in this story: the beads of the abacus he sees through a facing window prepare our mind (and his) for the final imagistic synthesis involving also a warm indoor image seen through a window. The whiteness of the paper he is unable to write on, the whiteness of the "so-called Christmas snow" both characterize Novodvortsev as occupying an anomic colorless space between Red Reality and "all the hues of the rainbow"(*vsemi ogniami radugi,* "[with] all of the lights of the rainbow"—the last word as well in the Russian text). The concluding phrase is retaken in a stylistically similar context nearly twenty years after the writing of "The Christmas Story", in *Bend Sinister.* Here the phrase is used by the writer of an Ekwilist (≈Communist) pamphlet, and once again it evokes both the vulgarity of the writing in its hackneyed image, and the richness of the otherworld negated by the Communist writer's aesthetics, and symbolized by the many-colored rainbow. In the *Bend Sinister* passage the rainbow motif is also a figurative one, in this case a description of those archi-Nabokovian otherworldly symbols, butterflies, which are denounced by the Ekwilist writer as capitalist propaganda. Here is the passage from *Bend Sinister*:

> The most popular photograph which appeared in *all* capitalist newspapers of that period was a picture of two rare butterflies glittering *vsemi tzvetami radugi* [with all the hues of the rainbow]. But not a word about the strike of the textile workers! (*Bend Sinister* 1964: 141).

Both the Russian transliteration and the translation are present in the original text. These coinciding images (like those of the reflection of the tree in the girls' eyes, as I will soon argue) may be read by some as deliberate intertextual markers; at the very least, they are 'obsessional symbols' which show the remarkable coherence of Nabokov's figurative patterns.

The motif of colored glass may also suggest the decoration of the Christmas tree, although only paper ornaments are mentioned. Perhaps paper is a surrogate for the colored glass of original experience? The reflection in the eye nonetheless suggests (to me) similar reflections in the glass balls of Christmas trees. In Nabokov's personal mythology, colored glass is associated with childhood at Vyra, the object of otherworldly vistas, and the 'paper ornaments' used by the émigrés can refer, reflexively, to Nabokov's Christmas story itself—literature being too, in a sense, a surrogate for the original experience. As to the rainbow motif, note that the Noah myth in the Bible explains the origin of the rainbow as the sign of a covenant between God and men after the Flood. Both the multicolored rainbow and the Christmas tree (like the multicolored butterflies) are signs, therefore, of the sacred dimension of existence, the 'otherworld' that Novodvortsev strives to negate.

4). *Epiphany and repressed memories.* At the epiphanic center of "The Christmas Story", Novodvortsev experiences a memory flash, which can be interpreted as an attempt at self-communication. Pillemer has emphasized the importance of memories of individual events in structuring a sense of self. He notes that the memory of an individual event is nonetheless "*reconstructed* and *transformed* in the retelling": we might extend this principle of transformation to the 'retelling' which is the memory itself: an event is *reconstructed* and *transformed* to yield a memory image. Novodvortsev is upset by the memory, which has an epiphanic importance he is not ready to recognize.

> Moments of illumination frequently have a self-reflective quality. The people affected appear to be self-consciously aware of and even startled by the intensity of their ideas and feelings. (Pillemer 1998: 45)

Nelson's (1993) concept of autobiographical memory may also be relevant to Nabokov's narrative poetics of memory. According to Nelson, "certain events have a privileged status in memory because they matter to the individual's evolving 'life story'" (Pillemer 50). We might describe the relationship of such memories with the life story as compositional, part of the individual's memory-system rather than exact mimetic analogues of "what really happened"; Nelson argues that "[m]emories do not need to be true or correct to be part of that system" (Nelson 1993: 8, qtd. in Pillemer 1998: 50). We may interpret the artist of memory's symbolic action as an extension of this principle. Vivid memories are rich articulations of symbolic meaning at a life-experiential narrative level, but that articulation of meaning can then be further displaced through a secondary modelization system and used as constructive elements in a written narrative. Whether the narrative is fictional or not, the roots of this textualized memory extend into the author's life-experience. Playing on the different terminology of Pillemer (1998) and Nelson (1993), we might define Novodvortsev's memory as a personal event memory which is censored, repressed, and therefore will not become an autobiographical memory. The memory remains nonetheless a relevant biographical memory of Novodvortsev's for the implied reader. And part of the flashback's symbolic charge returns—dulled and camouflaged after a process of displacement—in Novodvortsev's story. Writing his story is for Novodvortsev an ambivalent move: partly a symptom of the illness, partly a pathetically inadequate attempt at a cure through indirect symbolic action.[1]

Actually, the ending of the story sketches a recursive structure of symbolic displacements. The worker in Novodvortsev's story, trapped in the cold and peering "with a severe and somber gaze" at the rainbow-colored Christmas tree behind the glass

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[1] Cf. Pillemer: "adding narrative description, interpretation, and authority to stark, unintegrated sensory images is a prominent component of psychotherapeutic treatment of trauma" (1999: 166); "Once raw perceptual images are tied to narrative representations, feelings of dissociation diminish. The alien image becomes part of the self" (1999: 170). The split between present and past selves experienced by Novodvorsev, or by Nabokov for that matter, may be interpreted as a low-intensity trauma.

window, is for Novodvortsev a symbol of the oppressed working classes, humiliated and insulted by the luxury of the aristocratic Tsarist régime or of the capitalist class. For the reader, the illuminated store window becomes all too readily the symbol of a past time of happiness, tradition, abundance and emotional satisfaction in contrast with the "frozen sidewalk" of the Soviet present—the symbol thus becomes self-defeating. Novodvortsev's frustration is therefore enacted, 'shown' rather than simply told, shown through an act of creation which must be dismantled by the reader; the striking power of the symbol is greater insomuch as readers must make and unmake the symbol themselves, experience the symbol-making process undergone by the character, only at a higher level of awareness, since they must at the same time deconstruct the symbol. The story ends thus in a truly devastating symbolic climax. Unbeknownst to himself, Novodvortsev has pulled his emotions to pieces under the pitiless gaze of the implied author and reader.

Only the gaze is not so pitiless, after all. At a deeper level, the irony is complemented by sympathy and pity towards Novodvortsev.[1] This sympathy and pity spring in part from self-pity for a loss in which the author and the character share: the loss of the past, of youth and illusion. It is the story of a pathetic experience in which author and reader share—and thus the story goes beyond its political occasion, to tell a universal tale of loss and symbolic compensation. The story offers a unique combination of pity and scorn, intertwined in a way which can only be accounted for through a description of the story's construction, of the way the reader constructs the different narrative levels of the story: the fictional character's creative process, and the implied author's calculated codification of a judgement which is both moral and aesthetic. The implied reader understands—re-experiences, rather—the aesthetic limits of Novodvortsev's writing and cannot choose but pronounce that Novodvortsev's aesthetic blindness is the result of moral impoverishment. Thus the story provides a unique experience of ethical and aesthetic communication which is inseparable both from its structure—Nabokov's technique of constructing a self-contained narrative memory, as described by Couturier (1993)—and from its historical occasion, both at the level of the writer's occasion and of the contents portrayed in the diegesis.

Deep intentions and intertexts

Loss is an all-important theme in Nabokov's fiction, which is in one sense a vast attempt to come to terms—to symbolic terms—with the loss of childhood, of Russia, of teenage love, of the family house and of the father. Imaginative variations on fictional autobiography crop up everywhere in his works—not just as 'raw material' for fiction,

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[1] Here Kuzmanovich and Dillard grasp an aspect of the story which is easily overlooked by readers: "Dismissal and condemnation are not its center, but rather, sympathy for Novodvortsev as a kind man and fellow writer whose world is being diminished" (Kuzmanovich 1993: 87); "Nabokov does have sympathy for Novodvortsev, and that sympathy gives the story its human humidity, its richness beyond the satire" (Dillard 2000: 49).

but as a deliberate exploration of possible, rejected or unacknowledged sides of the author's personality.

Such is the case even with a satirized character like Novodvortsev. Nabokov would perhaps have rejected as preposterous any parallel between Novodvortev as a quasi-official writer of the Soviet régime and Nabokov himself as a quasi-official writer of the émigré Russian community in Berlin. Note, though, the N-v bracket linking their names. There are a number of other parallels between the author and his unfortunate puppet (or "galley slave," to use a Nabokovian expression). The satire on literary vanity draws from materials known to any author from the inside, and it necessarily contains elements of self-parody. This is clear in the case of other Nabokovian authors, such as Fyodor in *The Gift,* more closely modelled on Nabokov himself. The reflexive motif of structuring a story around the overcoming of a writer's block likewise draws from personal experience. Such use of the author's personal experience is hardly confessional or autobiographical, since it is refracted through the 'prismatic bezel' of the various narrative layers and carefully used as a calculated compositional element.[1] Still, it is my contention that in such artistic re-elaborations there remains an excess or 'margin,' one which escapes the intentional aesthetic project of the work, and may return to haunt it. Not that Nabokov does not keep his peripheral vision on that marginal element; far from it, he uses it as a compositional element of his *oeuvre* (not necessarily of the individual work) at another level, a level at which the author himself is at risk, since it is the level at which his work is the imprint of his life.[2] At this level of writing, Nabokov is no longer in full conscious control, as he was as long as we remained within the story he (deliberately) wanted us to read. Instead, he shows us the underside of his constructed authorial persona, half pointing to the things he cannot tell, half turning away from them.

In many stories of the twenties, and in his first novel, *Mary,* Nabokov plays imaginative variations on the theme of lost love, usually a version of Nabokov's teenage lover Valentina Shulgin, "Tamara" in *Speak, Memory.* Here the Tamara motif surfaces as Novodvortsev suddenly remembers "the woman he loved in those days, and all of the tree's lights reflected as a crystal quiver in her wide-open eyes when she plucked a tangerine from a high branch. It had been twenty years ago or more—how certain details stuck in one's memory...." (*Stories* 226). Both Nabokov and Novodvortsev—and we might add Tumanov—have lost a Russia associated to a sense of rootedness, of family warmth and a happy childhood. Insofar as Nabokov is Novodvortsev, he is also imagining a future self, in which professional achievements do not redeem the losses involved, and art is only a partially successful sublimation of frustrated desire.

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[1] *The Prismatic Bezel* is one of the fictional novels written by Nabokov's Sebastian Knight.
[2] Cf. Iser's (1989) definition of fictional constructions as necessarily grounded on and defined with reference to the real.

It is worth noticing that the image of the Christmas tree reflected in the woman's eyes also has an autobiographical source. In *Speak, Memory,* it is associated to adolescent sexuality rather than to early maturity (and thus suggests a closer connection of the image with Nabokov's own experience of Christmas in pre-Revolutionary Russia):

> The little girls in neat socks and pumps whom we and other little boys used to meet at dancing lessons or at Christmas Tree parties had all the enchantments, all the sweets and stars of the tree preserved in their flame-dotted iris, and they teased us, they glanced back, they delightfully participated in our vaguely festive dreams, but they belonged, those nymphets, to another class of creatures than the adolescent belles and large-hatted vamps for whom we actually yearned. (*Speak, Memory* 203).

Here again, the Christmas tree is not remembered directly but rather through its reflection in the girls' eyes—the image, once again, indissolubly associates eroticism and Christmas. It expresses, too, a mismatched desire for the past, and a nostalgia for adolescent eroticism—a desire which can only be retrospectively acknowledged, and only in part at that. The use of the word 'nymphet' from *Lolita* is telling in this connection. In the fictional reworking of the image, the "adolescent belles" and the little girls have been retropectively synthesized, as it is a young lover whose eyes reflect the tree, but this retroactive fulfilment of desire only emphasizes the extent of the loss. The loss of Christmas, associated in the story to the 1917 overhaul, is imaginatively reinforced with the personal overtones of Nabokov's loss conjured up by the Tamara motif.

Thus, the roots of the emotional experience articulated by the story extend beyond the character's past as presented in the story, into the author's own sense of loss of self and of the past. The difference between the autobiographical roots and the story itself is, of course, a vast one. Nabokov forcibly articulates his own integrity and emotional coherence against a representation of hypocritical, emotionally frustrated Novodvortsev—who, as far as we know, has no love life or family connections now, and is little more than a public façade, the official portrait on his complete works, which in turn are mere PCCPP.

There is in Nabokov's handling of Novodvortsev a danger of overkill, of the author intellectually brutalizing a subordinate. Authors' forcible articulations of their own integrity are not to the taste of contemporary critics.[1] Nowadays (i.e. late 20th c. and beyond) 'we' tend to like it better, as far as the dynamics of writing is concerned, when the element of viciousness one finds in satire backfires and returns to plague the inventor. Can it be argued that this 'return of the repressed' is present in the story in any way, plaguing not merely Novodvortsev (which would yield only the overt subject of the story,

[1] This reflection applies to aesthetically sophisticated criticism. Actually, 'friendly criticism' which endorses authorial self-righteousness abounds in those critical approaches mainly concerned with political correctness.

necessary for its understanding) but also Nabokov (which would yield an 'overstanding' of the story)?[1]

More re-flections

Novodvortsev thinks of the Russian dissidents or émigrés (Nabokov's immediately intended audience of "The Christmas Story") as "people who had formerly been somebody, people who were terrified, ill-tempered, doomed (he imagined them so clearly...) (*Stories* 225)." Part of the irony here lies of course in the fact that most émigrés would not recognize themselves in Novodvortsev's imagining of them. The power of irony is present, too, in Nabokov's very ability to assume the detached stance that makes this description possible. But the irony backfires in two different directions: first, through the element of truth there is in Novodvortsev's depiction. Nabokov was a maverick, but there was a good deal of frustration and ill-temper among the Russian émigrés, just as there were among them some highly visible Tsarist aristocrats, nostalgic have-beens, and yes, even taxis drivers and White Army generals. Nabokov was often at pains to keep his distance from that section of the emigré population, and often satirized them as pitilessly as any Soviet writer (and with a far more devastating accuracy). There is, therefore, a disturbing pinch of truth in Novodvortsev's vision, which in principle might have been supposed to be a mere Aunt Sally for the authorial irony. Maybe this means merely that the author's stance is not what we would expect it to be, catching the reader off-guard so to speak. Still, the irony also backfires in another sense—in the sense that there emerges a further parallel (albeit a half-conscious one) between Novodvortsev and the author. Just as Novodvortsev's emigrés are an unfair caricature with an element of truth, so Novodvortsev himself is a caricature, an exercise in 'imagining so well' an official Soviet writer which yields a caricatural version of the truth. There is a mirror logic between Novodvortsev trying to picture the life of the émigrés, a life forbidden to him but which nevertheless he can imagine "so well," and Nabokov trying to picture, for his own Christmas story, the mind and life of the Other. As often happens, the Other is pictured with elements extracted from the bad conscience of the self.[2] The structure of such mirror logics and play of self and other is announced by the title *en abyme* of the story. The metafictional title guides the reader through various interpretive manoeuvres: first, the title is read as self-descriptive (being the title of a story published in a newspaper on Christmas day); then the title is shown to describe the subject of the story, not the story itself, and finally the title becomes self-descriptive again, in a more complex sense—"The Christmas Story" consisting in the paradoxical relationship between the text written by

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[1] I borrow the term 'overstanding' from Wayne Booth (1979: 242ff).

[2] Cf. Wolfgang Iser: "fictionalizing acts as boundary-crossings should not be taken as a process of transcending, but, rather, of doubling, because whatever has been left behind is dragged along in the wake of the individual acts and remains a potential presence" (1989: 222). In the case of Nabokov's Soviet fictions, Iser's term 'boundary-crossing' should be read quite literally, in its geopolitical sense.

Nabokov and the one written by Novodvortsev. Such double duty is done, too, for instance, by the title of *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* a work which likewise plays dangerously with the abject image of the author's inner Other (Dorian's image in the picture, Wilde's in *The Picture*). The logic of the *Doppelgänger*, applied to the 'other life' in the Soviet Union, appears in several fictions by Nabokov, such as the story "The Reunion" or the play *The Man from the USSR.*[1]

The mirror logic is also at work in the twin central images of the story: the Christmas tree reflected in the woman's eye and the hungry worker looking at the Christmas tree through the shop window. Novodvortsev first thinks of émigrés weeping as they gather around a Christmas tree. He then displaces the image into an even safer cliché dictated by Socialist Realism, into Western Europe (with no explicit suggestion of émigré circles) with an as yet unliberated worker peering at the tree in a shop window "with a severe and somber gaze." Notice that Novodvortsev thinks this initial image is "the necessary, one-and-only key," etc., in terms which may be displaced to Nabokov's finding the exquisite formula for *his* story's conclusion: once again, the structural symmetry is significant here. At the overt level of the story, that of Nabokov's literary communication with his readers, the worker is a figural displacement of Novodvortsev: the image is created by Novodvortsev, and formulates in terms acceptable to his consciousness and his social face the sense of deprivation and loss he does not want to express overtly: just as the worker is separated by the glass pane from the Christmas tree, love and the spiritual communion with others symbolized by Christmas are figured by a reflection in an eye—but there is no way Novodvortsev can get to the inside of that eye now. So, Novodvortsev is communicating on one level with his implied Communist readership and on another (a censored and subliminal one) with himself. This model of communication reproduces *en abyme* the communicative structure of "The Christmas Story," with Nabokov writing satire for his émigré readership on the one hand, and a more private, subliminal reflection on time and loss through his deeper engagement with writing. This is a level of meaning which can be bodily experienced through a reading of the story, but which can become fully visible to consciousness only through an interpretive re-reading.

In abstract terms, one might argue that irony and pity should cancel each other, that the satirical strand in the story is at odds with the compassionate sharing in the experience of loss. In practice, however, it is the complex emotional fabric made up of these attitudes working at different but interacting levels of interpretation that makes the story so successful a work of art. The story establishes a chain of successive symbolic

[1] In Kuzmanovich's words, "at Christmastime 1928, Nabokov the émigré is writing a Christmas story about an imaginary Soviet writer who in turn is attempting to writer a Christmas story in which he imagines an émigré Christmas" (1993: 88).

mediations to stave off loss and grief, a symbolic chain longer than the overt one mentioned above:

- the worker cut off from the Christmas tree by the shop window,
- the worker's author (Novodvortsev) cut off from his past hopes by the thicker glass of time,
- the author's author, Nabokov, cut off from Russia and from his childhood by exile (as well as by time and the nature of things).
- the readers who experience in a half-subliminal way the figural relationship between these elements, and respond emotionally to Nabokov's story, finding in it a vehicle for any feelings of loss and grief they may entertain.
- the critic (e.g. me) who responds to this element in the story and tries to give an explicit, discursive account of the figural and subliminal elements in the story.

The ironic distance between the first and the last links of this semiotic chain should not make us forget the intensity of the feeling of loss which binds it together and is the precondition for the chain's viability. So, in spite of the irony, there is a continuum between the deliberate, intentional links in the chain of meaning, those which emerge from a "naive" reading and understanding of the story, and those which emerge only through critical interpretation. As I have pointed out with reference to the proxemic element, there is no absolute contrast between a naive and a critical reading, as Nabokov establishes a symbolic circulation of desire which turns any (reasonably percipient) naive reading into an informed one to some extent. Interpretation does not create the relevance of the subsequent symbolic links ex nihilo: they are a linguistically objectifiable element in the story, and they contribute to the effect and successful structure of the same, but, unlike the consciously designed intentional elements, they are not conceptually available in an immediate way. We read them with the body, or with the brain (Gazzaniga 1998), not with our conscious mind. Similarly, Nabokov may be said to have written them with his brain and body, beyond the epiphenomenal control of consciousness.

So, perhaps my attempt to 'overstand' Nabokov is doomed to failure, at least as far as this line of reasoning is concerned. I may claim that I have brought up aspects of the story which are subliminal for the author, but if they go beyond the conscious aesthetic project of the story it is only to contribute to a more impressive ('deeply intentional') aesthetic structure which binds together many levels of semiotic action: intentional and conscious actions, deep intentions, proxemic perceptions, subliminal discourse connections, and non-codified symbolic articulations of attitudes.[1] Deconstructing the story may well crack up the impressive satirical determination of its ironic structure—but, to use the words of Leonard Cohen's "Anthem" on the Liberty Bell, "Forget your perfect offering / There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the

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[1] I. A. Richards's term for subconscious bodily semiosis (1967).

light gets in." An artist like Nabokov builds his work with a material that will crack, and let the light—the light of all our Christmas trees, perhaps—shine in, unexpectedly.

Narratology and beyond

Finally, I will recapitulate some implications of my analysis for narrative theory 'beyond' narratology:

• The analysis of focalization, represented thought and represented speech must be expanded and refined to include a number of levels of perception and consciousness a) in the character, b) in the narrator's account of the character, c) in the implied author's stance towards both, and d) in the reader's construction of these diverse modes of consciousness. An elaborate narrative art like Nabokov's articulates in unprecedented ways elements of focalization, proxemics, non-codified semiotic processes, and implicit readership. It thus requires a corresponding refinement of interpretive and narratological analyses. The logic of supplementarity, the play of center and margin described by deconstructive criticism may offer a semiotic model for the dynamics of fully intentional vs. subliminal narrative representations of consciousness.

• The narratological description of perceptual and experiential phenomena in narratives may benefit from ongoing research into the psychological roots of such phenomena. The personal poetics of idiosyncratic writers may exploit in original ways some cognitive processes whose distinctiveness is only now being recognized. Such would be Nabokov's use of subliminal memory processes and of visually complex images.

• Intention is a relevant piece of the textual machine. It cannot be bypassed or denied, nor can it be described as a simple phenomenon. Intentionality manifests itself in many degrees, and at many different psychological and aesthetic levels. The interpreter is actively involved in the construction of intention, as well as in ascribing degrees of consciousness to intentional manoeuvres. Needless to say, interpretation is also crucially involved in making explicit (bringing to the reader's consciousness) elements whose semiotic-inferential relationship would otherwise remain implicit: these range from proxemic or paralinguistic notations at the level of the characters' action, to underscoring the lines to draw constellations of meanings at the textual level (e.g. the symbolic meanings of "white" or "glass" in this story) or at the intertextual level (e.g. the game of doubles which becomes visible only through a comparison with other texts by Nabokov).

• Therefore, there can be no proper rhetorical analysis of narrative which does not fully engage with an author's personal poetics, and the specific context in which a work is written and read. A work functions (can be read) at many levels, many of which are invisible from the horizon of author-contemporary readership. A narratological description must take into account these different interpretive contexts, since the relevant elements of the work's structure are not the same in just any context. Put more succinctly, there can be no adequate narratological analysis which bypasses hermeneutics—

hermeneutics both in the sense of coming to terms with the author's concrete linguistic universe and in the sense of attending to the increment in meaning derived from re-reading and from the tradition of critical debate.

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