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AN APPROACH TO VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S "OTHERWORLD"¹

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RESUMO – O presente artigo tem como objetivo abordar a questão de uma das polêmicas teorias recentes relativas às obras do escritor russo Vladimir Nabokov. Pretende apresentar uma análise do conceito do “outro mundo” (“*otherworld*”) que, entre outras coisas, tem desempenhado o papel tematicamente mais importante nos estudos nabokovianos nas últimas duas décadas. A intenção deste artigo é chamar atenção para algumas particularidades dos textos de Nabokov, ultrapassando a visão unilateral nos termos da qual os “outros mundos” que aparecem nas suas obras estão exclusivamente relacionados com as circunstâncias biográficas do autor. Ao contrário, propõe-se a apresentar evidências de que o uso de uma esfera transcendente ocorre principalmente devido à sua crença *sui generis* na metafísica, ou seja, os mundos existindo para além da capacidade de entendimento humano. Essa nova tendência nos estudos nabokovianos vai de encontro à equívoca interpretação tradicional, segundo a qual os textos de Nabokov são examinados como sistemas herméticos e auto-referenciais, aparecidos em forma de manifestos metaliterários.

SETTING THE SCENE

Vladimir Nabokov's massive literary output has yielded perhaps the greatest bounty of plausible interpretations ever since Pekka Tammi appreciatively classified him among “the most energetically studied modern American novelists” of contemporary literature (TAMMI, 1985, 13). This assessment was made in 1985, when the critical reception of the author's spectacularly large *oeuvre* had as yet inspired a disproportionately sparse number of books, essays, and studies. The three decades following Nabokov's death in 1977 have seen revolutionary developments in the interpretation of the author's intricately composed fictional worlds, and the critical appraisal of his works today is comparable in size to his own literary production. While the Nabokovian text seems to offer a bewildering variety of readings even today, it is the pervasive concept of the “otherworld” that has stimulated the most

intense discussion among scholars in recent years. The claim that any single critical school can ever hope to capture all the aspects of the author's fiction may sound preposterous to the trained ear, and yet there seems to be a mutual agreement among scholars that the "otherworld" has evolved into a major repository of all the thematic dominants that had been formerly identified in connection with his texts.

The notion of the "otherworld" only becomes entirely comprehensible in the Nabokovian context once the general overtones associated with the conventional realm of the hereafter have been driven out of our interpretative process. It is correctly conjectured that the "otherworld" in Nabokov's fiction is *not* analogous with the traditionally conceived domain of the dead, or, as Maxim D. Shrayer has stated, it is *not* "the domain where the souls of the deceased dwell in traditional metaphysical systems" (SHRAYER, 1999, 21). Pierre Delalande, the imaginary philosopher of *The Gift* (and perhaps the only philosopher whose postulations the author unconditionally accepted) also reinforces this view by stating that "the otherworld surrounds us always and is not at all at the end of some pilgrimage" (NABOKOV, 1991, 321-322). Instead of envisaging the world as a garden of forking paths, bifurcating into mundane reality and the ecstatic, the majority of his works focuses on the author's attempts to unify these two universes during moments of spiritual revelations that Nabokov described as "aesthetic bliss", that is, "a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm" (NABOKOV, 2000, 305).²

This paper attempts to examine the otherworldly as a theme in Nabokov's prose fiction through three representative short stories. In 1979, two years after her husband's death, Véra Nabokova was the first to call attention to the formerly overlooked notion of the "otherworld". She made the following observation in the preface to Nabokov's posthumously published *Verses* (1979, 3):

I would like to call the reader to a key undercurrent in Nabokov's work, which permeates all that he has written and characterizes it like a kind of watermark. I am speaking of a strange otherworldliness, the "hereafter" (*potustoronnost'*), as he himself called it in his last poem, "Being in Love".

I shall begin by conceptualizing the "otherworld" within the Nabokovian oeuvre and explain what role it has come to occupy in both his Russian and American works. I shall then attempt to provide evidence that the "otherworld" is a distinctive feature of his writing not because the author himself was an exile, but because Nabokov's art grows out of his profound preoccupation with and *sui generis* faith in the metaphysical, or more specifically, the mystery of the relationship of matter and spirit and of life before birth and after death traceable throughout Nabokov's work (TOKER, 2005, 238). The opening lines of *Speak, Memory*, the author's autobiographical novel is especially revealing here:

The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness. Although the two are identical twins, man, as a rule, views the prenatal abyss with more calm than the one he is heading for. (NABOKOV, 1999, 19)

The focus of my attention shall be exclusively confined to some early short stories, which, as opposed to the recognizably self-sufficient and convoluted worlds of the author's longer prose fiction, aptly illuminate how Nabokov foregrounds the model of the "otherworld" within a tight unity of time and action.

METAFICTION AND METAPHYSICS

Early critics of Nabokov's work viewed his fictional universes as hermetic, as arcane self-referential systems designed as metaliterary manifestos (MEYER, 1994, 326). Today it seems that nothing could be further from the truth, and the critics who obdurately ventured in the metaliterary direction were on the wrong scent. Of course, I do not wish to suggest that any reader or critic should overlook the stylistic bravura for which Nabokov as a writer has enjoyed lasting reputation through *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, *Ada*, and other masterpieces. To the questions whether he was a hidden god, a mystifier, an incorrigible leg-puller, or a literary agent provocateur, I would unhesitatingly reply in the affirmative. Of course, none of these attributes can be rejected when the author's works are subjected to critical scrutiny. Although Nabokov's originality, power of language, artistic deceitfulness, and the involutions of his works do not make up the whole of his art, they undoubtedly constitute a significant part of it. Nevertheless, the one-sided view one is to vehemently reject is the propensity of looking at Nabokov as merely a brilliant but shallow artist, who fails to take notice of universal human issues: a stylist whose audacious style calls attention as much to itself as to what it means to convey (PARKER, 1987, 17). The analysis I am about to offer is therefore a complete refutation of the traditionally acknowledged formalistic approach. The complexity of Nabokov's *oeuvre* reaches far beyond the playful invention of anagrammatic names, tortuous narrative structures, and instances of amusing paronomasia, all of which had occupied a central role in Nabokov studies up until recently. In my view, the metaliterary approach to Nabokov's fiction is erroneous because it refuses to take into consideration the author's deeply held conviction in metaphysics and his capacity to an aesthetically heightened visionary state of consciousness. The novel that appositively exemplifies the author's belief in a higher, transcendental realm is *Invitation to a Beheading*, where Cincinnatus C., the protagonist is incarcerated for being guilty of "gnostical turpitude" (NABOKOV, 1989, 72).³ The affinities between mundane life and the transcendental realm in Nabokov's works are often envisaged on the basis of Gnostical dualism, according to which all humans are divine souls entrapped in a spurious material world created by a demiurge. Leona Toker explain the connection that every human being is believed to possess a glint of the real world: "the recognition of this spark in oneself, fidelity to it, its cultivation, brings one closer to the 'state of being' in which the genuine life of the soul 'is the norm'" (TOKER, 2005, 238).

THE THEME OF DISPLACEMENT

Vladimir Nabokov had two tongues. Unlike many other émigré writers⁴ he was not trapped in knowing just Russian. By moving over to English he could transform the clichéd émigré topos of the lost homeland, the *tut/tam*, the “here” and “there”, into something dynamic (GRAYSON, 2002, 8). Separated by necessity from his native country, Nabokov lived in England, Germany, France, the United States, and Switzerland. Never fully assimilating into his adopted American culture, he made his real home in the worlds of imagination. In one of his lectures on literature Nabokov said that “great novels are above all great fairy tales (...) literature does not tell the truth but makes it up” (1982, 2). His novels, too, are supreme tales of the imagination and not merely improvisations on the autobiographical theme, as many first readers might assume. While the author’s famous cameo-appearances⁵ are copiously documented in almost any critical work, it is vital to remember that Nabokov never appears on the pages of his novels as a fictional character. Nabokov himself also insisted that he was careful to “keep [his] characters beyond the limits of [his] own identity”, and, in the case of *The Gift* “only the background of the novel can be said to contain some biographical details” (NABOKOV, 1990b, 13-14). Instead of making his voice clearly identifiable, he employs several forms of authorial self-encodement, most of which are shining examples of how the author “drops in” his fictional world but only makes himself visible for the most perceptive of readers (well-known examples include Adam von Librikov in *Transparent Things*, Vivian Darkbloom in *Lolita*, and Vivian Calmbrood in *Speak, Memory*). Therefore it is an oversimplification to assume that Nabokov’s treatment of the “otherworld” is attributable to the fact that he was an exile himself. If exiles are ubiquitous as they are in his fictional world, it is not because he had been twice uprooted, but because the acute state of dislocation offers ideal conditions for contemplation on the individual, who is forced to confront past, present, and future, self and setting (PARKER, 1987, 10). Even long years after his first displacement from Russia to Europe, he confidently stated:

I will never go back, for the simple reason that all the Russia I need is always with me: literature, language, and my own Russian childhood. I will never surrender. And anyway, the grotesque shadow of a police state will never be dispelled in my lifetime.
(NABOKOV, 1990b, 10)

Nabokov aptly maintained that the conception of a fictional world is not dependent on the author’s life course as it were, but “the transrational awareness of the existence of other worlds outside mundane reality carries more significance” (quoted in SHRAYER, 1999, 18). The best part of Nabokov’s early commentators adamantly argued that the author’s disconnection from his parent culture and the loss of his natural idiom were directly proportional with his application of the “otherworld”. However, in the last two decades the emphasis has shifted from the biographical to the metaphysical. Don Barton Johnson, a keen advocate of the metaphysical view, believes that in Nabokov’s fiction “there exists, beyond the scope of the intellect another, more real world, and that what man sees before him is but *a shadow and echo of that true reality*” (JOHNSON, 1985, 3) [italics added].

The reader may well have identified by now the underlying philosophical current of Nabokov’s worlds by seeing the echo of that true, otherworldly reality as resemblance to the model of the universe portrayed by Neo-

Platonism.⁶ Knowing how much Nabokov abhorred to hear about classification and literary influences, I would not even try to establish a close kinship between his art and any twentieth-century literary or philosophical currents. It has been convincingly demonstrated that Nabokov seemed to have stronger affinities with the nineteenth century than with the twentieth.⁷ In an interview, he named Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, and Emerson as “the great American writers” he most admired. All of them are classic figures of the American Romantic period (MORTON, 1974, 5). It is a widely accepted view today to think of Nabokov as a Romantic in the Platonic tradition. He once stated that:

I am afraid to get mixed up with Plato whom I do not care for, but I do think that in my case it is true that the entire book, before it is written, seems to be ready in some other, now transparent, now dimming, dimension, and my job is to take down as much of it as I can make out and as precisely as I am humanly able to.

Consequently, we can conclude that Nabokov’s art grows out of Romanticism, because he viewed this world as a pale reflection of the otherworld. The many varieties of doublings, mirrorings, and inversions appear to be a key organizing principle of his fiction, connecting worlds and worlds apart: our reality and realities beyond human consciousness.

SOMETHING ELSE, SOMETHING ELSE, SOMETHING ELSE

When Véra Nabokova first indicated, as mentioned earlier, the existence of another world in Nabokov’s writing, she referred to a poem that had appeared in the novel *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974). Here, Nabokov calls the work a “philosophical love poem” and suggests “the hereafter” as a near-translation of the Russian term, *potustoronnost*.⁸ In fact, Nabokov conceived of this otherworldliness as *something* he could not openly share with his readers. In “Fame”, a poem from 1942, Nabokov awakened his readers’ interest by writing:

But one day while disrupting the strata of sense
and descending deep down to my wellspring
I saw mirrored, besides my own self and the world,
something else, something else, something else.
(NABOKOV, 1970, 11; quoted in SISSON, 1994)

He never intended to explain the signification of “something else”. It was a secret he expressly refused to make his audience privy to. In an article about soccer from the *London Times* (September 20, 1993) Nabokov appeared as “one of history’s great goalies” and is quoted: “I was less the keeper of a goal than the keeper of a secret” (STRINGER-HYE, 2008).⁹ In another one of his oft-cited strong opinions, Nabokov gave an evasive reply to the question whether he believed in God, and appeared equally reluctant in unearthing the inscrutable mystery: “To be quite candid – and what I’m going to say now is something I never said before, and I hope it provokes a salutary little chill – I

know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more” (NABOKOV, 1990b, 45). God’s existence, art, and language for Nabokov were all obscure phenomena whose understanding lies beyond general human perception.¹⁰ Subsiding into silence, scholars were long unprepared to talk directly about the incommunicability of the “otherworld” in his literary make-up. It is relevant to note that the “otherworld” is made accessible only for Nabokov’s most admired, positive characters, who are capable of communicating with a transcendent, timeless, and non-material world that exists on a higher level of consciousness, above the mundane world of average reality. Characters partaking of otherworldly experiences in Nabokov’s fiction do not submerge into the realm of the “beyond” through death. In his fiction, dying provides no clearly defined passage to the land of the deceased; “instead [it] has them shift to some other plane or mode of existence, from which they are able to observe and gently bear on the fates of the living” (PROFFER, 1982, 59). In many of Nabokov’s writings the characters believe that the dead may be “hovering over them, trying to communicate with them through the things of space and time” (BOYD, 1985, 94). In *Glory*, for example, Martin, the protagonist

tried to comprehend his father’s death and to catch a wisp of posthumous tenderness in the dark of the room. He (...) even made certain experiments: if, right now, a board in the floor creaks or there is a knock of some kind, that means he hears me and responds.

Those who are in easy reach of the transcendent are almost always privileged characters, highly intelligent or sensitive artists and artists manqué, psychologically deranged individuals, who live in their intricately patterned, strangely solipsistic worlds imperceptible to the uninitiated, average, philistine characters. In his autobiographical writing Nabokov takes an inventory of things that are at top of his hierarchy of values; monomaniacal fixation on art, chess, love, and butterflies is a *sine qua non* to endow a character with extraordinary qualities and permit them to enter an otherworldly textual zone if and when the “door of the otherworld is left slightly ajar” (NABOKOV, 1990, 25-26).

I would like to discuss some representative textual examples of how the entry into an otherworldly space occurs. I shall confine my attention to three early short stories, all of which are excellent examples illuminating how Nabokov foregrounds the model of the “otherworld”. They are as follows: “Cloud, Castle, Lake” (1937), “The Return of Chorb” (1925), and “Terra Incognita” (1931).¹¹

“CLOUD, CASTLE, LAKE”: THE “OTHERWORLD” AS EPIPHANY

The short story “Cloud, Castle, Lake” best typifies the motif and design of entering an otherworldly space. Vasiliy Ivanovich, a modest bachelor, wins a ticket for a pleasure trip, which he undertakes reluctantly. There follows a hiking expedition amongst a group of vulgar Germans who constantly humiliate him, and he is forced to participate in organized entertainment. Before setting off he has a premonition that during the trip he would

experience some tremendous joy, a moment of epiphany, “an outburst of profane joy”, to borrow the famous Joycean term. Vasiliy has a vision of an idyllic landscape – the cloud, castle, and lake of the title – which he finds so mesmerizing that he wants to stay there for ever. The central images of the title are recounted here:

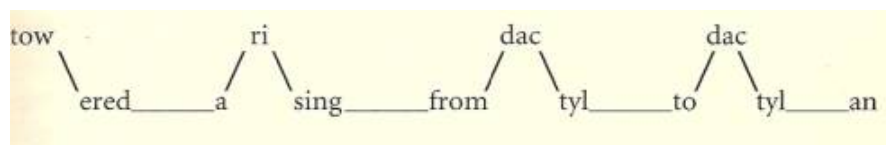
It was a pure, blue lake, with an unusual expression of its water. In the middle, a large cloud was reflected in its entirety. On the other side, on a hill thickly covered with verdure (and the darker the verdure, the more poetic it is), towered, arising from dactyl to dactyl, an ancient black castle. Of course, there are plenty of such views in Central Europe, but just this one (...) was so unique, so familiar, and so long-promised, and it so understood the beholder that Vasiliy Ivanovich even pressed his hand to his heart, as if to see whether his heart was there in order to give it away.
(NABOKOV, 1997, 435)

Vasiliy is the only one of the group who can somehow partake of the place’s otherworldly magnetism. His presentiments of something inexpressible occurring during the exhibition are accounted for early on in the story when he looks out the train window and contemplates all the parts of a landscape, the configuration of objects insignificant in themselves, a configuration in which he seems to experience a kind of fusion of the past and the future, shaped by the intuition of the “otherworld”. These are described as coalescing in an exceptional moment, during which the protagonist’s fate comes close to the state of what Nabokov famously calls “cosmic synchronization” in *Speak, Memory*. The rest of the characters in the story, German bullies representing the ideology of collectivism, simply pay no attention to any component of the otherworldly construct.

At some distance, Schramm, poking into the air with the leader’s alpenstock, was calling the attention of the excursionists to something or other; they had settled themselves around on the grass in poses seen in amateur snapshots, while the leader sat on a stump, *his behind to the lake, and was having a snack*.
(NABOKOV, 1997, 435) [italics added]

Vasiliy is not only different because he is disinclined to take part in the collective enjoyments of the group, but he is the only one conscious of the *poeticity* of the landscape. In his excellent reading of the short story, Maxim D. Shrayer detects the correspondences between the architecture of the otherworldly opening that the protagonist enters and the architectonics of its verbal signs. The prosodic representation of the italicized clause below (the very scene to which the title refers) helps the reader to reconstruct a central part of the landscape (SHRAYER, 1999, 153-155):

On the other side, on a hill thickly covered with verdure (and the darker the verdure, the more poetic it is), *towered, arising from dactyl to dactyl, an ancient black castle*. (NABOKOV, 1997, 435)
[italics added]



The dactylic line (both in English and Russian) assimilates three dimensions: (1) the metric (the line representing verse proper); (2) it represents physical space (the actual otherworldly opening, that is, the tower wall with its crenellations); (3) and the transcendental space (it being the boundary between the physical and the metaphysical).

Stories of entering the “otherworld” are a prevalent theme in Nabokov’s short fiction, often signifying a repository of idealized memories of a dream “so familiar, and so long-promised”. Vasiliy’s eventually fruitless attempt to enter the “otherworld” denotes his yearning to flee from the world where he feels imprisoned and, akin to the protagonist of *Invitation to a Beheading*, cherishes the belief that there exists a “dream world [because] surely there must be an original of the clumsy copy. Dreamy, round, and blue, it turns slowly toward me” (NABOKOV, 1989, 93).

“THE RETURN OF CHORB”: THE MYTHOPOETICS OF THE “OTHERWORLD”

“The Return of Chorb” (1925) is an emblematic text that points toward the author’s preoccupation with the idealized realm of the “otherworld” and his lifelong desire to recapture past in memory. The eponymous hero of the novella, a Russian *littérateur*, is returning from his honeymoon from France. It is revealed early on in the story that Mrs. Chorb had a fatal accident on the trip: she was electrocuted by a live wire. Chorb presents a catalogue of restored memories by retracing their journey in flashbacks. He seeks to recreate his dead wife’s image by hiring a prostitute to a seedy hotel room where he and his wife spent their wedding night.¹² The prostitute keeps him company without engaging in sexual intercourse with the client. Chorb uses the prostitute merely to fix the image of his dead wife in his mind forever. The moment of absolute proximity that Chorb seeks to reestablish with his wife transpires during the night when the protagonist is asleep. He awakens from his dream screaming only to discover later that the “white specter” lying beside him is not his wife. Considering the mythopoetic implications of the story, the excerpt that follows is especially revealing:

Behind the curtain the casement was open and one could make out, in the velvety depths, a corner of the opera house, *the black shoulder of a stone of Orpheus outlined against the blue of the night* and a row of light along the dim façade which slanted off into darkness. Down there, far away, diminutive dark silhouettes swarmed as they emerged from bright doorways onto the semi-circular layers of illumined porch steps, to which glided up cars with shimmering headlights and smooth glistening tops.
(NABOKOV, 1997, 153) [italics added]

The allusion to the Greek mythological figure of Orpheus should instantly call the reader’s attention to the classical story: “We grant the man his wife to go with him, bought by his song; yet let our law restrict the gift, that, while he Tartarus quits, he shall not turn his gaze” (BOETHIUS, 2008, 3.42). In the

classical myth, the eminent Thracian poet, Orpheus descends into the netherworld in search for Eurydice, his dead wife, who was fatally bitten by a nest of snakes. On meeting his wife anew, Orpheus is allowed to return with her to the upper world providing that he walks in front of her and never looks back. In like manner, Chorb, the modern Orpheus, travels to the “otherworld” to regain his wife, but fails to complete his undertaking.

“TERRA INCOGNITA”: THE DYSTOPIA OF THE “OTHERWORLD”

So far we have seen examples of the “otherworld” as a domain of idealized memories desperately sought after by a character who is made privy to the author’s worldview. “Terra Incognita” presents a modus of expression different from those found in elsewhere in Nabokov’s fiction. Instead of embodying a perfect alternative to the reality of our everyday existence, the “otherworld” is but a realm of horror, an unknown textual zone waiting to be explored by the readers and the protagonist alike.¹³ The first-person narrator of the story is recounting his expedition the tropical hell of Badonia, an imaginary region in Africa.¹⁴ The theme of the unknown land is turned into *terror incognitus*, that is, a nightmarish locus of absurdity. On developing a terminal disease, the narrator begins to have delusions, obfuscating the narrative mode, and together with it, the actual location of the story also begins to fuel our feeling of uncertainties.

I gazed at the weird tree trunks, around some of which were coiled thick, flesh-colored snakes; suddenly I thought I saw, between the trunks, as though through my fingers, the mirror of a *half-open wardrobe with dim reflections* (...) I, however, was much more frightened by something else: now and then, on my left (always, for some reason, on my left), listing among the repetitious reeds, *what seemed a large armchair but was actually a strange, cumbersome gray amphibian*, whose name Gregson refused to tell me, would rise out of the swamp. (NABOKOV, 1997, 298- 300) [italics added]

In presenting two simultaneously existing worlds, a hospital ward somewhere in Europe and a dangerous tropical rainforest, Nabokov deliberately complicates the ontological horizon on the story. Is the narrator lying in a hospital bed while having visions of a lush rainforest full of perils, or is the tropical experience the real one with occasional glimpses of the accoutrements of a room?¹⁵ The juxtaposition of these two distinctly dissimilar loci and the visions of a febrile mind cause this unique Nabokovian world to foreground an “otherworld” bereft of the magnificence and desire with which the author’s idealized realm of the hereafter is usually associated in other works.

CONCLUSION

It has transpired by now that the works of Nabokov that include more than two worlds in varying degrees of presence are plentiful. In addition to the short stories scrutinized above, *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and *Invitation to a Beheading* are perhaps the best-known examples of portraying another dimension into which their characters escape, disclosing their disillusionment with the blemishes of our mundane world of reality. It has been shown that Nabokov's idea of presenting a world beyond human consciousness is in line with the Gnostic view of regarding the world of matter as something fallen and that all humans are divine souls incarcerated in a material world. Consequently, it can be concluded that the otherworldly as a theme functions as the antithesis of a nightmarish locus, often epitomized by the "horrible here" (NABOKOV, 1989, 93), a pale reflection, or rather, the imperfect imitation of a world attainable only for a few elects. Brian Boyd, possibly the greatest living authority on Nabokov, writes that

[he] was fascinated by the possibility of a beyond, and rightly felt it would make all the difference to our sense of our lives if we could know whether there is anything beyond. But he also knew that despite all his own searching he had no "conclusive evidence". (BOYD, 2002, 24)

The partial readings of the short stories above have demonstrated that the "otherworld" can take a variety of forms, ranging from epiphanic episodes to the submersion into the unusually dystopian "otherworld" of disturbing phantasmagorias. Whatever the case may be, one must always be mindful of not drawing a demarcation line between this world and the worlds beyond in the Nabokov's fictional universe. The author's *sui generis* faith in the metaphysical allowed him to establish a perceptible link between two or more worlds, reinforcing the view that the "otherworld" is never a self-contained realm detached from present reality. It never supplants the real world but exists as an alternative for the dissonance of the real world, offering an exit from the darkness of one universe and entrance to the brilliance of another one.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Prof. Dr. Ákos Farkas from Eötvös Loránd University of Arts and Sciences (ELTE, Budapest) for having offered me his generous help in the writing of this article.

2. In an early pioneering work on Nabokov's literary production, Donald E. Morton claims that Nabokov is committed only to the purity of *aesthetic experience*, which the critic refers to as "[the author's] talent to conjure up the kind of bliss he has experienced in his own life. The pleasure in these moments arises from the conscious savoring of details, of colors, textures, patterns, designs" (MORTON, 1974, 9). Closely related to Nabokov's "aesthetic bliss" is the author's distinctly personal definition of "inspiration" in his lecture, "The Art of Commonsense and Literature" ("... you experience a shuddering sensation of wild magic, of some inner resurrection, as if a dead

man were revived by a sparkling drug which has been rapidly mixed in your presence. This feeling is at the base of what is called *inspiration* – a state of affairs that commonsense must condemn.” (1982, 378) [italics added]). The concept of *inspiration* appears more famously as “cosmic synchronization” in Nabokov’s autobiographical novel, *Speak, Memory*. Sisson, who has offered the most systematic treatment on the subject so far, compares the process of Nabokov’s “cosmic synchronization” to what Ezra Pound defined as an “image” in his manifesto, “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste”, and T. S. Eliot’s remarks in his essay “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921): “When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes” (quoted in Sisson, 1994, 157).

3. Nabokov’s metaphysical convictions cannot be exclusively explained away on the basis of Gnosticism per se. In addition to Gnostical imagination, Christian symbolism, Romantic quest for entirety, Schopenhauer’s poesy, and Bergson’s vision were, according to Toker, *alternative takes on experience* – visions with which the author himself had close affinities. See Leona Toker’s article (2005), “Nabokov’s Worldview” for a penetrative study on the relationship between Nabokov’s aesthetics, metaphysics, ethics, and politics.

4. For example Boris Pasternak, Andrei Bely, Ivan Bunin, Victor Shkolvsky, Ilya Ehrenburg, and others. Some émigré critics at that time described Nabokov’s art to be “un-Russian” and disloyal to the “humanist” traditions; they saw themselves “more Russian” because of their fidelity to their mother tongue and the oft-recurring *topos* of the “lost homeland”. Vladimir E. Alexandrov (1991) has more on this aspect of the author’s work in the concluding chapter of *Nabokov’s Otherworld* (“Nabokov and the Silver Age of Russian Culture”, 213-234). Another excellent article is: M. Osorgin: V. Sirin: Kamera obscura. Novel. in: *Vladimir Nabokov Pro et Contra*, Издательство Русского Христианского Гуманитарного Института, Санкт-Петербург. 1997. 240-241.

5. David Lodge comments that “[t]easing allusions to the author persist in Nabokov’s subsequent novels” (*The Modes of Moderns Writing*, 241).

6. One of the most challenging tasks that critics have been facing so far in Nabokov criticism is to establish the author’s proper place in the literary canon. The question whether Nabokov should be considered as a star in the modernist or postmodernist firmament is an immense and contentious issue whose discussion is beyond the scope of the present work. Suffice it to say in this cursory side-glance that Nabokov was an early postmodernist in American literature. Brian McHale (1987, 18), for example, argued that there were two Nabokovs, a modernist and an postmodernist: “The crossover from modernist to postmodernist writing also occurs during the middle years of Vladimir Nabokov’s American career, specifically in the sequence *Lolita* (1955), *Pale Fire* (1962), *Ada* (1969)”. Although this statement is among the first and most frequently cited ones in Nabokov studies, it is essential to remember (and most critics would concur with this) that classifying Nabokov is nothing but officious academic pigeonholing. Maurice Couturier’s thought-provoking essay, “Nabokov in Postmodernist Land” should serve as a point of

departure for all future scholars.

7. In the concluding chapter of *Nabokov's Otherworld*, Vladimir E. Alexandrov (1991, 213) calls attention to a highly provocative pronouncement by Nabokov, which, to some extent, has come to defy the author's systematic rejection of literary influences. In a letter written to his friend and well-known critic Edmund Wilson, Nabokov traces his own artistic roots back to the Silver Age of Russian culture, acknowledging that "Blok, Bely, Bunin and others wrote their best stuff in those days. And never was poetry so popular, not even in Pushkin's days. I am the product of that period, I was bred in that atmosphere". The claim that Nabokov's artistic development might have been influenced by the Russian literary movements between 1905 and 1917 (especially Symbolism and Acmeism) is not only relevant because critics have long been determined to find a suitable way to relate the author's name to some major philosophical or literary current but also because the revival of Russian literature around the turn of the century has emerged as one plausible inspiration behind the workings of the Nabokovian "otherworld." In her doctoral dissertation on Nabokov's "English novels", Márta Pellérdi (2004) also argues that the author's world is more tightly connected to the European modernism of the first half of the twentieth century than to the American postmodernism in the latter half.

8. Barry Scherr (1995) quotes the poem's last stanza where the paraphrase of *potustoronnost'* appears: "I remind you that [being in love] is not wide-awake reality, that the markings are not the same (...) and that, maybe, the *hereafter* stands slightly ajar in the dark" (NABOKOV, 1990, 25-26) [italics added].

9. See my bibliography for URL.

10. Nabokov's linguistic transcendentalism may be reconcilable with his indebtedness to Russian formalism, more specifically, to the Russian concept *zaum*, describing the linguistic experiments prevalent in sound symbolism and language creation of Russian futurist poets.

11. "Cloud, Castle, Lake" came out in 1937 under the title "*Oblako, ozero, bashnya*", and was translated by Peter Pertzov in collaboration with the author. "The Return of Chorb" was published in 1925 under the title "*Vozvrashchenie Chorba*", and was translated by Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author. "Terra Incognita" came out in 1931 under the same title in Russian, and was translated by Simon Karlinsky and the author.

12. This scene bears striking resemblance to *Lolita*, in which Humbert Humbert seeks the company of Monique, a childlike prostitute in Paris, to spiritually and physically return to his adolescence, marked by his love for Annabel Leigh, Lolita's famous precursor.

13. In an interesting discussion of Nabokov's short stories, Carol T. Williams (1975) remarks that most of the author's stories include a typically Nabokovian narrator: a Russian émigré, unnamed (because the unnamed is the unknown, and seemingly an elitist, ineffectual intellectual) (214). In fact, the narrator of "Terra Incognita" appears by name only once in the story, he and his surroundings (the actual locus of the events) are obscured, anticipating intense reader-interaction.

14. "Terra Incognita" was said to be inspired by Joseph Conrad's similar

novella, "An Outpost of Progress" (1896), in which the author relates his own experiences in the Congo. Concordances with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are also relevant at this point.

15. The complication the reader is confronted with is strikingly similar to the famous butterfly dream of the Chinese philosopher, Zhuangzi; one may never be sure whether Zhuangzi dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreamed that he was Zhuangzi. A modern variant of the Zhuangzi-motif is *A gólyakalifa* (*Stork Caliph*, 1919), a well-known novelette by Mihály Babits, the Hungarian writer and poet. In it, he writes: "I want to compile the files of life before I would fall asleep again. I have got precise notes of everything. My life was like a dream, and my dreams were akin to life itself. My life was as beautiful as a dream; alas, I wish my life had been miserable and my dreams beautiful" (my translation).

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