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Brian Quinn

Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov made a career out of conjuring up ghosts from the past in both his novels, poetry and short stories. His characters are often victims of cruel fate or destiny, especially when it concerns exiles and émigrés who have become homeless wanderers due to the chaos of war and revolution during the first half of the twentieth century. This pain and mental torture becomes even more intensified by Nabokov's characters when experienced by Russian exiles who have managed to escape the bloody terror of the evil and godless Soviet communist regime.

The appearance of ghosts and illusions amidst the harsh realities of Europe in the midst of World War II is given a fresh and new perspective through the eyes of an unnamed émigré Russian writer who has just arrived in New York City in the short story "That in Aleppo Once..." (May 1943). The writer, who remains unnamed throughout the story, tells his tale in the form of a letter addressed to another Russian émigré author and close friend and is only identified as "V", who has already been residing in America for several years and appears to be both well established and successful.

The story is set in the early days of World War II and depicts the hellish circumstances that existed for Russian exiles stuck in France and trying to escape to America before being captured by the Germans, who were at the time successfully advancing on all fronts in Europe. Amidst the physical chaos, Nabokov starts his story with an innocuously written letter to "V" (ostensibly the author of the story the reader is now negotiating) which has been written by an old Russian friend who himself has just arrived in New York City. After a brief explanation regarding how the writer of the letter (hereafter, referred to as "the narrator") obtained V's address, the narrator blurts out:

I have a story for you! (p. 556)

(Hereafter, all quotes are taken from the *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*. New York, Alfred Knopf Publishers, 1995)

This exclamation means that the story he is about to relate is worthy of being retold as a work of art or literature by V himself, who apparently is an author of some fame.

The narrator's tale consists primarily of two main elements, first of all, his escape from

Paris during the German offensive of May 1940 and, secondly, his brief marriage to a capricious young woman who has so thoroughly broken his heart that he has become quite delusional and now even doubts whether or not she truly exists at all.

Nabokov deals with five major themes in the course of this tale and these themes include an homage to the classical Russian literary tradition, the theme of adultery, the tendency for characters to possess totally different perspectives of the very same experiences, the presence of an unreliable narrator and finally, the theme of his characters' living in a type of "virtual reality" world amidst the turmoil and chaos of Europe in the early 1940's. Many of the characters in Nabokov's world have difficulty distinguishing between reality and illusion and this theme also plays a central role in this story.

I . The Theme of Literary Tradition

Right from the outset of this story, Nabokov sets the stage by showing the narrator to be a man of letters in the great Russian tradition. He addresses his letter as "Dear V.," which is a typical device of all Russian literary works. The narrator goes on to speak highly of "our national literature" while suggesting that his main profession, too, was indeed to protect this same tradition. He also hints at the fact that his close friend V is also a professional author, though possibly less dogmatic in his attachment to the classical traditions:

One of the first persons I saw was our good old Gleb Alexandrovich Gekko gloomily crossing Columbia Avenue in quest of the petit café du coin which none of us three will ever visit again. He seemed to think that somehow or other you were betraying our national literature, and he gave me your address with a deprecatory shake of his gray head, as if you did not deserve the treat of hearing from me. (p. 556)

The narrator also goes on to talk of their mutual youthful love of Russian poetry and then continues to add that his present state of mind is more like the nuances that one might find in a short story written by the great Russian playwright Anton Chekov:

I come to you like that gushing lady in Chekov who was dying to be described. (p. 556)

He further adds to the theme of literary tradition by comparing his marriage to a youthful bride in terms similar to the marriage of the greatest of all Russian poets, Pushkin, who also married a woman far younger than he and was known to be extremely jealous of his bride:

She was much younger than I – not as much younger as was Natalie of the lovely bare shoulders and long earrings in relation to the swarthy Pushkin: but still there was a sufficient margin for that kind of retrospective romanticism which finds pleasure in imitating the destiny of a unique genius (down to the jealousy, down to the filth, down to

the stab of seeing her almond-shaped eyes turn to her blond Cassio behind her peacock-feathered fan) even if one cannot imitate his verse. She liked mine though, and would scarcely have yawned as the other was wont to do every time her husband's poem happened to exceed the length of a sonnet. (p. 557)

Of course, the narrator is careful to note that the age difference was not quite as great, while also implying that his artistic talent was likewise far from that of the great Pushkin.

The narrator's final reference to literary tradition is in the final paragraph of the story in which he evokes the memory of Shakespeare's Othello, who commits suicide on the shores of Aleppo:

Somewhere, somehow, I have made some fatal mistake. There are tiny pale bits of broken fish scales glistening here and there is the brown meshes. It may all end in Aleppo if I am not careful. Spare me, V.: you would load your dice with an unbearable implication if you took that for a title. (p. 564)

In this passage, the narrator likens his woeful state to that of a tragic hero in a Shakespearean play. He compares his physical and mental state as a perfect parallel to that of Othello, and thereby hints at his own imminent suicide.

By repeatedly evoking the classical literary tradition, Nabokov is trying to coax the reader into entering the tragic and overly dramatic mindset of the severely depressed and possibly delusional narrator. As a result, Nabokov is able to guide the reader into his artificial world with great effectiveness.

In the end, the narrator makes a literary plea to his more famous colleague to let his story be told by writing up his tale as a short story. Ironically, Othello, in a similar manner, had also asked for his story to be told, just before committing suicide. The correlation between the narrator and Othello is not coincidental.

II. Theme of Adultery

The main human element in this story is the theme of adultery and betrayal. Adultery is a subject that Nabokov writes about again and again throughout his writing career. In addition, Nabokov also has a penchant for writing about henpecked husbands (usually with adulterous wives) as well. While the theme is dealt with in a myriad of ways in several of his novels, in this story Nabokov demonstrates a successful variation of one of his favorite themes.

Nabokov is extremely adept at portraying the devastation and despair of the betrayed husband as he finds out that his wife has just spent several days with another man:

"I've been lying to you, dear," she said. "*Ya lgunia*. I stayed for several nights

in Montpellier with a brute of a man I met on the train. I did not want it at all. He sold hair lotions.”

The time, the place, the torture. Her fan, her gloves, her mask. I spent that night and many others getting it out of her bit by bit, but not getting it all. I was under the strange delusion that first I must find out every detail, and only then decide whether I could bear it. But the limit of desired knowledge was unattainable, nor could I ever fortell the approximate point after which I might imagine myself satiated, because of course the denominator of every fraction of knowledge was potentially as infinite as the number of intervals between the fractions themselves. (p. 560)

This is perhaps the most powerfully written passage in the entire story. The reader is captivated by the psychological depth of the narrator’s emotions.

Although Nabokov’s works are often said to be artificial and contrived with the only purpose being for the author to demonstrate his linguistic dexterity, the realism of the psychological terror and agony described by the narrator is as dramatically realistic as any mad ranting and raving of other betrayed lovers that you will find anywhere in literature. The way Nabokov describes the narrator’s intense pain is absolutely exquisite:

Oh, the first time she had been too tired to mind, and the next had not minded because she was sure I had deserted her; and she apparently considered that such explanations ought to be a kind of consolation prize for me instead of the nonsense and agony they really were. It went on like that for eons, she breaking down every now and then, but soon rallying again answering my unprintable questions in a breathless whisper or trying with a pitiful smile to wriggle into the semisecurity of irrelevant commentaries, and crushing and crushing the mad molar till my jaw almost burst with pain, a flaming pain which seemed somehow preferable to the dull, humming ache of humble endurance. (p. 560-561)

The dark side of human nature also appears in the shadows of adultery as the narrator unwittingly hints that he has now even started to beat his wife in order to ease his pain and possibly help him survive the double ordeal of trying to emigrate to America and somehow save his faltering marriage:

And mark, in between the periods of this inquest, we were trying to get from reluctant authorities certain papers which in their turn would make it lawful to apply for a third kind which would serve as a stepping-stone toward a permit enabling the holder to apply for yet other papers which might or might not give him the means of discovering how and why it happened. For even if I could imagine the accursed recurrent scene, I failed to link up its sharp-angled grotesque shadows with the dim limbs of my wife as she shook and rattled and dissolved in my violent grasp. So nothing remained but

to torture each other... (p. 561)

Finally, in complete despair, the narrator begins to weep and curse his fate and possibly starts to lose touch with reality:

I confess that one evening, after a particularly abominable day, I sank down on a stone bench weeping and cursing a mock world where millions of lives were being juggled by the clammy hands of consuls and commissaires. I noticed she was crying too, and then I told her that nothing would really have mattered the way it mattered now, had she not gone and done what she did. (p. 561)

Nabokov therefore uses adultery as a key which opens up a Pandora's Box of violence, despair, evil and insanity, which are all about to descend upon his characters in their now forever changed world.

III. Different Perspectives of the Same Experiences

Another famous trait that is often found throughout Nabokov's works is the tendency to show various characters who relate wildly different accounts of the very same experiences. This technique powerfully demonstrates that often what is at stake in the world of literature is not so much what is real or not, but instead, what version of reality a particular individual has. As a result, readers are continually confronted with different versions of reality and hence come to realize that, in fact, many different "realities" may exist at the same time. Readers are thus left with the dilemma of having to choose which version of reality to accept, or in some cases, possibly even deciding to accept no versions as reliable, thereby leaving true reality as something one can only hypothesize or assume.

In this story, the first instance of different perspectives arises when the narrator is escaping with his wife by train to southern France and she begins to sob uncontrollably:

Once, however, quite suddenly she started to sob in a sympathetic railway carriage. "The dog," she said, "the dog we left. I cannot forget the poor dog." The honesty of her grief shocked me, as we had never had any dog. "I know," she said, "but I tried to imagine we had actually bought that setter. And just think, he would be now whining behind a locked door." There had never been any talk of buying a setter. (p. 559)

Based on the above scene, the reader is instantly confronted with the question of who to believe. Is the wife crazy? Is the narrator losing his mind? Was there or was not there a dog? The reader will, of course, tend to believe the narrator since he is controlling the flow of information.

Later on, after several days of dealing with the personal tragedy of betrayal, the wife

suddenly blurts out that there, in fact, had been no affair at all. The story about the sexual escapade had never happened – she had only wanted to test him:

“You will think me crazy,” she said with a vehemence that, for a second, almost made a real person of her, “but I didn’t – I swear that I didn’t. Perhaps I live several lives at once. Perhaps I wanted to test you. Perhaps this bench is a dream and we are in Saratov or on some star.”

It would be tedious to nuzzle the different stages through which I passed before accepting finally the first version of her delay. (p. 561)

Now, both the reader and the narrator himself are at a complete loss as to what is real or not. Nevertheless, for the sake of his marriage, the narrator tries his best to believe that his wife did not betray him.

The final and most dramatic instance of the difference in perspectives of similar experiences is when, after his wife has finally left him for good, he asks for advice regarding his wife’s whereabouts from a third party who duly accuses him, to his bitter shock and dismay, of being a terrible man:

There she informed me that, being twice my age, she had the right to say I was a bully and a cad.

During several preceding weeks, my dear V, every time she had visited by herself the three or four families we both knew, my ghostly wife had filled the eager ears of all those kind people with an extraordinary story. To wit: that she had madly fallen in love with a young Frenchman who could give her a turreted home and a crested name; that she had implored me for a divorce and I had refused, that in fact I had said I would rather shoot her and myself than sail to New York alone; that she had said her father in a similar case had acted like gentleman; that I had answered I did not give a hoot for her *cocu de pere*.

There were loads of other preposterous details of the kind – but they all hung together in such remarkable fashion that no wonder the old lady made me swear I would not seek to pursue the lovers with a cocked pistol. They had gone, she said, to a chateau in Lozere. I inquired whether she had ever set eyes upon the man. No, but she had been shown his picture. As I was about to leave, Anna Vladimirovna, who had slightly relaxed and had even given me her five fingers to kiss, suddenly flared up again, struck the gravel with her cane, and said in her deep strong voice: “But the one thing I shall never forgive you – her dog, the poor beast which you hanged with your own hands before leaving Paris.” (p. 562-563)

After reading the above passage the reader must now decide whether to believe the narrator’s version of reality or the version which his wife has told numerous friends. The most absurd

part, of course, is when the old woman admonishes him for killing "their dog" with his own hands before leaving Paris. What is most interesting is that the narrator no longer denies killing the dog. This leads the reader to suspect that perhaps some of these preposterous tales may, in fact, be true.

By constantly offering readers variations of apparently the exact same events, one is left to ponder what actually is true and what is false. Who is crazy and who is sane? What is real and what is illusion? This device serves Nabokov well, since it instills a sense of uncertainty in the reader which eventually makes it necessary to reread and re-evaluate all that has come before in the story. As a result, finishing one of Nabokov's stories often leaves readers with more questions than answers. At such times, the reader can almost see Nabokov laughing and smiling to his delight at our confusion. Such is the complex world that Nabokov wants the reader to partake of.

IV. The Unreliable Narrator

In all of Nabokov's works, we are constantly challenged to enter into a tightly structured and highly controlled world of the author and his narrators. It is essential for the reader to always keep in mind that the narrator is not Nabokov, even though he may be named V. or Vladimir, or be the same age as Nabokov, or the same profession. The bits and pieces of fact are often thrown into the web of details that make up a Nabokov story. Such facts are intended to lead readers into a sense of complacency thus resulting in shock and surprise when we realize that the narrator may, in fact, be a liar, insane, malicious, delusional, an imbecile or all of these factors combined.

There are numerous instances in the story "That in Aleppo Once..." where the narrator appears to be less than reliable and in various hints throughout the story we are also led to suspect that he may also not be psychologically stable.

At the beginning of the story, the reader is quite willing to accept all that the narrator tells us as fact. The presentation seems normal and the facts of the story also appear to be quite believable. After about 4 or 5 pages, however, the reader begins to feel increasingly uncomfortable as the author's thread of events seems to come unraveled.

In the second half of the story the reader notices that the narrator's presentation of events differs from that of his wife, the police, and their friends, who ironically are more than willing to believe the explanations of his wife but not of the narrator.

By the end of the story the reader may well no longer believe anything of the narrator's mumbled comments. Due to this progressive loss of reliability, the careful reader is forced to reread the entire story with a less believing attitude toward everything the narrator relates.

V. Virtual Reality

On numerous occasions throughout the narrative, the narrator calls his wife a ghost or a

phantom, and also suggests several times that she may never have actually existed at all.

On the very first page of the story, the narrator admits that even though he indeed was married and even has the documents to prove it, he now believes that his wife never existed and that she had been a mere illusion:

I married, let me see, about a month after you left France and a few weeks before the gentle Germans roared into Paris. Although I can produce documentary proof of matrimony, I am positive now that my wife never existed. You may know her name from some other source, but that does not matter: it is the name of an illusion. Therefore, I am able to speak of her with as much detachment as I would of a character in a story (one of your stories, to be precise). (p. 556)

As a result, the narrator infers that he has just returned from an excursion into a virtual world of fantasy and illusion. The narrator continues his tale but cannot recall what his wife looked like. He has just arrived in New York City and ostensibly is finally safe after surviving the hellish nightmare as a refugee from war-torn Europe. Yet, he seems to have just walked out of his imaginary fairy tale existence:

But I cannot discern her. She remains as nebulous as my best poem – the one you made such gruesome fun of in the *Literaturnie Zapiski*. When I want to imagine her, I have to cling mentally to a tiny brown birthmark on her downy forearm, as one concentrates upon a punctuation mark in an illegible sentence. (p. 557)

His wife has become little more than an old dream to him now. He even has begun to think of her as a ghost or a phantom:

If she has remained a phantom to me, I may have been one to her: I suppose she had been solely attracted by the obscurity of my poetry; then tore a hole through its veil and saw a stranger's unlovable face. (p. 557)

In these two passages we see that her memory remains strong but her physical presence seems to have disappeared into thin air. This feeling of surrealness is strengthened when she cries for her lost dog that the narrator swears they never owned.

The manner in which the wife becomes lost on the train in southern France also has a surreal air about it. Even during the narrator's search for his lost wife, the police appear as zombies. In addition, the people he encounters around him in the cafés and on the streets appear to be somewhat unreal while discussing the war:

I heard among them who chanced to have Jewish blood talk of their doomed kinsmen crammed into hellbound trains; and my own plight, by contrast, acquired a commonplace

air of irreality while I sat in some crowded café with the milky blue sea in front of me and a shell-hollow murmur behind telling and retelling the tale of massacre and misery, the gray paradise beyond the ocean, and the ways and whims of harsh consuls. (p. 559)

The narrator finds the entire refugee experience somewhat hard to believe, especially regarding the dour, dim-witted administrators who held the lives of so many innocent people in their hands.

Finally, when a policeman purports to have found his wife, it turns out to be, in fact, someone else – but nevertheless the policeman continues to try and make him confess that the woman in question was really his wife:

The girl he produces was an absolute stranger, of course; but my friend Holmes kept trying for some time to make her and me confess we were married, while her taciturn and muscular bedfellow stood by and listened, his bare arms crossed on his striped chest. (p. 559)

After surviving the absurdity of arguing with an idiot policeman trying to convince him that a stranger is not his wife, it becomes even more absurd that he should moments later chance upon his wife waiting in line to buy food.

The narrator thereafter tries to return to normalcy with his wife, however, his few moments of marital bliss are forever lost when his wife suddenly confesses that she has just spent the past several days with another man.

After numerous days of arguing, the narrator soon begins to lose his own grasp on reality and cannot quite remember whether or not he has started to regularly beat his own wife:

For even if I could imagine the accursed recurrent scene, I failed to link up its sharp-angled grotesque shadows with the dim limbs of my wife as she shook and rattled and dissolved in my violent grasp. (p. 561)

The narrator thereafter falls deeper and deeper into a sense of helplessness in which he sees the world around him as nothing more than a charade:

I confess that one evening, after a particularly abominable day, I sank down on a stone bench weeping and cursing a mock world where millions of lives were being juggled by the clammy hands of consuls and commissaires. I noticed she was crying too, and then I told her that nothing would really have mattered the way it mattered now, had she not gone and done what she did. (p. 561)

Nevertheless, he attempts to enter another virtual world by trying to believe his wife's now

even more absurd version of events, when she abruptly changes her story and professes to actually not have had any affair at all. For a while, in fact, he finds some peace while believing in this new and temporary fantasy:

I did not talk to her and was a good deal alone. She would glimmer and fade, and reappear with some trifle she thought I would appreciate – a handful of cherries, three precious cigarettes, or the like – treating me with the unruffled mute sweetness of a nurse that trips from and to a gruff convalescent. (p. 561)

In this new fantasy world of the narrator, his wife has begun to “glimmer and fade” like a ghost or spirit.

The narrator reaches the peak of absurdity in this surreal world when he is accused of being a bully and a cad based on a mountain of lies that his wife has told their friends. He can hardly believe his ears, but after listening to the wild excuses she has told people for her final escape from him, he starts to think that maybe, just maybe, some of these incredible stories might be true.

The narrator has now become so lost and confused in this web of incoherent lies and intrigue that he no longer even denies the fact that he has started to lose confidence in his own version of reality. The reader, too, is now faced with the dilemma of whose version of reality to believe.

Finally, the narrator gives up the notion of his wife having ever existed at all in the real world, but now believes her to be nothing more than a figment of his imagination:

This is, I gather, the whole point of the story – although if you write it, you had better not make him a doctor, as I think that kind of thing has been overdone. It was at that moment that I suddenly knew for certain that she had never existed at all. I shall tell you another thing. When I arrived I hastened to satisfy a certain morbid curiosity: I went to the address she had given me once; it proved to be an anonymous gap between two office buildings; I looked for her uncle’s name in the directory; it was not there. (p. 563)

The narrator can no longer distinguish what is real from what is illusion. Even the “proof” he gives that his wife never existed is based on the twisted logic of a man who is losing his grip on reality.

By the end of the story, the narrator mentions that:

Life had been real before, life will be real from now on, I hope. Not tomorrow, though. Perhaps after tomorrow. (p. 564)

He seems to be looking for the same reality that he had known before his marriage. Yet,

readers will now have difficulty in further believing him.

At the end of the story, he confesses to recently seeing a vision of his wife (even though he is in the USA and she is in France):

Yet the pity of it. Curse your art, I am hideously unhappy. She keeps on walking to and fro where the brown nets are spread to dry on the hot stone slabs and the dappled light of the water plays on the side of a moored fishing boat. (p. 564)

The narrator has now completely lost his ability to distinguish reality from illusion and has entered a new "virtual reality" of despair from which the only exit seems to be suicide.

Conclusion

In the masterfully written story "That in Aleppo Once...", Nabokov revisits a theme that has been used numerous times throughout his works, namely, the story of a poor and hopeless man who attempts to recapture the past, a woman, a time or his country, that has become lost forever. In another device used time and again in his past works, the reader sees the narrator gradually spiral down into a world of madness, although we are never quite sure to what extent the narrator or those around him are actually insane.

In this story, Nabokov is extremely successful in depicting the psychological agony of despair and hopelessness. The careful reader must read and reread the story again and again to pick up the various nuances which may have been missed the first time around. Nabokov is remarkably adept at guiding the reader into his own special world and then he lets us free to imagine and assume what might and might not be true in his layered world of intrigue. By the end of the story, the reader is left with the impression that the narrator has by now indeed committed suicide and that his friend, V, has merely written his story in homage to an old friend. As we close the pages of the book, the entire story itself does not seem to stop, but instead it seems to just slowly fade away into the distance like a dream.

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