

AESTHETS AND AESTHETICISM**Mădălina ALAMĂ**

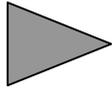
“Average reality begins to rot and stink as soon as the act of individual creation ceases to animate a subjectively perceived texture.”

Vladimir Nabokov

Abstract

This article does not intend to be a dogmatic critical approach. The two novelists that I focus on, Vladimir Nabokov and Mateiu L. Caragiale are observed from the perspective of their similarities and of their differences. Each author has a different cultural background and created his work in an environment that was in most respects different from the cultural milieu of the other. However, the artistic views of the two authors are more similar than one would imagine.

Keywords: literary realism, characters' autonomy, aestheticism, art, artist, individual perception



A World Of Words

In defining realism many critics agreed that it is such an elastic literary term that we may as well do without it, but since most authors are concerned with reality they attempt to tackle some form of realism or another. But what is reality? According to J.A. Cuddon the concept of reality is characterized by two major traits: correspondence which enables us to know the truth through scientific demonstration, referential language and objectivity, and coherence which leads to the truth by the power of perception, by insight, with the help of subjectivity and emotive language.

A creator of world, Vladimir Nabokov believes that objects are mirrors of reality in art as well because the universe, the world itself is perceived by every individual's consciousness in a very different, unique manner. Therefore, Vladimir Nabokov holds that any adopted form of art, be it concerned with reality or not, will eventually lose its freshness in time and become a mere method, a conventional, respectable pattern instead of a lively literary mode. Further on, Nabokov argues that composing a novel is the art of creative exercise in constant engagement to revitalize literary tradition. Indeed, in Nabokov's novel, we notice a tendency to parody and undermine the conventions of old, traditional novels and an emphasis on the personal experience of each individual. We can, thus, deduce that if literary realism came into being due to the tendency of the individual experience to replace the collective tradition as the ultimate mediator of reality then Vladimir Nabokov is a realist par excellence. Reality for him is where the common view stops and individual perception begins, conceiving personal meaning out of unique experience. The result of this conviction is a kind of "difficult" fiction that the French critic Roland Barthes defines as a "text of bliss" rather than a "text of pleasure". If the latter grants euphoria to the readers and does not contradict their cultural background, the former imposes a state of loss, it discomforts the reader by unsettling their historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of tastes and values, it brings the reader to a crisis in relation with language.

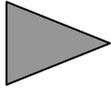
The text of bliss takes the shape of "aesthetic bliss" at Nabokov. Some critics argued that his patterns are too self-indulgent, that his authorial voice is too authoritative and thus takes away any hint of independence that his characters might have had. However, the author maintained that all his novels are fictions no matter how well anchored in history they may appear to be; "there is no story of history, without a teller; I do not believe that history exists apart from the historian", he said. (Pifer, 1980: 103) So does Nabokov "sin" against his own characters? Does the author lack the third dimension in his novels, namely humanism by imprisoning, limiting the complexity of his characters? Although he

calls himself the "perfect dictator in that private world" and his characters "galley slaves", the author makes a clear distinction between the world of life and that of art, advocating hegemony only in the latter. Outside the world of art Nabokov was committed to democracy and its freedoms saying that "democracy is humanity at its best" (Pifer, 1980: 107). But going back to the issue of characters we notice that some of them voice the author's opinion concerning the autonomy of art; thus Axel Rex believes that an artist's sole concern should be beauty; an extreme aesthete, Rex keeps striving to turn life into art. Even a more complex artist, Van Veen from ADA, experiences states of "aesthetic bliss" and presents them in a very original verbal way; but his genius as well as Rex's lacks of human dimension, there is very little of that profound wisdom, of the deep understanding that the reader would expect to accompany such brilliant and complex characters. This way we tend to see the artists as acutely aware of their imaginative trespassing against the essential rights of human beings ignoring what Immanuel Kant called the "moral imperative", that is the fact that one exists ultimately as an end in itself, in all their deeds whether they aim those at themselves or at other human beings. But some of Nabokov's most genial artists: Axel Rex, Humbert Humbert, Van Veen are depicted by their author in their tremendous cruelty, lacking the ability to perceive any distinction between the natural condition of human freedom and the less or inhuman privileges of art; therefore the reader can see that the writer not only understands his own creation very well but also distances himself from it, giving it the space to exist in itself with its own originality. Nabokov's voice is present behind his independent characters, disdaining their belief that the values of art may eliminate the moral imperative of human existence, the author was thus far from indifferent to his characters or to what we called the moral imperatives necessary both in his novels and outside, in his real world. He even called Humbert "a vain and cruel wretch who manages to appear 'touching'. That epithet in its true tear-iridized sense, can only apply to my poor little girl [Lolita]." She is not as much a victim of the pop-culture of America as of Humbert's aesthetic and sexual wobble. Humbert cannot at times help himself as a pedophile but as a man endowed with artistic sensibility, with the great gift of creative perception which he takes for something very similar to moral virtue, declaring himself more poet than pervert, trying this way to elevate himself and be seen as pure poet and to remove his actions from the ethical sphere of life into that of pure art. But in spite of this cunning attempt by the end of the novel, artist or not, Humbert sees himself as a bruiser, a maimer and a sexual brute, a "sex-fiend". Also by the end of the novel the human being most perfect in its finally reached freedom is Lolita, whose independence from Humbert is achieved only at the end of the book but whose autonomy from the author is evident all throughout the novel. The author must be aware of the hidden conundrum inside Lolita's inner life, that is why/how he transfers his awareness to his Humbert who admits, after having lost Lolita, that even during her imprisonment, her mind was a mystery to him, her juvenile clichés most likely hid a forbidden world: a wonderful garden and twilight, and a whole palace, and several substantial, emotional and intellectual regions which were

lucidly and absolutely forbidden to him. Left alone, Humbert understands the devastating effect of his actions upon Lolita's inner life; he is aware of the "breaking" both physical and psychological, of the rupture inside Lolita which he is guilty of. This understanding gives the narration an extra dimension, a depth and intensity which Nabokov labeled as a shift in narrative tone and explained it not as a way to elucidate the process of art into a hastened confession of its own perversity. Thus the stylistic effect is meant to render the major change taking place in Humbert's mind and reflected in his language. Actually language and style constituted a major issue for Nabokov's critics who singled out his verbal "pyrotechnics" as indicating some sort of obsession with style, form, aesthetics, and contempt towards traditional concerns in the literary field. His word-magic is meant to cover some flat, unfortunate characters, some paper figures or cards since those are less likely to disturb the master's intricate, well polished and elegant patterns, with any sign of will and vitality. But admirers of Nabokov's fiction argue that the way he builds his characters is most essential, if at all, but the artistic process in itself. However, the reader can elucidate this problem on his/her own since it is obvious that the aesthete is in the background and at the root of the otherwise fully complete creator of characters. Nabokov's style, his inversions, his multilingual approach in writing his prose should not dazzle the reader to such an extent that the substance as such may be obliterated. In Nabokov's prose there is a fine and unique balance between form and matter, the author mastering his art in a most exquisite and extraordinary way, the result being the very opposite of the objective correlative. As fascinated as the author may be by the powers of language, he regarded the process of verbal creation as mainly life-giving, which takes us back to the issue of authority and humanity. It is only natural that the author who took several bus rides among American teen-agers in order to better grasp these language peculiarities and render them in *Lolita* should hold that he is absolutely responsible for his characters, for their world at the level of stability and truth, in a word, at the level of coherence in a created world. Further on, Nabokov states that a writer must be very minor or insane if he lets his characters be in charge of him in the process of creation; this responsibility is for the author the mark of self-respect, artistic honor and literary insight. The lack of the so-called autonomy is compensated by the complexity and human profundity that the characters possess apart from the fulfilled intensions of their author. Therefore one could not limit a character at the level of language and authorial illusions. The artifice which Nabokov employed was used self-consciously in order to intrude upon the reader's awareness, marking the borders between the worlds constructed by the author and the one we call our own. His characters exist within the language of their creator but that does not reduce them to figures of speech, Nabokov himself confessing that the story of *Lolita* itself had preoccupied him for a long time before he started putting it on the paper.

All in all Vladimir Nabokov insisted on the uniqueness of the inner logic and particular truth of a work of fiction and deplored the "old-fashioned", naïve, and

musty method of human-interest criticism [...] that consists of removing the characters from an author's imaginary world of the critic who proceeds to examine these displaced characters as if they were "real people". However, the plausibility of characters is strongly connected to Nabokov's vision of reality which is rooted in this theory of individual perception of reality. The logic of this method is evoking this unique reality. Realist or artificer a good novelist must strive to make the perfect, or as close to perfect as possible, balance between the created characters and the created world.



A world of fabulation

Very much the same are the books created by J.R.R. Tolkien, whose famous *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* revolve around the same idea of fantasy worlds created entirely by the magic of language. Tolkien was to shatter the traditional acceptance of *fabulation*. He proves that *fabulation* can be more than a term designated to the anti-novel, to verbal acrobatics surrealistic literature. *Fabulation* becomes a reliable asset in Tolkien's prose because it involves allegory to great extent. However, the author seems to be more "gentle" so to say with the readers: before actually leading us into his fantastic world, he dedicates the first page of his prelude to *The Lord of the Rings*, to explain that the reader is to be introduced into a unique world of "delightful creatures" and to describe what a hobbit is, description which includes a few useful hints about the universe we are about to enter. But even without this extra help the reader does figure out the artificiality of this world populated by savage wolves, evil *orcs* and giant spiders. Nevertheless the author demonstrates his mastery in combining imagination and language, the result being an independent unreal and coherent inner structure world with perfectly integrated characters. In order to enter and understand this world and its inner structure we must be ready to drop our traditional belief of what reality means and be willing to grasp the reality which the author perceives in his own way and which he renders in his book. The same happens in *Lolita* when plausibility of character is naturally derived from Nabokov's vision of reality and his particular method of rendering this reality. Realism becomes thus, less of an issue since the good novelist strives to make his characters viable, conforming to the logic of the world he creates. And the characters exist by themselves and also within the author's world; that is why we as readers may become frustrated while reading a Nabokov novel, because we cannot even form a horizon of expectations: the author keeps surprising us on one hand, and on the other, the characters in their independent dimension get us to ask ourselves even more questions. Aware of the intricacy of his novels, Nabokov declares himself rather satisfied that his work, a "text of bliss", keeps teasing the reader who cannot find any piece of firm reality to fall back on, who wants to find out the exact relationship between the author and characters. As if to tease the reader even worse, Nabokov declares: "my characters

are slaves, but slaves are after all, puppets only in the social sense. The lack of autonomy does not necessarily rob them of intrinsically human qualities". (Pifer, 1980: 87). He also holds that, while reading one of his novels, the reader should experience "a stopping somewhere there suspended afar like a picture in a picture" (cf. Pifer). The quotation above is extremely relevant for Nabokov's art, both for his horizon of expectations and for his creative techniques which we shall discuss later.

Although he overtly manipulates his characters in an almost despot-like way we can conclude that he was equally aware of the independence which he inherently gave to them through the same means that made their existence possible. And although, concerned only with his fictional worlds, the author believes that the freedom of a literary character is only illusory and so the form of its fate is authorial choice. We must deduce that since he recognized the need for plausibility and consistency within his worlds the author felt excessively responsible for his characters but nevertheless realized that concerning their inner worlds he was not omnipotent.

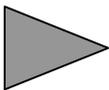
A similar and also very successful attempt is made by Mateiu Caragiale in his novel *Craii de Curtea Veche*. The author creates here a world through his words: the characters Pantazi and Paşadia speak of their faraway Spanish castles, Pîrgu, another character, tries to disembody these fantastic evocations also by means of words. You notice this way the author's tendency towards artistic affectation which teases the reader's expectation and does not lead to lifeless aestheticism but rather turns into an intricate, complex metalinguistic piece of work which proves to be as perfect and unique as a perfectly polished diamond.

In relation to his characters, Mateiu I. Caragiale does not even try to control them in any way, the process of their creation is not so consciously and diligently mastered as in Vladimir Nabokov's case. Mateiu I. Caragiale's characters all are eponymous and all represent several facets of the author. If Nabokov may have flirted with the idea of self-identification with Van Veen, the man who possessed demon-like beauty, intelligence and strength; Caragiale the man saw in Paşadia the artist, aesthete and man that the author himself would have liked to be: a genius possessed by the instinct of self-annihilation, a genius whose demonism involved a deep will to undermine. The reader gets the impression that Caragiale's characters are not created by their author but rather that they grow from within him and reflect the deepest and most complex parts of the creative personality tormented by its very essence. The author is thus contained and contains his all four male characters from *Craii de Curtea-Veche*: Pantazi, the man born to be an artist, always in love with any form of beauty, he stands for the aesthetic ransom of the world, due to his amazing decorum, good-taste and tireless potential to contemplate; Paşadia represents the eternal curse of a bastard, he undermines himself because of his ever lasting hatred, reinforced by the old ferocious instincts

of his ancestry; Pîrgu is the lowest of the low, the most vile and vulgar side of the author's mind. In the end we must consider the narrator from *Craii de Curtea-Veche* a link between the three: adoring Pantazi, deeply respecting Paşadia and almost against his will facing Pîrgu.

While creating his world the author was guided solely by his own sense of beauty, his prose is not didactic, it is definitely not moral, but self-governing, autonomous and has nothing to do with "real" life whatsoever. If in Nabokov's case we put forward the issue of morality in several crucial moments of his novels, in Caragiale's novel the world is the perfect projection of the aesthetic obsession of the author, morality is not an issue, humanism even less of an issue. Like a true aesthete Mateiu I. Caragiale proposes art not life, art instead of life, replacing any prior hierarchy of values with the sole criterion of beauty as he sees it. But the ethical limit of his work is unfortunately also very obvious: his idea of aristocracy and aestheticism leaves no space to humanism, to understanding people with their aspirations and struggles with their most humane side. The author proves himself to be a recluse dominated by an extraordinary tendency to despise people. From this perspective Mateiu I. Caragiale understood only *his* particular reality through the same mirror in both life and art; while Vladimir Nabokov considered that objects are mirrors in life and art and therefore one may change an infinite number of perspectives while perceiving something.

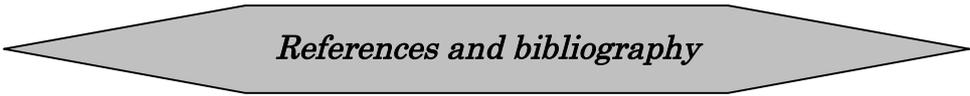
Nabokov was accused by several critics of obsession with style and form, Caragiale takes pride in exhibiting a brutal breakaway from all norms and celebrating style and form as the most superior and exquisite qualities of the world seen by him. Theoretically careless of the inner logic of a novel and for the particular truth of a work of fiction Mateiu I. Caragiale created also his unique reality in which his characters fit perfectly, so artificer or not, he proved to be an amazing novelist. If Vladimir Nabokov employed artifice in order to mark the border between the world of words created by the author and the one we call "real", Mateiu I. Caragiale has no attempt to draw such a line since in his universe the two worlds merge the author being notorious for "translating" and processing reality according to his very personal and often-times eccentric aesthetic eye.



Conclusion

In order to conclude this article we should answer the question we encounter in Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Ada*. At page 174 a character asks Van Veen: "What on earth is an artist?" and the latter answers promptly: "An underground observatory." Let us remember that "underground" means: "covered", "hidden", "clandestine" but also "experimental", "radical" and "avant-garde". As we have shown above

both Vladimir Nabokov and Mateiu I. Caragiale strove and succeeded in breaking away from any form of literary canon the result being a completely original, highly innovative 'text of bliss' which requires more than a thorough practice from its readers. One needs to be extremely flexible and open-minded while entering and visiting such intricate worlds of words. It is essential to understand this artificial, metalinguistic universe as an artistic compensation for the ugliness, brutality, oppression and hypocrisy which suffocate the real world. A genuine search for beauty as a revitalizing influence upon the individual mind, refutation of morality as the only governing principle in life, extraordinary characters leading spectacular lives, these are the compensations offered by the two novelists.



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