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## SELF-TRANSLATION AS A GHOST STORY: VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S *THE EYE*\*

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### Abstract

Nabokov's novella *The Eye* is usually read as a story in which the narrator tries to use his failed suicide attempt to announce his own death and assume the role of an observer, who, as it turns out in the end, is merely watching over his own (alienated) figure. The ending seems to project a reintegration of the self. In this essay, the process of Nabokov's translation of the novella into English is seen as connected with the spectral elements of the story, proposing a new reading embedded into the framework of liminality: the narrating hero keeps on dying, without, however, being able to escape his private inferno, because his obsessive memory continues to reproduce the same murky world, merely transferring the hero deeper and deeper into its narrowing circles. Each of these circles is an attempt to translate the text of (un)reality to the new language of consciousness, and each of these attempts reduces the hero to the status of a still more spectral voice, while still confining him to the boundaries of self. It seems quite fitting in this context that Nabokov, speaking of self-translation, described it as an unremitting torment of the body being transfigured into spirit. The essay also compares Nabokov's translation practice to his own views on translation expressed in essays and interviews, pointing out the fundamental differences: self-translation demands the death of the original text, out of which the phantom of existence in another language may be born – a ghost, each movement of which is always double, divided into the observer and the observed.

**Key words:** Nabokov, *The Eye*, spectrality, identity, self-translation

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## *The Eye* and Nabokov's theory of translation and self-translation

Nabokov's novella *The Eye* was originally written in Russian and published, in 1930, under the slightly odd title *Созлядатай*. This word is archaic and means "spy-observer". Publishing the book in English in 1965 (that is, when he was already installed in Montreux as the world-famous author of *Lolita*), Nabokov described his search for the perfect English title in the Foreword:

The Russian title of this little novel is SOGLYADATAY (in traditional transliteration), pronounced phonetically "Sugly-dart-eye", with the accent on the penultimate. It is an ancient military term meaning "spy" or "watcher", neither of which extends as flexibly as the Russian word. After toying with "emissary" and "gladiator", I gave up trying to blend sound and sense, and contented myself with matching the "eye" at the end of the long stalk (Nabokov 1990b: unnumbered).

The explanation – with the cheeky phonetic transliteration which inserts a darting eye into a perfectly innocuous Russian word – is clearly a joke. The Russian title was chosen as much for its sound as for its meaning; that absurd "gladiator" might have been chosen as a translation merely because it mimicked the accent on the penultimate syllable. Nabokov's joke is meant to draw attention to the sound of the "eye" in the original title, suggesting that from the start this might have been the English echo that he wanted to hear while rolling words in his rich and supple Russian. The translation, or "the shift from the mirage of one language to the oasis of another" (Nabokov 1990b: unnumbered), begins as a game of resonances between two languages.

The "long stalk" or the homophonic reverberation is no less important than the direct meaning: in this story, the "I" becomes "the eye". The narrating hero undergoes a series of misadventures, including public humiliation and death by suicide, and gamely continues the tale from the "beyond" in the role of an observer. This "beyond" turns out to be all too similar to the quotidian reality of the narrator's previous life, as if his memory resiliently reconstructed his past, refusing to allow the narrator to die. Ironically, there seems to be nothing worth keeping in that past and the narrator desires nothing more than to be able to get out of his predicament. Therefore, assuming that life after death is a function of the residual energy of his consciousness, which reproduces reality from memory and animates it with invented life,

the narrator finds relief in believing himself exempt from ethical responsibility for any of his actions – since the actions, just as the body that seems to produce them, are merely figments of the imagination of a ghost.

A different explanation of what is happening appears quite naturally to the reader: the death (and not the continued life) of the narrator must be imaginary. Most likely, the suicide was unsuccessful and the wound was not mortal; the life continues from the point of its attempted puncture. The stance of the narrator, who proclaims his total freedom from the conventions of society and the restraints of conscience, is merely an attempt to repair a badly bruised ego.

Whichever version is true, the narrator's occupation after his "death" consists in watching a certain young man, Mr. Smurov. And, as the reader gradually realizes, Smurov is none other than the narrator himself: the narrating spy is obsessed by watching others' perceptions of his own "ghost". Here, the "I" and the "eye" are not only homonyms, but actually two aspects of a single self: Smurov is "the blurred figure in his own posthumous dream", as well as the "observer following the actions, or, to be more precise, attempting to decipher the undisclosed essence of 'the little man in black' [i.e., his own secret self], by spying his traces, his reflections in the other beings inhabiting the shadowy émigré Berlin" (Skonechnaya 2015: 213).

Before tackling the translation of *Soglyadatay*, Nabokov worked for 14 years on a translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, producing a beautiful monster – a four volume edition with literal translation occupying "only about two thirds of the slenderest of these four volumes" (Brown 1967: 283), and an extended scholarly and "lucidly mad" (Trubikhina 2015, 208) commentary. The project demonstrated Nabokov's idiosyncratic theory of translation in extravagant practice. As early as 1941, he had already made some rather far-reaching statements on the art of translation, claiming that the ideal translator must be exact and pedantic, possess creative genius of his own, and also be capable of "mimicry": "be able to act, as it were, the real author's part by impersonating his tricks of demeanour and speech, his ways and his mind, with the utmost degree of verisimilitude" (Nabokov 1941). By the time his translation of *Eugene Onegin* was completed, Nabokov defined literary translation as the only "true" method: "rendering as closely as the associative and syntactical capacities of another language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original" (Nabokov 1990a: viii). This comes at a cost: "To my ideal of literalism I sacrificed everything (elegance, euphony, clarity, good taste, modern usage, and even grammar)", writes Nabokov in

his Foreword (Nabokov 1990a: x). He found a remedy for his early qualms about literality not providing the exact colour and feel of the original by adding "copious notes" (Karlinsky 2001: 232). And then, in a true Nabokovian twist, he mocked the very method in the structure of *Pale Fire* (published in 1962) with its expansive commentator re-animating the work of a dead poet with his own lucid madness.

Brian Boyd points out the paradoxical quality of Nabokov's translation "theory": Nabokov detests tyranny on any level – be it political, social or that of literary convention; yet, he demands that the translator become the slave of the "real author", to reject all vestiges of freedom and even the reasonable constraints of logic and language in the service of literality. Meaning (and not sound, or pattern, or logic) rules the day. In his own writings, Nabokov demonstrates his passionate love of the sound of the language – witness the famous alliterative passages in *Lolita*; yet, he resists the impulse to reproduce the games of resonances and echoes when he works on translation (Boyd 2012: 13–14).

None of this, however, seems to apply to Nabokov's self-translations. He managed to translate most of his Russian works into English, and some of his American texts into Russian.<sup>1</sup> And, as the transformation of *Soglyadatay* into *The Eye* indicates, he light-heartedly dismissed his own very strict rules, often rewriting the novels, "not to beautify a corpse but rather to permit a still breathing body to enjoy certain innate capacities which inexperience and eagerness, the haste of thought and the sloth of word had denied it formerly" (Nabokov 1968: ix). The metaphor merges on the liminal: the text lies as a former self, painfully incomplete; the author, looking down on it from the "beyond", tries to bring it back to life through a translation that is closer to "transfiguration".

*The Eye* is a particular case of self-translation for two reasons. Firstly, it is reworked into English immediately after the *Eugene Onegin* project is completed, and while Nabokov is under attack from his old friend Edmund Wilson, who deems his translation a grandiose failure. In fact, this is the time of "the fiercest feud about literary translation in the twentieth century, with distinguished figures pitching in from both sides of the Atlantic: Edmund Wilson, Robert Lowell, Anthony Burgess, and others, some

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<sup>1</sup> Nabokov frequently worked over the initial translation prepared by someone else (Glenny, Scammel or Dmitri Nabokov); although in some cases, including *The Eye*, the entire work was conducted by him from scratch.

attacking Nabokov, some supporting him” (Boyd 2012: 12).<sup>2</sup> Secondly, if self-translation is a spectral activity in itself, in this case it is combined with a text that is narrated from the point of view of a ghost. And even though the spectral position of the narrator seems to be exposed as an empty dream by the end of the novella, the text still may be read as a ghost story about the workings of memory, which confine the self to a hall of mirrors. As this essay will show, Smurov does encounter death – and not once, but several times – in the course of the narrative. Thus, the novella not only constitutes a clever exercise written after the model of Dostoyevsky’s *Dvojniki* (The Double) – exploring “the preoccupation of a character with an apparent alter ego and a concern over a possible mingling or exchange of identity” (Connolly 1993: 147)<sup>3</sup> – but constructs a metaphysical system, in which the “I” may continue to die, without being able to escape the prison of memory that has become emptied of all individual content, patterned into a generality.

Critics frequently note the atmosphere of unreality that permeates the story. Usually these comments quite understandably refer to the second and third part, or the supposed life after death. However, the narrator’s morbid hypersensitivity and desperate self-awareness create the impression of otherworldliness straight from the opening sentences of the story. Even the physical conditions of his existence – as a lonely, penniless émigré in a spectral Berlin of the early 1920s – are in perfect harmony with that murky unreality of Smurov’s tale. It seems that he is already a ghost, unprotected by any kind of corporeal shell, floating haphazardly among human beings and indistinct buildings in a film noir. Yet, his ethereal state does not free him from the pain of existence – to the contrary, it seems unreasonably sharpened, both in its psychological and physical aspect. He is constantly afraid of darkness; he frequently feels cold – “cold to the point of nausea”, and dizzy, as if unable to keep his balance, blown around by the unfriendly wind. Listen to his shrill misery:

В самом деле: человеку, чтобы счастливо существовать, нужно хоть час в день, хоть десять минут существовать машинально. Я же, всегда обнаженный, всегда зрячий, даже во сне не переставал наблюдать за собой,

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<sup>2</sup> The debate still continues today, and it is hardly less intense: for instance, Nabokov is accused (among other things) of “unrelenting verbal sadism” in his translation practices by Douglas Hofstadter (Hofstadter 1997: 548, 268, 270, 269 cited in Boyd 2012:13).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Dolinin on another possible source of Nabokov’s narrative model in Dostoyevsky’s novella *Сон смешного человека* (The Dream of a Ridiculous Man) (Dolinin 2011: 12).

ничего в своем бытии не понимая, шалея от мысли, что не могу забытья, и завидую всем тем простым людям – чиновникам, революционерам, лавочникам – которые уверенно и сосредоточенно делают свое маленькое дело. У меня же оболочки не было (Nabokov 2001: 46–47).

After all, in order to live happily, a man must know now and then a few moments of perfect blankness. Yet I was always exposed, always wide-eyed; even in sleep I did not cease to watch over myself, understanding nothing of my existence, growing crazy at the thought of not being able to stop being aware of myself, and envying all those simple people – clerks, revolutionaries, shopkeepers – who, with confidence and concentration, go about their little jobs. I had no shell of that kind... (Nabokov 1990b: 7)

Jane Grayson conducts a thorough analysis of Nabokov's self-translation in her *Nabokov Translated*, and in the case of *The Eye* she draws the following conclusions: in English, "the narrative acquires more pace; the characterization is made more vivid. At the same time, added irony and humour distance the reader from the action and enable him to view the characters with more detachment" (Grayson 1977: 89). She discusses a few examples in which Nabokov embellished a sentence, either to make an image crisper, or an allusion more tangible. Yet, there is more here than meets the eye: Nabokov also makes slight revisions, sometimes suppressing a meaning that might invoke a "wrong" allusion. For instance, in the Russian version, the first sentence of the above passage is very slightly different: *В самом деле: человеку, чтобы счастливо существовать, нужно хоть час в день, хоть десять минут существовать машинально* (Nabokov 2001: 46–47) It is slightly longer ("at least an hour, at least ten minutes"), and the blankness that is required for happiness is rendered as "mechanical" or "automatic existence". In this particular case, it seems that Smurov's desire for mechanical thoughtlessness is reduced to mere blankness in the English text – surely, a strange choice. This might be explained by Nabokov's unwillingness to suggest an allusion to T.S. Eliot's *Hollow Men* – a reference which would hardly appear in the mind of the Russian reader in the early 1930s, but would surely suggest itself to the English language reader in the late 1960s.<sup>4</sup>

Smurov's existential anxiety, sharpened to the point of intolerable alienation, appears as a peculiar version of insanity:

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<sup>4</sup> Nabokov famously detested T. S. Eliot's poetry and *Pale Fire* includes a mocking reference to him (Boyd 1999: 109).

И в эти страшные, нежно-голубые утра, цокая каблучком через пустыню города, я воображал человека, потерявшего рассудок оттого, что он начал бы явственно ощущать движение земного шара. Ходил бы он балансируя, хватаясь за мебель; (...) вскоре, от всей этой шаткости и качки, его стало бы тошнить, он сосал бы лимон и лед, ложился бы плашмя на пол, и все – понапрасну. Движение остановить нельзя, машинист слеп, а тормоза не найти – и умер бы он от разрыва сердца, когда скорость стала бы невыносимой (Nabokov 2001: 47).

On those terrible, pastel-blue mornings, as my heels tapped across the wilderness of the city, I would imagine somebody who goes mad because he begins to perceive clearly the motion of the terrestrial sphere: there he is, staggering, trying to keep his balance, clutching at the furniture; (...) soon, all the swaying and rocking would make him sick<sup>5</sup>; he would start sucking on a lemon or an ice cube, and lie down flat on the floor, but all in vain. The motion cannot be stopped, the driver is blind, the brakes are nowhere to be found – and his heart would burst when the speed became intolerable (Nabokov 1990b: 7–8).

Madness would indeed explain quite well the peculiar stance of the narration: the dissociation in the second part, already hinted at in the first, when the narrator sees his own reflection in the mirror without recognizing himself (Nabokov 1990b: 17); the narcissistic obsession with the impression he makes on others; even the more or less constant nausea from which he seems to suffer – as a physical symptom of psychotic condition. An insane narrator would also invest his madness into the story of his past; which would, therefore, appear in a distorted, unsettling shape. This text, balancing on the thin line separating reality from a dream, projection from a memory, fear from a real and present danger, develops a precarious metaphysics in which the unreliability of its narrator turns him into a kind of Cartesian demon, succeeding in cancelling the entire world or constructing a substitute otherworld through an unmotivated whim of fancy.

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<sup>5</sup> Nabokov uses “sick” instead of the more literal “nauseous” probably to avoid another literary echo: that of Sartre’s *Nausea*. Both Nabokov’s novella and the short story *Uzhas* (Terror), published in 1927, contain many resemblances to Sartre’s text. For instance, Roquentin eavesdrops on the conversations of other people, finally beginning to feel transparent, invisible: “My existence began to worry me seriously. Was I not a simple spectre?” (Sartre 2007). Nabokov disliked Sartre’s philosophical outlook, possibly irritated precisely because he noticed the similarities between his own early works and the fictions of Sartre. See Johnson 1994 for more detail on the Nabokov-Sartre controversy.

## The power of the gaze

Yet, it is perhaps a little too easy to assume that everything can be explained by Smurov's madness, since, it dismisses all the complexities of the tale instead of actually solving them. In fact, it is precisely Smurov's ambition to become the Cartesian demon, able to control the worlds of others, while the story shows his rather pathetic failure in this respect. When we analyse the first part of the novella (Smurov's life predating the suicide), we may notice that the others, populating the world of the story, enjoy a certain power over his existence. The two boys he looks after appear to control his behaviour in a rather uncanny way:

Я чувствовал в их присутствии унижительное стеснение. Они вели счет моим папиросам, и это их ровное внимание так на меня действовало, что я странно, на отлете, держал папиросу, словно впервые курил, и все ронял пепел к себе на колени, и тогда их ясный взгляд внимательно переходил с моей дрожащей руки на бледно-серую, уже размазанную по ворсу пыльцу (Nabokov 2001: 45).

In their presence I felt a humiliating constraint. They kept count of my smokes, and this bland curiosity made me hold my cigarette at an odd, awkward angle, as if I were smoking for the first time; I kept spilling ashes in my lap, and then their clear gaze would pass attentively from my hand to the pale-gray pollen gradually rubbed into the wool (Nabokov 1990b: 3–4).

This bizarre power grows even stranger when Kashmarin physically assaults Smurov, to punish him for his affair with Matilda, Kashmarin's wife. Recalling the appearance of Kashmarin in the apartment, the narrator presents it as a photograph:

И как живая картина, стоит эта сцена у меня в памяти: ярко озаренная прихожая, я, не знающий, что делать с непринятой моей рукой, справа мальчик, слева мальчик, глядящие оба не на гостя, а почему-то на меня, и сам этот гость, в оливковом макинтоше с модными нашивками на плечах, такой бледный, словно огорошенный магнием – глаза навывкате, черный равнобедренный треугольник подстриженных усов над ядовито-пухлой губой (Nabokov 2001: 49).

That scene remains in my memory like a *tableau vivant*: the brightly lit hall; I, not knowing what to do with my rejected hand<sup>6</sup>; a boy on the right and a boy on the left, both looking not at the visitor but at me; and the visitor himself, in an olive raincoat with fashionable shoulder loops, his face pale as if paralyzed by a photographer's flash – with protruding eyes, dilated nostrils, and a lip replete with venom under the black equilateral triangle of his trimmed moustache (Nabokov 1990b: 12).

Here the English version follows the original with fidelity: the only changes are skipping an unnecessary word (*почему-то*) and adding “dilated nostrils” to the catalogue of Kashmarin’s features. The last phrase is made slightly longer in translation, compensating for shorter words in English and thus retaining the approximate rhythm of the original. It is tense with fear, the narrator is babbling, piling up the words in an attempt to delay the moment of violence that is already in the air. One may take note of the geometrical patterns that organize the scene: the rectangle of the hall in which Smurov is fixed in the quadruple gaze of the symmetrically placed boys; the angry visitor, his face decorated by the neat triangle of the moustache; finally, the invisible photographer with his flash as the fourth observer, fixing the scene in all its stark vividness, to insert it indelibly into Smurov’s memory. Moreover, everything that happens after the scene “unfreezes” seems to be somehow orchestrated by the boys, who watch “imperturbably” the thrashing of Smurov, as if they were presiding over it. The whole beating consists of such “stills”:

Он стоял, скалясь и подняв трость, а за ним, по сторонам двери, застыли мальчики – и быть может, воспоминание у меня в этом месте как-то исковеркано, но ей-Богу, мне кажется, что один из них стоял, сложив руки крестом, прислонившись к стене, а другой сидел на ручке кресла, и оба невозмутимо наблюдали за расправой, совершавшейся надо мной (Nabokov 2001: 50).

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<sup>6</sup> The motif of the suspended hand, as Skonechnaya points out, is a reference to Don Juan’s Commander: “Don Juan is one of the literary masks of the principle hero” (Skonechnaya 2001b: 708). Skonechnaya also points to the repetition of the gesture in the last meeting between Smurov and Kashmarin (Skonechnaya 2015: 219). The parody of the Don Juan theme is continued in the name of Smurov’s beloved, Vanya, constructed from Monna Vanna, which echoes Donna Anna (Skonechnaya 2001a).

There [Kashmarin] was, teeth bared, cane upraised, and, behind him, on either side of the door, stood the boys: perhaps my memory is stylized at this point, but, so help me, I really believe that one was leaning with folded arms against the wall, while the other sat on the arm of a chair, both imperturbably watching the punishment being administered to me (Nabokov 1990b: 14).<sup>7</sup>

In Russian, the beating appears as an outrage, an absurd violence (расправа)<sup>8</sup>; while, in English, it becomes something deserved and even quite legalistic ("punishment being administered to me"). The English translation makes the scene crisper; while the Russian text has a quality of painful and inexact recollection, with the word order somewhat scrambled (*быть может, воспоминание у меня в этом месте как-то исковеркано, но, ей-Богу, мне кажется...*; Nabokov 2001: 50). The behaviour of Smurov's pupils is so strange that he repeats: "all this must have been a perceptual illusion" (Nabokov 1990b: 15) / *все это, должно быть, обман восприятия* (Nabokov 2001: 50).<sup>9</sup>

When Smurov returns to consciousness after his suicide, he seems determined to claim the power of the gaze he suspected the boys to possess by becoming a dispassionate observer of others. However, he makes a grave error in fixing once more on himself as the main object; thus, once again, becoming subject to the gazes of others. Instead of obtaining the omniscience of the author, who controls the events without participating in them, Smurov can only achieve a split between "that aspect of the self which displays authorial potential and that aspect of the self which functions as a character" (Connolly 1993: 32) – a partial, superficial detachment or, rather, a narcissistic pretence of detachment. All he wants is to see himself reflected in others. We may note, however, the peculiar aspect of Smurov's situation: before his suicide he seemed to shrink from the attention of others, as if he possessed a presentiment of the danger their gaze carried within itself; after the suicide, he is extremely eager to court attention. The book ends with a – desperate, pathetic, ineffectual – claim to immortality through the perceptions of others, which become echoes of the lost self:

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<sup>7</sup> The image has a certain architectural quality: the boys resemble the atlantes (this will be repeated in Smurov's afterlife, when he describes an evening at Khrushchov's household).

<sup>8</sup> The archaic meaning of the word in Russian is punishment, but it is used more generally as "violence" and even "unrestrained violence" in contemporary usage.

<sup>9</sup> The strange power of the boys' gaze is noted by Connolly (1993: 102).

С каждым новым знакомством растет население призраков, похожих на меня. Они где-то живут, где-то множатся. Меня же нет. Но Смуров будет жить долго. Те двое мальчиков, моих воспитанников, состарятся, – и в них будет жить цепким паразитом какой-то мой образ. (...) Я понял, что единственное счастье в этом мире – это наблюдать, соглядатайствовать, во все глаза смотреть на себя, на других – не делать никаких выводов – просто глазеть. Клянусь, что это счастье. (...) Я счастлив тем, что могу глядеть на себя (Nabokov 2001: 93).

With every acquaintance I make, the population of phantoms resembling me increases. Somewhere they live, somewhere they multiply. I alone do not exist. Smurov, however, will live on for a long time. The two boys, those pupils of mine<sup>10</sup>, will grow old, and some image or other of me will live within them like a tenacious parasite (...). I have realized that the only happiness in this world is to observe, to spy, to watch, to scrutinize oneself and others, to be nothing but a big, slightly vitreous, somewhat bloodshot, unblinking eye. I swear that this is happiness. (...) I am happy that I can gaze at myself (Nabokov 1990b: 103).

The Russian version sounds more desperate – it is replete with synonyms of “watch”, all of them multi-syllabic and deliberately archaic or colloquial words. A slightly awkward line meaning literally “to watch oneself with eyes wide open, without drawing any conclusions, simply staring” is replaced with the poetic “to be nothing but a big, slightly vitreous, somewhat bloodshot, unblinking eye”. Of course, this is a clear reference to the title, but there is more: here, unlike in the preceding examples, a literary reference is actually added to Nabokov’s own (Russian) poem of 1939, which he will translate and publish in *Poems and Problems* in 1970, entitled “Oculus” (“Око”). The poem is about a ghost who is represented as a “single colossal oculus, without lids, without face, without brow, without halo of marginal flesh (...) gone, in fact, is the break between matter and eternity” (Nabokov 2012: 105). This spectre views the world left behind without interest or longing. The lyric speaker of the poem finds this vision of a colossal eye meaningless: “who can care for a world of omnipotent vision, if nothing is monogrammed there?” (Nabokov 2012: 105). Paul D. Morris rightly notes that the poem translates the otherworldly status of the departed soul not in terms of transcendence,

<sup>10</sup> Here, even though the literal meaning of the phrase is simply “students of mine”, as the Russian version confirms, one is tempted to add a layer of meaning: “pupils” might suggest that those two frightening boys, two inscrutable Others, are transformed by Smurov into the pupils of his own eyes. Nabokov must have been conscious of this added meaning in the English word.

but of “limitation and reduction” (Morris 2011: 180). This poem appears as an answer to Smurov’s vain plea: if it were possible to escape self by merging with the world and becoming the transparent eyeball, Nabokov would want no part of such an eternity.

Smurov’s desperate insistence on being happy to simply watch others seems to suggest that, as long as there are reflections of his self in the mirrors of other people’s gazes, he can continue to gaze at himself, continue to exist. Nabokov’s readers may recall a similarly shrill invocation of ambivalent immortality at the end of his *tour de force*, *Pale Fire*: “I shall continue to exist. I may assume other disguises, other forms, but I shall try to exist. I may turn up yet...” – and here follows a long list of possibilities, including that of the narrator being an inmate of a madhouse or a Russian writer in exile (Nabokov 1962: 300–301).

## Smurov’s hell of memory

We may reconstruct the weird structure of *The Eye* as a Dantesque hell of concentric circles. From the level of the first part the narrating hero falls deeper into the well of time – into his second life as the Observer / Smurov. However, the narrative of the novella, clearly, does not begin with the birth of the story, but picks it up at some seemingly random instant. What could have happened before? Why is Smurov so utterly alone, friendless, parentless, homeless? Why is he so utterly exposed to the injuries of the outside world? Perhaps, it is because he does not, in fact, belong to this world at all – he is literally a ghost, leading an illicit life among the human shapes. He is already dead when the story starts off. The narrator simply omits to tell us this minor detail, ignoring (or, perhaps, forgetting) the wider circle from which he has already fallen.

Such an interpretation would reveal a peculiar irony of Nabokov’s text: the life that the Russian émigrés lead, in their exile, is surreal to such an extent that when an actual ghost appears among them they simply fail to notice anything out of the ordinary. Smurov, it would appear, is also taken in by his habitual lack of substance, only slightly heightened after death. Bungler that he is, he somehow managed to miss his own demise, and – death being a state of mind – he mingles in the phantom reality of the exiles convincingly enough. Instead of becoming invulnerable to earthly cares

after death, by failing to realize his spectral status he unwittingly amplifies his vulnerability.

Of course, we may also choose to view everything in the novella's world simply as Smurov's projection, or what Skonechnaya calls "the emphasised metaliterary quality of the plot" (Skonechnaya 2001a: 47)<sup>11</sup>: Matilda, Kashmarin, the boys, and later the inhabitants of Khrushchev's apartment would, thus, be phantoms bred by a phantom – dream images rising from the freshly dead brain of the deceased as the products of that mysterious residual energy. There is a certain oneiric quality to the whole narrative, as if the narrator was simultaneously the dreamer and the character in his own nightmare. As often happens in such dreams, nothing that the "I" of the dream's plot intends can materialize, something always frustrates its schemes. While in lucid dreams the "I" usually succeeds in creating flattering scenarios and wish-fulfilling resolutions, in unconscious dreams the mind does not fully control their content and unhappy endings are much more likely. Even more common is the inability to attain any kind of closure – the dream veers off in a new direction every time the story nears a possible conclusion. This description seems to fit very well the mood and structure of the narrative in *The Eye*. To cite Skonechnaya again, "[Smurov] is unable to separate himself from his dream, to go beyond the limitations of its personage. The latter is characteristic of the dream, but not of creation, of 'fantasy,' but not of the free play of imagination" (Skonechnaya 2015: 219).

The novella establishes the involuted pattern of a multiple-level dream that will become the hallmark of Nabokov's art. Such structure appears in the famous prophetic poem by Mikhail Lermontov, "Сон" [The Dream], which Nabokov translated and renamed "The Triple Dream", explaining that the original vision of the poet lying dying in the desert was dream level one, the next one – the evening feast with a single mournful girl – level two (within the first dream); finally, the third level was the girl's dream of the poet dead in the desert, which "describes a spiral by bringing us back to the first stanza" (Nabokov 1958: v–vi).

In *The Eye*, the episode of the affair with Matilda is, in fact, not the first, but the second level in this structure. The previous level – that is, life before death – is only obscurely hinted at, without being developed. There are certain images that we will find replicated on other levels of his existence: St. Petersburg (with its convention of dark, cold, persistent humidity), the

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<sup>11</sup> All translations from Skonechnaya are by the author of the essay.

plump, vulgar mistress, the book which she tries to make Smurov read, the train in which Smurov leaves Russia. Perhaps, some accident happened on that journey, or immediately after – we may only conjecture about the actual moment of Smurov's first death.

On the second level, Smurov builds his "Berlin" afterlife out of the scraps of his miserable past. The rain plays the key role as a matchmaker; the St. Petersburg seamstress will be reproduced as the large and voluble Matilda; the book will only change its title. The two boys are possibly a projection of some sullen bullies from Smurov's murky childhood – this may explain why he is always intimidated, even frightened, in their presence. Kashmarin would be a blown-up version of the same idea or, perhaps, a stock character from some bad novel – the violent, jealous husband. After Kashmarin's assault, Smurov continues his descent into the deeper circles of his private hell. This seems suggested in the scene of his departure from the two boys after the beating: "As I descended the stairs, I felt them watching me from above, straining over the banisters" (Nabokov 1990b: 16). The two pairs of eyes that follow him in inscrutable silence seem to still possess that power to control his movements – as if he was, in fact, not the dreamer, but a joint dream of two wicked children.

The next episode, Smurov's interactions with Evgenia and Vanya, is his life after life after death, the third level in the diegesis of the text. The image of their charming family home at first seems to introduce an entirely new, bright colour scheme of quiet happiness into Smurov's gloomy world. But this, of course, does not last – the pattern of failure quickly re-establishes itself. The echoes of his past lives reappear again: the book on Vanya's night table – *Ariane, Jeune Fille Russe* – is the very same book that formed a pretext for Matilda to invite Smurov to her apartment, beginning their affair.<sup>12</sup> Vanya, though described with the tenderness of the man in love, still betrays a family resemblance to Matilda and the narrator's St. Petersburg seamstress. The train theme pops up in the ridiculous Yalta story Smurov makes up to charm Vanya. When everything goes wrong on this level, Smurov descends still deeper into the dream structure. His exit resembles the scene of the post-beating escape (level two), in a downward movement again – Vanya's apartment is on the top floor, and Smurov rushes out after their terrible interview in which all his hopes are dashed into nothing.

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<sup>12</sup> See D. Barton Johnson on the development of the book theme (Johnson 1985: 399–402).

## Proleptic nostalgia, creative memory and identity

Before we proceed to level four of the text, let us note that the oneiric quality of the narrative may, in part, be caused by the way the narrator has of viewing some of the key events in his life as if they somehow lay outside time. We already noted his strange technique of “freezing” scenes – this is done several times throughout the narrative, most strikingly during the scene of assault, but also later, when Smurov becomes a frequent guest in Vanya’s apartment. Here is, for instance, one of such episodes:

Какое еще нужно напряжение, до какой еще пристальности дойти, чтобы словами передать зримый образ человека? Вот обе сестры сидят на диване, Евгения Евгеньевна в черном бархатном платье с большими бусами на белой шее, Ваня в малиновом, с мелкими жемчугами вместо бус, глаза у нее сияют, переносица между черных бровей почему-то запудрена. Сестры в одинаковых новых туфлях и вот то и дело поглядывают друг дружке на ноги – и на чужой ноге, верно, выглядит лучше, чем на своей. (...) Муж Евгении Евгеньевны, Хрущов – веселый господин с толстым, бледным носом (...) – говорит на пороге соседней комнаты с Мухиним, молодым человеком в пенснэ. Оба стоят по бокам двери, друг против друга, как кариатиды (Nabokov 2001: 58–59).

What further concentration is needed, what added intensity must one’s gaze attain, for the brain to enslave the visual image of a person? There they are sitting on the sofa; Evgenia is wearing a black velvet dress, and large beads adorn her white neck; Vanya is in crimson, with small pearls in place of beads; her eyes are lowered under their thick black brows; a dab of powder has not disguised the slight rash on the wide glabella. The sisters wear identical new shoes, and keep glancing at each other’s feet – no doubt the same kind of shoe does not look so nice on one’s own foot as on that of another. (...) Khrushchov, Evgenia’s husband, a jovial gentleman with a fat nose (...) is standing in the doorway to the next room, talking with Mukhin, a young man with a pince-nez. The two are facing each other from opposite sides of the doorway, like two atlantes (Nabokov 1990b: 31–32).

There are seemingly slight changes in the English version from the Russian original, and it is worthwhile to note what these are. The first striking feature in both versions is the desire to seize the moment, to extract it out of the flow of time. The Russian text seems to be about the (im)possibility of communicating, in language, a visual image (*словами передать зримый*

*образ человека*). This is crucial for Smurov: if he is merely a reflection in the gaze of another, fixing his image in words prolongs his life, adding a durable reproduction. In the English text, however, the emphasis shifts: language is bypassed, and the narrator speaks of enslaving the image in the brain. It is as if Russian Smurov was still preoccupied with recording the image in words; while, in the English text, he becomes impatient with the means, focusing on his longing to attain absolute mastery over others with his gaze alone. Thus, paradoxically, in the translated text Smurov appears less conscious of the language.

Another difference is in the image itself – it proves a lot less durable than the Russian Smurov desired. In the original, Vanya's eyes shine and the narrator is not quite certain why the dab of powder has been applied between her brows (*переносица между черных бровей почему-то запудрена*), thus making the image glow with inner light and adding a touch of (rather commonplace) mystery. The English text carefully adjusts the image: Vanya's eyes are lowered and the powder is clearly there to conceal the slight rash. The ambiguity in the phrasing is gone, together with the glow, but the mystery is no longer banal – why is she lowering her gaze? May this be a sign of amorous intimidation in the presence of the beloved?

Judging by the mirroring elements (identical shoes, sisters treating each other as reflections, the Atlantes-like position of the two men which, in turn, resembles the position of the boys in the beating scene), the scene is clearly stylized, arranged by a stage manager. The longing to freeze the moment modifies the tense of the narrative in both versions: while most of the story is told in the past tense, here it switches into the present tense, intensifying the impression of a photographer's flash illuminating a silent tableau. It seems strange, however, that this particular scene is chosen for this glare of mental concentration – it seems to be merely a description of a typical evening in this household. Marianna (a lady doctor living with the family) talks about the horrors of war, Smurov makes an idiotic comment about “the musical delight that the singing of bullets gives you” (Nabokov 1990b: 34), Roman Bogdanovich (another guest) tells an absurdly romantic Turkish story. Yet, there is an explanation of this strange intensification: almost immediately after this “frozen” instant, Roman Bogdanovich mentions Kashmarin, as someone who “once thrashed a Frenchman nearly to death out of jealousy” (Nabokov 1990b: 36). And Kashmarin is Smurov's “most fearsome shade from [his] former experience” (Nabokov 1990b: 99). One additional nuance of this scene consists in Nabokov's suppression of Kashmarin's name in the

Russian version – we know him only as Matilda’s jealous husband until the very end of the text, when his all-too-literary name is finally revealed. Thus, the first-time reader is not able to connect Roman Bogdanovich’s story with the narrator’s past. Curiously, in the English version Nabokov all but destroys this effect, by naming Kashmarin as Matilda’s husband in the Foreword. He justifies this in a sentence that seems a playful comment on the art of translation: “These tips should make things a little easier for the kind of reader who (like myself) is wary of novels that deal with spectral characters in unfamiliar surroundings, such as translations from the Magyar or the Chinese” (Nabokov 1990b: unnumbered). The spectral dimension of the text is intensified in translation, and Nabokov pretends to wish to help the hapless readers who are impatient with such ghostliness – and who may blame it on the weakness of the translator.

But, to return to the “frozen” instant of Smurov’s recollection: the moment is marked because it predates a danger – which is delayed by prolonging the banal scene. Smurov’s inane comment about the romantic lure of war delays Roman Bogdanovich’s story – even if for a very short time. The danger, of course, consists in the possibility of Smurov’s own story surfacing: Roman Bogdanovich, who knows about the Frenchman, may also know about another victim of Kashmarin’s jealousy. This danger does not seem to materialize, though Marianna thoughtfully fixes Smurov with her gaze during the Turkish story, watching closely his reaction. It seems quite likely that she has guessed his connection to Kashmarin. Curiously, she is immediately dispatched “to Warsaw (...) [or to] a still more eastwardly journey” (Nabokov 1990b: 55).<sup>13</sup> This is rather convenient: Smurov’s riddle remains unsolved, his identity – shrouded in mystery.

Let us once again look closely at those “frozen” scenes in the novella. They seem to represent mnemonic stills from the archive of Smurov’s life; yet, they are characterized by an atmosphere of timelessness. In Nabokovian criticism there are two terms used for his peculiar technique of recalling events which disturb chronological order: anticipatory memory – a term often used in a discussion of European modernism – and “future recollection”, coined by Nabokov himself. The term anticipatory memory describes

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<sup>13</sup> The Russian version is less specific and more pregnant with meaning: *говорили, что она уехала в Варшаву, но подразумевалось что-то другое, были глухие недомолвки* (Nabokov 2001: 70) (people said that she left to Warsaw, but something else was implied, there were silent omissions).

a peculiar recollection of a moment in one's past when one looked forward to some event in the future; an example of this de-temporalized memory may be found in *Mary*, where Ganin, spurred by a visual image, instead of turning straight to the memories of his first love, prolongs the pleasurable expectation by recalling in great detail the moments that predated his meeting with Mary. The term "future recollection" is used by Nabokov to describe a way of seeing the present through the eyes of the future. Thus, in *Speak Memory* he describes a game in which he tries to view the present (historically significant but individually banal) through the perspective of his future biographer. The result is silly and profane – "I catch myself wondering if we did not disturb unwittingly some perverse and spiteful demon" (Nabokov 1999: 194). Nabokov seems by turns repelled and fascinated by this practice; as if, on the one hand, he intuits that it violates temporal order and therefore may throw a fatal shadow over the present, and on the other, sees it as "the key to invigorating memory", which allows one to not only fix the fugitive instant to remember it better, but also to appreciate it more completely by viewing "the composed but fleeting present image with the 'distinctness and relief' of an object recovered from the past" (Sicker 1987: 259). Future recollection, as Foster insightfully notes, "is based upon an exaggerated movement forward in time that gives the present the false appearance of being a closed past" (Foster 1993: 57). It is an example of the heightened awareness of time passing, and an attempt to coerce the memory into obedience by saying to oneself: "this is how I am going to remember this moment years later". The anticipatory memory, on the other hand, seeks to "preserve the open-endedness of an as-yet-unknown future even though it is looking back at a past whose outcome is no longer in doubt" (Foster 1993: 57).

Foster's highlighting of the difference in these two approaches to memory is both accurate and helpful; yet, in the case of *The Eye*, the application of his method may be difficult. The first "frozen" scene, with Kashmarin, Smurov and the boys in the hallway, appears to be an example of anticipatory memory – it is the moment before the catastrophe, when it still may be averted somehow; yet, it is remembered with such intensity precisely because the expectation of the thrashing is even more horrible than the thrashing itself. The second scene, caught by the invisible photographer's flash during the beating, is more enigmatic. Even though its pattern seems to be very similar to the first instance, now it is characterized by a forced finality: there is no escape from the only possible future. One is inclined

to see it as a future recollection – this is how, during the beating, the protagonist imagines himself remembering the ordeal sometime in the future. The unreality of the scene explains the choice of the moment: it is not only harrowing, but ridiculous, and therefore it provides some refuge to the mind of the victim in the vain hope that the actual event was different, less humiliating than his recollection of it.

The third “frozen” scene is styled differently: the danger is deemphasized, the future seems to be open and, therefore, we may categorize it as an anticipatory memory, forestalling a rather unpleasant, but still unspecified moment. And yet, the stylization is somewhat forced: the two figures flanking the door, the two sisters in identical shoes, each glancing at the other’s feet as if they were a mirror image of her own. This artificiality fits with the “future recollection” model: this is how Smurov, sitting in Vanya’s living room, imagines himself thinking back on this very moment. In short, both terms may be applicable to this scene. If we now go back and re-examine the first two episodes, we will discover in each an element of artificiality and finality, as well as a degree of openness. In the first, geometrical patterns (stylization) and the venomous glare of the visitor (heralding the unavoidable future); in the second, besides the obvious affectation of the participants’ poses, one may glimpse a vain hope that the ordeal may be aborted, like a joke that has gone too far. In short, the ambivalence characterizes all three scenes, making it difficult to decide whether these are memories of the anticipatory glimpses, or evocations of moments deliberately selected as future memories.

The confused and confusing quality of these episodes may be explained by the two complementary desires which motivate Smurov’s every move: the desire to be remembered – and, thus, to continue his existence – at any cost, and the wish to finally have something to recollect. The particular emptiness of Smurov’s life, already discussed above, is a void crying out to be filled. His rather pathetic inventions, tall stories about his adventures during the war, and, quite likely, his boasts of sexual escapades, may be understood as attempts to find some content for the blank space of his existence, caused by his ghostly condition. Without memory there is no identity, and as Smurov moves deeper into his Inferno, more and more of his detailed memories are absorbed into the chaos of oblivion, patterned and stylized. On the one hand, memory makes escape from identity impossible, continually recreating patterns from the past in the present actions; at the same time, with each cycle memory becomes more and more generalized, void of personal

glow – merely an endlessly replicated loop, growing rounder and emptier with each repetition. Not being able to recall his past life, detached and alienated from it, Smurov desperately tries to form something resembling a recollection in others which would prove that he really did exist, that he was more than a spectral observer of an alien life. Smurov's thirst for existence in the reflections of other minds (as a "tenacious parasite"), his nostalgic longing for an incarnation is a desire to remember himself as *himself*, with the monogram of his lost identity, and not as a transparent floating eyeball.

It seems that Smurov remains unconscious that the relentlessly recurring patterns lock him out of his individualized memory and enforce the fatal failure. Olga Skonechnaya writes,

The shadowy reality which at first appears to Smurov to be controlled by his mind, constructs the convenient decorations with the readiness of fantasy. And yet, this world, which, as it usually happens in dreams, recreates the reality of the former life with the automatism of inertia, confines the being into the circle of fatality. This world resembles the eternal return of Blok: "You'll die, then start from the beginning", which in *The Eye* is echoed by "Night, rain, the outskirts of the city". The symbolic world of the eternal return, without exits into a beyond, "the world without novelty" (Skonechnaya 2015: 218).

Skonechnaya draws attention to the echo of Aleksander Blok's poem "Ночь, улица, фонарь, ("Night, highway and a lamp and chemist", 1912) which it is worthwhile to cite in full:

Ночь, улица, фонарь, аптека,  
Бессмысленный и тусклый свет,  
Живи еще хоть четверть века,  
Все будет так. Исхода нет.

Умрешь – начнешь опять сначала,  
И повторится все, как встарь:  
Ночь, ледяная зыбь канала,  
Аптека, улица, фонарь.  
(Blok 1988: 226)

Night, highway and a lamp and chemist,  
A meaningless and murky light.  
And twenty five more years of living  
Will see no change. There's no way out.

You die – you make a new beginning<sup>14</sup>,  
 And everything goes round once more,  
 Night, the canal with icy ripples,  
 And lamp and street and chemist store.  
 (Burnett 2012: 73)

Indeed, Blok's poem is the key to the passage, and if we take a closer look at the scene, its significance is even clearer. Smurov steals a letter from Roman Bogdanovich, hoping to find a memorable and striking image of himself there. Instead, he learns that the writer considers him a homosexual<sup>15</sup>, next to the information about Vanya's engagement to Mukhin. Quickly, Smurov's impatient curiosity is replaced by numbness: "I cleared my throat and with untrembling hands tidily folded the sheets. 'Terminal stop, sir,' a gruff voice said over me. Night, rain, the outskirts of the city..." (Nabokov 1990b: 86). The word "untrembling" (*недрожжащие*) is supposed to demonstrate to the reader the narrator's indifference to the insults contained in the letter, but instead it communicates Smurov's desperation. Terminal stop – death, means merely repetition of the same, and Smurov's following words might be a misquotation from Blok, a recognition that even though life has gone full circle, this still means nothing, since it will now repeat itself in a new circle. The fact that this recognition comes as a garbled citation from the work of another writer is yet another way of incarnating repetition in the discourse.<sup>16</sup>

The only chance to reclaim an undivided existence as a unified human being that this bleak afterlife offers is through the game of invention. After his suicide, Smurov initially perceives the entire world around him as an illusion. He should be in his element: now there should be no painful clashes with reality, since its very tissue is woven out of his own dreams. And yet, it

<sup>14</sup> This English line in translation sounds still more hopeful than Blok's original, which could be literally rendered thus: "When you die, you start from the beginning". This is emphatically not the same as "a new beginning".

<sup>15</sup> There might be a possibility to read *The Eye* as a queer text, with Smurov suppressing his homosexual longings by telling a bogus story of hopeless heterosexual love, with only the masculine name of the beloved signalling the hidden queer desire. Roman Bogdanovich's crude suggestion in the letter would be there to mislead the reader into dismissing this possibility.

<sup>16</sup> This part of the novella is translated quite literally into English. This might be because the original Russian phrase in Smurov's mind is not merely a misquotation, but a literal re-translation from a mental German translation from Blok – after all, he is in Berlin, however spectral it appears in the novella.

does not work. Somehow, the initial promise of brightness suggested in the meeting with Vanya is quickly subdued into the same pattern of perpetual disappointment. His involvement in the process of collecting spectral reflections, his unrequited love, even his brief career as the mastermind of some sinister spying operation, are merely abortive attempts at inventing a text in which he would eventually forget his own ghostliness, letting the world congeal into reality. The outcome is disheartening: the choice is between failure and being bored to death. This "life", too, is a disappointment.

What follows is a visit to the room in which the narrator had committed his suicide to reassure himself of the unreality of his current life. This seems to work, and immediately afterwards Smurov bumps into Kashmarin, who swiftly proves to be benevolence itself, offering his former victim a lucrative job by way of an apology. And, in a clever side-effect of description, the reader learns that Smurov is indeed the narrator of the story. This scene is usually considered to represent the "reintegration of the self" (Johnson 1995: 130). There is, however, an inconspicuous clue hidden in the depiction of the meeting that suggests another level to the story – and another descent into the circles of Smurov's private Inferno.

## Death and afterlife: the "continuation" device

It has often been suggested that Nabokov's stories represent models of the future novels in miniature, a concentrated and as yet schematic version of the prospective design. Our reading of the ending of *The Eye* relies on a short story, written in 1924, and originally called "Катастрофа" (The Catastrophe), later to be renamed "Details of a Sunset". It seems that the device of a particular plot twist is first tested by Nabokov in this short story, and is later, much more obliquely, used in the novella. The short story contains the following description:

Марк спрыгнул. Обожгло подошвы, и ноги сами побежали, принужденно и звучно топя. Одновременно произошло несколько странных вещей... Кондуктор с площадки откачнувшегося трамвая яростно крикнул что-то, блестящий асфальт взмахнул, как доска качели, гремящая громада налетела сзади на Марка. Он почувствовал, словно толстая молния проткнула его с головы до пят – а потом – ничего. Стоял один посреди лоснящегося асфальта. Огляделся, увидел поодаль свою же фигуру, худую спину Марка Штандфусса, который, как ни в чем не бывало шел наискось через

лицу. Дивясь, одним легким движением он догнал самого себя, и вот уже сам шел к панели, весь полный остывающего звона (Nabokov 2004: 145).

Mark jumped. There was a burn of friction against his soles, and his legs started running by themselves, his feet stamping with involuntary resonance. Several odd things occurred simultaneously: from the front of the car, as it swayed away from Mark, the conductor emitted a furious shout; the shiny asphalt swept upward like the seat of a swing; a roaring mass hit Mark from behind. He felt as if a thick thunderbolt had gone through him from head to toe, and then nothing. He was standing alone on the glossy asphalt. He looked around. He saw, at a distance, his own figure, the slender back of Mark Standfuss, who was walking diagonally across the street as if nothing had happened. Marveling, he caught up with himself in one easy sweep, and now it was he nearing the sidewalk, his entire frame filled with a gradually diminishing vibration (Nabokov 2002: 83).

After this incident, Mark continues to go about his business, yet the description becomes increasingly strange, with the reader gradually realizing that everything that Mark experiences belongs to the sphere of a delirium of his agony – he has, in fact, been hit by the bus, and is dying in the hospital. The conclusion of the story explicitly confirms this realization: “Mark no longer breathed, Mark had departed – whither, into what other dreams, none can tell” (Nabokov 2002: 85).

If we compare this fragment of the story to the description of the reintegration of identity episode from *The Eye*, the resemblance is quite clear:

Я шел не спеша по самому краю панели и жмурился, представляя себе, что иду над бездной, и вдруг меня сзади окликнул голос: “Господин Смуров” – сказало он громко, но неуверенно. Я обернулся на звук моего имени, причем одной ногой невольно сошел на мостовую (Nabokov 2001: 91–92).

I walked leisurely along the very edge of the sidewalk and, half-closing my eyes, imagined that I was moving along the rim of a precipice, when a voice suddenly hailed me from behind. “Gospodin Smurov”, it said in a loud but hesitant tone. I turned at the sound of my name, involuntarily stepping off the sidewalk with one foot (Nabokov 2002: 100).

This passage is almost exactly equivalent in both languages: nothing is added, nothing is taken away. Clearly, this is the key scene in the novella, and must be kept intact in the translation. Note the impression of walking “along the rim of a precipice” – stepping off the sidewalk would mean falling off the cliff, into the abyss. Secondly, even though the story

continues logically after Smurov turns around at the sound of his name, there is a decided change in the tone. The whole scene contrasts with the normal logic of events – Smurov should be terrified of Kashmarin, yet seems to be strangely pleased to see him; Kashmarin, the tormentor who brutalized Smurov, causing him to commit suicide in the first part of the story, suddenly appears as his most generous benefactor – an overwritten parody of a betrayed jealous husband is swiftly exchanged for a shorthand version of a rich uncle, offering an unexpected solution to all the problems of the hero (cf. Książopolska 2012: 171).

The deviation from the pattern of disappointment is more than a sudden turn of fortune. Stepping off the sidewalk, Smurov (like Mark in the short story) must have been killed by the traffic, and this talk with Kashmarin occurs within yet another of his afterlives. And, again, it seems to continue the past and at the same time disconnect from it – it is the repetition after the terminal stop. The fear of Kashmarin on this level is replaced by a warm friendliness, even gratitude, entirely out of place in the old order of things. Thus, the effect of surprise at the discovery of the narrator's identity – or a pleasurable confirmation of a prior suspicion felt by the reader – masks something much more momentous: the death of the protagonist. It is possible that Smurov himself fails to notice that once again he has succumbed to his unpleasant habit of death.

Nabokov's footnote to the 1976 edition of "Details of a Sunset" seems to indirectly support the above thesis: "It was written in June 1924 in Berlin and sold to the Riga émigré daily *Segodnya*, where it appeared on July 13 of that year (...); it was included in the collection *Soglyadatay*, Slovo, Berlin, 1930" (Nabokov 2002: 652). Nabokov with pedantic precision specifies the dates of publication, but, strangely, misnames the collection in which it appeared in 1930. The collection, in point of fact, was called *The Return of Chorb*, while the *Soglyadatay* collection was published, together with the Russian version of *The Eye*, but without "Карактрофа", in 1938 in Paris (Dolinin et al. 1997: 924).<sup>17</sup> It is significant that in Nabokov's mind "Details of a Sunset" belonged with *The Eye*, and not with those earlier

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Boyd for the confirmation of the dates of composition (1990: 232, 560); see also specification of the date of original publication of *Soglyadatay* as taking place between December 1929 and February 1930 (1990: 345); for specification of the date of publication of *Soglyadatay* in *Sovremennye Zapiski* journal as October 1930 and in book edition, together with short stories in Paris, as 1938 see 1990: 567.

stories – perhaps, because a device used quite overtly in this story is also used, with far greater finesse, in *The Eye*.<sup>18</sup>

To summarize, *The Eye* produces a four-layered structure:

- 1) Smurov's untold earthly life before the beginning of the story and his death;
- 2) Smurov's after life – a phantom existence in a ghostly Berlin and the affair with Matilda, terminated by Kashmarin's assault and Smurov's suicide;
- 3) Smurov's after-after life – a post-suicidal spectral existence as body and soul, alienated from each other, terminated by his stepping into the street after proposal to Vanya and being killed by the traffic;
- 4) Smurov's after-after-after life – begun by the phantasy of reconciliation with Kashmarin.

Whatever happens to Smurov, no matter how many times he dies, kills himself, is killed – there seems to be no escape from the self-perpetuated agony of existence. Memory builds his involuted hell, identity imprisons, and yet – to be confined by the self seems to be the only way to perceive reality in any meaningful way.

Smurov's existence beyond each circle is akin to self-translation: there seems to be no external deity that regulates his transformations through the dimensions of (un)reality. And it seems quite fitting in this context that Nabokov, speaking of self-translation, described it as an unremitting torment – “sorting through one's own innards and then trying them on like a pair of gloves” (Beaujour 1995: 720). Elizabeth Beaujour uses the concept of liminality to formulate the key question which the very act of self-translation unavoidably raises: “when the soul of the text has been transferred by its author to a second language, is the original L1 text to be discarded like a worn-out body?” (Beaujour 1995: 719). When Nabokov deviates in his self-translations from his own very strict rules, he seems to be opening the door to such an interpretation. And yet, careful comparison of versions allows the reader to recover the sense of uniqueness of each – it seems that Nabokov deliberately maintained the untranslated peculiarities of each text to ensure their continued separate existence. *The Eye* does not

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<sup>18</sup> Nabokov will return to the device of spectral narration in *Transparent Things*, the plural narrator of which is a “ghost of ghosts” – a company of departed friends and loved ones of the hero (cf. Nabokov 1990c: 196). He will also repeat the device of seamlessly continued existence after death in *Ada* (cf. Nabokov 1990d: 510; see also David Potter's discussion of the episode in Potter 2019).

replace *Soglyadatay* precisely because, while remembering the Russian text, the English plays its own games of alliteration, allusions and puns. Unlike the hero of the tale, who falls into the trap of eternal repetition, translation builds its own patterns, while lovingly echoing the patterns of the original.

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