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THE “LUINESQUE EYE” REVISITED

In memoriam Dmitri Nabokov
On the tenth anniversary of his passing

Bernardino Luini (ca. 1480–1532) was a North Italian painter from Leonardo da Vinci’s circle. Nabokov mentions the painter in his short story “La Veneziana,” written in 1924, and in the two novelistic versions—the Russian *Kamera obskura* (1933) and the English *Laughter in the Dark* (1938). In each case, Nabokov speaks of “Luin(i)-esque eye(s).”¹

In “La Veneziana,” McGore, a restorer and connoisseur of art, attributes these eyes to Luini’s Madonnas and specifically to the Virgin Mary in his *Madonna and the Child Holding an Apple* (1525, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin), which Nabokov could have seen at the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in the interwar German capital. McGore calls Luini “the most delicate of masters” and imparts, “His best Madonna has long, caressingly lowered eyes, and her apparel has light-blue, rose-red, misty-orange tints. A gaseous, rippling haze encircles her brow, and that of her reddish-haired infant. He raises a pale apple toward her, she looks at it lowering her gentle elongated eyes . . . Luinesque eyes . . .” (*Stories* 101).²

In both versions of the novel, the “Luini-esque eye(s)” come to the mind of Bruno Kretschmar / Albert Albinus (*Ssoch*, 3: 260; *Laughter in the Dark*, 22, hereafter *Laugh*) when the protagonist watches his soon-to-be mistress. In each of them, the narrator does not think highly of

¹ Curiously, Marcel Proust, whom Nabokov held in highest esteem, mentions Luini’s works in his magnum opus on at least two occasions. I am grateful to Eric Naiman for bringing this to my attention.

² In Russian, McGore calls Luini “нежнейший мастер” (*Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 94; hereafter *Ssoch*). One is mindful that Giorgio Vasari calls Luini “a very delicate and pleasing painter” (*Vasari, Lives*, 5: 60).

the central character's professional competence and defines him as “a connoisseur of art [...], a man seemingly very knowledgeable but not at all brilliant” (“знатоку живописи [...], человеку очень, кажется, сведущему, но отнюдь не блестящему”) and “not a particularly gifted man” (*Ssoch*, 3: 254; *Laugh* 8). “Seemingly” serves as a cautionary remark to the reader. Indeed, the protagonist is not as well versed in the arts as might be expected. Every room of his residence contains “some fine painting—with a sprinkling of fakes” (*Laugh* 146). He wrote a monograph on Sebastiano del Piombo but was unaware that the Venetian-born painter never composed sonnets or any poems for that matter (see Shapiro 54–56).

In their recent article, Savely Senderovich and Yelena Shvarts argue that Nabokov adopted a negative perception of Luini upon reading *Images of Italy* (*Образы Италии*) by Pavel Muratov, a notable connoisseur of art. They quote a lengthy passage from the book that reads in part:

Luini possessed an amazing ease of doing. His productivity reached unheard-of proportions. Milan galleries number in the tens his Madonnas and saints, smiling with their languid glances and porcelain doll faces; hundreds of them were exported to the collections of Italy and Europe [sic] [...] Luini liked to set himself monumental tasks, dealing with them for the most part very casually and cheaply.

(Луини обладал поразительной легкостью делания. Производительность его достигла неслыханных размеров. Миланские галереи насчитывают десятками его мадонн и святых, улыбающихся своими томными взглядами и фарфоровыми кукольными личиками; сотни их вывезены в собрания Италии и Европы [...] Луини любил ставить себе монументальные задачи,

разделяваясь с ними по большей частью весьма небрежно и дешево.)
(Muratov, 3: 197–98)

The quoted passage is taken from the third volume of Muratov’s three-volume set that came out in Berlin in 1924—the same year Nabokov composed “La Veneziana.” According to Brian Boyd and Dmitri Nabokov, the writer worked on the short story throughout September of 1924 and completed it on October 5 of that year (Boyd 235, *Stories* 668). On the strength of this conjectural synchronicity, Senderovich and Shvarts infer that “Nabokov undoubtedly wrote ‘La Veneziana’ having been inspired by reading Muratov” (“Набков написал ‘Венецианку,’ несомненно под впечатлением от чтения Муратова”) (Senderovich and Shvarts 3).

This assertion, however, is not at all obvious and deserves additional examination. The presumable publication date of Muratov’s study may be surmised from an announcement that appeared under the weekly rubric “New Books” (“Новые книги”) in the Berlin-based Russian émigré daily, *The Rudder* (*Пуль*). This one-time publication announcement of *Images of Italy* was printed on November 5, 1924, a whole month after Nabokov finished writing “La Veneziana” (*Rul’*). Maxim Gorky’s letter to the publisher Zinovy Grzhebin of January 25, 1925, in which he acknowledges receipt of Muratov’s book (see Grzhebina 30–31), obliquely corroborates its coming out toward the end of 1924. The presented evidence, albeit inconclusive, makes it clear that so long as the exact publication date of Muratov’s study is unknown, its availability to Nabokov at the time of his writing the short story remains in doubt.

What further complicates the matter is that along with the disparaging remarks cited by Senderovich and Shvarts, Muratov makes some favorable comments about Luini’s art. He writes that “One could call almost a masterpiece of lightness and movement his *Ascension of St.*

Catherine by the Angels—a fresco fragment, transferred together with the others from the Villa Pelucca to the Brera Gallery. These fragments in general mark something sincere, simple, and good in Luini’s art” (“Почти шедевром легкости и движения можно назвать его ‘Вознесение ангелами святой Екатерины’—фресковый фрагмент, перенесенный вместе с другими в галерею Брера с виллы Пелукка. Эти фрагменты вообще отмечают что-то искреннее, простое и хорошее в искусстве Луини”) (Muratov, 3: 198). He also singles out for praise “the grace of Luinian women” (“грацией луиниевских женщин”) (Muratov, 3: 213). Lastly, as though reversing his earlier quoted negative opinion of Luini, Muratov avers, “No one should pronounce a final judgment on him without seeing the fresco cycles in the sanctuary of the Saronno church, the works of settled mastery and of genuine grand style.” (“Никто не должен произнести о нем окончательного суждения, не увидев фресковых циклов в хоре Сароннской церкви, произведений отточенного мастерства и подлинного большого стиля.”) (Muratov, 3: 208). The appreciative tone of Muratov’s latter statements tallies well with that of McGore in “La Veneziana.” Therefore, it seems unfair to call him a “questionable art critic” (“сомнительный искусствовед”) (Senderovich and Shvarts 3). This is all the more so since McGore is referred to in the story not only as “an old connoisseur of art” but also as “this famous art expert” (*Stories* 91).

When discussing *Kamera obskura*, Senderovich and Shvarts link it to Muratov’s anecdote about Luini’s absconding from Milan “disguised as a miller” (“переодетый мельником”) (Muratov, 3: 198). They connect the anecdote to Horn’s and Kretschmar’s introducing themselves to Magda as Müller and Schiffermüller respectively (see *Ssoch*, 3: 265 and 272), prompting her to think to herself, “It’s just my luck with millers” (“Везет мне на мельников”) (*Ssoch*, 3: 272). On this basis, the scholars ask rhetorically, “Is this not a sign of Muratov’s presence in the novel?”

(“Не знак ли это присутствия Муратова в романе?”) (Senderovich and Shvarts 4). This connection, however, is tenuous at best and serves as no proof that Nabokov consulted Muratov for Luini’s art.

There is no denying that Muratov’s views on art held considerable sway over the contemporary Russian readership. Thus, Nina Berberova recalls that Muratov “was a whole and accomplished European and before World War One had already discovered Europe for himself; I discovered it through him in these years” (Berberova 245). Nevertheless, John Ruskin and Walter Pater, whose works Nabokov evidently read, were no less significant, if not more influential.³ Both Ruskin and Pater held Luini’s art in high regard. For example, Ruskin spoke of “the excellency and supremacy” of Luini, included him among “great painters,” alongside Tintoretto and Botticelli, and even preferred his *St. Catherine* to that of Raphael (Ruskin, 2, pt. 3: 246 and 207). Similarly, Pater regarded *The Holy Family*, apparently having in mind *The Holy Family with Saints Anne and John the Baptist* (ca. 1530, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Milan), as “one of the loveliest works of Luini, a small, but exquisitely finished” (Pater 93).

As important as these aestheticians and their writings were at the time, it looks like Nabokov’s familiarity with Luini’s art came from an altogether different source. It stands more to reason to seek a monograph that could provide Nabokov with concrete information about the artist and his unique manner of painting. In all likelihood, the writer drew these particulars from *Bernardino Luini* by George Charles Williamson. Williamson’s monograph became available in Bell’s Miniature Series of Painters, which was extremely popular at the turn of the twentieth

³ The library of Nabokov’s father contained nine entries of Ruskin’s works (*Sistematicheskii katalog* 44). One is also mindful that Nabokov referred to Yuli Aikhenval’d, his literary mentor and friend, as “a Russian version of Walter Pater” (*Speak, Memory* 287).

century. Suffice it to say that Williamson's book on Luini went through four editions over the span of nine years (1899, 1900, 1903, and 1907). Of note are Williamson's use of the term "Luinesque" and his repeatedly mentioning the "downcast eyes" of the artist's Madonnas, thereby bringing to mind their depiction by McGore (Williamson 91 and 61, 64, 85). The British art historian also calls attention to Luini's rich palette and points out that,

He was a shrewd and dexterous colourist, his frescoes are luminous and brilliant but never gaudy, his easel pictures rich, deep, and harmonious. In fresco work his scale of colouring is a low one, and his colours grey in their tone; such tints as salmon, orange, pale brown, puce, and cold blue being his favourite ones. In his easel pictures a different idea prevailed, and his tints are velvety red, delicate roses and greens, and intense purples and browns; but the result is always harmonious. (Williamson 93)

Once again, the latter representation evokes McGore's richly hewed description of Luini's painting. Incidentally, all these unique features of Luini's art, indicated by Williamson, are absent from Muratov's study.

After establishing a more plausible origin of Nabokov's information about Luini, let us return to the discussion of the writer's works in question. Senderovich and Shvarts are correct in pointing out that Nabokov distinguishes between "charm" ("прелестъ") and "beauty" ("красота") and perceptively name Arthur Schopenhauer's writings as his likely source for this distinction (Senderovich and Shvarts 4–5).⁴ Nabokov, however, did not employ this juxtaposition in "La

⁴ It is noteworthy that the noun "prelest'" and the adjective "*prelestnyi*" are cognate with the verb "*prel'shchat*," that is, "to lure, to charm, to entice."

Veneziana.” In this story, McGore calls Luini’s Madonna “самая прелестная” (*Ssoch*, 1: 94), which Dmitri Nabokov rendered in his 1995 translation of the story as “the most enchanting” (*Stories* 101). This superlative epithet, followed by McGore’s above-quoted depiction of Luini’s Madonnas, stands in total agreement with the characterizations given by Ruskin, Pater, Williamson, and many others.

In *Kamera obskura*, on the other hand, Nabokov demonstrates that Kretschmar confuses “charm” and “beauty.” When seeing Magda for the first time, the art critic associates her with both. In nearly the same breath, he finds himself attracted to her “charming, excruciatingly charming face” (“Прелестное, мучительно прелестное лицо”) (*Ssoch*, 3: 259) and “he recalled how many times beauty would pass him by and would vanish without a trace” (“ему вспомнилось, сколько раз красота проходила мимо него и пропадала бесследно”) (*Ssoch*, 3: 260). Later, unbeknownst to himself, Kretschmar evaluates his mistress more accurately when he stares at her “without taking his eyes off this face, in which everything was charming” (“не спуская глаз с этого лица, в котором все было прелестно”) (*Ssoch*, 3: 273). Contrary to the clueless art critic, Dr. Lampert, who treats Magda for a minor cold, muses upon observing her and seeing through her: “Charming, there is no question [...] And yet there is something of a viper in her all the same” (“Прелестная, слова нет [...] А все-таки в ней есть что-то от гадюки”) (*Ssoch*, 3: 327).

In *Laughter in the Dark*, Nabokov further highlights the difference between “charm” and “beauty.” Of particular interest is the way in which Albinus perceives Margot’s face: “He looked up at her and saw again the limpid gleam of her eye as it chanced to catch the light and the melting outline of a cheek which looked *as though it were painted by a great artist*” (*Laugh* 20, emphasis

added).⁵ This “as though it were,” a subjunctive reservation, portends Albinus’s inability to tell the genuine from the fake not only in works of art, but also in human beings. He completely misjudges Margot and forms a wrong opinion of Rex, a sinister, cynical cartoonist and her furtive lover. Gullibly, “Albinus had poured out his heart to him on several occasions,” shortsightedly believing that they were bound by “their friendship” (*Laugh* 180 and 181).

The “as though it were” phrase is almost immediately followed by a crucial passage: “she passed to and fro, quite near to him several times; but he turned away because it hurt to look and because he could not help remembering how many times beauty—or *what he called beauty*—had passed him by and vanished” (*Laugh* 21, emphasis added).⁶ The italicized narratorial aside underscores Albinus’s failure to comprehend the true nature of beauty. It is not Luini’s art that Nabokov spurns, but rather the protagonist’s equating his mistress with the painter’s Madonnas. Being incandescent with lust and blinded by it, the art critic is incapable of differentiating between the devious glance of the uncouth strumpet and the blissful gaze of Luini’s Madonnas. Consequently, he does not realize that the eyes, devoid of kindness and spirituality, do not deserve to be called “Luini-esque” merely because of their elongated shape and downcast look.

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⁵ *Kamera obskura* does not include the “as though it were” reservation in the corresponding passage (see *Ssoch*, 3: 259).

⁶ Likewise, this narratorial interjection is absent from the Russian original (see *Ssoch*, 3: 260).

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