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“TOGETHER UNTO THE TOMB”: ORPHIC UNDERCURRENTS IN “THE RETURN OF CHORB”

In Nabokov’s “The Return of Chorb” (1925), newly married Chorb, a Russian émigré and a writer, loses his wife on their honeymoon when she is electrocuted by a downed wire near Nice. Rather than tell her parents, Chorb hoards his grief and, in an attempt to recollect the memory of his beloved so that “her image would grow immortal and replace her forever” (149), he painstakingly revisits the journey of their honeymoon, finally arriving back in the German city where they married. Chorb informs his in-laws’ maid that his wife is merely sick, then pays a prostitute to sleep chastely with him in the room where the couple spent their wedding night. Chorb wakes during the night and screams because he has seen the specter of his wife sleeping beside him. The hired woman flees the hotel room just as Chorb’s in-laws, the Kellers, arrive to see what has become of their daughter.

Nabokov presents readers of “The Return of Chorb” with at least two central, and closely related, questions regarding the titular character and his actions. How are we to regard Chorb’s quest to immortalize his dead wife? And how, given the results of that effort, do we regard Chorb himself as a character?

A number of critics have argued for the central importance of the Orpheus myth in terms of how we understand Chorb’s actions and the story’s climactic scene. Nabokov smuggles the Orpheus allusion into the story via the final scene in the hotel room. There, the prostitute looks down from the window onto a cityscape where “one could make out . . . the black shoulder of a stone Orpheus” (153). David Larmour notes that “there are two major ancient versions of the myth:

those of Vergil . . . and Ovid,” and this “chain of retellings” is intimately connected to Chorb and his tragic quest (374). Chorb is attempting to bring his dead wife back “in his imagination, just as Orpheus tried to bring back Eurydice physically from the Underworld” (375). But Larmour posits that unlike the efforts of Vergil and Ovid’s Orpheus, Chorb’s attempt to bring back his wife is “presumably” successful (377), since Chorb does see an image of his wife sleeping beside him and, after screaming in apparent horror, reacts by breathing “a sigh of relief, for he realized that the ordeal was over” (153). Marina Naumann argues similarly that when Chorb “momentarily mistakes the prostitute for his wife, he recaptures the memory of his wife and thus survives his trauma” (21).

To these more definitive readings Maxim Shrayer adds a note of caution, asserting that Nabokov’s story presents a conundrum for readers because “the omniscient narrator, the sober witness of Chorb’s ‘ordeal,’ makes no ethical or psychological pronouncements about his protagonist” (90). We may naturally have sympathy for Chorb’s situation, and we surely resonate with his desire to immortalize the memory of his dead wife—a resonance that is encouraged, as Naumann points out, by a narrative shift into Chorb’s perspective in the story’s central section (22). But readers of Nabokov should always be wary when a story is filtered through a character’s subjectivity. In this case, Chorb’s passivity (relative to his wife’s vivacity), deceit (he hides his wife’s death and tells the Kellers’ maid that his wife is merely ill), and questionable judgment (hiring a prostitute), should complicate readers’ efforts to decide, ultimately, how to regard him or his quest to his immortalize his wife’s image. While it is true that Chorb reacts with seeming relief after seeing his wife’s specter, it also true that “he scream[s] horribly,” after which his smile is described as “meaningless” and, for the prostitute, a source of “terror” (153-54).

While echoes of Vergil and Ovid are certainly present in the story's Orphic subtext, I would like to suggest that additional insight into Chorb's ordeal can be discerned via a lesser-known version of the Orpheus myth, one which may resonate just as deeply with the story's conclusion and may likewise alert us to certain deficiencies in Chorb's character. In Plato's *Symposium* (179d), Phaedrus reflects on the sacrificial nature of love, noting that "only such as are in love will consent to die for others." As a positive example of this trait, he cites Alcestis, who offered up her own life to save her husband, Admetus. As a counterexample, however, Phaedrus cites Orpheus:

But Orpheus, the son of Oeagrus, the gods sent back from Hades a failure; they showed him a mere phantom of the wife for whom he made the journey. They did not give him the real thing because he seemed to be a coward, seeing that he was a harp-player and did not have the heart to die for his love as Alcestis had. Instead he schemed to enter Hades while still alive . . . (qtd in Heath 179)

Phaedrus believes that any true lover would prefer death to life without his or her beloved. Suicidal self-sacrifice is required. Orpheus's desire to live clearly supersedes his desire to retrieve Eurydice, or he would have made the simple choice to kill himself and join her in Hades. That he chose not to do so is linked by Phaedrus to his status as a poet-singer ("harp player")—a status that Plato elsewhere decries as fundamentally deceitful.¹

Phaedrus's description of what happened to Orpheus seems precisely applicable to Chorb. Like Orpheus, Chorb has traveled to the place of death and returned alone, his only consolation a

¹ On the link between Phaedrus's insult and Plato's view of poets, see Segal, *Orpheus: The Myth of the Poet* (1989), 17.

fleeting phantom of his dead wife. The question then becomes whether or not Chorb is, like Orpheus, thwarted for a perceived lack of courage and heart. Moreover, the scorn shown to Orpheus because he is a “harp-player” makes one wonder if Chorb’s status as a “littérateur” (150) is somehow analogous.

The central concerns of Nabokov’s story are memory and the process of recollection. Just as Chorb is attempting to re-collect, in reverse, all the details of his time with his wife, readers are rewarded for noticing such details as the blond hair in the hotel room’s wash basin and the *baigneuse* painting on the wall, both of which confirm the prostitute’s prior presence in the room. But there is another detail which, if recalled, begins to point us towards the story’s Orphic theme. On the night of Chorb’s wedding, the newlyweds find that the bride’s parents have prepared for them a room in which Chorb and his wife are to spend their first night together. Prominent among the room’s kitschy adornments is a rug with the inscription “We are together unto the tomb” (150). Naumann sees the inscription as mere foreshadowing—“a grim sign of what lay ahead for the couple” (28). But in fact the inscription does not quite prefigure the couple’s fate, for Chorb does not actually accompany his wife to her tomb. As the narrator carefully notes, Chorb’s wife “had to be buried” in Nice but Chorb refuses to participate in the planning for her burial and then leaves “without waiting for the funeral.” He does not, we are told, accompany her “unto the tomb.” Rather, Chorb seems to lose all interest in his wife’s physical body, which upon her death becomes to him like something “alien and needless” (148).² Had the rug’s inscription read “Until Death Do Us Part,” Chorb’s reaction would be no violation, but the actual inscription implies a

² Chorb’s decision to abandon his wife’s body before her ceremonial rites have been completed, along with his failure to inform her family, could be seen as a fundamentally discourteous act. As Dana Draganoiu has shown in *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Moral Acts*, courtesy, or the lack thereof, can be seen as an important marker of character throughout Nabokov’s oeuvre.

responsibility not only to the spirit but to the body, a distinction that lies at the heart of Chorb's actions and character throughout the story.

Evidence that Chorb's frightened encounter with the phantom of his wife is indeed linked to the Orpheus myth found in Plato's *Symposium* manifests via a supreme irony: Chorb himself is a thoroughgoing Platonist. Indeed, apart from *The Defense's* Luzhin, it would be hard to find a character in all of Nabokov's fiction who more clearly neglects the forms of everyday existence in favor of his own idealized conceptions.³ For Nabokov, the failure of a character to identify and attend to one's everyday moral and ethical obligations because of the blinding effects of some idealized obsession always leads to ruin.⁴ Chorb, for his part, is very nearly paralyzed by his idealism. On his wedding night, instead of consummating the marriage, he merely gives his wife a chaste kiss "on the hollow of the throat" (150) and goes to sleep on the couch. Indeed, it is unclear whether the marriage is ever consummated. Chorb seems to be afraid that the pleasures and complications of the body might taint the idealized form of his wife that he keeps in his mind. Even language seems to endanger his ideal, as when he remembers that "she whom he never named liked to take rides in cabs" (149)—and in fact his wife is never named in the story. Likewise, after his wife dies, Chorb is unable to tell her parents because he wants to preserve his grief, as if it were a tangible form, without "tainting it by any foreign substance" (148). Even Chorb's attempt to immortalize his wife via a process of sensory recollection finds echoes in Plato. In *Phaedrus*, Plato posits that in order to access the ideal, one should engage in kind of synecdochal process whereby sensory perceptions are collected in order to manifest the non-physical ideal:

³ Like Chorb, Luzhin does not consummate his marriage on his wedding night.

⁴ Hermann Karlovich (*Despair*), Humbert Humbert (*Lolita*), and Charles Kinbote (*Pale Fire*) are but a few of the most prominent examples of characters who neglect reality in favor of an ideal.

For a human being must understand a general conception formed by collecting into a unity by means of reason the many perceptions of the senses; and this is a recollection of those things which our soul once beheld, when it journeyed with God and, lifting its vision above the things which we now say exist, rose up into real being. (249)

When Chorb retraces the steps of his honeymoon, his task is to find all of the small sensory items that “retained [his wife’s] exclamation mark” (148), and by this process recollect what his “soul once beheld.”

Given the similarity of Phaedrus’s account of Orpheus to the events in the cheap hotel, and given the evidence of Chorb’s excessive Platonism, which leads to his violation of the rug’s inscription, readers can begin to understand that Chorb’s quest to idealize his dead wife is not, ultimately, a success. While it is true that her image appears to him in the hotel bed, the appearance is both horrific and fleeting. What’s more, once Chorb has composed himself, he offers only “a sigh of relief” and a “meaningless smile” because “the ordeal was over” (153). It would seem, then, that his wife’s image has not been cemented “forever” but rather has been manifested only to be cast out, almost as in an exorcism. Chorb’s task may be complete but not on the terms he originally set for himself. Even the night with the hired woman, in its chastity, is a sensory echo of his equally chaste wedding night.

The violation of terms is a central motif in the story. Chorb’s unwillingness to follow his wife “unto the tomb” reveals a lack of fundamental courtesy and is a bridge to the greater critique leveled by Plato’s Phaedrus, namely that if one is not willing to die for love, to follow one’s love not just *unto* but *into* the tomb, then any effort to reclaim the beloved must fail. Phaedrus ties

Orpheus's lack of courage to his status as a poet-singer, so it may be that Chorb, a "littérateur"⁵ (150), is likewise guilty of a kind of aestheticism which Phaedrus considers disingenuous or incompatible with the visceral demands of true love. Chorb's Platonic idealism proves both ironic and ultimately fruitless. He spurns the body in favor of the mind and tries to idealize his wife, but he lacks the courage to give up his own body, his own life, for love. Chorb's Platonic ideal thus succumbs to Phaedrus's (and Nabokov's) critique of Chorb.

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⁵ Note that this designation appears in the same paragraph with the rug's inscription, as if to highlight the connection.