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POETIC GENESIS IN *THE GIFT* AND *SPEAK, MEMORY: THE COMPOSITION OF "THANK YOU, MY LAND" AND "THE RAIN HAS FLOWN"*

Nabokov omitted Chapter 11 of *Speak, Memory* in the Russian version of his autobiography because of "the psychological difficulty" of replaying a theme he had already elaborated in *The Gift* (*SM*, 12). Indeed, this chapter is devoted to the theme of poetic creation and partly resembles the episode in which Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev composes the poem "Thank You, My Land." While these similarities have not escaped the scholars' attention, the very process of poetic genesis has not yet been examined and described in terms of Nabokov's aesthetics.

The complex process of a poem's birth as represented in the prose of *Speak Memory* and *The Gift* can be seen as proceeding in several phases. In this note, I define and describe these phases, analyzing them with the help of Henri Bergson's concepts of time and memory.

The poem "Thank You My Land," one of the central poetic compositions in *The Gift*, is introduced in Chapter 1 after the rather long sequence of Fyodor's poems on childhood. The first sparkle of inspiration visits the poet when he — overall satisfied with his first collection — begins to imagine his future literary glory. Here the narrator reports Fyodor's thoughts in the first person, tracing the spontaneous emergence of poetic lines out of an unrestrained flow of words:

And yet ... I am still a long way from thirty, and here today I am already noticed. Noticed! Thank you, my land, for this remotest ... A lyric possibility flitted past, singing quite close to his ear. Thank you, my land, for your most precious ... I no longer need the sound "oticed": the rhyme has kindled life, but the rhyme itself is abandoned. And maddest gift my thanks are due ...[...] Did not have time to make out my third line in that burst of light. Pity. All gone now, missed my cue. (*G*, 41)

The representation of the birth of this poem occurs with the help of verbs and nouns that belong to the semantic fields of auditory and visual perceptions, supplemented here with a sense of speed. Through a visual metaphor, Fyodor laments not to have been able to "make out" the rest of the poem "in that burst of light." The instant of poetic inspiration is therefore very brief. Yet, despite the evanescence of this moment, the poem's opening lines linger in the poet's mind

until they reemerge a few hours later, when he notices the oscillating sound of a swinging streetlamp:

And this swinging motion, which had no apparent relation to him, with a sonorous tambourine-like sound nevertheless nudged something off the brink of his soul where that something had been resting, and now, no longer with the former distant call but reverberating loudly and close by, rang out “Thank you, my land, for your remotest ...” and immediately, on a returning wave, “most cruel mist my thanks are due...” (*G*, 66)

In both these passages the reader can already perceive a twofold presence within the poet’s mind: one Fyodor is busy living his life, while another part of his consciousness is an attentive listener and observer who never misses a potentially usable combination of sounds or images. He either elaborates this input immediately, as it happens in this episode, or archives it for future artistic use. In the previous passage, Fyodor’s attention to the sound of an inner rhyme within the flow of his own thoughts triggered poetic inspiration. In this case, the poem re-emerges thanks to an external and apparently unimportant rumor. Yet Fyodor notices it and welcomes this sound into his mind, deploying on it the rhythm of an iambic tetrameter. Following this passage, the narrator clarifies the twofold essence of a poet’s nature, when he reports that

[Fyodor] was somnambulistically talking to himself as he paced a nonexistent sidewalk; his feet were guided by local consciousness, while the principal Fyodor Konstantinovich, and in fact the only Fyodor Konstantinovich that mattered, was already peering into the next shadowy strophe, which was swinging some yards away and which was destined to resolve itself in a yet-unknown but specifically promised harmony. (*G*, 67)

Thanks to this explanation, Fyodor’s split consciousness acquires a hierarchical nature. If the principal Fyodor is responsible for poetic work, it is the secondary Fyodor who bears the weight of everyday life and walks the streets of Berlin like a sleep-walker, like Gogol’s Akaky Akakievich who confuses the streets of St. Petersburg with the meticulously handwritten lines of his texts. Poetic genesis is here described in almost prophetic terms through the metaphor of the street’s length: the new strophe of the poem already exists and is only swinging “some yards away” from Fyodor. Hence, poetic experience is both similar and opposite to Plato’s theory of ideas: the poem exists in one timeless, perfect and absolute version, while millions of its alternatives are fakes that must be rejected; but instead of anamnistically rediscovering it, Fyodor transcends temporal limitations and “peers” into the future strophe, like a prophet, with absolute faith in its perfect harmony. This passage bears affinity to Nabokov’s own on-record statement on literary work:

I am afraid to get mixed up with Plato, whom I do not care for, but I do think that in my case it is true that the entire book, before it is written, seems to be ready ideally in some other, now transparent, now dimming, dimension, and my job is to take down as much of it as I can make out [...]. (SO, 69)

Such a conception of artistic creation may have been influenced by philosophical theories that Nabokov does not directly mention here. Leona Toker (2013: 194-213) traces this assertion back to Bergson, who in turn, was influenced by Théodule-Armand Ribot's *L'Imagination créatrice* (1900) in likening creative imagination to discovering the solution which ideally exists somewhere ahead of us. According to Bergson, we "present to our mind a certain effect as already obtained, and then we seek to discover by what composition of elements we can obtain it" (2007: 170). Bergson thus interprets the artist's task as that of converting a "whole" scheme into an image, a movement "from the abstract to the concrete" (see Toker 2013: 207), akin to Fyodor's "peering" into a poem's "shadowy" strophe and its subsequent transcription.

After another interruption, Fyodor continues his work and, without noticing, remains awake for hours. Now the process of poetic creation is described through the metaphor of a conversation, a conversation with "a thousand interlocutors, only one of whom was genuine and this genuine one must be caught and kept within hearing distance. How difficult this is and how wonderful..." (G, 68). At this stage, the semantic field of vision is fully replaced with words associated with auditory perceptions: in *Dar* Nabokov uses the hardly translatable noun "вслушивание" (*SSoch*, IV: 241), which describes an act of arduous listening (as if tuning to one specific speaker) and was rendered in English as "concentration": "After some three hours of concentration and ardour dangerous to life, he finally cleared up the whole thing, to the last word, and decided that tomorrow he would write it down" (G, 68).

Overall, in the representation of poetic genesis the focus on hearing dominates over seeing, although both senses are evoked in the process. The poem is mostly heard and murmured, it emerges out of a consonance, sings, fills the poet's head "with a heavenly buzz" (G, 68). Similarly, in the novel's third Chapter, Fyodor will recall his earliest verses and describe their origin as a "desire to transpose into verse the murmur of love" (G, 162), or, in Russian, "шум любви" (the sound of love, *SSoch*, IV: 331).

When the poem is finished, Fyodor tests the sound of the newborn text by reading it aloud: "In parting with it he tried reciting softly the good, warm, farm-fresh lines" (G, 68). Satisfied, he gets up to turn off the light and notices his own reflection in the mirror "not quite recognizing himself": "those broad eyebrows, that forehead with its projecting point of close-cropped hair. [...] Goodness, what a growth on those hollow cheeks after a few nocturnal hours, as if the moist heat of composition had stimulated the hair as well!" (G, 69) The changes that happened overnight to Fyodor's face seem to suggest that the intense experience of composing

a poem turned him into someone new, took him a step further in his life, with his younger self, which existed prior to this moment, left behind.

Chapter 11 of *Speak Memory* opens with the author's recollection of a situation that triggered his very first impulse to write a poem. In this episode, too, the poet's senses are alert: he observes the details of nature and is mesmerized by a shining raindrop on a leaf, shortly before the rhythmic patter of water drops inspires his first poem. As noted by Brian Boyd, this chapter represents a "stylization of the actual event" (1990: 108). Indeed, the poem evoked in this passage, the 1917 text "Дождь пролетел" (self-translated as "The Rain Has Flown" for the 1971 collection *Poems and Problems*), was written hundreds of poems after Nabokov's actual first poem, composed in 1914. Moreover, the description of poetic genesis in *Speak, Memory* is itself poeticized and contains a rhythmic enumeration of monosyllabic words that almost onomatopoeically depict the fall of a raindrop and the subsequent birth of the poem:

the sheer weight of a raindrop, shining in parasitic luxury on a cordate leaf, caused its tip to dip, [...] and then, having shed its bright load, the relieved leaf unbent. Tip, leaf, dip, relief—the instant it all took to happen seemed to me not so much a fraction of time as a fissure in it, a missed heartbeat, which was refunded at once by a patter of rhymes. (*SM*, 217).

If one collates this passage with the self-translation of "Дождь пролетел," one will find not only textual but also rhythmic correspondence. Whereas the Russian poem was originally composed in dactyls and amphibrachs, "The Rain Has Flown" is written in English free verse. Yet, the self-translation establishes its own rhythm thanks to the predominance of monosyllabic words, some of which match the description provided in *Speak, Memory* (as in the closing lines: "Downward a leaf inclines its tip / and drops from its tip a pearl." *PP*, 19). As a result, the poem and the description of its creation acquire autonomy in English and exist independently of the original Russian poem.

The passage quoted above also pertains to the poet's perception of time. In creating a stylized recollection of his first conscious aesthetic experience, the author attempts to represent its consequences on his self-perception, within but actually beyond or outside the regular flow of time. He likens this moment to a "fissure" in time, to a "missed heartbeat." Like Demon Veen, whose heart "missed a beat" at the sight of Marina on stage ("and never regretted the lovely loss," *Ada*, 12), the young poet's skipped heartbeat appears as a small sacrifice made for the sake of experiencing beauty.

Chapter 11 of *Speak, Memory* continues with an analysis of the impact of this experience on the poet's perception of time and space. Here, too, the importance of consciousness is mentioned: poetry can be seen as an attempt to "express one's position in regard to the universe embraced by consciousness," and, whereas

scientists see everything that happens in one point of space, the poet is capable of cosmic synchronization because he “feels everything that happens in one point of time” (*SM*, 218).

After some reflections on Russian prosody and the young poet’s attempts to compose his first sets of rhymes (pages devoted to Fyodor’s early imitative poetry are also present in Chapter 3 of *The Gift*), Nabokov switches to the effects of verse-writing on a more “physical plane” (*SM*, 221). The narrator enumerates some states and “dim” actions performed by his body (walking, sitting, lying) while the mind is fully absorbed by the poem. In what is defined as “the walking stage,” we see the young poet “wandering one moment in the depths of the park and the next pacing the rooms of the house” (*SM*, 222). These absentminded wanderings are strikingly similar to Fyodor’s nocturnal walk along a non-existent sidewalk. In *Speak, Memory* the process is described in even greater detail: the reader follows the poet as he enters a “trancelike state” and suddenly finds himself now “on a leathern couch” in his grandfather’s study, now “prostrate on the edge of a rickety wharf” (*SM*, 222). Significantly, in both books the writing stage is marked by loss of the track of time on the poet’s part.

The final lines of the chapter also echo the episode of poetic creation contained in *The Gift*. In both texts, the process of poetic genesis ends in front of a mirror, where the poet observes his own reflection without really recognizing it:

Looking into my own eyes, I had the shocking sensation of finding the mere dregs of my usual self, odds and ends of an evaporated identity which it took my reason quite an effort to gather again in the glass. (*SM*, 227)

In this passage, the boy has just recited the poem to his mother and now lingers in front of a mirror. Having returned to a regular perception of space and time, the poet sees an unusual reflection of himself: the sensation is defined as “shocking” probably because this is a representation of the narrator’s first acquaintance with poetic inspiration, an experience so intense that it reduced his usual self to “mere dregs.”

Thus, a complete cycle of the composition of a poem is described both in *The Gift* and *Speak, Memory*. This cycle can be now summarized as follows:

- Inception phase: a necessary condition for the poem to occur is the artist’s attention to details, a heightened alertness of his senses. The triggering event can be as small as a raindrop on a leaf, a swinging lamp, a rhyme in a free flow of thoughts. There is in all probability Bergson’s influence behind the concept of heightened awareness of human senses, which must be educated in order to be harmonized and fill in the intervals and gaps established by basic human needs (1919: 46-47). Bergson saw the human brain not as a storehouse of memories, but rather as an *instrument* of recall, selection, and blockage (Toker, 195). By

allowing us to perceive what is not essential for our survival, and thus running against the brain's tendency to skim the unnecessary, the education of senses is what promotes aesthetic experience.

- Aesthetic experience: the very moment of aesthetic bliss is when the poet's physical boundaries seem to dissolve and he becomes one with an external object: "when for a moment heart and leaf had been one" (*SM*, 217). The movement outside and back to the self is echoed by the swinging to-and-fro movement of the lamp in *The Gift*. This is but a brief moment, which, however, is powerful enough to alter the regular flow of time and a person's perception of physical space.
- Writing phase: in both *The Gift* and *Speak, Memory*, the act of translating aesthetic experience into the words of a poem occurs while the poet is immersed in a trancelike state. This state of intense concentration allows the poet to "take down" the full and perfect text of his poem, that seems to already exist somewhere. If during aesthetic experience the poet is able to find a fissure in time, at this stage neither the flow of time nor physical space are perceived by the poet.
- Conclusion: when the text is finished, the author tests its sound by either reciting it to another person, as in *Speak, Memory*, or murmuring it to himself. In both works, the journey is concluded with the poet's return to the present moment and place, as he observes his reflection in a mirror and acknowledges the effects of aesthetic experience on his identity.

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