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SPEAK, MEMORY AND *SOME PEOPLE:* VLADIMIR NABOKOV AND HAROLD NICOLSON

Vladimir Nabokov told Harold Nicolson's son Nigel that all his life he had been fighting against the influence of his father's memoir, *Some People***.** "The style of that book is like a drug."[1] And indeed, Nabokov's portrait of his governess seems to have been triggered by Nicolson's opening chapter, "Miss Plimsoll." Nicolson's depiction of his governess reads like a cultural translation of "Mlle. O." into British, but Nicolson wrote his description of his English governess nine years before Nabokov wrote his memoir of his Swiss mademoiselle.

The comparison of the two memoirs shows how very important Nicolson's sketch was in inspiring Nabokov's, not only the idea of crafting a portrait of his governess, but in the formation of *Speak, Memory* as a set of vignettes organized by topic, with "Mademoiselle O" as the first in the series. Nabokov's book is far more tightly structured and resonant than Nicolson's collection; the diplomat and biographer Nicolson wrote occasional essays of varying degrees of fictionality urged on by his friends, whereas by its third iteration, *Speak, Memory* had become the carefully crafted autobiography of a renowned author of prose fiction. As Nicolson's biographer Lees-Milne writes, "Nicolson complained…that it was the one book of his which old ladies, the proletariat and the Earl of Athlone remembered,…the only book he had rattled off at great speed."[2] This (sadly) denigrated category of old ladies (not to mention what he might have said about the proletariat) is echoed by Nabokov's explanation of why he rejected the title, *Speak, Mnemosyne*, though we can't know if Nabokov knew of Nicolson's complaint.

Harold Nicolson (1886 – 1968) was the youngest son of diplomat Arthur Nicolson, and spent his boyhood at his father's postings in Europe and the Near East. He became a British politician, diplomat, and writer, and was married to the writer Vita Sackville-West, on whom Virginia Woolf based the protagonist of *Orlando: A Biography*.

Nicolson published *Some People* in 1927. The sketches blend fiction and autobiography in nine chapters that describe characters drawn from Nicolson's life: Miss Plimsoll; J. D. Marstock; Lambert Orme; The Marquis de Chaumont; Jeanne de Henaut; Titty; Professor Malone; Arketall; Miriam

[1] James Lees-Milne, *Harold Nicolson. A Biography. 1920-1968* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1984), 313. See also the introduction to Harold Nicolson, *Some People*. (London: Faber & Faber, 2013).
[2] Ibid, p.313.

Codd. Some are composite portraits, while others portray one real-life figure. And as Virginia Woolf wrote, "…by the end of the book we realize that the figure which has been most completely and most subtly displayed is that of the author . . . It is thus, he would seem to say, in the mirrors of our friends that we chiefly live."[3]

The events Nicolson records begin sixteen years before those recounted by Nabokov. Miss Plimsoll arrives at the train station in Budapest in 1889 (Nicolson reconstructs the timing by the death of the Archduke Rudolph in Mayerling) as governess to the Nicolson family's three sons, when Harold is five; the Swiss Cécile Miauton arrives at the Siverski train station near Vyra as the Nabokov brothers' French-speaking governess in 1905 (where the Nabokov family had moved to avoid the turmoil of the uprising in St. Petersburg) when Nabokov is six. The accounts, however, were published nine years apart: Nabokov wrote "Mademoiselle O" in 1936, when he had to prepare something to read to a French-speaking audience. It eventually became part of *Conclusive Evidence* (1951) and *Drugie berega* (1954), to finish as chapter 5 of *Speak, Memory* (1967).

The authorial personas' young selves vigorously resist the efforts of their governesses. Nicolson recounts four (were there more?) subversions of Miss Plimsoll by the time he was nine: he terrified her by climbing around the cornice of the Legation where they lived and "very suddenly" saying "Halloa!" in her window; he trotted up behind her mule, making it break into a trot which caused her to fall; he locked her into the schoolroom and threw the key into the garden. Finally, he watched silently-gleefully as Miss Plimsoll carefully inked in the heading DAIRY instead of DIARY on the title page of her new leather-bound book, then grabbed it and rushed off to show it to everyone, shouting "this is how Miss Plimsoll spells diary!"[4]

Nabokov at age six is indignant that he has been left in the newly-arrived governess's sole care at Vyra and gets his brother Sergei to join him in running away. They disappear two miles down the snowy road to the village until apprehended by the coachman after sundown (and moonrise); Mademoiselle is frantically shouting her one Russian word, Giddy-eh? (where) from the porch when the coachman brings them back.[5]

Both writers recount their cruelties with some satisfaction (and here I must confess that at age seven I stabbed *my* English governess in the back of the hand with a fork at lunch after one too many repressions). Nicolson describes his own only half-feigned remorse: "'Miss Plimsoll,' I said, 'I'm sorry—I really am…' I locked myself in the water-closet. I cried there

[3] Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography," *Granite and Rainbow* (New York: Girvin Press, 2012), 152-4.
[4] Harold Nicolson, *Some People* (New York: Athenaeum, 1982), 19. Page numbers in the text refer to this edition.
[5] Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 104. Page numbers in the text refer to this edition.

softly: soft enough to indicate manliness and restraint: just loud enough to make sure certain people could hear" (20). The distance of adulthood allows Nicolson to confess both his meanness and his duplicity.

Nabokov's description is written from a greater narrative distance and with little indication of a personal relationship. Mademoiselle is "very stout," has a "vestigial mustache," a "blotchy complexion," and three chins; she "tackles the job of sitting down, the jelly of her jowl quaking, her prodigious posterior…lowering itself warily…she surrenders her bulk to the wicker armchair, which, out of sheer fright, bursts into a salvo of crackling" (96). Mademoiselle's room itself reveals her shortcomings—it was "a kind of hothouse sheltering a thick-leaved plant imbued with a heavy, enuretic odor" (107).

This repellent portrait of Mademoiselle is mitigated only by Nabokov's praise of her "slender" reading voice on summer days on the veranda at Vyra in section 5: "This is the time when Mademoiselle is at her very best," but even then he reminds us of her ungainly appearance: "Apart from her lips, one of her chins, the smallest but true one, was the only mobile detail of her Buddha-like bulk" (105). "Occasionally a fly would settle on her stern forehead and its three wrinkles would instantly leap up all together like three runners over three hurdles" (105-6)—the simile takes precedence over any sense of her internality, even as Nabokov is enjoying her reading voice.

Miss Plimsoll and Mademoiselle are hypersensitive to the (partially imagined) attitudes toward them of the household; these humiliations ultimately trigger the governesses' departure. As Nicolson says, "that vague sense of being put upon…is the brown aura in which all governesses have their being" (12).

Miss Plimsoll moved on as governess to another boy. Mademoiselle returns to Switzerland, where Nabokov visits her while at Trinity College. And here Nabokov employs a device of Nicolson's: on her writing desk in Russia, both at Vyra and in Petersburg, Mademoiselle has "a picture postcard of a lake and a castle" (107), whereas in Lausanne "[i]nstead of the Chateau de Chillon picture, there was now one of a garish troika" (115). Nabokov is making fun of Mademoiselle's nostalgia for the place where she is not, like the other Swiss governesses in her Lausanne circle.

The postcard device is an elaboration of Nicolson's use of a photograph to frame Miss Plimsoll's arrival and departure. As Miss Plimsoll unpacks, she places "a framed photograph of H.M.S. *Agamemnon* upon the mantelpiece" (12); as she is packing up to leave, Nicolson notes "that photograph of H.M.S. *Agamemnon*, to which had since been added a companion picture of the *Arethusa*" (19). The choice of photograph underlines Miss Plimsoll's unwelcome urging a career in the Navy on Nicolson.

The accounts conclude with epilogues to the governess's departures. The time shift allows the narrative some later self-awareness by the authors of their limited appreciation of the people they have just rather ungenerously

caricatured. Nicolson is surprised to learn from his successor that Miss Plimsoll spoke glowingly of him: "I was somewhat dazzled by this portrait of myself…Really that had been very kind of Miss Plimsoll." "It was evident that Miss Plimsoll had been loyal and romantic." And when he asked his successor (whom he chanced to meet at college) whether she'd urged him to go into the navy, he answered that "she was always talking about diplomats" (20). She has changed due to her exposure to Nicolson's family, while his narrative stance in depicting her retains his childhood animus.

Nabokov, too, shows Mademoiselle romanticizing him and their relationship in retrospect. Yet he maintains his distance from and dismissal of her: "She had spent all her life in feeling miserable…[A] sense of misery, and nothing else, is not enough to make a permanent soul. My enormous and morose Mademoiselle is all right on earth but impossible in eternity." He wonders, "Have I really salvaged her from fiction?" but also if "I had not kept utterly missing something in her that was far more than her chins or her ways or even her French---…something perhaps akin…to that last radiant deceit she had used in order to have me depart pleased with my own kindness" (he had bought her a hearing aid that she pretended allowed her to hear) (117).

Nicolson's "Miss Plimsoll" is a template for the structure and thematics of "Mademoiselle O," written from the child's point of view with a slight shift of appreciation of the subject at the end made possible by distance in time and place. Both governesses have to adjust to foreign cultures, intimidating households, and recalcitrant charges, and although the narrators imply their difficulties, they appear not to empathize with them even in retrospect. But unlike Nabokov's, Nicolson's retrospective implied *self*-portrait shows his recognition that he had been unkind.

There are other things in *Some People* that reveal that Nabokov has been there. In "Lambert Orme," Nicolson describes his own rude snobbery towards the eponymous visitor to the family when they are in Madrid. Rebuked by his mother for it, Nicolson takes Orme for a horseback ride, exclaiming at one point, "what an El Greco sky!" (42). Decades later, Nabokov himself notes "[a] grim El Greco horizon" in a diary account of one of his cross-country butterfly collecting trips with Vera.[6] He subsequently gives the phrase to Humbert in *Lolita,*[7] but unlike Nicolson in relevant Spain, Humbert is in the middle of the United States, superimposing his European background onto an unappreciated new world. Thus Nabokov does finally make (invisible) fun of himself for having done the same.

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[6] June 30, 1951. Quoted in Brian Boyd, *The American Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 201.

[7] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated* Lolita (New York: Vintage, 1991), 152.