

ASPECTS OF IDENTITY IN VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S NOVELS

Florina MOHANU*

When one stands before a mirror, what is it that is reflected back to the viewer? Is it an exact replica of the self, with the same thoughts, ideas and feelings? Or is it merely the projected image, the exterior of the body, with all internal aspects of the self not displayed?

While it is pretty obvious that it is only our images that are reflected when we look into the mirror, Vladimir Nabokov enjoys asking himself and his readers questions regarding our reflections of the self. He is constantly wondering what it is that formulates each individual's identity and what it is that might make that identity separate from all others. Through his works, Nabokov suggests that our identities might not always be so easily separated. He suggests that some of what we label as our *self* might actually be found in another. In other words your neighbor, or your best friend, or even some stranger casually walking by you in the street, might have some reflections of your own personality in their own *self-concept*. Along with this, Nabokov is also constantly pointing out that there are possibly *three conscious identities* running through our minds. The first is *how we perceive our self*, the second is *how we think others perceive us*, and lastly, an idea that lingers just below our conscious thought, *how others actually perceive us*. Nabokov uses these different forms of single identity to ask questions of the reader about who the real character is, and why is it that the next character isn't the exact same person who happens to be wearing different shoes.

While this idea can be found in many of Nabokov's novels, although often presented quite abstractly, there are a few that use the question of identity as their basic premise. Three come to mind immediately: *The Eye*, *Despair*, and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. In each of these novels we are asked to second guess what it is we would usually assume about a novel. We are asked to discover the truth behind each character's existence; to look past what we typically assume is

occurring and to make some definite realizations about each character's separate identity, or their inability to be distinguished from another.

In *The Eye*, we are given small clues that lead us to wonder about the existence of doubles. This doesn't necessarily mean doubles in the physical form, but abstractly suggests that *in any one person there could be two or three, or even a countless number, of identities* which can be found. The character in this story begins by killing himself, which might not be the truth from the start, but nevertheless ends up being able to view himself from afar. The story progresses with the author describing the interaction of a group of people in an apartment building, focusing mainly on a character by the name of Smurov, who could indeed very well be himself. This allows us to receive two viewpoints of the same character at the same time. One of the character from the inside; the author's thoughts about what Smurov's actions (his own) must mean, and the other from the outside; from the viewpoint of being viewed. With this strange, yet quite enviable situation set up, we find that the author is in a way trying to find his true self. Nabokov has set up the novel so that the character is able to step out of his own body and make judgements about his own actions, as if he were another person; his goal is the attainment of his true self. At one point the author says, "I could already count three versions of Smurov, while the original remained unknown". Here the author plainly states that he is yet unable to distinguish himself from the others. He has found Smurov to be much like all the rest, possibly not realizing that the three classifications are from the original Smurov himself.

The author continues to struggle to find his true identity, confused and daunted by how others perceive him, and how he thinks they perceive him, almost unwilling to accept the original image which he finds before him when he looks in the mirror. He details his struggle by saying, "I resolved to dig up the true Smurov, being already aware that his image was

* Reader, Ph. D., Department of Romance Languages and Business Communication, ASE Bucharest.

influenced by the climatic conditions prevailing in various souls". At this point, the author is suggesting that the true Smurov, his true self, might be so hard to capture because it is constantly changing. There is no one self for any of us, but rather the self is like a chameleon, adjusting to the changes in the environment.

While this is a very possible solution, that there is no definite answer to a single self, Nabokov continues to toy with the idea of double identities in some of his further works. One novel solely based on this premise is *Despair*. In this work, we are told the story of Hermann who is trying to find his absolute double so that he may shoot him, eventually playing this off as his own death. The magic behind this novel is that in reality, the figure which Hermann has chosen, Felix, is really far from being his double. He doesn't look like Hermann and doesn't act like him, but Hermann is so determined to find a double, that he imagines everything about himself onto his 'actor'. The importance of this story is that Hermann believes that there is someone who is exactly like him in the world, someone who replicates him in every way, and that he eventually finds out that this is an impossibility. At points in Hermann's narration he realizes that, "Felix could not come for the simple reason that he was a product of my imagination, which hankered after reflections, repetition, masks, and that my presence in a remote little town was absurd and even monstrous". Here, Hermann stumbles upon a truth which Nabokov is forcing upon the reader, that there are no exact reflections of any one person. That we each do contain our own separate identities which enable us to be distinguished from others. This story also shows that the others's perceptions of another self do not necessarily change that self; that even though Hermann tried to change Felix's identity, by perceiving him as someone who he was not, he ultimately fails and has to realize that his perception of Felix will not change Felix's real identity. Essentially here, Nabokov is giving the reader a large clue. He claims that although there are different perceptions about the same identity, the three which were mentioned earlier, these variances are not effective on the identity at all.

Despair also points to another aspect of these differing viewpoints on a single identity. At one point in the novel, Hermann begins to describe his process of writing the script for his movie. He has already become entwined and confused with other characters in the novel so that sometimes his likeness is able to be seen in the people who surround him. (Obviously, because it is all from his point of view). Finally, he divulges how it is that this process occurs. He states that he has, "exactly twenty-five kinds of handwritings", and

that, "this book is written in all my twenty-five hands mixed together", suggesting that he perceives himself as being made up of not just a single identity, but rather many different ones. He claims that he is able to assume any identity that he wishes; he is able to change how he is perceived by others, simply by adjusting his perception of himself. This theory, although a little ridiculous coming from Hermann's voice, suggests a lot about a single person's identity. It suggests that we might not just be of one single form. Rather, we might be a conglomerate of differing personality traits, possibly with the ability to wear each different mask, a different personality, at will. This would suggest that in each person the linger all aspects of any personality. And if one is able to change their perception of their own identity, then he or she can assume any role, can be any person they choose to be. The problem here, in Hermann's case, is that Felix does not want to change his role and has to deal with Hermann who is not sure about what his is.

In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, this same theme is explored in a much lighter format. In this novel, we are not sure who the author of the story is until the end, when we realize that he is just as much Sebastian Knight as Sebastian Knight is himself. Throughout the story the reader has been toyed with; we have been given a wide range of perceptions of Sebastian Knight, never quite realizing that he is the author because we are not asked or told to perceive him that way. Here, the reader becomes much more part of Nabokov's game. We are given V's perception of himself and his and others' perception of Sebastian, but the two never cross paths. The reader has to realize that he or she is being force fed these perceptions, that each are coming from an opposite viewpoint and so cannot be matched. But if the reader is able to step back and try to see the characters through each other's eyes, he or she is able to see that they are quite similar. Their only distinction is that they are wearing the masks of the other.

This mask theme is quite important to the resolution of this novel. Based on the same premise as the perception theme, Nabokov often suggests that the characters are masked, that they are not showing their true identity as we wish to perceive it, but rather are forcing a different perception, resulting in a different impression. A first example is in the case of Mr. Goodman. When V., one of the characters, first meets this author he doesn't realize that he is also writing about Sebastian. V. states that Goodman, "strokes his face under the mask", and that he, "returned the black mask to him" at the end of their visit together. V. never quite sees the real Goodman, only the perception that Goodman wants to have of him, until after their first encounter. Nabokov firmly states that through their

first meeting Goodman was covered by a black mask, suggesting that he was somehow masking his true identity, and forcing a different impression on the struggling author.

In the same vein, this novel also brings us back to the *three perceptions of identity*: our perceptions of ourselves, how we think others perceive us, and how we are actually perceived by others. Nabokov does make a point to show us that these three are able to often be interchanged, and can even fool those who look too closely, but he reminds us that it must always come back to that singular first impression, that of the true identity. Throughout this story, there are careful references to the number three. We are shown the novel *The Funny Mountain* which was Sebastian's third story, containing three stories, and described an event which surrounded three travelers. The letters X, Y, and Z also keep popping up, which could stand for many things, but here quite possibly suggest the three manifestations of identity. But Nabokov warns us. He suggests that we should not be fooled by the three different impressions; that we should not be swayed from our own perceptions of ourselves. He suggests that if we look too closely, to find how others perceive us, we are straying from our true paths. For example, he states that, "All things belong to the same order of things, for such is the oneness of human perception, the oneness of individuality, the oneness of matter, whatever matter may be". To Nabokov, one's own identity can not be changed by the others' perceptions; he suggests that we must not try to see all perceptions at once, but should remain by the one which is truly our own.

So how does all of this fit together? Is there any true

perception, is any one viewpoint the correct one? No, obviously it is not. Our own perceptions of ourselves would not be the way they are if it was not for the others' perceptions, or what we believe them to be. Nabokov is warning the reader from both directions. He is suggesting that we should not trade our own identity, how we think we are, for the other viewpoints that others may give us. But at the same time, he is telling us to be wary of the other perceptions, to be careful about how one is to look at things. He suggests that some perceptions might just be reflections from a looking glass, or an obscure cover-up from under a black mask. Nabokov is able to use the theme of the 'double-character' to allow us to question our own perceptions and where they might form and how they might affect our actions. He is telling us never to be too sure of what we think we are perceiving, while also asking us to remain true to our self. Then again this whole paper could be someone else's perception of three very different novels

For all we know, this might not even be Nabokov that we're talking about.

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