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The Carroll Carroll Pattern. Nabokov and Lewis Carroll

Abstracts

My article aims to discover Nabokov's poetic transition from poetry to prose through translations of prose works, first of all that of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* in 1923, not without considering some biographical motivation. By means of comparative textual analysis a profound kinship reveals itself in the world view and in the devices of the two authors', translator and translated. Carroll's special narration, imagery and modality could greatly contribute not only to Nabokov's concepts of play and motifs, but also to the 'absurdization' and 'abstractization', and, what is more, to the concept of seeing reality as a conditional realm, one of many "realities", their mutual permeability and the aporia of visible and invisible.

Статья является одной из глав готовящейся монографии, охватывающей всё романное творчество Владимира Набокова, и рассматривает период перехода писателя от лирики к прозе. Помимо некоторых событий и биографической мотивации в статье придается самая важная роль в этом переходе переводу прозаических произведений, главным образом книги Л. Кэрролл *Alice in Wonderland* в 1923 году. Сопоставительный анализ приемов и видения мира двух писателей, однако, позволяет делать выводы более принципиального порядка о том, как перевод текста Кэрролл обратил Набокова к столь характерным для него концептам абсурдизации, взаимопроникновению между т. н. «реальным» и другими мирами и игровому приципу в целом.

Keywords: *Carroll, Nabokov, translation, absurd, otherworld, names, nominalism, word play, Doppelgänger*

*I can explain every poem that has been written,
and quite a few of those that have not been written yet.*

Lewis Carroll

Carroll's two books, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass and what Alice found there* (1865, 1872) were built into Nabokov's intellectual equipment as early as his "semi-English childhood" in the quality of fundamental tales (Nabokov 1990:81).¹ The way in which the English children's books took root in the Russian child, with his anglophile upbringing, and what they meant to him is reflected in the identity-problems of his hero Martin, in *Glory*.

At Cambridge he felt still more foreign. Upon talking to his English fellow students he noted with wonder his unmistakably Russian essence. From his semi-English childhood he retained only such things as had been relegated by native Englishmen of his age, who had read the same books as children, into the dimness of the past properly allotted to nursery things, while Martin's life at a certain point had made an abrupt turn and taken a different course, and for this very reason his childhood surroundings and habits had assumed a certain fairy-tale flavor, and a book he had been fond of in those days was now more enchanting and vivid in his memory than the same book in the memory of his English coevals. He remembered various expressions that ten years ago had been current among English schoolboys, but now were considered either vulgar or ridiculously old-fashioned. (Nabokov 1971: 58)

Translating Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* into Russian determined Nabokov's language, his way of looking at things and constructing texts, and, as I argue, played also a decisive role in his change of preference for writing prose rather than verse. The fact that I too am a literary translator must also have contributed greatly to my recognition of this. Few readers spare the matter a thought: in the last analysis the creator of a translated text is the translator, who assumes the author's role and gets into his skin, but creates his own language in the translation. George Steiner just remarked that the Alice-translation, made early in

¹ Lewis Carroll, writer, mathematician and photographer, was a master of mind-games. His books may also be read as fairy-tales, and were and have remained the favorite children reading in families of an intellectual bent almost everywhere in the world.

Nabokov's career had had a lingering effect on his *oeuvre* (Steiner 1972:6).² What follows is a purposive overview of Carroll's *Alice*-books exclusively from this angle – how they might become building material for Nabokov's prose.

The two *Alice*-books clearly contributed to his bilingualism and developed the creativity and the awareness in language, discovering the capacity of all sorts of wonders of playing with words (strongly active in childhood in general). When, in the summer of 1922, in Berlin he was given the request of the publisher Gamayun of translating *Alice in Wonderland*, the opportunity to not only translate, but re-interpret it must have come to his mind immediately, as he held a startling opinion of antediluvian-style Russian children's literature (most of all, of Russian children's newspapers). This must have been his guiding plan in the domestication (russification) strategy of this translation too – the replacement of English literary allusions and quotations, names, songs and objects by Russian ones resulted in a veritable Russian fairy-tale (Carroll 1923).³

The book must also have appealed to him in two further ways. Firstly, the memories of lost childhood must have been resurrected and strengthened. At the time he had returned from Berlin to Cambridge, to the family which had lost its father just a few months earlier. That anglophile figure must have hovered over the work as the translation proceeded hence the translation of Romain Rolland's *Colas Breugnon*, expressly instigated by his father, had only recently been finished.⁴ Secondly – and this I regard as of supreme importance – late 1922 and early 1923 was a crucial period in Nabokov's *oeuvre* – that was precisely the time when he was switching from verse to prose.⁵ On that basis I conjecture that Carroll's book served him as an important pattern, a sort of training for becoming a prose writer. The two *Alice*-books show clearly the departure, in terms of both literature and world view, that defined Nabokov's mind-set, because he was interested in not only the relationship between reality and dream but also that between reality and language, and, moreover, in questioning the interdependence of these relationships. The *Alice*-books must have influenced Nabokov

² Steiner's statement, stumbled upon after writing my article backed me up, because studies on "Nabokov and Carroll" topic principally analyze the translation itself. Karlinsky, S. "Any in Wonderland. Nabokov's Russified Lewis Carroll." *Triquarterly* 17, 1970; Demurova, N. "Vladimir Nabokov, Translator of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*" *Nabokov at Cornell*, ed. by G. Shapiro, Ithaca 2000. 182–191.; Weaver, W. *Alice in Many Tongues, The Translations of Alice in Wonderland*. Madison 1964. Alfred Appel, in his commentaries on *Lolita*, lists the references in the novel to the title of *Alice in Wonderland* (Nabokov 1970: 377).

³ Carroll's books had appeared in Russian translations before Nabokov. An anonymous translation – similarly Russified – had appeared in 1879 (*Sonya in the realm of wonder*, Moscow); and in 1909 N. Solovyov, under the pseudonym Allegro, published *Alice's adventures in the land of wonders*, in St. Petersburg).

⁴ He wrote to his mother in June 1922, while taking his finals at Cambridge: („[B]efore every exam, I looked on his portrait, as if on an icon, and I know that he helped me.” Nabokov stated that he had worked on the two translations, Carroll and Rolland simultaneously, Boyd shows that although Nabokov stated that he had worked on the two translations simultaneously, Boyd shows that this was not so (Boyd 1990:194, 197, 557).

⁵ Brian Boyd in his pioneering biography attributes the change of genre only to the death of Nabokov's father (Boyd 1990: 194).

chiefly and directly in the formation of seeing things in abstract ways and absurd forms. Carroll's language games and abstractive humor clearly deepened his view of the real world in absurd refraction. This was supported by the language of another hugely influential novel that appeared in the same year, Joyce's *Ulysses* (see Hetényi 2011).

The difference between Nabokov's lyric and prose voices is noticeable earlier in his personal language, as he uses a poetic tonality in his letters to his mother and a more prosaic in his diary and in his letters to his father. The former are more emotional, more intimate, while the latter are more condensed, ironic, more consciously edited texts that used every playful possibility of language. This "father-language" seems to be characteristic of his prose, and as his *oeuvre* progresses its growing domination can be plainly observed. A process of movement away from an emotional, lyrical beginning towards a sarcastic, ironic genre and language can be sensed clearly in the comparison of, for example, the early *Mary* (1926) and the late *Ada* (1969).

Julian Connolly in his essay, after a detailed account of Nabokov the translator's efforts at Russification of the first *Alice*-book, sums up in twenty lines Carroll's influence on Nabokov and among three shared elements, besides the word games he detects two thematic parallels, the blurring of the boundary between "ugly" reality and illusion or dream, and Alice's yearning for a garden.⁶ Clark, in a separate chapter with a series of examples, shows the duality of the fantasy-world and reality and the common feature of the word-games and parodies.⁷

We can speak of much deeper influences than that. One of the fundamental relationships between *Alice's* fairy-tale world and Nabokov's *oeuvre* is the permanent presence of other worlds, other dimensions, the multi-layered interpretation of this world and the beyond, and the possibility of crossing the border between the two. In the realms of different logic, Wonderland or Looking-Glass Land, Alice moves by secret paths which seem haphazard, almost prohibited, and things happening to her are "out-of-the-way", that is, abnormal, unusual (CW 21). It is as if she were guided by serial mistakes and misleading directions, in which, nevertheless, there is an order, a logic that is mathematical, obeys the rules of chess or the symbolism of cards or numerals, a variety of codes which may be interpreted as allegories of paths of life or destiny. "Remember who you are" – rings out the Queen's command at the start of the journey (CL 145). The paths wind their way through a

⁶ The latter he links to that pining to escape which attracts Cincinnatus to the Tamara-garden (*Invitation to a Beheading*). For several reasons this parallel does not hold good, chiefly because Cincinnatus yearns for the place of his youth, while Alice yearns for a garden where she has never before been (Connolly 1995: 24).

⁷ In his opinion the literary parodies play the role of the "novel within the novel" (Clark 1986: 106).

non-Euclidean space because they do not lead to the goal, the garden; they go in precisely the opposite direction, even turn back on themselves and lead back to the starting-point. “It’s not a path, more like a corkscrew”; “To her surprise, she [...] found herself walking in at the front door again.” (CL 136, 140) Something similar happens in Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading*. Nabokov’s hero Cincinnatus believes that he has escaped from prison, but when after a long way through a bridge (!) and the city he opens the door of his house he finds himself back in his cell. In this second attempt at escape Emma, a somewhat Alice-like girl, helps him. The description conceals entirely concrete allusions to Carroll’s corkscrew-path: Cincinnatus starts out for the *winding* path from a *mirror-written* notice, and goes down *Garden Street*. This direct influence indicates the enduring presence of the *Alice*-books in Nabokov’s thinking fifteen years after the Carroll-translation. (This influence will be still active in *Ada* in 1969, see below.) Nabokov’s spatial corkscrew and temporal spiral are interconnected, because, as we can see in his *Speak, Memory!*, the circle that turns back on itself is the devilish variant of the spiral in both dimensions. This figure returns again and again as a Leitmotif in Nabokov’s *oeuvre*.

As the story begins Alice, on the fringe of dream and wakefulness, falls in a daze into a deep well which leads her to the other world, at the existence of which neither she nor the reader is the least surprised because the ways curve like a Möbius strip naturally the other dimension, into the dream world or other world. In Carroll’s text the tunnel, the deep well and the stove are archetypal crossing-points, as they lead either into the depths of the earth or into the sky with the smoke from the transforming fire. At the same time books, pictures and maps play also the part of the transitory state, the medium, that is, the secondary, encoded agency of culture that lets us fly into a quite different world. This virtual, space-expanding power appears in a realized metaphor, visualized in a spatial form. Alice does not *fall* into the well – the kind of thing that happens in many fairy-tales – but floats, flies slowly down. This makes the approach to the other world, the actual journey itself important and meaningful experience. “[S]he fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her and to wonder what was going to happen next.” “Down, down, down.” (CW 17, 18). Nabokov employs this fall as a fundamental reference-point, a metaphor for life that advances towards death, in his lecture-essay that he wrote on the art of literature, “The Art of Literature and Commonsense”: “In a sense, we all are crashing to our death from the top storey of our birth to the flat stones of the churchyard and wondering, with an immortal Alice in Wonderland, at the patterns of the passing wall.” (Nabokov 1982: 372–373).

When Alice thinks, as she falls, that in such a length of time she would fall right through the earth and emerge on the other side, she incorrectly utters a foreign word denoting the other side: *Antipathies* comes to her mind, obviously in place of *Antipodes* (the point diametrically opposite), which can be also associated with anti-paths, that is, paths reflected by mirrors and leading from the same point in opposite directions. This image reminds us of Terra and Antiterra in the spatial framework of *Ada*, a mirrored-space construction where, like Wonderland, another, yearned-for world will be composed of Russian and American fairy-tale-like spatial and cultural elements. The *Alice*-book is also alluded to in *Ada*, by the parodically distorted title “Ada’s adventures in Adaland” (Nabokov 1969: 445). By a twist, Nabokov relocates Ada herself too in Wonderland when her defloration has taken place – as if, by a kind of initiation, she has gone through into another, more substantial, dreamlike, non-existent dimension (*ibidem* 104).⁸

Alice is sometimes far from the floor, sometimes terribly close, as she expands and contracts in swift succession, and neither key nor door is within her reach. Carroll employs elements of reality with very broad symbolic meanings, as do fairy-tales: the door itself is the “way out”, a solution, while the key is the means the clue, the device or knowledge to this “solution”. In Nabokov’s *The Gift* the key will also play a corresponding key role, and Nabokov is very much aware of the symbolic usage of all kinds of “carpenter’s job”– doors, windows and gates.⁹

Carroll is unmistakably alluding to his wish to capture a change in focus and perspective, when he instils in Alice the feeling that she is “the largest telescope that ever was” in the world (CW 24). Later magnifying telescope, reducing microscope and opera-glasses too appear side by side in a nursery-rhyme rhythm, with the secondary contexts of nature and cosmos, laboratory and theatre or stage: “first through a telescope, then through a microscope, then through an opera-glass” (CL 147). This last in particular, the theatre, is very important for Nabokov. A logical succession is constructed here: the very close scientific analytical observation (microscope) is the opposite of the remote, abstract and philosophical (telescopic, teleological) one, then as a kind of synthesis with this there follows the artistic conception which, at the same time, through the stylization of opera indicates the nature of an artistic model and remoteness from reality.¹⁰

⁸ The name of one of the invented places in *Ada* is Cheshire – an allusion to Carroll’s Cheshire Cat.

⁹ “I know that death in itself is in no way connected with the topography of the hereafter, for a door is merely the exit from the house and not a part of its surroundings, like a tree or a hill. One has to get out somehow, ‘but I refuse to see in a door more than a hole’” – quotes Nabokov his favorite invented philosopher, Delalande in *The Gift* (Nabokov 1966: 282).

¹⁰ This way of seeing things, the involvement of optical enlargement and reduction, is typical of Yury Olesa’s visual constructions in the 1920s, especially in his *Envy* (1927).

All this happens in a new dream immersed in a dream, in which Alice loses her name too – as if all the changes of perspective, the approaching and distancing result in the loss of the Self (CL 150, 152).¹¹ In Nabokov the dream within a dream from which it is impossible to wake indicates the traps in our mind, the paths leading away from reality and questioning it (in *Despair* and *Ada*).¹²

Alice's variations in size bring up the questioning of customary values: large and small are muddled together, their distinction loses its significance, as, for example, in Nabokov's *A Guide to Berlin* important and unimportant things change places, and finally the absence of unusual happenings seems unusual: “Alice had got so much into the way of expecting nothing but out-of-the-way things to happen, that it seemed quite dull and stupid for life to go on in the common way.” (CW 23)

Alice's “logical” thinking leads first to the creation of abstraction, then gives independent existence to it and detaches it from the basis from which she has considered it. She tries to imagine what the candle flame can be like when it has been blown out (CW 22). And soon there appears the Cheshire Cat, whose smile can be seen even after it has vanished; it lives an abstract, separate life from its physical bearer. We can find an analogy with this in the relationship between the creator and his creation, which originally used to be an organic “part” of him, then assumes a life independent of him. We can see a similar abstraction between numerals and their connotation or attributed thought-content, those values that they designate and on the higher level of abstraction, their secondary, symbolic meaning.

Alice “was very fond of pretending to be two people” (CW 23), and at the same time is not sure that she amounts to a single whole, which specifically questions the outlines of the concept formed about the Self and makes its place in the world relative. There is not a single certain identity if the Self is more or less than one, and has no guaranteed “mass” or extension. No wonder that Alice no longer knows who she is and in what time she exists. “Was I the same when I got up this morning? [...] But if I'm not the same, the next question is, ‘Who in the world am I?’” (CW 27) First she tries to define herself by comparison with others, like many Nabokovian heroes “I'm sure I'm not Ada...” says Alice (NB the overlapping name of her friend Ada with the heroine of Nabokov's later work). Then she hopes to assess her own certain existence by means of her knowledge – like Charles Kinbote

¹¹ Appel refers this infinite regress to the self-referential, involuted type of fiction, and establishes parallels with Raymond Queneau (*Les enfants du limon*, 1938) and Samuel Beckett (*Endgame*, 1957) (Nabokov 1970:xxiii-xxiv, see also 377). He refers to the life-like quality of the chess-board, but does not mention the Gide-ian *mise en abyme* (ibidem lxix).

¹² The pattern of the 'dream within the dream' is at the origin of the dream-death motif of Nabokov, which has another important literary source: Lermontov's Caucasus-poem, “The Dream” (*Son*) which Nabokov analyses as a triple dream in several of his pieces on Lermontov including the foreword to his translation of Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*. See also later, and: Hetényi 2015a.

(in *Pale Fire*), who supplies his neighbor's poetry with a mass of footnotes so as to create his personality in the foreground. Neither numbers nor geography is adequate to "prove" the individuality and place for Alice, so she turns to poetry, as if the uttering of words would confirm her existence, but "the words did not come the same as they used to do". The betrayal of words and her inability to express herself finally deprive Alice of her self-awareness: "Who am I then? Tell me that first..."; "I'll stay down here till I'm somebody else" she ponders (CW 27). And in *Looking-Glass Land* every word is out of context: in an absurd dialogue Nobody becomes Somebody, and *vice versa*. "[T]ell me if you can see either of them.' 'I see nobody on the road,' said Alice. 'I only wish _I_ had such eyes [...] To be able to see Nobody!" "Who did you pass on the road?' [...] 'Nobody,' said the Messenger. 'Quite right,' said the King: 'this young lady saw him too. So of course Nobody walks slower than you.'" (CL 192–194). The play on words reminds us of Odysseus' adventure with Cyclops, to whom he introduced himself by the name Nobody. Anybody/nobody will be one of Sebastian Knight's determinants in Nabokov's first novel published in author's own English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941). The doubled personality of Sebastian mirrors his struggle with the change of language and identity, similarly to his author, who crossed the Atlantic Ocean while working on the book.

The loss of names indicates not only a crisis in the definition of the Self but also a cognitive chaos. While some sort of explanation can still be assumed in the case of common nouns, a historical or semantic link between alphabet and object (which, however, Carroll constantly questions), the accidentality and conditionality of personal names is quite obvious by virtue of the act of allotting names, which may be considered voluntary. This naming, which is in fact haphazard in nature, nevertheless designates the person named in his entirety. Indeed, it even characterizes him, depicts his identity, according to the word-magic or Adamist¹³ conception of word. In the "wood where things have no names" Alice and the Fawn are not afraid of one another until they remember their names, and when they do, the Fawn runs away in alarm (CL 153–155). In Carroll there are many telling names appropriate to the fairy-tale genre. According to Humpty Dumpty, names must mean something and his name "means" the shape he is (CL 180). In this other world there is a frequent danger of forgetting names, and the jurors even write down their own names at the start of the hearing

¹³ Adam gave names to things and animals. Adamism compares the situation in which nothing has a name to that of the first man, by not accepting the commonly agreed and stereotype meanings of words. Adamism was the corner-stone of the Acmeist aesthetic views of Osip Mandelstam, who, by a return to the ancient, primary strata of the meanings of things, isolated himself from the pan-philosophic views of Symbolism which extended meaning beyond bounds.

so as not to forget them during the process (CW 99–100).¹⁴ The connection between the name and the named in Nabokov too goes beyond the usual technique of employing telling names, and even beyond solutions involving the fulfilment of the destiny and the word-magic held by a name – the name is no longer a constant and defining certainty, but constitutes a problem in itself and is conditional.

In Wonderland neither space nor time conforms to rules. While spatial relationships do not correspond with earthly experience, they are not merely spatial concepts either. Neither inside-outside nor directions have meaning without goals. It is impossible to go out when Alice yearns to go into the garden, nor when she has no idea where she would like to go. At the same time the moves of the chessmen are laid down just as on the black and white squares of the chessboard. In Nabokov's novel *The Defense* the inevitability of destiny or fate as a series of chess moves confined to the black and white squares becomes an allegory of life. Anyone who walks for long enough, like Alice, reaches somewhere. There, however, all sorts of madmen live, and anyone that goes among them is driven mad, as the Cheshire Cat explains (CW 64). Making madness or abnormality relative by making everyone appear abnormal raises the question of what is meant by normality – this is indubitably the fundamental question of Nabokov's *oeuvre* with his strange heroes by everyday standards: murderers, lunatics, deviants, schizophrenics.

In Wonderland time does not move forward in a straight line, but passes, is skipped, quickens and stops as desired – subjective time conforms to the inner life (CW 69). In Alice's new thinking historical time too is confused in the series of school lessons that have been learnt but are not known; what has been parroted under compulsion is meaningless and there is no point in knowing it. In Wonderland life can go not only forwards but also backwards, and accordingly memory too can operate in both directions. Typically, this entanglement of times springs from the language itself, from the similarity of the everyday word *jam* and the Classical Latin *jam* (meaning 'now') – “jam to-morrow and jam yesterday – but never jam to-day.” (CL 171) The idea of “living backwards” (ibid.) influences not only Nabokov's memory-genre writings and his autobiographies, but the time-structure of all his work; the present is absorbed like a past projected on the future. As one can see in Nabokov's short story “A Guide to Berlin” too, time and memory likewise move in directions contrary to the usual. *Invitation to a Beheading* also begins from the end, the pronouncement of Cincinnatus' death sentence, and his past life emerges in parallel with his expiring days, but meanwhile he

¹⁴ The sentence of decapitation might give an allusion to the end of *Invitation to a Beheading*, where also the victim does not die (CW, Chapter 12).

draws closer and closer to the start of his real life. In his *Nicolai Gogol* (1944) Nabokov starts telling Gogol's biography also from the end, from a detailed report of the circumstances of his death. This turn may reflect the deeper meaning of the originally planned Carrollian title, "Gogol through the Looking Glass", finally abandoned.

Messages composed in translations into foreign languages do not work in the text either, because the alien language, rather than give rise to adequate communication, only deepens incomprehension. Alice wastes her time speaking both Latin and French to the mouse once she cannot understand it in her own language, but tactlessly mentions cats and dogs that frighten the mouse, so she does not have empathy of communication, what would be fundamental for understanding another living creature. Carroll is putting her, with her limited knowledge, in a compromising situation, as the French question – *Où est ma chatte?* – has a distinctly erotic secondary meaning (in French *chatte* is a colloquialism for the vagina). So it not surprisingly excites the mouse in a double meaning of this word, and it begins to "tremble all over". Nabokov too very frequently uses ambiguous words with erotic associations, mainly French, which (or parts of which, e.g. *con*, *-cul*) refer to intimate parts of the body (see Naiman 2010).

Carroll's work also rests on the philosophy of words, and brings up the aspect of Adamism or nominalism.¹⁵ In chapter six of *Alice in Wonderland* Carroll breaks the bond between words and their conventional meanings, and entrusts the creation, contextualization and stylization of words to individual hands. For Humpty Dumpty "glory" can mean "a nice knock-down argument", because he chooses the meanings of existing words and also creates his own new ones (e.g. Jabberwocky). His new words are invented sometimes out of old ones by compressing them or parts of them (morphemes) into portmanteaux or distorting them (brillig, slithy, tove, gyre, gimble, wabe...)¹⁶ "When I use a word [...] 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less. [...] The question is, [...] which is to be master'" – declares Humpty Dumpty (CL 184–185). Words work for their masters and get their wages accordingly. Nabokov was employing very similar metaphors for both language-creation and (artistic) creation in general when, in his forewords and interviews, he called his heroes "galley-slaves" (Nabokov 1990:95) and himself an omnipotent author, their grand master, puppeteer, tyrant and dictator. Carroll once conjures up this invisible writer who accomplishes his will from the background. Alice is actually invisible when she takes hold of the White King's pencil, and she writes with it in the King's notebook; he perceives the pencil being

¹⁵ See Hetényi 2012, 2015b.

¹⁶ Nabokov too enjoys word-formations in which the meanings of two words are condensed into one – I call this practice in my book 'metamorfusion'.

guided by a higher being or moving by itself, writing “all manner of things” that the King does not intend, he does not recognize his “feelings” (CL 132).¹⁷

Carroll not only links the meanings of words to a sort of Adamism, but in connection with that metaleptically transgresses the framework of the literary work and in so doing steps out of the framework of fiction by a self-parodying, metafictional commentary. On the one hand by suddenly placing himself, the narrator, and the circumstances of the narration back within the framework of the work, he also addresses the reader: “Alice didn’t venture to ask what he paid them with; and so you see I can’t tell YOU” (CL 185).¹⁸

The metafictional character appears more clearly already at the beginning of the first book. Under the influence of her first impressions in Wonderland Alice thinks: “When I used to read fairy-tales, I fancied that kind of thing never happened, and now here I am in the middle of one! There ought to be a book written about me, that there ought! And when I grow up, I’ll write one – but I’m grown up now” (CW 40) Not only is the book appearing in the text projected in the future on the book presently being read, but from the outset the story draws the natural borderline of a world of dream, that of a fairy-tale, so as to establish the conventional acceptance of fantastic events. This literary ‘fairy tale agreement’ between writer and reader about accepting believing in what is said in the text is literally materialized when Alice signs one with the Unicorn – with it, obviously, because each of them believes that the other is a non-existent “fabulous monster”. “If you’ll believe in me, I’ll believe in you. Is that a bargain?” (CL 197) This agreement is menaced by the return to the reality marked by the materializing of the book, by the realization of writing, in point of fact, the existence of the text read actually. Nabokov acts in the same way countless times, to become a master of ironic destruction, disillusionment following the creation of worlds that merge together.

Nabokov too creates scintillating (and untranslatable) constructions from the secondary meanings of words, or modifies their pronunciation for this purpose, or generates a shared meaning between them on the basis of their similar graphic appearance, filling the gaps with associations (following the example of Carroll’s ‘tail-legend’, *tail* v. *tale*, CW 34). Similar words, if they have something in common in visual or grammatical form, soon conjoin the things that they designate. Nabokov merges two words, *pigment* and *figment* in *Lolita*, where the former by its first syllable *pig* is linked into a complex pig-motif that spreads like a climbing plant, while in the latter the first syllable *fig* enriches the Adam-motif

¹⁷ This scene provides the solution to the key scene in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, where the capacity to write upside down is a motif.

¹⁸ The pronoun *you* here may be taken as singular or plural. Nabokov also often inserts *you* without reference, meaning either his wife (SM) or, in his novels, a lover of similar standing and role (more often in his early short stories, later in *Ada* and in *Look at the Harlequins!*).

(Nabokov 1970:119 and further pages). This same *pig-fig* word-pair also features in *Alice in Wonderland*, when the Cheshire Cat misunderstands or mishears these same two words (CW 65). Nabokov's most famous mishearing scene is the dialogue between Humbert Humbert and Quilty on the porch of the Enchanted Hunters hotel, before the enchanting first night with Lolita (Nabokov 1970:129). Otherwise, in Carroll the pig is merely the result of an absurd metamorphosis, produced by the transformation of a baby that is tossed to and fro, by the matter-of-fact comparison, destructive of sentimentality, to which an over-fed, bloated infant can give rise: "she began thinking over other children she knew, who might do very well as pigs, and was just saying to herself, 'if one only knew the right way to change them'" (CW 62). The *óboroten'* or werewolf of Russian folklore and popular mythology is a demonic creature that metamorphoses into animals and back. It appears in countless variations of shape, partly as references to the Gogolian tradition in Nabokov's novels. In *Lolita*, for example, in hotel 'The Enchanted Hunters' figures metamorphosing into pigs become more and more numerous, and this happening corresponds in many respects with Homer's account of Circe, which is given an extended paraphrastic chapter in Joyce's *Ulysses*. That is why I refer to Nabokov's portmanteau words as *metamorfusions*, frequently designating shape-shifters, emerging as if from a metamorphosis by the fusion of morphemes (see also the ominous significance of the dog-motif).¹⁹

Carroll's Cheshire Cat is a metamorphic shape-shifter; it behaves like a dog and can vanish in a moment. A metamorphosis also occurs in Chapter 5 of *Alice in Wonderland*, when the Queen crosses the river and turns into a sheep (CW 173). Carroll presents the river-boundary reminiscent of the underworld with a drawing of a wide, undulating line in his text. At the end of *Alice in Wonderland* the exchange of chessmen too takes place as a metamorphosis, in the same way that (according to the chess rules) a pawn becomes a queen on reaching the eighth square – in fact, as the Queen reaches the border, she crouches down and transforms into a cat. Waking up, transformation, border-crossing between reality and non-reality are also a sort of arrival at a safe berth on the other side. This suggests a possible interpretation of the end of the Luzhin story (*The Defense*), which is generally read as suicide by those for whom an event can happen only in Life and the border-crossing can mean only Death.²⁰

When interpreting the unexpected surprise endings of almost all of Nabokov's novels it is worth considering a form of metamorphosis. Sebastian Knight steps over straight into

¹⁹ See more in Hetényi 2010 and 2011.

²⁰ See Hetényi 2005.

another soul, because he identifies himself with his half-brother whose life he would like to describe, but meanwhile – although the identity of the brothers is extremely doubtful – he transmigrates into his own Self. The surname Knight and other references to chess appear so potently on the pages of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* that Nabokov was actually asked whether the whole novel was based on a game of chess. At the time the reply was a definite denial, but later he remarked in a letter and an interview that “it has been a more or less conscious attempt”.²¹ *The Defense*, which is about chess, is the most immediate display of this, but the foreword to the late (1971) English translation to *Glory* summarizes the main problem in the novel in the situation of the White Queen and the Black King, raising the clue question: who may the White Queen in the work be? (As I had the chance to deduct elsewhere, most probably it can be only Irina.)

The 'dream within the dream' device, mentioned before, arises at the end of both Carroll books may be correlated to the ends of most of Nabokov's novels. “Which dreamed it?” asks the title of the twelfth and final chapter of *Through the Looking Glass*. Either Alice was dreaming about the Red King, or the Red King was about Alice. Alice muses at some length as she twiddles the chessman, and the last line of the novel too is a line of verse: “Life, what is it but a dream?” (CL 234) Stranger still is the awakening at the end of the first book. Alice relates her dream (and so, presumably the text of the whole book) to her sister, who starts daydreaming in the story and dreams herself into Alice's dream that has already happened by then – textually, hence the text gives rise to a dream-reality which is like living also in reverse, because the book is formed as a perpetual text-space which all may enter and leave. In Nabokov, heroes having the same dream at the same time before knowing one another (e.g. Humbert and Annabelle in *Lolita* or Pnin and Victor) are linked together by a common secret knowledge, a twin dream. The graphic inversion of dreamer and dreamt, together with the philosophy of a transition to the dream-world, go back to a famous Taoist text “The Dream of Tsuang Tsi”, where an important Nabokovian image, a butterfly is the object of the dream. (The Oriental journey in the later *The Gift*, where the motifs of dream return amplified, justifies the presence of knowledge of Oriental sources). This view, which renders uncertain the relationship and boundary between worlds, is the basis of the concept of dream-death, which refers back not only to Lermontov's Oriental motifs, but in particular to two of his poems, the *Dream* (translated by Nabokov into English under the title *The triple dream*, and wrote an article on it, as I have mentioned before); the other verse is *I shall set out alone upon the road*. I consider dream-death an important invariant motif, one of the roots of

²¹ In a letter to Wilson (Karlinsky 2001: 51); in interview (Bergery 1992: 4).

which is also presumably in Carroll's work. (Here I shall only anticipate from my future book that the interpretation of death as sleep/dream in the metaphor of dissolving back into nature and continued breathing with its rhythm is a variant of eternal life, the creative transmigration of souls by way of metamorphosis. Warts and all, the alternative to “something after death” (as Hamlet puts it when he ponders the idea of “to die, to sleep...”) can only be the inconceivable void.

In Carroll the crossing of lines, rivers and boundaries takes place in terms of mythical spaces, and in both writers the rules of two games, chess and cards, are closely followed. On Carroll's royal croquet lawn there appear the King, the Queen and the Knave, the same three cards which give the title to Nabokov's novel (*King, Queen, Knave*, 1928) and its figures. As the cards also have numerical values, the figures can also personify numbers. In Carroll's fairy-tale the chiasmic metamorphose, the coming to life of numbers and cards pictures and the flattening of living beings into two dimensions form his underlying principles and fundamental language in which the process of the creation of symbols is a natural and organic constituent.²²

Nabokov, being an entomologist, has an expert knowledge of metamorphosis, and in his work nymphs (nymphets) are a basic metaphor, indeed a concept. In the plots of his novels metamorphoses can take place fast in both fantastic and psychological transformations. The word *nymphet* entered the English vocabulary after the publication of *Lolita* (Webster's dictionary 1974: “a sexually precocious girl of the age of puberty”). In Carroll too it is the Caterpillar in its transitional state that poses Alice questions concerning her identity, and makes the girl aware that she can neither define nor express herself – so her identity can become invisible thanks to a word play. “I can't explain MYSELF, I'm afraid – because I'm not myself, you see.” To which the Caterpillar replies, “I don't see”. Alice finds an excuse in the fact that it is very confusing for her to change shape several times a day. To the Caterpillar, which will pupate, passing from ugly larva to chrysalis and then beautiful butterfly, this is naturally not an argument, and Alice goes through constant changes on the advice of the Caterpillar. Later the Duchess gives her a wide-ranging instruction out of which emerges a formula which is applicable to many Nabokovian heroes define themselves completely incorrectly (e.g. *The Eye, Despair*). ““Be what you would seem to be’ – or if you'd like it put more simply – ‘Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had

²² My article on the animated objects and puppetized characters is in press: Hetényi Zs. “О предметном мире и экзистенциальной эмиграции Набокова и Хармса”, 2016, Tallinn University.

been would have appeared to them to be otherwise.” (CW 85–86) By the end of the story Alice has learnt the lessons: that it is impossible to define oneself, that one can be so many *different* people in a single day, and that others can't understand what someone says.

The name of Looking Glass in the title rather than Mirror deserves comment. Nabokov too has a preference for this form because of its derivation from the verb *look*, which correlates with views, outlook, world view, with visuality in general. The archetypal meanings of the mirror and the magical interpretations are extremely suitable for laying the foundations for the invariant of the mirrored worlds and the doubled characters in Nabokov's *oeuvre*. The looking glass does not reproduce the image of the present world but reflects it, and at the same time its enigmatically transparent surface conceals an independent life, because behind the visible, similar image: “all the rest was as different as possible” (CL 127) The nabokovian motif of “gauze”, this not transparent, but translucent interleaf paper that covers colored pictures in books reminds the obscurity of Carroll's mirror surface that that permits beautiful conjectures:

The day promised to be lovely; the cloudless sky still had a hazy cast, as a sheet of gauze paper sometimes covers an exceptionally vivid frontispiece in an expensive edition of fairy tales. Martin carefully removed this translucent sheet . . .”; “Upon her, upon that frontispiece, which, after the removal of the gauze paper, had proved to be a little coarse, a little too gaudy, Martin replaced the haze and through it the colors reassumed their mysterious charm. (Nabokov 1971: 43, 46)

The game of chess is a shared parallel allegory for the game of life at both writers. “It's a great huge game of chess that's being played – all over the world – if this IS the world at all” (CL 142). In this game also the doubling is a basic, visible phenomenon – all chess pieces have a Doppelgänger of other color. Among Carroll's characters there are many pairs who look like duplicate or twin figures, and their names alliterate (e.g. Tweedledum and Tweedledee, Hata and Haigha, and alliterative chapter-titles are frequent too, e.g. “Pig and Pepper”, “Wool and Water”). Here Nabokov's peculiar dual figures come to mind, although he denied firmly and consistently that he had Doppelgänger heroes, and he called the whole Doppelgänger subject “a frightful bore” (Nabokov 1990: 83, 85).

Parallel or duplicated figures do, however, play an important and distinctive role in his work. One of their functions is a simple comic, satirical or standardizing-uniforming duplication. The two prison warders Roman and Rodion bear the name and patronymic of

Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, but Nabokov evades a plain interpretation as duplicates by setting a third, Rodrig, beside them. This pair are puppet-like, and indeed are wax figures in both writers.

Nabokov himself repudiated the suggestion that Carroll had had any influence on him, for example, on *Lolita* (Nabokov 1990:81).²³ However, for example the role of photographs in the novel (about a hero who is considered a pedophile) is not insignificant, and this genre had greatly interested Carroll too. In addition to the work as painter, teacher and mathematical logic which he did in his own name of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, he took, among other things, a whole series of photographs in his own studio of girls aged from ten to fifteen, scantily dressed and in abject poses, one of whom was Alice Lidell, then only seven, whom he took in rags, posed as a beggar.²⁴ It is because of this attraction to little girls of tender years that Nabokov calls him Carroll Carroll, indicating or hinting by the double name that he was the original of Humbert Humbert, the spiritual relative of the narrator of *Lolita*. He regards the girls in Carroll's photographs, however, as sad, "as if participating in some dusty and dreadful charade" (Nabokov 1970:377). It was a kindly stroke of fate that Nabokov's acquisition of his first post in America was favorably influenced by the circumstance that his Carroll-translation was in the Wellesley College library (ibidem 286–287).

To return to the question of literary translation and to frame my reflections by a theme from their beginning, I cannot evade the question: how is it possible that Nabokov in his early career translated by domesticating (resolutely cutting everything off from the original, naturalizing and Russifying) in the *Alice*-book and earlier in Romain Rolland's *Colas Breugnon*, while in the maturity of his career, when he translated *Eugene Onegin*, he worked very close to the original, literally, and indeed produced as a background to the translation volumes of learned critical apparatus, not very reader-friendly but academic and detailed. Without surveying his whole career as translator and self-translator one of many answers may be proffered. In addition to the fact that over the forty years that separate the two translations the demands, practices and customs of literary translation had changed tremendously, the key to the answer lies in the question of the dominance, of the choice between the two languages and cultures, together with the direction of translation. He translated the earlier works into

²³ Appel's interview question was related to Carroll's influence on the unreal, hybrid language of *Bend Sinister* and *Pale Fire*. See also Sigler, C. ed. *Alices: Visions and Revisions of Lewis Carroll's 'Alice' Books*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1997.

²⁴ Only a fragment of his work remains; this is not only the result of the wet collodion development process of the time, but also because he destroyed all his pictures. At the same time, researchers like to deny that Carroll was a pedophile. See Wakeling, E. *Lewis Carroll: The Man and his Circle*. London: I. B:Tauris, 2015. On the photographs: ibid., Taylor, R. Lewis Carroll Photographer. Princeton UP, 2002.; Burgett, G. "A Look at tThe Unknown and Controversial Photography Career of Lewis Carroll". <http://petapixel.com/2014/04/18/look-unknown-controversial-photography-career-lewis-carroll/>. Last visited April 18, 2014.

Russian, but *Onegin* – from Russian, and this difference of direction must have shaped the difference between the two approaches. In both cases Nabokov seems to have made the Russian text the point of orientation, the base to which he worked. In the case of Carroll, he meant to place in Russian hands a delightful Russian children's book, and adaptation was the only means to this. In the case of *Eugene Onegin*, the Russian language and Russian text, and especially the person of Pushkin, meant to Nabokov a fundamental principle, a canonic standard, an inviolable whole. He meant to render accessible to the English readers Russian culture, the Russian world and language and his beloved Pushkin in their entirety. Whether the dense commentaries and the precise but desiccated verse really achieved is debatable – the four-volume *Eugene Onegin* is to be taken as a work of scholarship rather than as reading material. Another argument supporting the idea that the Russian-orientation guided him in every translation is the self-translation of *Lolita*, so important to him, from the original English to Russian. He confessed that this self-translation was undertaken because he did not want to entrust this task to another translator. It was his second and last self-translation into Russian (the first was *Speak. memory!*, resulting in *Drugie berega*). When he believed the critical voices that his Russian *Lolita*-translation was unsuccessful, that his Russian had become rusty, he gave up translating into Russian forever. In the final analysis every language is foreign, every text is a translation, expressing thought is a failed attempt, and one can only play with words.

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