

THE „MYSTIC VARIABLE”

Constructions of Happiness in Nabokov's works of his Russian Years

In my dissertation I study Vladimir Nabokov's literary constructions of happiness, their genesis and cultural roots. I investigate the evolution of the motif of happiness in the works written in Russian years, mainly in 1920's and 1930's. I had to realize due to the process of my research that one can not understand the development of Nabokov's constructions of happiness without an insight of his works, which were written in the same period, but in other genres. Therefore I extended my research to his poems and dramatic works as well. The analysis of *Tragedy of Mister Morn*, which remained in fragments proved to be necessary for this study. In this theatrical work Nabokov deals with the Russian revolutions, their consequences, and the social conceptions of happiness.

As far as I know the nabokovian concept and constructions of happiness has not been in the focus of Nabokov researches yet. Zsuzsa Hetényi¹ does not mention happiness among the so called invariant motifs of Nabokov's novels in her monography on Nabokov which was published in 2015. However, she points out the importance of the theme happiness in her analysis of *Mary*, where she correlates the motif with Pascal's thoughts. (Nabokov, who was a graduate with French minor of University of Cambridge could have studied Pascal.)

In the early period the element of transcendence has a significant role in Nabokov's literary constructions of happiness. One of the most important question of my reearc is what the relation of concepts and connections of *потусторонность* (otherworld) and *счастье* (happiness). (In my approach conception means the cultural context of the notion, and construction means the textula appearance, the context of the notion in Nabokov's works.)

1 HETÉNYI Zsuzsa: Nabokov regényösvényein, Kalligram Kiadó, Budapest, 2015.

In his early period Nabokov mainly enters the dialogue of the Russian metaphysical tradition of happiness. He plays with these conceptions, parodies and/or deconstructs them.

It was very important for me to follow the linear changes in the evolution of the constructions of happiness. On the other hand there are valid and reasonable arguments, which picture Nabokov's works as a unique „timeless” system. Nabokov's self-reflective narration itself offers this opportunity. The historical approach is necessary to better understand the cultural background of metaphysical elements of happiness in Russian culture at the turn of the last century.

In this paper I aimed to study those components of the huge and unbelievably rich Russian cultural heritage. These have not come in focus of Nabokov studies earlier, or not have been examined in this context. These components are the following: Nabokov's psychological knowledge in the early period (considering first of all William James's works), the art and life of genius director, play writer, artist and theorist, Nikolai Evreinov, and the grandiose tolstoyan heritage.

Thomas Karshan designated Nabokov's concept of happiness as „mystic variable” in his introduction of the English edition of *Tragedy of Mr. Morn*. In mathematics the *variable* often means an unknown quantity, however the „mystic variable” of happiness is a qualitative component, presence of which one can intensively sense in Nabokov's works, but in contrast with the constant ('invariant'), well-identified meanings, the sense of happiness is never steady or fixed. Therefore I analyse the constructions of happiness from different but strongly related, even overlapping, aspects: the aspect of the poetic (linguistic) articulation, the political perspective in a wide sense (historical and cultural), the aspect of visual sensation and picture creation, the psychological aspect, the aspect of Russian literary representation of love and intimacy, and from the point of view of mental processes and patterns of writing and reading. Multidisciplinary approaches in a research like this are absolutely legitimate and inevitable if we take into consideration the multilingual author's huge knowledge and wide range of interests in different areas: mathematics, biology, philosophy and literary history, chess, visual arts, drawing, sports, several games and so on. His short stories and later his novels are condensations, they were

made by the concentration of multiple layers of knowledge.

I arranged the order of the chapters in my paper as logically as I could, so the reader can easily follow the evolution of constructions of happiness and their links to in the more and more complex and complicated nabokovian textual universe.

Nabokov started his carrier as a poet, and his poetry was rooted in the great tradition of Russian Romantic literature. The Nabokovian poetry can be considered as a successor of the aesthetic lineage of such Romantic poets as Pushkin, Tiutchev, Fet and Bunin. As a part of the influence analysis, it was important to examine thoroughly the similar features of the constructions of happiness in the works of young Nabokov and his elder colleague, Ivan Bunin.

In Nabokov's short story entitled *Sounds* which was written in 1923, one can observe the same specific cosmism of poetic sensation. This cosmism is the most obvious link between Nabokov's early works and Bunin's poetry. At the same time one can also detect the characteristic innovations of Nabokov's narration distinguished from the Russian literary tradition, which tradition was otherwise masterfully integrated by him.

The problems of facing bereavements and coping with traumas are also key issues from the point of view of formation and development of Nabokov's happiness constructions and narrative strategies. Themes like lost happiness, the problem of remembrance, and the constructive and destructive mental dynamics of nostalgia appears in various combinations in his short stories from the 1920's.

The social dimension of happiness rarely emerges in Nabokov's constructions of happiness. The historical events and the political discourses are represented indirectly, only in allusions. After all I considered it to be important to examine happiness constructions from a political aspect as well, in the interest of better understanding Nabokov's reluctance to deal with social questions and his consequent defense of autonomy of art.

Liberal views as autonomy of art and freedom of research and speech were a paternal heritage for Nabokov: his father Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov was one of the founders, main

supporters and members of Russian parliament (State Duma) of the liberal Kadet Party (constitutional democrats). The aim of this party was to introduce a Western type of political system in Russia. Vladimir Dmitrievich's father, Nabokov's grandfather who was the Minister of Justice of Alexander the Second (The Liberator)'s government, worked on the modernisation of Russian legislations. As it is widely known, Nabokov himself was always reluctant to participate in any political movements or activities, however he exactly understood and accepted his father's political endeavours and shared his political values. He defined himself as an old school liberal and a white Russian.

My aim was not to position Nabokov's art in political context, but to detect the reflections of the contemporary political concepts of happiness in Nabokovian literary constructions. *Tragedy of Mr Morn* is not only one of the richest in references to Russian revolutions among Nabokov's works, but in this play one can see the most complex connections and correlations between Nabokov's artistic pathfindings and the historical-political realities in 1920's. My detailed analysis of the play in conjunction with examination of history of influence proved that Nabokov had been interested in first of all the interface between politics and art, i. e. the make-believe, the methods of illusion making.

Nabokov's father was an excellent speaker and powerful publicist as well. (His life had been threatened by far left and far right political forces as well. His name had been one of the first ones on the death note of the infamous Black Hundreds, the Russian ultra-nationalist movement. As an aristocrat and member of the Provisional Government he was in the cross hairs of bolshevik attacks too. In the end, he was killed in Berlin, by Russian fascists' bullet, which was not intended for him.) The style of his speeches and writings was clear, straightforward, had strong visuality. Besides, his memoirs cited in this chapter, demonstrate his exceptional responsiveness toward theatrical elements of politics, for example Alexander Kerensky's theatrical and hysterical behaviour, demagogic speeches, or the bolshevik propaganda.

In Nabokov's play happiness gets in focus as a political vision, which could be realized by a

talented monarch or an excellent ruler. This positive vision can be realized as so called „reflective reality”, which can come into existence when people believe in its possibility. However, one could call into action negative „reflective realities” as well, i. e., to use contemporary vocabulary, one can reprogramme the mind of the masses oppositely too. In *Tragedy of Mister Morn* the antagonists, the King and the Revolutioner fight against each other first of all on the *stage* of politics. Oppositional ways of thinking, oppositional psychological attitudes and personalities are feuding with each other in the play, and the stake their fight is to establish their credibility in front of the people.

After the examination of the theatre of politics and politics of theatre I analyse Nabokov's picture creation and his textual representations of visual arts and mediums in connection with happiness constructions in the Russian period. There are a lot of essays and monographies in Nabokov studies, which discuss in depth this theme, and Zsuzsa Hetényi in her monography also classifies paintings, photography, films, lights, colours, mirrors and other visual elements as invariable motifs in Nabokovian texts. Nabokov himself wrote about the defining role of visuality played in his life in the *Second Chapter* of his memoirs entitled *Speak, Memory!*, which contained his mother's portrait as well. Both of them were synesthetes, and Nabokov's dreams, visions, fantasies, perceptions of pictures of the Nature were also akin to his mother's experiences and sensibility. Moreover, his mother taught him water-colour painting in his early childhood as well. I discuss this theme after the political aspects of happiness constructions, because there are multiple signs, that during writing *Tragedy of Mr Morn*, Nabokov made himself aware of the huge potential in textual depiction of visual patterns. Seeing as neurobiological link between the beholder and the cosmos (or the world of flesh, according to the Merleau-Pontian idea), and as culturally determined, learned ability played central role in Nabokov's thought from the beginning of his career.

In chapter titled *Enchanting spectacles – the power of the picture* I examine the broad spectrum of the physical and mental images and depictions of happiness. Already in the early short stories we can detect not only the narrative depiction of aesthetic individual perception, but

also the appearance and development of the theme „image as cultural construction”. The expectations, desires, aspirations, beliefs and misbeliefs related to happiness get visual markings as well. Moreover, in some works the semantic level of patterns counterpoints the narrative level of the plot. While analysing the novels titled *The Gift* and *Invitation to a Beheading* I focus on the literary portrait as a genre, and in connection with it I examine the ambivalent role of literature in creating, reserving and interpreting cultural images. Another important issue of these novels is what opportunities the writer has if the dominating political power monopolises and controls all media, and the ways and methods of using any kind of aesthetic media become a question of life and death. During the process of interpreting the novels it is necessary to analyse symbolism of the water as one the most essential motif of Nabokovian texts. For example the star reflected by the water surface is one of the most frequently encountered cosmic metaphors of Buninian poetry as well. Water as natural mirror, as guide of the light, or as a destructive element destroying readable signs, by its optical features occurs characteristic component of the Nabokovian patterns. In the above mentioned novels water is as symbol of consciousness as well. Issues of controlling living waters and the regulation of waterways are correlated to the question of freedom and possibility of human creation in the novels.

While analysing and interpreting happiness constructions we must take into consideration the possible sources of Nabokov's psychological knowledge. As it is widely known, in prefaces of his Russian novels translated to English and often in his very works Nabokov speaks of Freud and freudism in pejorative and dismissive terms. In chapter titled *The psychology of happiness* I research Nabokov's different kind of psychological approaches and examine William James's possible influence on Nabokov's writing strategies. Nabokov had started to read James's works under his father's inspiration in his childhood in Russia. In early short stories we can find correlations and analogies between James's views and Nabokovian constructions of happiness first of all in the following areas: James's conceptions of happiness, free will, attention, the cosmic consciousness and immortality.

Literary codes of love and sexuality have a very important and specific role in Nabokovian constructions of happiness. In the plots of the examined short stories one can observe the various patterns of love affairs. In *Sounds* the adulterous liaison comes to an easy end in a happy summer day. In the *Revenge* the consorts, the old professor and his young wife fatally misunderstand each other and the story ends with the killing of the wife. The *La Veneziana* is a story of adultery too, „packing” in an art forgery case. In *Terror* love appears as a protecting power against the terror of alienation and feeling of meaninglessness. In early dramas, in the *Death and Tragedy of Mr. Morn* the adultery and eternal triangle motifs have a central role, too. From the aspects of love and sexuality I examine coding of intimacy in Russian literary tradition, first of all in Pushkin's, Chekhov's, Tolstoy's and Bunin's works, and influences and roles of these codes in Nabokov's happiness constructions. During the analysis of poetics of love in *Mary* and *Glory*, I deal with Bergson's impact on Nabokov's way of thinking. According to my hypothesis, Nabokov did not only integrate Bergson's thoughts on time, evolution and artistic inspire, but he creatively improved them in his autonomous aesthetic system. Therefore it is not surprising, that Nabokovian understanding of time or his relation to visuality strongly correlate with Gilles Deleuze, who improved the bergsonian notion of time in his philosophy of images.

While Nabokov research explored thoroughly the influences of Chekhovian and Buninian codes of intimacy, the influence of Tolstoyan codes has not become a central topic of investigations yet. The causes of it are probably the antagonistically opposed aesthetic views of them. In Tolstoy's short stories conformism of individuals is caused by secularisation, emptiness of official religion and prevailing hypocrisy. The only way out from this condition is finding the authentic way to believe in God. Nabokov is not interested in social circumstances and conditions, but he deals with the analysis of the subject, the individual confrontations against various pitfalls of conformism. This individual confrontation does not allow redemption that is guaranteed for everyone redemption, which seemed so liberating perspective in Tolstoy's works.

At the same time in Nabokov's early short stories one can detect the tolstoyan

concept that „there is no death”, and the identification of death as the fear from it. The ending of *Tragedy of Mr. Morn*, where the protagonist happily steps out into the blue night, shows a strong Tolstoyan impact. It does not matter, however, how much Nabokov deconstruct later the tolstoyan spiritual happy ending in his works, he would never abolish Tolstoy's desired perspective, which the great ancestor had tried to authenticize all his life.

The tolstoyan concepts are also noticeable in Nabokovian coding of intimacy. However, contrary to the gradation of psychological tension in Tolstoy's works, Nabokov operates with more and more elaborated and complex narrative structures in his love stories. One of the most often cited pitch of Nabokov's struggle with Tolstoy is the sentence in the beginning of the novel titled *Ada*, as a „bad translation” of the opening sentence of *Anna Karenina*: „All happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy ones more or less alike.” This definition is relevant to Nabokov's strange, obsessed and maniacal heroes. Happiness means different things for all of them, but unhappiness means the same: to be deprived of the object of desire and love: a book, a country, a language, a habit or the presence of another person; and to be humiliated, outlawed, hunted because of one's individual differences.

Nabokov focused on and affirmed his whole creative work on the very basis which alienated Tolstoy from art: deception and delusion. Nevertheless, in Nabokovian trickery there is something fundamentally metaphysical and tolstoyan. In the chapters of *Speak, Memory!*, where Nabokov writes about his passion for butterflies, one can observe a parallel mental process of „reading”: the way as a scientist reads the Book of Nature. This high-level scientific knowledge and precise methods of studying butterflies made it possible for Nabokov to affirm all of his passions, all of his memoirs, and all of his works. In other words, he does not only imitate other writers in terms of intertextuality, but he imitates the Creator Himself. The extraordinary ecstasy as he writes on butterflies is substantially similar to the extraordinary ecstasy of reading of his works.

In the last chapter of my paper I deal with nabokovian concepts of the art of reading. To better understand Nabokov's reading concepts I examine his reflections to the tolstoyan criticism of

art, and narrative patterns of reading as cognition. In the last part of this chapter – as a sort of excursus – I show some aesthetic documents of Ottó Tolnai's readings and understandings of Nabokov. To do so, I do not only take into consideration not only the postmodern theories, which eliminate the border between the writer (author) and the reader in the process of creation of a literary work. However I also examine the ways, how Tolnai, by his own devices introduces Nabokov's works into the Hungarian literary discourses, and offers further inspirations for the Nabokov research in Hungary.

As the result of the recent research I found that constructions of happiness in Nabokov's early works was an amalgam of the different contemporary disciplines and literary allusions as well. In each of his works Nabokov approaches the complexity of theme from different angles. By his open ending texts he can picture those components of individual, personal emotions and desires, which very often do not or can not be conscious, and are not accessible by the others. Desire of happiness and happiness as an extatic experience are paradoxical phenomena. From the aspect of time they occur as a memory or a projection, and they can easily become traumatic nostalgia or narcissist illusion, or, in extreme cases an aggressive utopianism. Illusion, imagination or belief, i. e. mental processes beyond the realm of the reason, are inseparable parts of the desire of happiness. These mental processes make the transcendent experience possible, without which the authentic experience of happiness is not possible in Nabokov's stories. The experience of happiness is represented in early works only in individual patterns, and it cannot be generalized, and can not be derived from any deep structures. It is not can be a goal, and it is not only a mental condition. It is rather a special perception of time: the gift of personal experience of eternity.

List of my publications related to the theme of the dissertation

1. A nagy Nabokov-szótár. Hetényi Zsuzsa: *Nabokov regényösvényein*. Jelenkor, 2016. 7-8. sz 827-832.o.
2. „Azon a boldog napon...” A boldogság konstrukciója és a költői megnyilatkozás problémája

Nabokov *Hangok* című elbeszélésében. Tanulmányok, 2015/2. Újvidék, 21-32.
<http://epub.ff.uns.ac.rs/index.php/tan>

3. A múzeum mint hamisítvány és csapda.. Tiszatáj, 2015. 12. sz. 33-41.

4.. „Mint a víz Opheliának” Az esztétikai percepció kérdése Nabokov *Meghívás kivégzésre* és *Adomány* című regényeiben. Jelenkor, 2014/10. 1106-1115.

5. A Semmi enciklopédiája. Alteregók Kosztolányi, Esterházy, Tolnai és Nabokov műveiben In: Mikola Gyöngyi: *A pillanat küszöbén*. Esszék, tanulmányok, elemzések. Zetna Kiadó, Zenta, 2013. 37-59. A tanulmány korábbi változata: Jelenkor, 2011/4. 451-460.

6. Titkos fordulópont. A szerelem transzcendenciája Nabokov *Másenyka* című regényében. In: *Lábjegyzetek Platónhoz* 11. kötet: A szerelem. Szerk.: Laczkó Sándor. Pro Philosophia Szegediensi, Magyar Filozófiai Társaság, SZTE BTK Filozófia Tanszék, Státus Kiadó, Szeged, 2013. 145-153.

7. Red Admirable In: Mikola Gyöngyi: *A véső nyoma*, Kijárat Kiadó, Budapest, 2010. 245-249. Eredeti megjelenés: Red Admirable, avagy az írásművészet boldogsága, Élet és Irodalom, 2010. február 19.

8. Árnyék a szív mögött. Nabokov szerelem-fölfogásáról és az olvasás szenvedélyéről in: Mikola Gyöngyi: *A véső nyoma*, Kijárat Kiadó, Budapest, 2010. 250-260. Eredeti megjelenés: Pannonhalmi Szemle 2010/1 Passio 104-112.