

“The Vane Sisters” by Vladimir Nabokov and the Hermeneutics of Memory and Death

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Abstract

The narrative of Nabokov’s short story “The Vane Sisters” is saturated with the language of death and memory. It is the knowledge of the sudden death of the Other, the apprehensive living in the presence of the death of the Other, the phantoms, but also the trivialities of life in which the discourse of death surfaces. The narrative of the story revolves around the deaths of two sisters: Sybil and Cynthia, and the narrator’s recollections of their deaths. The article offers a reading of the story’s narrative through the lens of Paul Ricoeur’s philosophical hermeneutics, Jacques Derrida’s *aporia* of mourning, Sigmund Freud’s reflection on mourning, Emmanuel Levinas’s explication of the mechanisms of memory and mourning, as well as Linda Hutcheon’s discussion of nostalgia. The insufficiency of memory, its downcast substance, the recollection and contemplation of the dead Other stumbles against an impossibility of mourning. The remembrance of the past as a volatile activity, the poignancy of suffering mollified by meaningful evasions, the unfeasibility of nostalgia conveyed in dreams constitute Vladimir Nabokov’s art, in which the hermeneutics of memory and death forcefully transpires.

Keywords: Nabokov, death, memory, hermeneutics

Abstrakt

Narracja opowiadania Nabokova „Siostry Vane” jest nasycona językiem wyrażającym śmierć i pamięć. Nagła śmierć, życie w ‘obecności’ śmierci, spotkania z duchami, ale i trywialne sprawy codziennego życia przeniknięte poczuciem przemijania tworzą dyskurs, w którym śmierć staje się motywem przewodnim. Treścią opowiadania jest fakt śmierci dwóch siostr: Sybili i Cyntii, oraz refleksja narratora nad śmiercią. Artykuł jest interpretacją opowiadania w świetle różnych perspektyw filozoficznych i psychologicznych: hermeneutyki filozoficznej Paula Ricoeura, *aporii* żałoby według Jacquesa Derridy, refleksji Zygmunta Freuda nad żałobą, filozoficznych rozważań Emmanuela Levinasa nad pamięcią i żałobą, a także pojęcia nostalgii według Lindy Hutcheon. Niewystarczalność pamięci, jej mroczna treść, wspomnienie i kontemplacja Zmarłego rozbija się o niemożliwość rzeczywistej żałoby. Pamięć, cierpienie łagodzone poprzez znaczące unikanie pełnego odtwarzania w pamięci wydarzeń przeszłych, nieuchwytność nostalgii wyrażona w marzeniach sennych tworzą sztukę prozatorską Vladimira Nabokova, w której hermeneutyka pamięci i śmierci przemawia z niezwykłą siłą.

Słowa kluczowe: Nabokov, śmierć, pamięć, hermeneutyka

The narrative of Nabokov’s short story “The Vane Sisters” is riddled with the language of death and memory. It offers an insight into the sudden death of the Other, the apprehensive living in the presence of the death of the Other, the phantoms, but also it is concerned with the trivialities of life in which the discourse of death surfaces. The narrative of the story revolves around the deaths of two sisters: Sybil and Cynthia and the narrator’s recollections of and musings on their deaths. The article is a reading of the story’s narrative through the lens of Paul Ricoeur’s philosophical hermeneutics and Jacques Derrida’s *aporia* of mourning. It also draws upon Sigmund Freud’s and Emmanuel Levinas’s attempts to explicate the mechanisms of memory and mourning. Finally, it deploys Linda Hutcheon’s theorization of the nostalgia mode. Nabokov’s story instantiates the problematics of the insufficiency of memory, as well as its downcast substance. It shows how the recollection and contemplation of the dead Other stumble against an impossibility of mourning. Vladimir Nabokov’s art probes deeply into the themes of the remembrance of the past as a volatile activity, the poignancy of suffering mollified by meaningful

evasions, and the unfeasibility of nostalgia conveyed in dreams. These are the areas of meaning in which the hermeneutics of memory and death forcefully transpires.

The phenomenon of death – the somber, premature deaths of the titled Vane sisters becomes the pivot of the French teacher's – an unreliable narrator's remembrances. Most significantly, the solemn memories are enmeshed with the bizarre recollections of the trivialities of life. The story opens with his learning of the death of one of the girls – Cynthia's. The death happens by chance and strikes as something inasmuch profound and unbearable as banal. The narrator's reaction to the sinister news testifies to Freud's reflection on the reductionist nature of our response to the death of the Other. In an attempt to explain death, we focus on a chance, an accident, some tangible, explainable reality (Freud 1953, 304–305). The narrative doubles the effect of the suddenness of death enveloped in the trifling circumstances of life by placing another death within its plot. This is done in retrospect.

The narrator is confronted with the death of his student, Sybil, one of the Vane Sisters. Most certainly, because of an unfulfilled love, Sybil commits a suicide. Narrated from a hindsight, the teacher's encounter with Sybil's corpse shocks with an outstandingly uninvolved fashion of the treatment of death. The narrator concentrates on the grammatical mistakes in the death note. There arises a question: is memory resistant to the depth of feelings? Or perhaps the arousal of sentiment dissolves memory's capacities? The narrator's response in the face of the death of the Other brings to mind the Derridean insistence on the impossibility of mourning (Derrida 1993, 5–6). The French teacher is not capable of genuine mourning. Memory plays tricks on him; remembering becomes selective. Memory undergoes a significant erasure of everything which seems to disquiet or disparage the routine and stability of life.

Riddled with both recollections and hints about the inexpressibility of the past, the narrative probes deeply into the interconnections between the past and the present. It offers not only remembrances of the past, but revels in images of weird contacts with the dead Other. Though rendered in a simple, seemingly casual style, the interconnections with the spectral world are shocking. Cynthia's memory is haunted with the odd visitations of the dead Other. The people whom she used to know come like revenants and incarnate her psyche. The uncanny takes on various, inexplicable forms:

For a few hours, or for several days in a row, and sometimes recurrently, in irregular series, for months or years, anything that happened to Cynthia, after a given person had died, would be, she said, in the manner and mood of that person. The event might be

extraordinary, changing the course of one's life; or it might be a string of minute incidents just sufficiently clear to stand out in relief against one's usual day and then shading off into still vaguer trivia as the aura gradually faded (Nabokov 2016, 7).

Cynthia remains under the spell of the dead Other. The barrier between her and the afterlife seems to collapse, her subconscious enters the incomprehensible. The unfathomable recesses of the mind creating memories of the dead Other get neutralized on the conscious level. However, the call of the dead Other generates for Cynthia the feeling of disquiet, a painful unease if her dead sister is actually pleased with her. Nabokov's delineation of her mourning, which happens on the conscious level, is a literary illustration of Levinas's reflection of death and mourning. Levinas focuses on the ethical dimension of death – the import and the irreducible nature of the relation between the self and the Other. The responsibility for the Other is not restricted to life only. For him it is extended to the phenomenon of death. The French philosopher writes:

The other who expresses himself is entrusted to me (and there is no debt in regard to the other, for what is due is unpayable: one is never free of it)...The death of the other who dies affects me in my very identity as a responsible me" [moi]; it affects me in my non-substantial identity, which is not the simple coherence of various acts of identification, but is made up of an ineffable responsibility...It is in my relation, my deference to someone who no longer responds, already a culpability – the culpability of the survivor (Levinas 2000, 12).

For Levinas, the relation of the self with the Other – my 'self' in the face of the dead Other causes that I am a blameworthy self. The feeling of blameworthiness does not amount to a moral guilt, but becomes part of my genuine response to the Other. Here I reach that which is not to be reached since death is an impossible possibility. The way I am bereaved does not mean I am focused on myself and thus I am bereaved, but the profundity of my bereavement conveys the state of my being no longer worthy of living. The acute confrontation with the dead Other causes that I cannot and will not be able to exist in the sense I had existed earlier. There comes to an impasse – my being responsible means both that I am resilient to death and I endure it. My endurance is ominously accompanied with an unbearable feeling of my 'self' as not being able to respond properly in the face of the dead Other as the dead Other cannot respond to me.

Cynthia feels a total lack of a proper response to the dead Sybil. Imagining her dead sister not to be contended with her conduct, she resorts to the symbolic mourning,

named by Freud as healthy mourning. The remembrance of the dead Other is brought about by cherishing the Other’s former belongings: hair, clothing, etc. These bear the symbolic value of something absolutely close to the survivor’s heart. However, Cynthia’s gestures become a monstrous version of the symbolic. The whole process evolves into an outrageous distortion of the symbolic mourning. Cynthia sends to the French professor snapshots of Sybil’s tomb, skunks, or even her own hair pretending that it is Sybil’s.

The mourning takes on a grotesque note. Cynthia beguiles the dead sister, but also teasingly frolics with the survivor – Sybil’s lover, sending him the most eerie symbols of her presence to induce the memory of the dead Other. The traumatic experience of the death of the Other gets augmented and verges on the absurd. The boundary between the real and the non-real is shattered. Cynthia shows an odd proclivity to spiritualism. Summoning ghosts becomes a procedure tinted with an ultimate delight. The reader is taken aback by the narrator’s confessing of the apparitions’ visits – the ghosts of Oscar Wilde, Leo Tolstoy and others. The real and the non-real converge, the effect of awesomeness is perfectly achieved. There arises a query if the communication with spirits is of nonsensical nature, or if it has some significant bearing on the narrative’s incorporation of such exhilarating experiences within its framework of evoking the traces of memory. The summoning of the ghosts seems to be in accord with the narrative’s insistence on revitalizing the past. The past is not merely a recollection, but more meaningfully the past becomes the present. The ridiculous summoning of the men of *belles-lettres* aggrandizes Cynthia’s contacting with the spirit of her sister and her feeling of being culpable in a Levinasian sense. As the survivor, Cynthia feels guilty, but also enters and dwells in nostalgia. Her pervasive sensation of melancholy attests to Linda Hutcheon’s theorization of the nostalgia mode who explicates it thus:

Nostalgia, in fact, may depend precisely on the *irrecoverable* nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal. It is the very pastness of the past, its inaccessibility, that likely accounts for a large part of nostalgia’s power – for both conservatives and radicals alike. This is rarely the past as actually experienced, of course; it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire. In this sense, however, nostalgia is less about the past than about the present (Hutcheon 2016, 2).

The critic also points to the crystallization of nostalgia “into precious moments selected by memory, but also by forgetting, and by desire’s distortions and reorganizations” (Hutcheon 2016, 2). This kind of crystallization has a stupendous effect in the

narrative of “The Vane Sisters.” After Cynthia’s death, similarly to her attempt to disarm Sybil, the narrator tries to fight Cynthia’s ghost. The eccentric memories enmeshed with fear are productive in all forms of visages. These are conjured up in accord with the unconventionality of the nostalgia mode. To forget means to eradicate, to contradict, to deny, to annihilate, but is this truly tangible? To forget is also to live anew. Interestingly, the story’s narrator follows the quaint workings of nostalgia. He discloses the inner fight of a total disagreement with the death of the Other: “I was appealing to flesh, and the corruption of flesh, to refute and defeat the possible persistence of discarnate life. Alas, these conjurations only enhanced my fear of Cynthia’s phantom. Atavistic peace came with dawn, and when I slipped into sleep the sun through the tawny window shades penetrated a dream that somehow was full of Cynthia” (Nabokov 2016, 13). The disagreement, though, is doomed to a failure and intensifies the acute feeling of a loss.

Astoundingly, the devastating force of an experience of death merging with nostalgia’s selective memory prompting the most peculiar re-existence of the past, entails nothing feasible for the narrator. An alluring potency of memory seems to collapse. The narrator’s divulging of the elusive, ephemeral qualities of memory at the story’s ending instigates unexpected avenues in the interpretative process as nothing appears to be certain or graspable. The French professor assumes the position of a reader/interpreter of his own story:

I set myself to reread my dream – backward, diagonally, up, down – trying hard to unravel something Cynthia-like in it, something strange and suggestive that must be there. I could isolate, consciously, little. Everything seemed blurred, yellow-clouded, yielding nothing tangible. Her inept acrostics, maudlin evasions, theopathies – every recollection formed ripples of mysterious meaning. Everything seemed yellowly blurred, illusive, lost (Ricoeur 2004, 5).

In assuming the role of the interpreter of his own story, the narrator attempts to reconfigure the dire events, opening a possibility of reading them otherwise. The sense of a loss, an irredeemable possibility of Cynthia’s ‘incarnation’ frustrates the narrator. Do the constructive, reconstructive powers of nostalgia really work to the effect of rearticulating the past in its very pastness? Does memory spark off a viable possibility of re-living the past? Hutcheon remarks on the various ways nostalgia operates: “You can look and reject. Or you can look and linger longingly. In its looking backward in this yearning way, nostalgia may be more of an attempt to defy the end, to evade teleology” (Hutcheon 2016, 4). In this impossible attempt to counterpoint the end, to fight the dark forces of

death, the French teacher experiences the fuzziness of any ruminations. It seems that every recollection abounds in covert meanings: “...every recollection formed ripples of mysterious meanings” (Hutcheon 2016, 4). Nabokov deploys massively words evocative of an impasse in grasping the extraterrestrial reality, creating thus the world which nears the magic realm. Nothing seems definable, everything seems abstract and obscure.

Paul Ricoeur begins his seminal *Memory, History, Forgetting* with the phenomenology of memory, drawing upon the ancient Greek equalization of memory and imagination. He claims: “...the presence in which the representation of the past seems to consist does indeed appear to be that of an image. We say interchangeably that we represent a past event to ourselves or that we have an image of it, an image that can be either quasi-visual or auditory” (Ricoeur 2004, 5). The representations of the past in Nabokov’s “The Vane Sisters” possess the transgressional value of conjoining the past to the present images of the past while demonstrating the condensation and displacement of language, its fertility and ineptitude. The report-like, shockingly cold delivery of the information regarding death is juxtaposed with longish, reflective passages which meticulously record feelings bespeaking the need for memory’s sharp and effective work. The narrator informs about Cynthia’s death in a brisk, seemingly unmoved fashion at the story’s outset, just to follow it from a hindsight by an elaborate, minute delineation of the aura of the evening he learnt about her death. It takes three long paragraphs to convey the specificity of the evening the narrator got to know about the dire event. These include exquisite descriptions of nature: the show of the icicles “drip-dripping from the eaves of a frame house,” “the dazzling diamond reflection of the low sun on the round back of a parked automobile,” “the delicately dying sky” (Nabokov 2016, 2). The imagery anticipatory of death comes to a climax in the most atypical image of a parking meter, which invokes ghostliness, the horrendous spectral effect: “The lean ghost, the elongated umbra cast by a parking meter upon some damp snow, had a strange ruddy tinge” (Nabokov 2016, 2).

The narrator’s memory is fueled, urged by and equated with the imagination’s productive force: “...more than once in my life have I felt that stab of vicarious emotion followed by a rush of personal irritation against travelers who seem to feel nothing at all upon revisiting spots that ought to harass them at every step with wailing and writhing memories” (Nabokov 2016, 2–3). Elucidating the interrelation between memory and imagination, Ricoeur points to the distinctive features of the phenomena in question. He talks about: “Two aims, two intentionalities: the first that of imagination, directed toward the fantastic, the fictional, the unreal, the possible, the utopian, and the other,

that of memory, directed toward prior reality, priority constituting the temporal mark par excellence of the ‘thing remembered’ of the ‘remembered’ as such” (Ricoeur 2004, 5). Ricoeur explains an indispensable role of imagination in memory operations, which at some point in his discussion of memory is even equated with memory. Affection and imagination become the true texture of the narrator’s recollections.

In his hermeneutics of the self, underscoring the dynamic nature of memory workings, Ricoeur proclaims that “to remember (*se souvenir de*) something is to remember oneself (*se souvenir de soi*)” (Ricoeur 2004, 3). Nabokov saturates the narrator’s powers of reminiscence with an outstandingly unusual metaphor of being in a union with the universe, an existential unity of human perception and the ontological, primordial unlimitedness of knowledge. The narrator professes: “I walked on in a state of raw awareness that seemed to transform the whole of my being into one big eyeball rolling in the world’s socket” (Ricoeur 2004, 2). This most intriguing metaphor is evocative of the exquisite communion between being as transformed to perception only; the beholder of an eye experiences the body instrument in its unique articulative function. Illumination and Being come as one; in the eye, the essential and existential merge. The perceptible becomes a vehicle of knowing. The fusion of one’s existence and the world conveyed via the metaphor affirms Heidegger’s authenticity of being, which bespeaks the state of calmness, detachment; one is no longer in possession of things. The essence of existence is conveyed in the releasement. Heidegger’s *Dasein* – being there communicates an openness to being (Heidegger 1962, 28–30). The releasement is entwined with the faculty of memory. If remembering for Ricoeur is equalized with remembering oneself, memory is elevated to the state pertaining to Being itself.

Presenting a phenomenological account of memory in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricoeur speaks of various sets of opposites. One of the pairs is evocation and search, he writes:

[B]y evocation let us understand the unexpected appearance of memory. Aristotle reserved for this the term *mneme*, reserving *anamnesis* for what we shall later call search or call. And he defined *mneme* as a pathos, as an affection: it happens that we remember this or that, on such and such an occasion; we then experience a memory. Evocation is an affection, therefore in contrast to the search. In other words, abstracting from this polarity, evocation as such bears the weight of the enigma that set in motion the investigations of Plato and Aristotle, namely, the presence now of the absent that was earlier perceived, experienced, learned (Ricoeur 2004, 26).

Ricoeur's discussion of the evocative character of memory; memory being submerged in the immensity of affection explains with efficacy Nabokov's fashion of grasping memory's workings.

Memory in Nabokov's narrative operates as a range of evocations, these are images of the things experienced and re-lived through affection. The day the narrator learns about Cynthia's death is deemed compunctious. At the story's beginning the narrative offers an elaborate image of icicles and their shadows with which the narrator is enchanted. These play an anticipatory, symbolic role in terms of the two deaths, around which the story revolves. The narrative is rounded up with a reference to icicles and in retrospect these become expressive of the troublesome memories, whose force gets moderated via the appeal of the artistry of colors and hues. Belonging to the realm of sensuous experiences, these scraps of memory, however, come with vehemence in the narrator's subconscious expressed in dreams. Fighting the specter of the dead lover, recollections come in an unrestricted, untamed flow. The problematic of memory, a capacity for recalling, the truthfulness of recollections need to be viewed as a more complex query once the reader realizes that the unnamed narrator of the story is not a reliable story-teller. Memories are rendered through the prism of feelings which distort a genuine account. A lack of knowledge regarding the narrator's appearance or of any other detailed information multiplies the effect of incredulity.

While rendering the weirdest spiritualistic séance, the narrator discloses that the inducement of memories regards reality which is hard to decipher. He purposefully creates an aura of undecidability and of an impasse in comprehension: "A complex of what seemed to be some Russian type of architectural woodwork (figures on boardsman, horse, cock, man, horse, cock), all of which was difficult to take down hard to understand, and impossible to verify" (Nabokov 2016, 10). Nabokov's enchantment with the enigma which needs to be unraveled, in "The Vane Sisters" is conveyed by means of the acrostic. The narrative's last paragraph is a meaningful example of it. The acrostic serves the role of both creating the concealment and a possibility of discovery. The aura of awesomeness rules. Nabokov grants us with the joy of reading the acrostic. The first letter of each of the words in the final paragraph constitutes the hidden message. The acrostic is Nabokov's excellent hoax – what is concealed in the finesse of the longish paragraphs depicting the icicles and the meter at the story's beginning is unveiled in the narrative's last lines. The two sisters in the other world send a message to the French professor, destabilizing his deterrence of the contact with the eerie afterlife.

Most importantly, Cynthia, the story's spiritualist, appears to be Nabokov's spokesperson. Scott Esposito notices:

Nabokov was infatuated with the paranormal, and his works are saturated with penetration between worlds. Nabokov believed that something (not necessarily a deity) helped this world hold together, that coincidences were not always just coincidences, but the agency of something beyond. 'The Vane Sisters' is a very clear statement of this idea, which plays key roles in *Invitation to a Beheading*, *The Gift*, *Pale Fire*, *Ada*, and *Look at the Harlequins!*, among others (Esposito 2016, 2).

Nabokov's attempt at evocating the operations of the agency from beyond is a remarkable feature of his fiction. The mystery enveloping memories in the narrative opens an unexpected leeway. Eternity appears to have an impact on mortality in ways most outrageous for understanding. Cynthia features in the narrative as a puppet in the hands of the dead Others who seem to have some peculiar claim over her life. The human specters send her a welcoming gesture, which is a soothing experience of hospitality:

She was sure that her existence was influenced by all sorts of dead friends each of whom took turns in directing her fate much as if she were a stray kitten which a schoolgirl in passing gathers up, and presses to her cheek, and carefully puts down again, near some suburban hedge – to be stroked presently by another transient hand or carried off to a world of doors by some hospitable lady (Nabokov 2016, 2).

In his hermeneutics of memory, Ricoeur demonstrates the underlying dynamics of remembering and forgetting. The French philosopher stresses that to remember means to 'struggle against forgetting,' to wrestle and to wrest scraps of memory from the "rapacity" of time (*Augustinian Dexit*), and from sinking into oblivion (*oubli*) (Ricoeur 2004, 30). Cynthia's unconventional attitude to the past and the dead Other bespeaks this quaint need for the nostalgic saving of the past. In this respect, approaching the past with the daunting, premonitory sense of the dead affecting the present is also concordant with Hutcheon's explication of nostalgia: "The aesthetics of nostalgia might, therefore, be less a matter of simple memory than of complex projection; the invocation of a partial, idealized history merges with dissatisfaction with the present. And it can do so with great force. Think of how visceral, how physically "present" nostalgia's promptings are..." (Hutcheon 2016, 10). The presence of the past is both encrypted in the workings

of memory and exteriorizes itself through the recollections facilitated with the idealized forms generated by nostalgia’s cogent capabilities. Cynthia’s eccentricity as regards the positioning of the spectral figures in her mental composure betokens her adherence to the instinctual, the intuitive, the primeval. This secret gift caters for the knowledge one needs to handle. The persistence of the unnamable must surface, and it surfaces in the discourse in the more palpable and also the absolutely inimitable ways. Jacques Derrida puts this truth thus: “[t]here is then some spirit. Spirits. And one must reckon with them. One cannot not have to, one must not not be able to reckon with them” (Derrida 2012, xx).

The narrative of Nabokov’s “The Vane Sisters” avoids any simplistic depiction of the phenomena of death and memory. Memory’s evocative power to enliven the dead Other in the deepest recesses of the psyche is pictured with an eschewal of crudeness, as the incomprehensible is always escaping any conceptualizations or banal manifestations.

Conclusion

Summing up, reading “The Vane Sisters” in the light of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of memory, Derrida’s *aporia* of mourning, Levinas’s ethics of death, Freud’s conceptualization of mourning and Hutcheon’s discussion of nostalgia, provide a spectrum of insights into the richness of the text’s instantiation of the hermeneutics of memory and death. Nabokov’s narrative demonstrates a resilience of a particular kind. Memory is treated both as a mental faculty which engages the fundamental powers of receptivity and as an apparatus of image construction. The novelist’s ample vision of the phenomena of memory and death substantiates the philosophical musings. Nabokov’s fictional rendition of reminiscences accords with Ricoeur’s insistence on memory’s combative aptitude, its duel with the deteriorative forces of forgetting and the primacy of the evocative capacity.

The narrative of “The Vane Sisters” provides also an intriguing illustration of Levinasian notion of responsibility in the face of the death of the Other, responsibility which crosses the boundary between this and the other world. An impossibility of mourning, an impasse in effectual mourning conveyed in Cynthia’s awkward resorting to the world of symbols testifies to Derrida’s deconstructive concern with an *aporia* of mourning, as well as Freud’s distinction between the healthy and unhealthy mourning. Finally, Hutcheon’s reckoning of the nostalgia mode sheds light on the subtle nuances of the relation between

the present and the past in the story's narrative. The characters are shown as enduring the present which is influenced by an awesome past. The death of the Other becomes the site of some peculiar convergence of the present and the past. The richness of articulations and understandings of memory in this short emblematic text by Nabokov manifests his profound interest in the workings of memory and his espousal of the impenetrable. The narrative of "The Vane Sisters" is a fiction, the reading of which through the prism of philosophical hermeneutics moves beyond any ossified form of dogmatic expression; immanence and transcendence merge.

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