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The Poetry of Nabokov's Drama *The Waltz Invention*

In the following brief essay, I would like to turn to two of the lesser known genres from Nabokov's multifaceted oeuvre – poetry and drama. More specifically, I intend to illustrate a portion of the central relevance of poetry to Nabokov's most thematically puzzling play, *Izobretenie Val'sa* [*The Waltz Invention*]. My poetry-based interpretation of but one play, while necessarily limited in scope, is nonetheless also meant to be indicative of the thematic interconnectedness of Nabokov's oeuvre and the importance of poetry within Nabokov's writing.

The Waltz Invention is an unusual play, and since its first publication in 1938 and first staging in 1968 it has met with mixed response, much of which expresses considerable consternation and interpretative uncertainty. (1) Divided into three acts, *The Waltz Invention* recounts the adventures of a poet-inventor, Salvatore Waltz, who has invented a fabulous machine capable of causing tremendous explosions anywhere in the world. By virtue of his personal control over this machine, Waltz seizes absolute power in a non-specified country with the intention of subduing a war-like neighboring state and of inaugurating a new era of freedom and creativity. Rather than exercising his dictatorial power in the realization of his dream of a new age, however, Waltz abuses his power in the fulfillment of his increasingly capricious and sordid personal desires. Unable to fulfil his final wish, the seduction of the seventeen-year-old daughter of General Berg, Waltz's

entire world collapses; his trusted aide, the androgynous figure “Son” (“Dream”), abandons him; the game ends and Waltz awakes from his dream-become-nightmare to find himself back in the setting from Act I. The events of the play are revealed to have been nothing more than the fantasies of a deranged man who, in the final scene, is forcibly removed to an insane asylum.

This brief introduction does little to convey the atmosphere of bizarre comedy, tragedy and insanity evoked in Nabokov’s play. Laconically deemed a “Drama” by Nabokov, *The Waltz Invention* with its grotesque combination of lyrical poetry, subdued emotional pain and manic, farcical activity, approximates the absurdist dimensions of an Ionesco or Beckett. Indeed, given the form and quality of this play, it would seem possible to argue that Nabokov was already in 1938 practicing a form of Theatre of the Absurd, *avant la lettre*. As in theatre of the absurd, events transpire in an indeterminate setting where levels of being – dream and reality – seem to merge and part randomly. Moreover, the characters of *The Waltz Invention*, like the characters of much absurdist drama, are figures of radically indeterminate status. Apart from the recognizably human characters – Waltz, the Minister of War, his aide the colonel, and General Berg – a cast of less conventional characters populate Nabokov’s stage: among them Waltz’s helper, the androgynous figure “Son;” an invisible President of the republic; and a succession of 11 tellingly named generals who appear throughout the play in various roles – Berg, Brig, Breg, Gerb, Grob, Grab, Grib, Gorb, Burg, Brug. Of these generals, one is dumb while the final three are literally stuffed dummies. Completing the cast of characters is also General Berg’s mysterious daughter, Annabelle. Furthermore, as in theatre of the absurd, language in *The Waltz Invention* occasionally slips the referential moorings tying

signifier to signified to become less a medium of rational communication than, at best, a locus for puns and play, and, at worst, the source of failed communication and incomprehensibility.

The events of the play themselves seem beyond the realm of discernible, rational motivation, stemming instead from the highly subjective experience of the main character, Salvatore Waltz. The plot of the play proceeds not according to a system of naturalistic, causal development but more as the externalization of Waltz's personal fears, memories and megalomania. (2) Despite these surface similarities, however, Nabokov diverges with the characteristics of theatre of the absurd as subsequently developed by its post-war practitioners in the arch, Nabokovian refusal to admit abstract, meta-critically formulated theories of being in explanation for the state of affairs depicted in his play. The intimations of tragedy suggested by Waltz are not the result of some inchoately felt existential angst, but the residual effect of painful experiences and the memory of deep personal loss. In short, it is not the loss of God which makes Waltz's life intolerable, but the pain of living in a world unresponsive to the depth and specificity of his intensely individual, and hence incommunicable, experience. *The Waltz Invention* depicts not an irrational world, but a world gone irrational for one man, the poet-inventor Waltz, with poetry forming the portal to the metaphysical depths within the surface irrationality of the play.

That Nabokov should associate poetry with the depiction of the irrational in *The Waltz Invention* is consistent with various statements made by Nabokov concerning both poetry and a poetics of the theatre. In reference to the poetry of Gogol's *The Inspector General*, for instance, Nabokov conflated poetry and Gogol's drama in the following

manner: "Gogol's play is poetry in action, and by poetry I mean the mysteries of the irrational as perceived through rational words" (*Nikolai Gogol* 55). In an article entitled "The Tragedy of Tragedy," Nabokov specified his ideals concerning a poetics of the theatre still further in a series of statements which seem highly significant to *The Waltz Invention*: "The highest achievements in poetry, prose, painting, showmanship are characterized by the irrational and illogical, by that spirit of free will that snaps its rainbow fingers in the face of smug causality" (326). Still further, in the same essay, Nabokov goes on to suggest the mixing of the grotesque and the tragic in the form of "dream-plays" which he held to be the summit of dramatic production:

I doubt that any strict line can be drawn between the tragic and the burlesque, fatality and chance, causal subjection and the caprice of free will. What seems to me to be the higher form of tragedy is the creation of a certain unique pattern of life in which the sorrows and passing of a particular man will follow the rules of his own individuality, not the rules of the theatre as we know them (341).

Although I have done little more than outline its contours here, Nabokov seems to have been striving for a form of theatre wherein the events on the stage would slip the chains of causality and determinism to dramatize the "tragedies of real life [which] are based on the beauty or horror of chance..." (341). With these principles of Nabokov's poetic poetics of a theatre of the irrational in place, it remains to be seen to what extent poetry is utilized in the thematic development of *The Waltz Invention*. Stated briefly here, thematic

and formal reference to poetry will arise in the character of Waltz, a poet; in abrupt, contrastive transitions to outbursts of poetic language; and in the transmission of important themes in poetic form.

In one of the at once earliest and most prescient statements regarding Nabokov, Vladislav Khodasevich suggested that Nabokov's writing is dominated by a central theme — that of the nature of the creative imagination and, relatedly, the fundamental loneliness of the individual or artist possessed of such creativity (9). (3) In pursuing this idea, Khodasevich suggested further that the artists in Nabokov's works often wore a mask of sorts disguising the nature of his creativity. Both comments seem particularly apt with regard to *The Waltz Invention*. For in this play it becomes apparent that the drama, the tragedy of the central protagonist's life, is his inability to reconcile his abilities and desires with the blunt forces of reality, those forces which have produced the experiences of deprivation and pain intimated in the play. For the artist *manqué*, the poetry of the play provides the troubled poet with the refuge of comforting dreams, while for the audience, the play's poetry offers essential thematic information.

Act I of *The Waltz Invention* begins in the office of the Minister of War where the minister's aide, the colonel, is attempting, with comic affect, to remove a speck from the minister's eye — one of the first of a series of involved references to impaired vision. Received by the minister and his aide, the unknown inventor indicates that his real name is not Waltz but something similar sounding and that he has invented a machine, a *telemor*, capable of causing tremendous explosions and which will provide unlimited mastery over the world to him who controls it. Rebuffed by the minister and his aide, who even hint at Waltz's possible insanity, Waltz angrily leaves the office insinuating

that as an example of his machine's terrible potential he will destroy the beautiful mountain visible from the minister's window. With the subsequent destruction of the mountain according to Waltz's precise instructions, he is hastily summoned back to the minister's office where he begins to reveal his plans. It is revealed that Waltz has suffered terribly in the past and that now he has a plan to change the world which he must follow: "Allow me to say that *my* life has consisted of such material privations, of such mental torments that now, when everything is about to change, I still feel behind my back the raw cold of the past as, after a stormy night, one still feels an ominous chill in the morning shadows of the glistening garden. I feel sorry for you, I sympathize with the stabbing pain that every man experiences when his habitual world, the familiar order of life, crumbles around him. However, I must carry out my plan" (*Izobretenie Val'sa* [IV] 535; *The Waltz Invention* [WI] 28-29). Waltz's sympathy for those whose worlds have crumbled about them, his obsession with changing the world and the linguistic counterplay between "gora" (mountain) and "gore" (woe) invite the interpretation that the mountain he has destroyed is a metaphor for the brute, unmoveable reality which seems to have been the source of his pain. In his desperation and anguish, Waltz in his delusion is erasing, blowing up, dreaming away the reality which has made his life unbearable. And now with the mountain of woe miraculously gone, the time is ripe for the appearance of a figure who will serve Waltz in the fabrication of his new, alternate dream world, "Son." Son (Trance, in the English translation) immediately addresses Waltz as a colleague and elicits from Waltz the admission that he was indeed once a poet. Aided by Son — dream incarnate — Waltz is, by the end of Act I, being taken seriously as the potential leader he eventually becomes.

In the final scene before Act I concludes, however, the aged General Berg appears with his daughter, Annabelle. Both characters are subsequently to pursue Waltz throughout the play as Waltz's interest in the seventeen year-old develops into an obsession and conflict with her father. By the end of Act III, when Waltz has exhausted all the potential of his dictatorial desire, he insists on having Annabelle. General Berg's refusal to release her to him, his insistence that his daughter is hidden in a place he will never gain access to and, finally, his possible insinuation that she is dead combine finally to rend the delicate fabric of Waltz's three-act dream. The implacable General Berg – whose German name means mountain – seems to resurrect the exploded mountain of blunt reality and Waltz's inability to reverse the brute pain of life, embodied here in the death of a young girl, potentially from Waltz's youth. His inability to have her back, possibly from death, accompanied by the increasing incursion of memories from his past lead to the destruction of his dream world and the return of the mountain of granite fact and woe. Neither Annabelle's fate nor identity is ever made explicit in *The Waltz Invention*; although she nonetheless exercises a particular form of power over Waltz and his dream. Consistently associated with fairy tales and the delicate wonder of the world, she seems a portion of the poignant and yet terrible booty of experience on earth, the topic of the poem which forms a still more explicit reference to the role of poetry in *The Waltz Invention*. (4)

After the Act I appearance of Annabelle, in Act II, during a farcical conference between the 11 generals, one of the generals abruptly steps forward and recites a poem. The poem, which in my reading gives poetic expression to Nabokov's dual-world concept of the "otherworldly," is discovered to have been assigned to General Gerb as a

form of homework. The poem is by Tourvalskii, quite likely Waltz himself; for Waltz's is the controlling consciousness behind all of the events of the "dream-play" and thus the only figure capable of "assigning" tasks to the characters. "To My Soul" is a poem addressed to the speaker's soul, which wishes to return to its native realm, while the poet fears the loss of booty collected in the conscious world, the memories of life. This it would seem is the dilemma tormenting the poet Waltz-Tourvalski: the desire to escape the torments of life into the purer realm on "the other side," while at the same time not wishing to forego the terrible beauty of the living world. (5)

A further explicit transition to poetry in *The Waltz Invention* comes in Waltz's description of the era he wishes to inaugurate on earth after his seizure of total control. Upon clarifying that he intends nothing less than personal control of the world, that the power he wields will not be released to others, Waltz announces the start of a new world order, the creation of a beautiful garden to which he will hold the key: "Attention, Gentlemen! I now declare / The start of a new life. Be welcome, Life!" (IV 557; WI 65). In extended speeches of blank iambic verse, Waltz describes the era he intends to enforce. The dream of a better world Waltz describes, while nobly intended, reveals itself to be an almost hysterical mixture of utopian vision and random authoritarian *dictat*, a hybrid of lyric poetry and a socialist realist paean to a future decreed shining. In terms of the use of poetry in a play functioning on levels of reality, it is significant that verse is used to mark Waltz's crossing into still another level of dream within a dream. Once again, it is poetry which provides entrance into the irrational, this time the irrational of Waltz's private, utopian dream of a better world.

Throughout Act III, Waltz's reign of dictatorial power is revealed to be less than the paradise Waltz expected. It becomes apparent that Waltz's dream is fading and with it his ability to control the incursions of real-world memory. In his desperation, Waltz attempts another form of escape — this time to a paradise setting, Palmora Island. But before going, Waltz demands the fulfillment of a series of desires which reveal the extent of his degradation. Waltz commissions "Son" to assemble for him thirty of the most beautiful, desirable women of the realm. Instead of that, "Son" delivers two prostitutes and three physically grotesque women, one of whom begins to recite a doleful convict's song which Waltz recognizes as his own verse, the third example of formal, poetic writing in the text. With the intrusion of Tourvalski's real-world verse into Waltz's dream, the fragile bubble of Waltz's dream-world finally bursts to become, no longer a dream, but a nightmare: "Son, shto eto za koshmar!" ("Trance, what is this nightmare?") (*IV* 576; *WI* 103). Unable to satisfy his desires with these women, Waltz demands possession of Annabelle. Hidden by General Berg, however, Waltz's final most desperate plea for the return of the girl is unfulfilled; the mountain of reality, of *gore*, has reasserted its implacable presence and Waltz is rudely returned to reality. He finds himself seated, as in Act I, before an uncooperative Minister of War. As Waltz is forcibly removed to an insane asylum by Grib, Grab and Grob (fungus, pillage and grave) he is left threatening that he will explode.

Waltz's exiting threat that he is capable of exploding is one of the final motifs from *The Waltz Invention* which seems to connect this play to the fate of failed artists, poetry and the pain of the world represented in other works by Nabokov. With this threat, Waltz joins a poetic fraternity of characters from across Nabokov's oeuvre. It is to be

recalled, for instance, that the humble butterfly collector of “The Aurelian,” Pilgram, is visited by death described as a mountain. The sensitive, modest bachelor Vasili Ivanovich of Nabokov’s “Cloud, Castle, Lake” (“Oblako, ozero, bashnia”) begs to be “let go” after his realization that he no longer possesses the strength to belong to mankind. Likewise, the story “Vasilii Shishkov” ends with the poet Shishkov’s decision “to disappear, to dissolve” after his failure to mount a poetic publication: *A Survey of Pain and Vulgarity*. And finally, in an alternative working of the motif, Nabokov represents the return of a poet years after his presumed death in the story “A Forgotten Poet.” In each of these works, as in *The Waltz Invention*, Nabokov clearly associates the attempt to escape the pain of the world with passage into another purer realm represented as art, fantasy, perhaps death. In *The Waltz Invention*, Nabokov used poetry to give expression to his poetics of the theatre and to provide poetic form to one of his central thematic concerns — the terrible poignancy of life made wondrous by both suffering and beauty.

Notes

(1) For information concerning Nabokov’s plays see: Diment 586-99; Babikov 771-80; and Boyd 489-92, 496, 263-67, 220-29.

(2) For a seminal discussion of the central features of theatre of the absurd, see Esslin 320-334.

(3) See also Karlinsky 183-94.

(4) Annabelle remains a nebulous figure throughout the play, one whose character and fate is never fully revealed, despite her great importance for Waltz. She seems to share

literary ancestry with Annabel Lee of Poe's eponymically named poem and the object of Humbert Humbert's childhood love in "a principedom by the sea." Although undeveloped here in this paper, my reading of Annabelle's possible death and her importance to Waltz is based on her association with the enchantment of childhood (an association which is intensified in the English version of the play), General Berg's confusion in speaking about her death and the death of his wife, Berg's assured claim that she is hidden beyond all finding, and finally, the fact that her inaccessibility is the cause of Waltz's distraught return from the pleasure of delusion to the pain of reality – the resurrection of the mountain of woe.

(5) Compare "To My Soul" with Nabokov's poem "O, kak ty rvesh'sia v put' krylatyi" (1923).

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