

Overt and Covert Shandyism of Nabokov's Nikolai Gogol

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Abstract: In her article "Overt and Covert Shandyism of Nabokov's *Nikolai Gogol*" Margarit Ordukhanyan examines Vladimir Nabokov's 1942 novel, an unusual biography of the nineteenth-century Russian author. Ordukhanyan discusses parallels between Nabokov's biography of Gogol and Laurence Sterne's *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. She highlights the direct allusions and textual references Nabokov makes to Sterne's novel and argues that Nabokov uses *Tristram Shandy* as the model for creating and interpreting his biography of Gogol by fictionalizing Gogol and portraying him as a Shandean character. Further, Ordukhanyan discusses how Nabokov uses Sterne's novel to undermine the genre of literary biography.

Margarit ORDUKHANYAN

Overt and Covert Shandyism of Nabokov's *Nikolai Gogol*

In a 1969 interview with Allene Talmey of *Vogue*, Vladimir Nabokov dismissed his own *Nikolai Gogol*, a critical biography of the nineteenth-century Russian writer as an "innocent, and rather superficial, little sketch" (*Strong* 156). In the commentary accompanying an edition of Aleksander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, he referred to it equally ungenerously as a "rather frivolous little book" (314), thus signaling that the book, written a decade before Nabokov's transformation from an obscure Russian transplant into a bestselling US-American author, should not merit serious consideration. Others have been considerably more enthusiastic in their assessments of Nabokov's book. When the biography first came out, Edmund Wilson, Nabokov's one-time friend, wrote an encouraging, if cursory, review of it for *The New Yorker*; he described the book as "first-rate" and insisted that "Nabokov's *Gogol* must be henceforth read by anybody who has any serious interest in finding out about Russian culture" (216). It should be noted, however, that Wilson was less positive about the book in his private correspondence with Nabokov and suggested that the latter had "gone out of [his] way to be rather silly and perverse about the subject" (Nabokov qtd. in Karlinsky 156). In his introduction to *Gogol in the Twentieth Century* Robert Maguire contends that despite its shortcomings, Nabokov's book "has probably done more than any other work of criticism in this country to spark an interest in Gogol among readers who know no Russian" (54). Donald Fanger, in his 1995 entry on the subject in the *Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, describes the book as "brilliant and one-sided" (421), echoing a sentiment expressed earlier by Victor Erlich, who labeled the biography a "provocative yet wantonly lopsided essay" (5). And Neil Stewart, in his "Notes on Noses" goes as far as to credit Nabokov's book with having shaped much of the post-1940s Western critical discourse on Gogol (149).

There is no doubt that Nabokov's eventual reputation of a literary megastar contributed to a rise of critical interest in *Nikolai Gogol* in the English-speaking world, where Gogol was virtually unknown at the time when Nabokov's biography was published in 1942. As Fanger points out, Nabokov's analysis of Gogol's work was preceded by a meager handful of English-language studies (see Fanger, "Nabokov" 422-23). However, my concern here is not with Gogol's critical heritage, but Nabokov's *Nikolai Gogol* itself, a book so enigmatic and elusive that the sparse voices professing its brilliance have offered little in terms of critical assessment. Even as scholarly interest in Nabokov's work has continued to grow unabated, his *Nikolai Gogol* has remained on the margins of the discussion. The biography stands perched at the pivotal moment in Nabokov's literary evolution: Nabokov emigrated from war-torn Europe to the U.S. in 1940 to reinvent himself as an English-language writer, leaving behind a formidable Russian-language literary legacy. He arrived in the U.S. a virtual unknown, scrambling to support his family and to find work while at the same time forging a unique voice in his newly adopted literary tongue. It was under these circumstances that *Nikolai Gogol* was commissioned in 1942 as part of a New Direction series, in order to "introduce a strange and poorly understood writer to the English-speaking public" (Fanger, "Nabokov" 422). Nabokov completed the book a year later amid his then still unsuccessful attempts to gain a foothold in the US-American world of letters. Chronologically, the biography is bookended by Nabokov's first and second English-language novels, *Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941) and *Bend Sinister* (1947). Thematically, too, it follows *Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, a novel about discovering the "real life" of a dead author when nothing remains of him save for his books, letters, and other people's impressions. Unlike Gogol, Sebastian Knight may be a fictional author, but the impulse to exert complete authorial control over a dead writer's life resonates through both books.

The purpose of my study is not to discuss the peculiarities of Nabokov's *Nikolai Gogol*, but to identify echoes of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* in it. In creating a narrative that defies the expectations of the genre it purports to represent, Nabokov relied on Sterne's unorthodox, digressive, and self-referential novel to both frame his own narrative and to package Gogol for English-language readership. It is precisely his choice of a text as atypical for the novelistic conventions of the eighteenth century as *Tristram Shandy* that allows Nabokov to both fictionalize Gogol and to create what is essentially an anti-biography. Before turning to the investigation of the dialogic relationship between *Tristram Shandy* and *Nikolai Gogol*, however, it seems pertinent to discuss what exactly makes Nabokov's book so unusual and so far departed from the conventional literary biography. For one, the biography contains a visible speaker, an opinionated stand-in for Nabokov. With a tone of superiority, the narrator delivers such pronouncements as: "frankly speaking I am sick of reading biographies in which mothers are subtly deduced from the writing of their sons" (13) or "I have a lasting grudge against those who like their fiction to be educational or uplifting, or national, or as healthy as maple syrup and olive oil" (42). The narrator criticizes the existing translations of Gogol, arriving at a somewhat unexpected conclusion that "None but an Irishman should ever try tackling Gogol" (38); in the process, he reveals the centrality of the narrator's ego and lays bare the process of the book's creation: "I find pleasure in following the outlines of these strange shadows lying across those distant lives" (25). Nabokov also expels from his narrative those books by Gogol he deems inferior including *Вечера на хуторе близ Диканьки* (*Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*), whose publication made the twenty-four-year-old Gogol a literary celebrity. He asserts his authorial presence by interrupting the story of the reception of *Ревизор* (*The Government Inspector*) to linger on the beauty of the word "stratagem" and to indulge in a bit of self-promotion: "I shall have occasion to speak in quite a different book of a lunatic who constantly felt that all the parts of the landscape and movements of inanimate objects were a complex code of allusion to his own being, so that the whole universe seems to him to be conversing about him by means of signs" (59). Needless to say, Nabokov is referring to his own (at this point still

unfinished) "Signs and Symbols," as he draws a parallel between Gogol and a character who is but a figment of Nabokov's own imagination, thus undermining Gogol's real-life status. The narrator also asserts his presence through a number of digressions, such as Nabokov's famous discussion of the untranslatable *poshlost'*, or *poshlust* in Nabokov's transliteration.

Another unusual aspect of *Nikolai Gogol* rests on the marginalization of "plot" and "storyline" both in Gogol's life and in discussions of his works. The book begins with Gogol's death, suspended in narrative time so that Nabokov can render his deathbed agony, and concludes with Gogol's birth (150). What happens between the two is shrugged off as irrelevant: "His boyhood? Uninteresting" (8). In fact, Nabokov acknowledges that he has taken all the facts of Gogol's life, including Gogol's correspondence, from "Veressaiev's [*sic*] delightful biography of Gogol" (155; he is referring to Vikentii Veresaev). The meager information about Gogol's life receives no further amplification in the appended chronology "meant for the indolent reader who wants to take in Gogol's life and labors at a glance" (154). Far from yielding factual data, the chronology disintegrates into an exercise in self-referentiality capped with the last entry: "March 4th 1852. Died (page 1)" (162). This marginalization of Gogol's life story is consistent with Nabokov's assertion that Gogol's "real life [was] the life of his books, and in them he was an actor of genius" (26).

When talking about Gogol's works, Nabokov displays a similar determination to underscore the relative inconsequentiality of their plots. After declaring that "The plot of *The Government Inspector* is as unimportant as the plots of all Gogol books" (39), the narrator directs the reader to a footnote, which in turn refers one to "page 153 of 'Commentaries' for a summary of the plot" (39) and where the reader finds the plot summary provided not by the narrator, but by the biography's fictional publisher. Nabokov performs a similarly complex spatial dislocation of plot during his analysis of Gogol's *Мёртвые души* (*Dead Souls*). Once again, a footnote directs the reader first to the bottom of the page and then to "page 159 in the 'Chronology'" (61). The summary of *Dead Souls* does, in fact, materialize there, but not before a two-page digression regarding the institution of serfdom in nineteenth-century Russia. The digression itself does not fail to refer back to the section of the biography's main body that has directed us to the chronology in the first place, thus constructing a perfectly self-referential circle (Nabokov was to deploy a similar but more sophisticated version of the self-referential relationship between text and fictional metatext over two decades later in his *Pale Fire* is followed by a qualification: "This is all in the way of plot, but of course the *real* plot (as always with Gogol) lies in the style, in the inner structure of this transcendental anecdote" (144).

In "Authorial Authority" Jamie Bush explains that "since the appeal of a biography normally lies in its subject, the biographer accordingly usually assumes the role of a relatively anonymous purveyor of information whose language ... is 'vehicle' rather than 'spectacle,' and whose interpretive orientation is unoriginal if not inconspicuous" (25). As one can surmise from the few examples cited above, Nabokov's *Nikolai Gogol*, by contrast, is marked with a prominent and self-oriented narrative, an impressionistic, descriptive language, and a lack of interest in factual information about Gogol's life as the book's primary objective.

The cataloguing of *Nikolai Gogol's* unorthodoxies (perhaps complemented by a broader contextualization within the then existing theories on the genre of literary biography) would have capped the current study had it not been for the faint, but distinct echo of *Tristram Shandy* which threads through Nabokov's entire book. Surprisingly, the connection between the two works has never been pursued, and yet *Tristram Shandy* offers Nabokov a perfect model for writing about Gogol. For one, Sterne enjoyed tremendous popularity in Russia going as far back as the court of Catherine II and all throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see, e.g., Stewart). Second, Sterne's influence on Gogol's own writing was prominent enough to have invited multiple comparisons between the two authors in his own lifetime and earned Gogol the alleged moniker of the "Russian Sterne" (see Peace; Setchkarev; Shklovsky; Vinogradov). Thus Sterne, with an almost unparalleled impact on nineteenth-century Russian literature and a recognizable yet sufficiently distant model, would provide Nabokov with a convenient link between his Russian subject and his English-speaking readership. Additionally, the intrinsic qualities of *Tristram Shandy* would also make it an appealing model to emulate. The novel is infamous for its digressiveness, for its protagonist's inability to stick to a story-line without lapsing into seemingly random asides on various subjects, for its absence of a central, cohesive plot, and for its utter disregard for chronology. While the novel's full title is *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Esq.*, the novel offers little in terms of its protagonist's life, lingers on the story of his birth for three full volumes, and concludes five years before the protagonist's birth.

Nabokov's own later correspondence and his commentary to his translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* into English (completed in 1964) point to his familiarity with Sterne's work. So, for example, in a letter to Pascal Covici of Viking Books discussing the terms of publication of his 1957 novel *Priglasenie*, Nabokov addresses the publisher's concern about how to categorize the book by asking, "What is a novel? Is Sterne's *Sentimental Journey Through France* a novel?" (*Selected Letters* 179). His commentary to *Eugene Onegin* contains no less than fifteen allusions to Sterne and direct references to *Tristram Shandy* itself, including such information as the French translations of the novel available to Pushkin, as well as direct quotations from the novel's first volume indicating that he was well aware of Sterne's popularity in nineteenth-century Russia. And in an interview with Alfred Appel Jr. in 1967, Nabokov declared that "I love Sterne but had not read him in my Russian period" (*Strong Opinions* 74). Scholars of Nabokov's work have long learned to take his pronouncements on literary predilections and possible influences with a grain of salt. However, assuming he was not being coy with his interviewer, his first introduction to Sterne would roughly coincide with the decade during which he composed *Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Nikolai Gogol*, and *Bend Sinister*. While the apparent parallels between Nabokov and Sterne have gone largely unacknowledged, in a 1960 review of *Bend Sinister*, Frank Kermode points to Sterne and specifically to *Tristram Shandy* as a literary precursor to Nabokov.

kov's *Bend Sinister*, going as far as to describe Nabokov's protagonist, Adam Krug, as a "tragic Shandy" (75).

Nabokov's biography of Gogol, while evoking *Tristram Shandy* on numerous occasions, makes a total of only three direct allusions to it, though only two in each of its respective editions. Thus, the 1961 edition, reprinted in 1971, has one entry for Sterne on page 3. The 1973 edition, has "Sterne, Laurence, his style, 84" (170), but omits the earlier mention of Sterne. Neither edition indexes the quote about the fancy begetting the nose discussed at length below. In the opening chapter of *Nikolai Gogol*, entitled "His Death and His Youth" (note the incongruous word combination in the title), while discussing the "nasal leitmotiv" (3) and its presence in Gogol's works, Nabokov mentions the following: "This or that hero comes into the story trundling, as it were, his nose in a wheelbarrow -- or drives in like the stranger in Slawkenburgius' tale in Sterne" (3). Nabokov, of course, is referring to the tale that opens Volume 4 of Sterne's novel, in which a stranger arrives one day in Strasburg with a nose so impressively sized that it excites and unsettles the imaginations of all city inhabitants including both male and female members of the clergy. Their obsession with the stranger's nose takes such hold of them that through a circuitous series of events, Strasburg eventually falls to the French army. Three things in particular must be noted about Sterne's bawdy story: it encapsulates the novel's general fascinations with noses, the nose in Sterne's tale serves as a double entendre, and, lastly, the tale itself poses as a translation from Latin, thus exploiting the eighteenth-century novelistic trope of a found and translated narrative. The Latin "original" provided by Sterne on the facing pages (the tale has been translated from Latin by none other than Tristram Shandy himself) serves to underscore the discrepancies between the two. We should remember that the issue of translation (and mistranslation) stands front and center in Nabokov's *Nikolai Gogol*, in which he complains about the violence exercised upon Gogol's texts by inept translators (61, 89).

Noses run rampant in *Tristram Shandy* (along with their insinuated parallels with phalluses), and Nabokov points out that Gogol mirrors this fascination with the olfactory organ as evidenced in Gogol's short story "The Nose," which Nabokov describes as "a hymn to that organ" (4). He cautions the readers not to be carried away with Freudian temptations of equating the nose with the penis; instead, he points out that Russian is rich in proverbs and sayings both comical and otherwise and that allude to the nose. Even as he contextualizes Gogol's "olfactivism" within Russian "nose-humor," he insists that "whether the 'fancy begat the nose or the nose begat the fancy' is inessential" (4). Nabokov is quoting (without acknowledging the source) *Tristram Shandy*, in which one fictional philosopher, Scroderus (note the phonetic allusion) disagrees with his intellectual counterpart named Prignitz, who represents the opposing camp of thought, insisting "that so far was Prignitz from the truth, in affirming that the fancy begat the nose, that on the contrary, -- the nose begat the fancy" (*Tristram Shandy* 3 169). The direct borrowing from *Tristram Shandy* obscures the source and yet allows Nabokov to establish an affinity with the privileged reader who will recognize the reference.

The astuteness with which Nabokov discusses Gogol's fascination with the organ and even (in a concession to the Freudian-minded readers) Gogol's association of the nose with masculinity (another linkage with *Tristram Shandy*, where a nose is never just a nose) should not obfuscate the fact that Nabokov displays an equal fascination with Gogol's own olfactory organ: "His big sharp nose was of such length and mobility that in the days of his youth he had been able (being something of an amateur contortionist), to bring its tip and his underlip in ghoulish contact; this nose was his keenest and most essential outer part. It was so sharp and long that it could 'penetrate personally without the assistance of fingers into the smallest snuff-box ...' (from one of Gogol's letters to a young lady)" (3). Even earlier, in the description of Gogol's final hours, Nabokov exhibits a typically Sternean balance between tragedy and farce as he lingers with seeming relish on the image of "plump" leeches dangling off the dying Gogol's nose and "getting into his mouth" (2). Nabokov insists that Gogol "saw with his nostrils" and that his nose was "his most important ally" at the peak of Gogol's creative prowess (5). So pronounced is the narrator's fascination with Gogol's nose that during the imaginary conversation with the biographer's fictionalized publisher Nabokov actually proposes to use Gogol's nose as the cover for the biography: "Yes -- let us have a picture of Gogol's nose. Not his face and shoulders, etc. but only his nose. A big solitary sharp nose -- neatly outlined in ink like the enlarged figure of some important part of a curious zoological specimen" (154). While rejected both by fictional and real-life publishers, the proposed cover illustrates the same impulse for metonymizing a person (in this case Gogol) and substituting him with a nose that is observable in both "Slawkenburgius's Tale" and Gogol's "The Nose" in which the protagonist's nose assumes temporarily the guise of being a separate character. What is more, despite repeated warnings that the nose is just a nose, Nabokov is eager to reduce Gogol to a taxonomically ambiguous organ. Considering the long-established link between Gogol and Sterne *vis-à-vis* the nasal motif (some critics in fact credit the proliferation of nasal allusions in the Russian literature to Sterne's popularity in Russia in the first half of the nineteenth century, such as Fanger, *The Creation* 120; Stewart, "From Imperial" 142). Nabokov's own fixation with Gogol's nose insinuates itself into the position of being the literary progeny of both Sterne and Gogol; at the same time, it exploits its comedic potential by *reductio ad absurdum* in his desire to supplant Gogol with an image of his own nose.

Nabokov's second direct allusion to *Tristram Shandy* appears in the chapter dedicated to Gogol's *Dead Souls*. Nabokov's discussion of Gogol's novel highlights the uniqueness of Gogol's style, which itself is decidedly Sternean in its reliance on digressions, temporal suspension of action, and a heavy-handed authorial presence, among others. As Nabokov brings back to life Gogol's army of secondary characters with cameo appearances, he writes that "one of those passages which fairly burst with little people tumbling out and scattering all over the page ... reminds one in a curious anachronistic fashion of a certain intonation and trick of style used by Joyce in *Ulysses* (but then Sterne too used the abrupt question and circumstantial answer method)" (84). The parenthetical aside may pose as an inconse-

quential observation, but in truth is anything but that: it threads a direct line from Sterne through Gogol and Joyce (and Sterne's impact on British modernism can only be rivaled by the influence of his work on the birth of nineteenth century Russian prose) to Nabokov.

In addition to the direct textual references to *Tristram Shandy*, Nabokov deploys other subtle strategies to forge a dialogic relationship with Sterne's novel. Among these is his use of the word *homunculus* to describe the undeveloped secondary characters that make brief and cursory appearances only to vanish without a trace in many of Gogol's works. Nabokov comments on the Gogol's technique of chance encounters which turn out to be false leads: "Gogol's guns hang in midair and do not go off -- in fact the charm of his allusions is exactly that nothing whatever comes of them" (44). Twice during his discussion of these "non-characters" which bring texture to Gogol's prose, Nabokov uses the word *homunculus* to describe them: once when in *The Government Inspector* "another homunculus appears" (45) and the second time when a "chance passer-by" created with painstaking degree of detail makes a casual appearance in *Dead Souls*, as if he is on the brink of becoming a character of substance, "as so many of Gogol's homunculi seem intent to do -- and do not" (77).

Nabokov's choice of the word *homunculus* may strike one as archaic, but it echoes the opening pages of *Tristram Shandy*, in which an elaborate set of indirect allusions and convoluted hints combine into the story of the protagonist's conception: Walter Shandy performs two husbandly duties on the first Sunday of every month where he winds the household clock and has sex with his wife (*Tristram Shandy* 4 4-5). In the midst of "conceiving" Tristram, his mother, to whom sex and the winding of the clock have forged an indissoluble association, interrupts the act to inquire whether her husband has not forgotten to wind up the clock, compelling Walter to remonstrate against the interruption. While the narrator does not shed light on the obscure linkage between the winding of the clock and the interrupted activity for another three chapters, Tristram offers a hint by delving into a digression about the nature of the *homunculus*: "it was a very unseasonable question at least --because it scattered and dispersed the animal spirits, whose business it was to have escorted and gone hand-in-hand with the HOMUNCULUS, and conducted him safe to the place destined for his reception" (1 2, see Landa for a historical contextualization of Sterne and the *homunculus*). In *Tristram Shandy* and Sterne's lifetime both the notion of a *homunculus* and views on conception possessed significance extending far beyond the realm of science and medicine to include religion, baptism, and viability as a human. Long obsolete by the time Nabokov set out to compose the biography of Gogol, however, the term stands out, too odd not to be perceived as a textual marker.

The connection of the *homunculus* in *Tristram Shandy* and the religious questions it raises in the novel leads indirectly to yet another echo of Sterne discernable in Nabokov's *Gogol*, this time a narrative device. In Chapter 20 of the first volume, in one of the numerous textual self-interruptions, Sterne's protagonist admonishes a female reader for missing the fact that his parents could not have been "papists" (Roman Catholics), a joke Sterne himself clarifies in a footnote about the issue of baptizing a fetus *in utero*, debated among various church denominations. The interjection offers Sterne's narrator the opportunity to send his reader back to reread the preceding chapter: "I do insist upon it, that you immediately turn back, that is, as soon as you get to the next full stop, and read the whole chapter over again" (1 41). He then pauses his story and entertains the readers with casual banter until the inattentive reader returns.

Needless to say, Nabokov neither limited his engagement of the reader and his distinction between good and bad readers to his *Nikolai Gogol* nor would he have had a shortage of literary antecedents for this particular device outside of *Tristram Shandy*. However, one cannot help remembering his admonition to certain kinds of readers to "keep away from Gogol" (149). Before acknowledging the existence of the "right sort" of readers, he goes even further to excoriate the wrong kind: "The awful trouble of learning Russian in order to read him will not be paid in your kid of hard cash. Keep away, keep away. He has nothing to tell you. Keep off the tracks. High tension. Closed for the duration. Avoid, refrain, don't. I would like to have here a full list of all possible interdictions, vetoes and threats" (149). While in this particular instance Sterne's "conversation" with the reader carries more benign humor than Nabokov's vitriol, both point to the Sterne's and Nabokov's desire to not only exercise control over their readers, but also to afford the privileged reader the illusion of being "in on a joke" that others are likely to miss. Nabokov goes as far as to weed out readers unsuited for Gogol's works insisting that "neither the person who wants a good laugh, nor the person who craves for books 'that make one think' will understand what *The Overcoat* is really about ... Give me the creative reader," demands Nabokov, for "this is a tale for him" (140). Sterne, too, in moments when levity momentarily gives way to graver contemplations, dismisses "great wigs," whose self-importance he finds intolerable, adding, "mark only -- I write not for them" (3 147).

It should be added that the authorial intrusions in both of these texts extend beyond the direct conversation with the readership and sometimes serve to remind of the presence of a "real" author behind the text or to offer a glimpse into the author's intentions. Consider, for example, Nabokov's reluctant introduction of Gogol's mother into the biography: "At this point it behooves me to say a few words about that mother of his, although frankly speaking I am sick of reading biographies in which mothers are subtly deduced from the writing of their sons and then made to 'influence' their remarkable sons in this or that way" (13). Setting aside the topic of mothers, laden with possibilities in light Mrs. Shandy's role in her son's narrative, note that Nabokov's narrator makes his presence visible by not merely interrupting himself, but also indicating that this interruption contradicts his own views on the nature of literary biographies. While the first-person narrator of *Nikolai Gogol* makes his first appearance as early as the second page, here he pauses his primary narrative to "reluctantly" introduce a secondary character whom he cannot keep out of the story completely. Once again, *Tristram Shandy* offers a helpful antecedent. In Book 3, just as Tristram is about to interrupt the story of his birth to segue into a conversation about bridges (as the reader will recall, his own nose-bridge is about to be

crushed by forceps during a botched delivery), he adds that "you must know, my uncle *Toby* mistook the bridge as widely as my father mistook the mortars -- but to understand how my uncle *Toby* could mistake the bridge -- I fear ... I must give you some account of an adventure of *Trim's*, though much against my will" (3 150). Not a chapter goes by in *Tristram Shandy* without examples of the recalcitrant but inevitable interruptions that append and amplify the information contained in the primary narrative.

One of the last textual reverberation of *Tristram Shandy* in *Nikolai Gogol* that should be mentioned is Nabokov's use of the mock-scientific discourse to farcical ends along with his dismissive representation of hack doctors and priests who become the undoing of one of Russia's greatest writers. Among the childhood ailments suffered by Gogol, Nabokov lists "mumps, scarlet fever and *pueritus scribendi*" (8). Nabokov's use of the Latin *pueritus scribendi* (boyish writing) recalls Sterne's mocking (and often incorrect) use of Latin to emulate a pseudo-scientific discourse, a point made by Kermode with regard to the parallels between *Bend Sinister* and *Tristram Shandy* (80). Further, the opening of *Nikolai Gogol* introduces two "diabolically energetic physicians who insisted on treating him as if he were an average Bedlamite" (1). Nabokov does not stop there, but rather goes on to catalogue the inadequate medical treatment rendered to Gogol as he was on the brink of death, including the application of hot and cold water and the leeches affixed to his nose (2).

The Gogol created by Nabokov can be interpreted as a Sternean character, a personage not unlike *Tristram Shandy* himself. In contrast to his own rich and eloquent prose, he appears as somehow pathetic and insignificant, physically unappealing, and perhaps even impotent. Nabokov dismisses as a figment of Gogol's imagination the unattainably beautiful woman he invented for the sake of duping his gullible mother adding that Gogol "showed complete indifference towards women insofar as the facts of his riper years show" (21). While *Tristram Shandy* does not show a similar indifference to women (there is his beloved Jenny and his uncle's paramour Widow Wadman), *Tristram Shandy* certainly leaves the question of its leading men's virility hanging: as a child, *Tristram* has suffered a near-castration by a falling window sash, the ramifications of which are never fully elucidated. The fear of impotence looms over the budding romance between Widow Wadman and Uncle *Toby* as well: he has suffered an ambiguous groin injury in the Battle of Namure and the widow attempts to pin down the extent and exact location of the injury.

And, just like *Tristram Shandy*, Nabokov's Gogol is seen in constant flight, "flitting from place to place," (26) unable or unwilling to settle down in "his weird wanderings abroad" (114). Nabokov certainly does not invent Gogol's long trips abroad, but he does amplify and fictionalize them, painting Gogol as a self-made permanent exile. He describes Gogol as a "unique rolling stone [...] wandering from spa to spa" (116), in an attempt to cure or escape his attacks of "melancholy" and "unspeakable forebodings" (*ibid*) in a "vicious circle of no geographic meaning" (117). Nabokov suggests that Gogol's desire to escape resulted from the loss of his "gift of imagining facts" (119) and his concomitant inability to deliver anything equal in greatness to his *Dead Souls*. For an author whose "real life" existed only his books, the loss of his prodigious gift would have been tantamount to death, and Nabokov tacitly implies this to be the case: the brooding melancholy, the restlessness, the desperate plunge into far reaches of Russian Orthodoxy all point to Gogol's inevitable progression towards his demise, which he feebly and unsuccessfully attempts to escape through his incessant traveling.

Travel as flight from death figures prominently in *Tristram Shandy* as well: by the opening of Volume 7, the novel's narrator declares his intention to flee death by literally running away from it: "then by heaven! I will lead him [death] a dance he little thinks of -- for I will gallop, quoth I, without looking once behind me to the banks of the Garonne; and if I hear him clattering at my heels -- I'll scamper away to Mount Vesuvius -- from thence to Joppa, and from Joppa to the world's end, where if he follows me, I pray God he may break his neck" (7 336). Sterne, already suffering from worsening respiratory health at the time of writing volumes 6 and 7 of *Tristram Shandy*, died less than three years later. As Sterne's health deteriorated, the prominence of the motif and metaphor of travel in his writing grew accordingly.

The compulsion to flee demise by impulsive and incessant traveling points to another point of kinship between Nabokov's Gogol and Sterne's *Shandy*. Considering the heavy-handed authorial presence which sets up a framing narrative for the biography and the "Nabokovization of Gogol" (Fanger, "Nabokov" 426), it would not be a leap to describe this particular version of Gogol as Nabokov's invention, one that is little different from, say, Sebastian Knight, whose only true life also resides within his books. After all, Nabokov himself said as much in a letter to James Laughlin: "This little book has cost me more trouble than any other I have composed. The reason is clear: I had first to create Gogol (translate him) and then discuss him (translate my Russian ideas about him)" (*Selected* 45).

Once the intertextual connection between *Nikolai Gogol* and *Tristram Shandy* becomes evident, the eccentric aspects of Nabokov's treatment of his subject attain a different aspect. Far from being a "superficial" sketch or a concocted examination of another writer's life, *Nikolai Gogol* fits into a paradigm in Nabokov's writing of exposing and openly deriding the genre of literary biography. It is an enterprise that dots his literary aesthetic beginning with his *Gift*, the pinnacle of his Russian-language oeuvre, in which the novel's fictional and autobiographic protagonist, Fyodr Godunov-Cherdyntsev, writes a biography of real-life Russian philosopher and writer Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828-1889). Godunov-Cherdyntsev's interpretation of Chernyshevsky's life (which landed both the fictional author and Nabokov in trouble with the Russian émigré(e) intellectual circles) already points to Nabokov's belief that a biography is but an act of creative interpretation. Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* elevated Nabokov's disdain for the genre of literary biography and the very notion of an author's "real life" to a sophisticated art-form. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, whose composition, as mentioned earlier, predated *Nikolai Gogol* by only two years, a dead author's half-brother sets out to write his brother's biography, but eventually discovers the futility of the task. In contrast to him, his

brother's literary agent (who is also the book's most contemptible character), concocts a biography of Sebastian Knight that typifies everything that Nabokov finds objectionable about the genre overall. Madeleine Descargues establishes a strong parallel between *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Tristram Shandy* and while *Nikolai Gogol* is not discussed in her study, she does point out that *Tristram Shandy* is equally concerned with the limitations of both autobiography and biography alike. Descargues argues that the brief biography of parson Yorick in Volume 1 of *Tristram Shandy* is one of its most linearly told plotlines and that therefore must conclude with the parson's death, for Sterne, too, finds the conclusiveness of a straightforward life-story to be nothing but reductive, displaying "a measure of suspicion regarding the biographical craft" (173).

When an opportunity arose for Nabokov to "translate" his mistrust of biography into a book about an actual author, he went to great lengths to display the futility (the absurdity, even) of the very notion of a dead author's "real life." *Nikolai Gogol* hinges on a blurred distinction between truth and fiction, consistently insinuating that Gogol could have (and likely had) invented many of the facts about himself. Even the concluding paragraph of *Nikolai Gogol* relies on the interplay of truth and fiction: Nabokov regrets the fact that he has not "produced any tangible proof of its [Gogol's art's] peculiar existence" (150). He then feels compelled to swear that Gogol is not a figment of his imagination: "He really wrote, he really lived" (150). The solemnity with which Nabokov reassures the reader that Gogol is, in fact, a historical figure resembles Sterne's assurances that by a nose he really means nothing but a nose. Nabokov's insistence on the factuality of Gogol's existence is not reassuring because he chooses to conclude his narrative by appending two additional facts about Gogol: one allegedly invented by his mother and the other about "his having been born on the 1st of April," which Nabokov claims is true (150) and which is actually false because Gogol was actually born on 31 March. Thus, far from being a superficial or incomplete biography of Gogol, Nabokov's *Nikolai Gogol* is a deliberate treatise on the interchangeability of truth and fiction and the impossibility of rendering a dead author's life. *Tristram Shandy*, the fictional model chosen by Nabokov fits his purpose perfectly. *Tristram Shandy*'s self-referentiality, its open disdain for novelistic conventions, its irreverence, and its prophetically modernist nature offered an appealing combination for Nabokov's own aesthetic and a win-some antecedent as he reinvented himself as an English-language author.

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