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OTHERNESS IN NABOKOV'S HERMANN, HUMBERT AND KINBOTE^{1 2 3}

ABSTRACT: As one of the key notions in postmodern theory, Otherness is defined as a quality of being different and separate from the Self. Within the postmodern theory, it is defined within the center-margin binary opposition discussed by theoreticians such as Linda Hutcheon. Yet, long before the theory, three of Nabokov's novels depicted the concept of Otherness in their respective protagonists. Hermann in *Despair*, Humbert in *Lolita* and Kinbote in *Pale Fire* are assigned the role of the Other in their communities on different levels, all of which lead them to construct their own alternative realities where the margin is the center. This paper discusses the occurrence of the theoretical concept of the Other in the novels that predate the official theory of Otherness. The reoccurrence of the concept of the Other in literature, (especially in the period before the theoretical framework officially appeared) testify to the high relevance of the theory and the concept for discussing different phenomena of the human spirit and artistic experience.

Key Words: Otherness, Nabokov, *Despair*, *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*

INTRODUCTION: OTHERNESS AND NABOKOV

Otherness represents the quality in matters that are different from the Self. Concerning the works of Vladimir Nabokov, which precede

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³ An early version of this paper was presented at the student's conference STUDKON in Niš, in 2015

definitions of postmodern traits of the ex-centric, it can be said that he is a forerunner of the postmodern issue of Otherness. In his novels, the idea of the Other is closely connected with the notion of estrangement, a “shifted perspective” that all of Nabokov’s protagonists seem to possess (Paunović 1997: 15). The term in Russian is “ostranenie”, which Cuddon defines as “making strange”, or more precisely making “fresh, new, strange, different from what is familiar and known” (Cuddon 1999: 214). Such a shifted perspective is perhaps best seen in the example of Nabokov’s three novels *Despair*, *Lolita*, and *Pale Fire* and their protagonists Hermann, Humbert and Kinbote, respectively.

Hermann, Humbert and Kinbote are Others from two different points of view – they perceive themselves as Others and are also perceived as Others by the people who surround them. In *Despair*, *Lolita*, and *Pale Fire*, Nabokov’s protagonists are marked with Otherness mainly on three different levels; they are foreigners, mentally disturbed persons and, most importantly, artists. These levels of Otherness determine their positions in the worlds they live in (concerning temporal, spatial and cultural contexts), and result in their constructing alternate realities that might suit their preferences.

The notion of the Other and Otherness was appealing not only to literati. The term is somewhat familiar within the various fields of science, such as philosophy, or psychology, more precisely psychoanalysis. The meaning of the Other is often attributed to Hegel, although his perspective on the notion did not contain the negative aspect to Otherness. What is seen as negative is the urge of the Self to assimilate the Other, thus erasing its Otherness (Sims 2012: 678-9). The term was later used by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* and De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, where she equalizes the Other with the Female. Sartre’s view is more similar to Kojève’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* his idea of “otherness-overcoming” (Sims 2012: 678). The opposition that is introduced by Hegel and by Kojève is the master-slave opposition, that would later develop into Self-Other. However, it was not before the emergence of psychoanalysis, or rather its modern, poststructuralist reincarnation (post-Freudian rewritings), that the term the Other was coined. Its definition, as we know it today, was introduced by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

Regarding the history of literature, the notion of the Other has been present in literary writing as the Double, or the Doppelganger, and the Alter Ego. Within the scope of postmodern theory, the notion of the Other had to be redefined. The result is a rather broad definition of what the Other is today. The binary opposition Self-Other still exists, and the Other still carries the mark of that which is different – whether identifying someone or something physically or psychologically different than the Self. However, it is the point of view that allows postmodernists to include more of Hegel's original premise. Henceforth, Linda Hutcheon introduces the binary opposition center-margin and the notion of the ex-centric.

The center stands for everything that is perceived as master or the Self – the norms, the narratives, the roles – “the eternal and universal” (Hutcheon 1988: 58). The ex-centric, therefore, is a quality of being out of the center, the peripheral, the margin; “the ex-centric, the off-center: ineluctably identified with the center it desires but is denied” (Hutcheon 1988: 60). The analog term for the margin, thus, would be the Other. However, what grants postmodern theory more credit than just that for the mere invention of neologisms is stressing the dominant point of view. What Hutcheon (1988) and other postmodern theoreticians state is that the general point of view has been assigned to the center by the center itself.

Concerning Nabokov's fiction, the Other can be interpreted as marginal and ex-centric, most notably in terms of ethnicity, status, class and sexual preferences. However, his margin is not concerned with gaining its voice in relation to the center. The purpose of his protagonists telling their stories is to make the center hear their voice or convince them of their stories as much as it is to make themselves convinced of their own truth. Hermann, Humbert and Kinbote write with the purpose of gaining legitimacy, but not by making the center accept them, because the center does not have that power over them – they write because art and literature have the power of making their truth legitimate in creating alternate worlds around it. They are egomaniacs, their worlds revolve around them and their perceptions of life; they are not the oppressed margin that wants to prove a point to the center, they are the margin that is oriented towards itself.

Nabokov grants them the ability to narrate their worlds, impose their perspective on events onto their readers and alienate themselves in

their Otherness within the realm of their hyperrealities. For Kinbote, that would be his Zembla, for Humbert, sadly enough, his imagination and his story, and for Hermann, Felix's life, or at least his interpretation of it. In such alternate realities, their Otherness is rather celebrated, and the margin they belong to is not only proclaimed to be the center, but is proclaimed to be a completely independent universe, disregarding every notion of the center and the norm whatsoever.

It should be stated that these Nabokov's protagonists could as well have been marginalized just regarding one of these criteria. However, in this manner of making them Others from multiple standpoints, Nabokov amplifies their marginalization and estrangement; he brings their Otherness to extremes to have better literary effect, and to achieve a spacious distance that would leave room for subtle criticism on social norms and imposed tradition of understanding reality, and in relation to it, literature.

LEGAL ALIENS

The first and most obvious level of Hermann, Humbert, and Kinbote's Otherness is their immigrant nature. They are all European immigrants, whether their specific country of origin is clearly revealed or not. However different the three of them may seem, this shared European background is what shapes their identities. They are sophisticated, well-educated and well-mannered; they are gentlemen in the essential sense of the word (or, at least, their social images are). Such background, however, may be the chief contributor to their arrogance and egocentrism. Each one of them considers himself to be above the petty society of which they are now called residents.

Hermann may appear as a perfect immigrant material in terms of assimilation. Quite unlike Humbert or, especially, Kinbote, he does not idealize his homeland. He equalizes Russia with its people, who at the moment happen to be Bolsheviks, and for him they are "sadists and hooligans" (Nabokov 1965: 20). Regarding this attitude towards Russia, he should, ipso facto, be considerably fonder of the country he now lives in. However, that is not the case. In Berlin, his life is dull and boring, bordering on mediocre. The people around him, being the product of society and history, are nothing more pleasant themselves. Moreover, it is not just

Germany that he is displeased with, he goes on a business trip to Prague and even Czechoslovakia fails to appeal to him. No country he moves to can satisfy him, because it is his life he wants to get out of.

Similarly, Humbert and Kinbote feel as dissatisfied with America as Hermann is with Germany. Their attitude, however, is driven by their origin – Humbert is proud of his European descent which makes him so much more civilized than the community he arrives in and Kinbote is so in love with his Zembla that he does not even bother considering the US – it is less worthy to begin with, because nothing is as worthy as his Zembla. However disgusted by what he encounters in America, Humbert is not cruel when talking about them mainly because he has a horrible secret, much worse than their provincialism, but also, later, because as much as the world around him and Lo seems nasty (cheap hotels and motels, primitive entertainment etc.), it is still the locus of his heaven, because that happens to be where Lo was his. Concerning Kinbote, his version of the story tells us that he cannot go back to his homeland, and, therefore, has to settle for America for the time being. He is exiled and, for him, where exactly he is holds little significance – what determines him is where he is not. The people around him are not much different from those in *Despair* and *Lolita*, although, unlike Hermann or Humbert, Kinbote has access to an academic community.

Concerning their target countries, people that live in them and the way they perceive the three of them, their status of the Other is further confirmed. They all perceive them as different, as alien to their community. Sometimes, as in Humbert's case, their nature of being foreigners is a source of some exoticism. Charlotte is enchanted by the fact that Humbert is from Europe, as is the mistress of the school in Beardsley, Mrs. Pratt. More often, however, it is not as positive. Kinbote is perceived as disagreeable and different, and the same can be said for Hermann. However, it should be noted that much of this disagreement with the communities they come into strives from their attitudes towards the community itself (but also their other traits of Otherness, especially their psychological profiles).

“LONELINESS IS NOT GOOD FOR THE DISPLACED SOUL”

The next level of their Otherness is closely connected with their psychological profiles. All of them have some level of a split personality. Symbolically, this is probably Nabokov’s way to place them as far as possible from realism. Also, in the technical aspect of the narrative, this level is crucial for formalist estrangement – the perspective of their minds is literally shifted from that of a sane person.

If the respective communities they came into do not mind that much the fact that they are foreigners, they most certainly mind their madness. Hermann, Humbert, and Kinbote are all perceived as crazy both by the people around them and by the audience. Humbert himself confesses he has been institutionalized, and several times. He speaks of his mental issues in a rather light-hearted fashion, but we do see how much it affects his actions. On the other hand, Kinbote is entirely delusional. He does not think of himself as of a deranged person and does not even notice when the word “lunatic” is brought up in relation to him. However, to an average reader, it is completely clear that it is how people perceive him.

Regarding Hermann, his frail mental state is quite transparent throughout the novel, especially from the point when he commits a gruesome crime. Although not many hints are given in the novel of the other people’s perspective of him, we can suppose that those were similar to the way Humbert and Kinbote’s societies perceived them. It can be guessed that his madness was obvious to his environment, considering the way Felix treats him with caution and carefully examines him every time they meet, or the way Ardelion states in his letter how he always knew Hermann’s true nature.

Furthermore, their mental problems are evident from their unhealthy obsessions. Such obsessions are multiple within each character, but can be divided roughly into two groups: an obsession with people and an obsession with ideas. Concerning obsessions with people, Kinbote is obsessed both with Shade and with himself. His obsession with Shade further hints at homosexuality, which represents another level of his Otherness. However, his obsession with Shade has its other side – he needs Shade to gain his legitimacy, to prove his being the exiled king of Zembla,

by means of Shade's poem. Humbert is, obviously, obsessed with Lolita, but also a whole wide range of nymphets lead by his beloved Annabel (which, like in Kinbote's case, hints at another level of Otherness – his undeniable pedophilia). Like Kinbote, there is a trace of egocentrism and self-obsession in him as well, which logically leads to the third of this peculiar group – Hermann, who is, most obviously, his main obsession. Regarding the second group of obsessions, the three of them are obsessed with either various ideas or particular, palpable things. Kinbote is obsessed with the story of Zembla and Shade's poem. Humbert is obsessed with his and Lo's love story, but also Quilty's murder, and in it – revenge. Hermann, finally, is obsessed with the idea of a perfect murder, but also the idea of multiple selves (whether in the case of a physical double, like Felix, or a virtual reflection, which is connected to his obsession with mirrors), which is quite a logical companion to his self-obsession.

Another aspect of their psychological Otherness is their indomitable urge to lie. This is closely related to their narration, ergo the construction of their identities through storytelling. It is also what contributes to their unreliability as narrators. The three of them are self-declared liars, whether they are aware of admitting this trait or not. Hermann is the bravest one – he openly declares, at the very beginning of the novel, that one of his “essential traits” is his “light-hearted, inspired lying” (Nabokov 1965: 4). His lying is his confirmation of superiority, which is why he pompously states: “A slight digression: that bit about my mother was a deliberate lie” (Nabokov 1965: 4). Humbert tries to conceal his lying, but reveals himself when talking about the legerity with which he lied to the local paper in an interview or when he misleads John and Jean Farlow into believing he is Lo's biological father. Purposely or not, as he finishes the story, he writes: “I have camouflaged what I could so as not to hurt people. And I have toyed with many pseudonyms for myself before I hit on a particularly apt one” (Nabokov 1992: 326). Such proneness to forgery is closely connected to his lying nature. Kinbote is the most skillful of the comrades. Galef proclaims him both the author and the manipulator (Galef 1985:421). He never explicitly admits that he is lying, but there are a few times when he mistakes “he” (as in the king) with “I”, which reveals that he is, in fact, talking about himself. Then, there is the attempt to change the poem, so it stands for his life rather than Shade's. It is, also, questionable how much of the poem

remained Shade's original and how much Kinbote forged of it. If we are to allow ourselves to define his reconstructing *The Haunted Barn* scene as an involuntary slip of the tongue, as a testimony to his forging tendencies, then his statement "I offer the reader the following scene which I feel cannot be too far removed from the truth" (Nabokov 1962: 136) could be a summary of his interpretation of *The Haunted Barn* play, but also the poem in its entirety. He is admitting that what he says may not be the truth, but still tries to convince us that it is as close to it as it is possible for him to grasp that truth. Their lies, however, are of no help with their mental conditions; such tendencies towards lying instead contribute to their breakdowns.

Such breakdowns are most apparent with Humbert, since he openly confesses he had them. He neatly reports on his stays in various sanatoriums, and furthermore, allows us to witness one of his breakdowns in the infamous chapter twenty six (Paunović 1997: 123). For Hermann, we can identify the moments of breakdowns to take place when the news of his crime first come to him – he becomes enraged and is unable to control his reactions, appalled that not a single person believed him and what he envisioned as his perfect fraud (i.e. assuming the false identity) – and also when the police come to arrest him. Concerning Kinbote, it may be apt to say that he is experiencing a breakdown at the very moment of writing the commentary to the poem and we are witnessing the very climax of his breakdown. The betrayal of his friend Shade and the lack of Zembla in the poem seem to finally push him over the edge of sanity, and he feverishly writes the commentary, it seems with a feverish, even obsessive purpose – to prove his legitimacy as the king of Zembla, but also to pursue revenge towards the poem itself for failing him.

PORTRAITS OF THE ECCENTRIC ARTISTS

If we are to discuss the abovementioned traits of Nabokov's protagonists, we may not find enough proof that they are characteristic of all Nabokovian heroes. They are indeed often immigrants, often mentally deranged, and, safe to say, not rarely liars. However, if we are to determine a single trait present in all Nabokovian heroes – it is that they are all artists. Their manners of narration, albeit quite different, inevitably have the poetic sound to them. Humbert may speak of unforgivable and quite disgusting things from a life of a pedophile, but his artistic, poetic language is what

makes him relatable. Considering Hermann's writings, the effect he aims at is rather a comic relief than poetic, verse-like expression. His narrative resembles a speech, with various metafictional moments. He also states that he is no artist; however, he boasts that he knows just about everything about literature. He is probably the most self-aware of them all, admitting as the story progresses that he is a novelist. He acknowledges the purpose of his writing – to justify his crime (or rather to explain it), but this aspect of the story is not as highlighted as it is with Humbert, for example. Humbert wants to defend himself, and his love for Lo, but it seems that he is more concerned with explaining the story to himself than to the jury and readers. Boyd notes that his entire story is a “perfect defense of the crime it caps” (Boyd 2016: 249). Hermann, and Kinbote likewise, on the other hand, want to convince the audience of their story, because people do not understand what is real – that Zembla exists and that Felix is the spitting image of Hermann. Inevitably, we may call them the storytellers, since the story seems to be the only thing more significant than the three of them – their stories (and in them the notion of a story as such) are their source of life, the only possible plane of existence. It should be also mentioned, when discussing their artistic nature, that Hermann proclaims himself to be an actor, and even finishes the novel on what he sees (or wants to see) as a movie set.

The godly, omnipotent aspect of their personalities is undeniably the most important aspect of their Otherness. It is their artistic vision that allows them insight into realms besides the universal, conventional frameworks of their times. In the very act of acquiring the role of gods, they gain the power beyond the center, but also inevitably ostracize themselves from the center to such a level that the stripping of their Otherness becomes impossible and unimaginable. They do so by holding and practicing power over fictional worlds they create and the social personae that they present to the world they inhabit. Vujin writes that Humbert “shapes the world he belongs to⁴” (Vujin 2019: 113). The same can be said for Kinbote and Hermann. This way, they position their versions of truth over what may or

⁴ Translation by the author of this paper.

may not be the objective truth; an action equally narcissistic, as it is artistic and creative.

HERMANN, HUMBERT, AND KINBOTE AND THE ART OF CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

As stated before, Hermann, Humbert and Kinbote are assuming a god-like role. One may say that, if we regard the notion of identity as a mere construct (and if we accept the psychoanalyst theory that everyone constructs their identity), Nabokov's protagonists are no different from any other person on Earth. However, it is vital to take into consideration an essential aspect of one's building one's identity suggested by the psychoanalysts such as Lacan and different poststructuralists – and that is the influence of social reality. Everyone acquires social norms; one builds one's identity within the frame of those master social norms. However, with Nabokovian heroes, that is not the case. It can be said that Hermann, Humbert, and Kinbote build their identities despite the norm. They assume the imposed role of the Other, but from there on, they build both their identities and their realities entirely as they wish themselves. In order to achieve such a difficult task, they are armed with the only thing possible that can help them – their narrative skills. The means of their self-construction is narration. Nabokov's point stated here is that literature surpasses all imposed norms and construction – there is no option for literature to be defined by the conventions of the real; fiction cannot be defined in terms of fact, and, ultimately, the margin cannot be determined by the center. The three of them, although skillful and appealing narrators, are far from being reliable ones. Yet, the space that postmodernism leaves when discussing narratorship and authorship allows the reader to make a choice – whether to believe or not.

As much as these traits are interpreted here as their advantages, if we regard their Otherness put in specific contexts Nabokov assigned to them, it can be deduced that the only way for them to accept their Otherness as positive is to make the margin completely independent. Henceforth, Nabokov's protagonists construct their realities that may only seem to resemble the actual (factual) realities. Kinbote constructs Zembla, and although it can be argued that it is, in fact, Russia, we cannot deny the author himself who not only states it is not Russia – he gives it an entirely

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different name, and locates it as Russia's far more beautiful neighbor. Humbert is not as transparent in his construction as Kinbote is. His alternate reality is America, but not the USA that welcomed him upon his arrival to Ramsdale; his America is imaginary America – that Promised Land where he can be with his Lo. Harold notes that his love for Lolita is his “life beyond self and beyond the art” (Harold 1975: 72). However, it is undeniable that this “life” is nothing but a constructed narrative. Hermann's alternate reality is equal to his alternate identity – Felix's life and identity are what constitutes his hyperreality.

CONCLUSION: WRONG PLACE, WRONG TIME?

Hermann, Humbert, and Kinbote are a proven margin. They are assigned with the role of the Other and they embrace it in its essence and its every aspect. If we take the Other to be that which is different from the center, then the three of them are different from the center societies of their worlds on three different levels: they are foreigners, they are mentally deranged men and they are artists.

They are foreigners unable to assimilate and adapt to the new environment. However, they are unable to exist in their respective homelands, either. Exiled and lost, the only thing that they can do is construct their realities. The loci of these alternate realities do match what is perceived as the “real” reality but are strikingly different. Kinbote is in America, but his Zembla is all around him, the medium through which he enters it being his mind; it exists as long as Kinbote can access his imagination. Also, though it may appear to be Russia in the realm of the “real”, within Kinbote's hyperreality it is and it will always be Zembla. Humbert's America is the America of his affair with Lo. The petty and cheap society that is “real” is surpassed, and Humbert sees the US as the Promised Land where he and his lover have a chance at happiness. Hermann inhabits real countries as he moves, but he switches realities in terms of identity. His hyperreality is Felix's life, and he employs all he has to become Felix, physically and psychologically.

Their psychological profiles are marked with undeniable insanity. Furthermore, what is strikingly typical for the three of them are their various obsessions. Kinbote is obsessed with Zembla, with the poem and with

Shade. Humbert is obsessed with Lo and nymphets in general, but also with Quilty and murder. Hermann is obsessed with Felix, mirrors and, most of all, himself. Matter of fact, the obsession with themselves is the most prominent obsession of each one of them. This aspect of Otherness combined with the following one is what will completely ostracize them from the real and set them, to stay there forever, within the realm of the non-real, the imaginary.

The most striking trait of these Nabokovian heroes is, no doubt, their artistic nature. They are aesthetes, storytellers and, in a way, poets (concerning their lyrical expression). When artists and madmen overlap, the aftermath is creation. They assume the roles of gods, inherent to artists, create their alternate worlds within the non-real; worlds within which the margin becomes the center for itself, concerned only with its own perspective, and furthermore, recognizing no objective, or “real” norms.

In the end, one has to ask oneself whether Hermann, Humbert, and Kinbote would assume the roles of the Other if they were to be put in different contexts. There was a time when it was not scandalous for a grown man to be in love with a young girl. There are cases when a man assumes the role of another person, his double, and manages to trick the world of his identity. Finally, perhaps there is such a country as Zembla within some other world or reality, factual or fictional. So, the question is: are the three of them set in the wrong place, at the wrong time? It is a debate whether a different context would contribute to their stripping of the roles of the Other. However, even if they manage to get rid of some of their Otherness, that essential trait of a Nabokovian hero, their artistic Otherness would nevertheless remain. Within the real, they will always be the Others, which is why their imaginary worlds are their only possibilities, their only right place and right time.

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Slađana Stamenković

DRUGOST KOD NABOKOVLJEVIH HERMANA, HAMBERTA I KINBOTA

Rezime

Kao jedan od ključnih pojmova u teoriji postmodernizma, Drugost se definiše kad karakteristična različitost i odvojenost od onoga što se podrazumeva pod pojmom Jastva. U teoriji postmodernizma, ovaj pojam još se može objasniti u okvirima binarne opozicije centar-margina o kojoj pišu razni teoretičari, a među kojima je najistaknutija Linda Hačion. No, pre nego što će se teorija pojaviti, tri romana Vladimira Nabokova već su se bavila pojmom Drugosti. U svakom od ovih romana, protagonist može se definisati kao Drugi. Herman u Očajanju, Lambert u Loliti i Kinbot u Bledoj vatri redom zauzimaju poziciju Drugog u sredinama u kojima se nalaze i to na više nivoa. Ova ih činjenica navodi da za sebe stvore svako svoju alternativnu realnost u kojoj margina postaje centar.

Ključne reči: Drugost, Vladimir Nabokov, Očajanje, Lolita, Bleda vatra