

L. A. Ballesteros Gentile¹

Potato

FOREWORD

'Potato, or the Confession of a White Weeping Male,' such were the two titles under which the writer of the present note wrote the strange page(s) it preambulates.

Save for the repositioning of various sections and any cruel transgression of each self-imposed rule that despite 'D.A.'s own efforts subsist in his text as signposts and tombstones (indicative of techniques or attitudes that taste would improve and compassion edit), this jocular pastiche is presented intact. Viewed simply as an essay, 'Potato' deals with sensations and memories that would have remained unquestionably banal to the reader had their expression been explicated by means of naff memoirisms. No doubt, D'Antonio is tasteless, he is abject, he is a shining example of literary hedonism, a mixture of childish and stubborn that betrays supreme passion perhaps, but is not conducive to art. He is abnormal. He is not a gentleman. But how quickly his painstaking prose can conjure up a humor, a love for Nabokov that makes us intrigued by the essai while skeptical of its author!

PART ONE

Potato, *paura* of my palate, storm of my pancreas. My foe, my flaw. Po-tay-to: the pit of my stomach taking a trip of three steps up the torso to stop, at three, in my throat. Po. Tay. To.

They are Gross, plain Gross, by themselves, rolling one inch round in every sack. They are Horrid when baked. They are Harry at market. They are Tuberosum on the dotted line. But on my plate they were always Po-tato.

Did they have a precedent? They did, indeed they did. In point of fact, there might have been no Potato at all had I not struggled, one August, to breathe upon my birth, in a hospital by Ford's Heart.²

Readers and editors of this essay, exhibit number one is what my mother, my well-intentioned, frustrated, sleep-deprived mother, dreaded.

1 "Dante"

2 Editor's note: It would seem that 'D.A.' was born with paralyzed vocal cords, had a tracheostomy shortly thereafter, and, as a result, struggled not only with his weight, but also with the consumption of certain food textures for many years. Potatoes exemplify this latter category, causing a particularly nasty gag reflex. (I remember one time I was in the presence of D'Antonio and his family, delighted to be so close to the subject of my study, but never—even at my highest moments of ecstasy—could I have imagined a display so evocative: In an attempt to wash down the 'scraggy wee shits' that littered his plate, 'D.A.' dipped a potato in ketchup, only to wash it down immediately after with water. Some unfortunate combination of these substances must have exacerbated the prior-mentioned gag reflex, because shortly post-ingestion the child introduced an amount of vomit onto the table that I previously would not have believed possible by someone his size.)

[Ford's Heart is a juvenile poetic deconstruction, of course. The meaning being Hartford, Connecticut.]

Look at this pool of vomit:³

Everytaste of them subsisted within the hollows and dells of memory, over which, if you can still stand this parody (I am using another's sentences), the fire of my hatred had set;⁴ surely, you all know those red-and-green remnants of food regurgitated, with the lumps, inbetween some juice in blood or suddenly splattered and rejected by the esophagus, on the tiles of the floor, in the poorly lit bathroom; a warm eruption, golden spew.

I'd wiggle, and squirm, and slam my mouth closed, but Mother's hand would always clench on my rejected fork, as she'd half-vault closer, and her deadset eyes, readers of this essay, inevitably'd reach my fearful face, while she pushed down against my upturned tongue the largest chunk of the nastiest vegetable man or monster had ever known.

You have to be an *artiste* and a child, a creature of immediate perspective, with a bubble of cold ketchup at the ready and a recently-disinfected pale permanently attached to your buckling chair (oh, how you have to whine and cry!), in order to escape for once, by parental mercy—the slow disappointed fall of a jaw, the silence of a rejected meal, and other indices which despair and shame and tears of dread forbid me to tabulate—the fat putrid vegetable among the mouthwatering foods; *it* squats unchallenged by them and tooknowing itself of its fantastic power.⁵

PART TWO

They had been everywhere.⁶ I had really enjoyed nothing.⁷ And I catch myself thinking today that our long battle had only defiled with a sinuous trail of mush my lovely, trustful, joyous, enormous dinnertable that by then, in retrospect, was no more for us than a collection of wellknown

3 Here Dante jumps through the text and begins to stitch together passages from the entire first section of *Lolita*. In Nabokov's, of course, after the "tangle of thorns," *monsieur* Humbert Humbert goes on to narrate the entire *trama*. Dante's view seems to be more localized: he will now literally describe a pool of vomit.

4 In this, as in other sections throughout, the author's imitation—pastiche?—seems to fall short of poetic brilliance. The editor has mentioned that this could, in and of itself, be a reference to the awkward poetic non-brilliance of a certain John Shade, further increasing the reference—reverence?—to Nabokov's *oeuvre*; but although this point could be haphazardly defended, it could just as easily be supposed that the author simply couldn't think of anything finer that would work within the rules of his system, and deemed adherence to predetermined structure more important than the perfection of his art.

5 There's a sad irony here, in that the form D.A. has chosen for his confession necessarily works *against* this self-proclaimed notion of artist as "creature of immediate perspective," for truly, what can be immediate when the object of art is so layered in commentary, obfuscated by the brew of different voices? (It bears mentioning here the criticism Nabokov often received for being an intellectual writer, a writer unconcerned with the visceral—shall we say, the *immediacy* of his work—but simply with how well it was constructed. Of course, in this way, one could connect him to Boulez and write a thesis; but we are in the business of art, not academia, and as for Nabokov—we say nothing here of Boulez—we believe he was in that same business, and knew it.)

6 Presumably the potatoes.

7 Presumably hyperbole.

gags, spilled wine glasses, old jokes, and my sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I dreamed potato.⁸

Po! Poto! Potato! I hear myself crying from a hallway into the kitchen, with the acoustics of starch, cooked starch, endowing my call and its tell-tale hoarseness with such a wealth of anxiety, passion and pain...

But in the end, merciful fate's formal handshake, as reproduced by Grandmother before leaving the kitchen—(for it was she who finally convinced my parents to end their campaign of forceful feeding; my grandmother, who used to go shopping with her mother for paddles with which to beat my mother and her sister and who believes even still in a righteous God, worried Saint Peter won't open his gates to her because no new generations will pray)—brought me out of my confinement; and I wept. Readers and editors of this essay—I wept.

8 And when did it stop? Those nights, those dinners, those family—familiar—routines? That long stretch of time in D'Antonio's memory where every night a new glass spilled and every night a new argument broke out? Where do the images of his father—hands on hips, back to the table, body filled with Spanish rage—end? Where do the tears and the hours and the food mercilessly stuffed into a child's mouth as their parents grasp for—seemingly illusory—control: where do they go to dry? *[This note was not present in the original manuscript sent to publication, but curiously appeared in the first edition, without context or warning.]*