

## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

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**Re-Viewing *The Eye***

*I first read Nabokov's *The Eye* in 1986, a lifetime ago. Tracing my steps through the book, I saw the need to trace my voyage to the book—to reveal a veiled preparation that enabled me to engage with the book. That is, though I once believed *The Eye's* effect was fully due to Nabokov, I can see now how elements of his writing had been at work within me before turning a page.*

I was renting a room with Aino in a run-down house in Oakland, CA. I was twenty and she was eighteen. We'd hitchhiked across the United States. Because we looked about fifteen, everybody who picked us up thought we were runaways. We were in and out of so many strange cars—in and out of the bubbles of strangers' lives—that by the time we reached California, I'd adopted the view that everybody is a little crazy. By that, I meant that everybody exists in his own world, the corollary of which is that no one has an objective eye on life.

When I was ten, I fantasized about running away with an imaginary girlfriend. Behind our apartments, I'd walk through the woods and along a brook, pretending a girl was beside me, the two of us eloping to freedom. I imagined constructing a camouflaged fort where we'd hide in case we were followed. In winter, I'd build a burrow with a system of tubes from swamp grass for our underground fire to breathe. The smoke would puff thinly through these tubes, so no one would suspect our hearth in the middle of the wilderness.

Aino was my first real girlfriend. Until our relationship, I'd imagined all I needed to complete my lonely life was a soul mate. I was certain to be an ideal boyfriend. Still, part of me eyed Aino analytically. The first day on the road, I wrote:

Aino had planned to stay awake through the night and in the morning prepare for herself an "enormous" breakfast of eggs, bacon, toast, grapefruit with a glass of milk. Instead, she climbed into bed probably no earlier than one hour before sunrise. In the morning, she was overtired (a little testy with her mother, probably not looking cheerfully to the drive to Washington, D.C.) and ate a pear in the car.

Aino and I stayed at campsites, sleeping in a tiny tent. We were side-by-side twenty-four hours a day—just like soul mates. During the day, we didn't know what to do with ourselves. We were tense and tired from walking around aimlessly. I was by turns critical, sullen, horny, adoring, insecure and bossy. By the time we reached California, Aino and I were talking about breaking up. I remember us sitting on a bench in Berkeley, with our knapsacks at our feet, trying to dissect the Relationship.

It turned out I didn't know how to be a boyfriend. I glimpsed Aino's perception of the relationship, seeing myself from the outside. I didn't know how to share. I was imperious, stubborn and controlling. I saw myself as a desperate little kid, a lonely only child who never learned how to play with others. Aino held up a mirror, and I gazed upon the most

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friendless soul ever made.

Aino and I rented a room in Carlo's house on Thirty-First Street, Oakland. Since retiring from the Navy, Carlo had two interests—filling his house with junk from tag sales, and taking nude photos of “models” in his “studio,” which was his bedroom. It didn't fit my conception, this grandfatherly man with basset hound jowls with a sideline in erotic photography. Among the heap of tag sale junk, I found carousels of slides of Carlo's “work,” miniature images—iridescent and translucent—of women posing in various stages of undress. I was spying into Carlo's idea of sex. What turned him on, when seen from the outside, appeared transparent and cliché. I wondered: *How could anyone with any degree of self-awareness take his desires seriously?*

Aino was tired of traipsing around Berkeley. We'd become familiar with the downtown coterie of panhandlers, one of whom would chew our ears with mystical nonsense and would bow with his palms together after I gave him a dollar. Another panhandler had formulated a treatise justifying his not working. “I'm not working either,” I'd say, but I'd give him a dollar anyway.

Finished with walking circles around Telegraph and Shattuck, Aino made for the library. Panhandlers milled about its steps. Inside were sleeping vagabonds, the sun pouring upon them through skylights. Aino knew where she wanted to go: she took an easy pleasure in reading. I was intimidated by the idea of all that I had never read and would never read, by the great brains behind books, brains that overshadowed mine. Alone, I roamed the stacks. I had a fantasy of the perfect book, one in which my mind appeared as print, in which the typeset was as familiar as the hairs on my arm. At random, I pulled spines from the shelves, reading where fluttering pages came to rest, scanning for an echo, my undiscovered twin. I browsed the Ks and imagined my own clone voice filling my ear with angelic consolation. I sought, unconsciously, a narrative of dislocation.

I'd decided that Nabokov was my favorite writer the previous winter. I loved *Pale Fire*, how its out of touch anti-hero Kinbote dwelt within a world of words. I was attracted to Kinbote's vulnerability, to his bare despair pushing against verbal mastery. There, amongst the Ns, stood a slender volume, *The Eye*, examining me with monocular ardor. In his introduction, Nabokov described his protagonist as “*exist[ing] insofar as he is reflected in other brains, which in their turn are placed in the same strange, specular predicament as his...The theme of THE EYE is the pursuit of an investigation which leads the protagonist through a hell of mirrors and ends in the merging of twin images.*” Like me, the hero of *The Eye*, an awkward young man, was alternately aloof and hypersensitive, disdainful and ashamed. Nabokov's nameless hero felt:

always exposed, always wide-eyed; even in sleep I did not cease to watch over myself, understanding nothing of my existence, growing crazy at the thought of not being able to stop being aware of myself, and envying all those simple people—clerks, revolutionaries, shopkeepers—who, with confidence and concentration, go about their little jobs. I had no shell of that kind; and on those terrible, pastel-blue mornings, as my heels tapped across the wilderness of the city, I would imagine somebody who goes mad because he begins to perceive clearly the motion of the terres-

trial sphere. (7)

I connected with the hero's inability to adopt an identity amid multi-angled self-scrutiny. His existential drift made possible a stylized acuity of perception, elevating imagination into manifesto, a doctrine of being. After the hero's apparent suicide, he comes to reoccupy the dream of his former body through an imaginative, rather than an affective, extension:

I assumed that the posthumous momentum of my thought would soon play itself out, but apparently, while I was still alive, my imagination had been so fertile that enough of it remained to last for a long time. It went on developing the theme of recovery, and pretty soon had me discharged from the hospital. The restoration of a Berlin street looked a great success—and as I glided off along a sidewalk, delicately trying out my still weak, practically disembodied feet, I thought about everyday matters [...] For I knew now that after death human thought, liberated from the body, keeps on moving in a sphere where everything is interconnected as before. (22-23)

The hero of *The Eye* stood as a consoling example of the self-fictionalizing gaze, as a confirmation of a neatly detached regard for the world. The posture of Nabokov's protagonist held out a promise to me, a method for enlarging my imagination while suppressing painful feelings. I considered myself in the third person, examining my moods, as an author might, with a pose of indifference. One evening, Aino and I had dinner with her cousin and her friends, graduate students at Berkeley. I wrote of myself attempting fit in:

An impostor, he was unsuccessful in presenting his personality favorably. He found it necessary to adopt an intellectual posture, which he did badly, and his attempts at humor were childish and ill timed. Every few minutes he would take a step back and wish he were a different person entirely. He tried to reflect the character of each person as a sort of intermediate step for altering himself into a new individual.

Literature was my prototype for defining my place in the world. Yet, "the world" bothered me. Was it an internal reality or an external fact? I suspected the former, and was drawn to literature of subjectivity, which illustrated the ultimate puzzle: how to find satisfaction in a world of mirrors? Nabokov seemed concerned especially with the beguiling alliance between inspiration and isolation. *The Eye* offered a spectacle of an insular romantic learning to love through his own imagination. Nabokov's hero regarding his muse, Vanya, asks:

What difference did it make to me whether she were stupid or intelligent, or what her childhood had been like, or what books she read, or what she thought about the universe? I really knew nothing about her, blinded as I was by that burning loveliness which replaces everything else and justifies everything, and which, unlike a human soul (often accessible and possessable), can in no way be appropriated, just as one cannot include among one's belongings the colors of ragged sunset clouds above black houses, or a flower's smell that one inhales endlessly, with tense nostrils, to the point of intoxication (70-71)

I was a lover—as narcissistic as Nabokov's protagonist. The self-ab-

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sorption I'd glimpsed through Aino's eyes stung from the discovery that I was inept at deeply identifying with my girlfriend. I tried writing my way into the heart of the relationship, but couldn't wake from my self-referential desire:

He could not remove his eyes from a certain blonde woman...her skin ranged from pale to pink, depending on her frequently changing moods during the evening, from withdrawn and shy to rowdy bursts of laughter. Throughout the night, the young man circled the woman. He found her beautiful but startling.

Aino and I had arrived at a knotty consciousness of our relationship. Our quarrels were the result of not seeing the world through the other's eyes. I can picture the two of us in our room, unadorned save for a silk scarf she'd draped over a naked nail and a landscape photo in sepia I found while rummaging through Carlo's junk. The photo was propped atop a milk-crate, our bedside stand. I was balancing on two hind legs of a chair, *The Eye* open on my knees. Nabokov's persona instilled me with a new sense of potency: "*Whenever I wish, I can accelerate or retard to ridiculous slowness the motions of all these people, or distribute them in different groups, or arrange them in various patterns, lighting them now from below, now from the side...For me, their entire existence has been merely a shimmer on a screen*" (90). In the corner of my eye, I caught a shift in Aino's pose upon the bed. I sensed her staring contentedly at me, admiring my contemplative figure. I glanced over. She had set her book aside and—her gaze directed away from me—appeared to be studying the photo.

She said softly, "M?"

"What?" I replied, pretending she'd interrupted my reading.

"I'm imagining sitting on that bench, being in that moonlit space," she said.

"That's not a bench," I said. "It's a fence."

Like my twenty-year-old persona, the hero of *The Eye* is subject to rude awakenings, to accidental exposures of himself. I embraced *The Eye* because it seemed to argue for the primacy of subjectivity. *There's no getting out of the bubble of the self*, I reasoned. Yet, I could read in both *The Eye* and myself a shade of despair. I would take long walks alone into Berkeley in hope that the world might lift my spirits. Walking in and out of cafés, I saw myself in Nabokov's fragmentary hero:

As I pushed the door, I noticed the reflection in the side mirror: a young man in a derby carrying a bouquet, hurried toward me. That reflection and I merged into one. (97)

When Aino flew back home to Connecticut, my walks turned interminable, labyrinthine. She wrote a letter on the plane describing from above "the hills like warm, velvet backs of sleeping animals." Her voice, and way of looking at things, had become familiar to me. Her letters were consoling: I absorbed them, understanding the emotional life from which they sprang. I wooed her through the mail, more at home with drafting a romantic persona through words than with the uncertain improvisations real life had demanded. What did it matter that circumstances with Aino

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had altered? My passion was intact. My letters to her breathed a perfect ardor. To be an ideal boyfriend, I realized, didn't require an actual girlfriend. I had on my side Nabokov's persona, who "Every other night...dream[s] of her dresses and things on an endless clothesline of bliss, in a ceaseless wind of possession" (104).

A week after Aino had left, the real life of Carlo's house revealed itself. I was in bed writing: "reminding himself of the continuity of his own character." In the afternoon, I finally left my room. I padded through the house in my socks, down the dim hall, and past Carlo's bedroom, where I heard his old voice unctuously instructing some mute partner. I don't know whether my hand turned the knob or the door opened of its own accord. I saw myself frozen in the threshold of Carlo's room. He was standing by his bed, and a woman, whose face I couldn't see, was seated before him, her arms around his buttocks. Carlo's pants had fallen below his knees, and the harlequin pattern of his underwear struck me incongruously. A cord ran from Carlo's hand to a camera, which took in the scene from atop a tripod. I was transported at once from a one-man reverie to a tableau of four, queasy with the recognition of myself dispersed equally among our figures. I felt like a character in a book, whose author cunningly undermines his view of things:

It is frightening when real life suddenly turns out to be a dream, but how much more frightening when that which one had thought a dream—fluid and irresponsible—suddenly congeals into reality! (98)

Over the years, *The Eye* has become enshrined. At first, it was an argument between the self and the world, each striving to prove the other false. I would later regard the novel in the light of my own growth—away from isolation and idealization of camera-like detachment and toward an experiential sense of world and self in mutual reflection. There's something uncontainable about the interplay between our inner and outer spheres; yet, I've come to feel the novel's force is augmented rather than diminished by this fuzziness at the heart of perception. From a statement about the self, *The Eye* has translated itself into a statement about writing. The word, according to my reading of Nabokov, strives to create a seamless world, whose seeming self-sufficiency can only be absorbed (paradoxically) by the unruly and incomplete eye of the reader.

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### Works Cited

Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Eye*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.