

# “I’ll Get Urinary Impotence”: Updike’s Double Reference to Nabokov in “Bluebeard in Ireland”

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As is well known, John Updike greatly admired Vladimir Nabokov’s oeuvre. Since his first encounter, via a *New Yorker* excerpt from *Pnin* in 1953, Updike remained an appreciative reader and, later, a constant reviewer of the Russian writer, whom he dubbed, in his famous review of *The Defense* (1964), “Grandmaster Nabokov.” Nabokov’s artistic influence on Updike has been frequently pointed out by critics. One of the earliest examples can be found in *Bech: A Book* (1970), as Jonathan Raban observes, “The book is studded with small acts of homage to Nabokov, and comes rigged out with spoof appendices, a bibliography and a commendatory introduction by Bech himself” (494). Updike once told an interviewer that he had Nabokov in mind when he assembled his first volume of Bech stories: “The idea of putting together a kind of half novel out of short stories about a single character came to me from Nabokov’s *Pnin*, which I love” (Salgas 179). Nabokov’s shadow is also palpable in *A Month of Sundays* (1975), a confessional novel with a postmodern twist, wherein the narrator-protagonist Reverend Tom Marshfield composes a manuscript describing his sexual profligacy and resulting therapy at a motel<sup>1</sup> for ministers-gone-astray. Here, Nabokov’s *Lolita* comes to mind; that novel is narrated by Humbert Humbert, a murderer and pedophile who composes, while in prison, his own confession about his past behavior. Moreover, some critics, including James Schiff, perceive Nabokov behind Marshfield’s voice: “With his verbal playfulness and dexterity, his lurid sexual intensity and anxious mocking

voice, Nabokov's Humbert Humbert is the most obvious precursor" (31). But perhaps the most obvious instance of Nabokov's influence is the entirety of *The Coup* (1978). Narrated by Colonel Elleilloù, an exiled dictator of a fictional country in Africa, the novel immediately brings to mind Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), in which Charles Kinbote, a self-proclaimed exiled king of the fictional country of Zembla, recounts the story of his life in the form of an extensive commentary on the titular poem. In an early review, Joyce Carol Oates observed that "Nabokov's presence is felt throughout" *The Coup*, suggesting that the novel's basic structure—the exiled ruler's narrative of his removal from power—parallels that of *Pale Fire* (32).<sup>2</sup> Oates' statement is corroborated by Updike himself, who said in an interview with Iwao Iwamoto that "*The Coup* is kind of an attempt to have a Nabokovian unreality, a made-up country and other things" (121).

All of these are from the 1970s, after which Nabokov's influence might seem to have diminished in Updike's oeuvre. In fact, Nabokovian references and devices continued to appear in his later work, just in a more complicated or obscure fashion. The 1993 short story "Bluebeard in Ireland," which portrays an American couple, George and Vivian Allenson, on a visit to the southwest region of Ireland, is an example.<sup>3</sup> Jack De Bellis notes that *Pale Fire* is mentioned in the couple's conversation: "Nabokov's novel of deception and betrayal makes an ironic comment on their troubled relationship" (297). But what happens here is not as simple as it seems. The story opens as the protagonist is trying to play along with his wife:

"Yes, the people are wonderful," George Allenson had to agree, there in Kenmare. His wife, Vivian, was twenty years younger than he, but almost as tall, with dark hair and decided, sharp features, and it placed the least strain on their marriage if he agreed with her assertions. (520)

These opening lines efficiently convey their delicate situation, which is partly due to Vivian being George's third wife. They are haunted by his two ex-wives, Jeananne and Claire, and for this reason they already disagree about the planning of their itineraries: "Vivian was so irrational that, because her predecessor wife had been called Claire, she had refused, planning the trip, to include County Clare" (523). Now in Ireland, George and Vivian are again divided on the schedule for the day. While he wants to drive south, she flatly refuses, because she had been scared to death of his driving the day before: "Vivian had twisted in her seat and pressed her face against the headrest rather than look, and sobbed and called him a sadistic fiend" (520–21). Again attempting to avoid an argument, he gives in to her plan for a short hike along high country roads. Nevertheless, she complains of his poor

sense of direction as well as her newly bought shoes, and they almost end up in a quarrel. As she declares that she won't take another step, he harbors "murderous thoughts" (531), imagining that her body is going to weaken, die, and be scattered over the Irish dust. He even has a vision of yet another wife: "What would she be like, this fourth Mrs. Allenson?" (530).<sup>4</sup> He is indeed a Bluebeard figure. But they finally find their way to the planned route—or their way to delay making the crucial decision about their marriage—and come near to the highest point of the road.

The reference to Nabokov appears when Vivian here expresses her urgent need to urinate. Since there is no toilet around and she has a poor sense of balance, George gives his hand to her, jokingly suggesting that splashing her shoes "might soften them up": "Don't make me laugh. I'll get urinary impotence." It was a concept of Nabokov's, out of *Pale Fire*, that they both had admired, in the days when their courtship had tentatively proceeded through the socially acceptable sharing of books" (533). The reason why Nabokov is invoked isn't revealed until the conclusion of the story. Walking back to where their car is parked, Vivian says, "You haven't asked me if I like Ireland," and when he asks her, she asserts, "I do" (534, italics in original). Hence the concluding sentence: "They were back where they had started" (534). On a base level, this simply means that the couple has returned to the starting point of the tour, where they had parked their car. However, the line also implies the story's structural resemblance to *Pale Fire*. Nabokov's novel mainly consists of two parts, John Shade's poem "Pale Fire" and its line-by-line commentary prepared by Charles Kinbote. Written in heroic couplets, the poem has 999 lines, ending in the last line—"Trundling an empty barrow up the lane" (69)—which remains unmatched in rhyme. But the fact is, it does rhyme with the first line of the poem: "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain" (33). The poem thus makes a full circle. Similarly, the last line of "Bluebeard in Ireland" harks back to the story's beginning, where George reluctantly agrees to Vivian's appreciation of Ireland: "Yes, the people are wonderful" (520).<sup>5</sup> The reference to *Pale Fire*, therefore, is a self-explication of the story's structural design as well as an ironic commentary on their ever-troubled situation.

This is not the whole story, however. As far as I am aware, there is no such mention of "urinary impotence" in *Pale Fire*; only a vague parallel when Kinbote describes his newly hired gardener: "He was awfully nice and pathetic, and all that, but a little too talkative and completely impotent which I found discouraging" (291). Here Kinbote, a self-described gay man, suggests that he has somehow deduced his male employee's sexuality. The quote hardly seems comparable, though the word "impotent" faintly echoes the line in "Bluebeard in Ireland." On the other

hand, *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974), Nabokov's last novel published before his death, does offer the very phrase when the narrator declines to "repair for a leak" with his male friend: "because I knew by experience that a talkative neighbor and the sight of his immediate stream would inevitably afflict me with urinary impotence" (69). Thus, there arises a puzzling problem: why did Updike embed an obscure reference to *Look at the Harlequins!*, assuming he did not uncharacteristically misattribute the quote? To address the question, we need to examine this other Nabokov novel.

Like "Bluebeard in Ireland," *Look at the Harlequins!* presents a man who experienced several marriages—as the first sentence reads: "I met the first of my three or four successive wives in somewhat odd circumstances" (3). The narrator seemingly does not bother to count his own wives. But as we go on reading, we understand that this strange utterance is just one instance of the novel's general evasiveness. The narrator often makes excuses for his own unreliability throughout the text: "In fact, those first days at Villa Iris are so badly distorted in my diary, and so blurred in my mind, that I am not sure if, perhaps, Iris [his first wife] and Ivor [her brother] were not absent till the middle of the week"; "I believe that much of the confused impressions listed here in connection with doctors and dentists must be classed as an oneiric experience during a drunken siesta" (17, 19). The slippery descriptions are an inherent characteristic of his account, though some of them can be explained by his chronic mental illness.

Such a narrative strategy is further enhanced by what might be called the novel's pseudo-intertextuality, that is, the elaborate system of oblique allusions to other texts. The narrator, Vadim Vadimovich N., is a Russian-American author like Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov himself, and Vadim's oeuvre is almost transparently a self-parody of his creator's. To quote Updike's review of *Look at the Harlequins!*: "*Tamara* (1925) is surely *Mary* (1926); *Camera Lucida* (*Slaughter in the Sun*) replicates *Laughter in the Dark* (*Camera Obscura*); *The Dare* mistranslates *The Gift* [*Dar*]; *See under Real* and *Dr. Olga Replin* openly conceal *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Pnin*; and *Ardis* (1970) is scarcely even a pseudonym for *Ada, or Ardor* (1969)" (216). If Nabokov's works are neatly arranged chess problems, Vadim's world is as oblique as a harlequin's habit: "As the jacket design reminds us, a harlequin's traditional lozenge-pattern is a chessboard made oblique" (220). Moreover, *Look at the Harlequins!* contains a number of references to these fictional texts, which are in fact oblique allusions to actual Nabokov titles, as anyone familiar with Nabokov easily understands. The plot of *See under Real* is, for example, described as follows: "An English novelist, a brilliant and unique performer, was

supposed to have recently died. The story of his life was being knocked together by the uninformed, coarse-minded, malevolent Hamlet Godman. . . . The biography was being edited, rather unfortunately for its reckless concocter, by the indignant brother of the dead novelist" (*Harlequins* 121). This is a variation of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, where the narrator V. tries to rewrite the distorted biography of his half-brother Sebastian Knight, itself written by a Mr. Goodman. Throughout his 1974 novel, Nabokov stretches a web of pseudo-intertextuality that ultimately leads us to reread his own oeuvre.

As we have already seen, the reference to *Pale Fire* in "Bluebeard in Ireland" is no less unreliable than the oblique allusions in *Harlequins*. If we overlook the title or fail to consult the text, the detail may be read as no more than a token of Updike's respect for Nabokov. But if we examine Nabokov's works as well, the pseudo-intertextuality brings us to the oblique world of *Harlequins*. Updike thus seems to imply that George Allenson's cherished memory of his and Vivian's courtship is also unreliable: when Vivian cites *Look at the Harlequins!* George mistakes it for *Pale Fire*, just as he mistakes the cause of their troubled relationship for their age gap or the baby that she wants but he feels too old to afford. The true problem lies in their romantic incompatibility, as is indicated in the prequel story "Aperto, Chiuso" (1991), in which the couple takes a trip to Italy, and also which introduces the theme of underlying tension between a chauvinist husband and a feminist wife. This tension is reintroduced in the very first paragraph of "Bluebeard": "Vivian, a full generation removed from [George], was an instinctive feminist, but to him any history of unrelieved victimization seemed suspect" (520). As the narrative structure suggests, their basic disagreements remain unresolved at the end of the story. The ambiguous reference to *Look at the Harlequins!* thus gives an additional layer of irony to George and Vivian's relationship.<sup>6</sup>

Brian Boyd, a distinguished Nabokov scholar, suggests that the author, with his "reputation for teasing his readers for the sake of teasing," in fact "teases us to test us":

He knows that there is no substitute for the excitement of a discovery we make ourselves, and he encourages us to exercise our curiosity and imagination in a world that may often resist the mind but that can afford endless rewards to those who approach it in a spirit of inquiry and confidence that it has worthwhile secrets to yield. (426)

If such is the case, Updike performed a truly Nabokovian teasing/testing for us in "Bluebeard in Ireland." If we are curious enough to reread Nabokov for the source of the citation—"one cannot *read* a book: one can only reread it" is his famous quote (*Lectures* 3)—we are surely rewarded for it. With this in mind, it's

quite possible that Updike built a Nabokovian puzzle out of the precariousness of marriage, one of his own stock materials for a story. Not surprisingly, Updike appreciated Nabokov's handling of women in *Look at the Harlequins!*: "The manner in which these three wives . . . travel in fictional space, enlarging from first glimpses into love objects and marriage partners and then diminishing through disenchantment into death or abandonment, is no mean feat of projection" ("Motley But True" 218). We can say, then, that Vadim's three or four wives bore Updike the story "Bluebeard in Ireland," the offspring of the happy marriage of a Nabokovian trick and an Updikean topic.

#### NOTES

1. Though the narrator of *A Month of Sundays* calls it a "motel," he acknowledges that this is not fully accurate: "The motel—I resist calling it a sanatorium, or halfway house, or detention center—has the shape of an O, or, more exactly, an omega" (4).

2. For a comparative study of the narrative structures of *Pale Fire* and *The Coup*, see Joyce B. Markle, "The Coup: Illusions and Insubstantial Impressions." *Critical Essays on John Updike*, ed. William R. Macnaughton. G. K. Hall, 1982: 281–301.

3. The short story was first published in the January 1993 issue of *Playboy* and later collected in *The Afterlife and Other Stories* (1994), along with another story about the Allensons, "Aperto, Chiuso." In this paper, citations refer to the Library of America edition of the *Collected Later Stories*.

4. This sentence does not appear in the *Playboy* version of the story. Moreover, the passage that follows, speculating on a fourth Mrs. Allenson—"Jewish, with a rapid, humorous tongue and heavy hips and clattering bracelets on her sweetly hairy forearms? Black, a stately fashion model whom he would rescue from her cocaine habit . . . ? A little Japanese, silken and fiery within her kimono . . . ? Or perhaps one of his old mistresses, whom he couldn't marry at the time, but whose love had never lessened and who was miraculously unaged . . . ?" (530–31)—was added in the later texts. Updike probably intended to highlight the parallels between his story and the folk tale.

5. When the story first appeared in *Playboy*, the opening line read: "The people *are* wonderful" (94, italics in original). Updike later added the word "yes," slightly emphasizing the implicit continuity of the couple's conversation.

6. The name "Vivian" might be another instance of Updike's homage to the Russian writer. As is well known, Vladimir Nabokov relished embedding partly anagrammatic versions of his own name in the texts, such as "Vivian Badlook" (*King, Queen, Knave* 153), "Vivian Darkbloom" (*Lolita* 4, *Ada* 591), and "Vivian Bloodmark" (*Speak, Memory* 218). The name also appears in *Look at the Harlequins!* without a family name (249).

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