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“TERRA INCOGNITA”

Returning from the Undiscovered Country

On its surface, Vladimir Nabokov’s “Terra Incognita” reads like an adventure story—if a rather phantasmagoric one. But it also seems to be marred by an obvious problem of internal incoherence.

Consider first the possibility that the jungle adventure is a feverish vision dreamt by Vallière as he lies on a sickbed somewhere in Europe. This would explain why armchairs, bedposts and crystal tumblers are appearing and disappearing at various points of the jungle and swamp: in moments when Vallière’s eyes loll open, these objects really are before him and his sick brain clumsily inserts them into the dream. The problem is that, at the climax of the story, Vallière has a moment of sudden clarity and seems to insist, with great emphasis, that this is not the case.

But suddenly, at this last stage of my mortal illness—for I knew that in a few minutes I would die—in these final minutes everything grew completely lucid: I realized that all that was taking place around me was not the trick of an inflamed imagination, not the veil of delirium, through which unwelcome glimpses of my supposedly real existence in a distant European city (the wallpaper, the armchair, the glass of lemonade) were trying to show. I realized that the obtrusive room was fictitious, since everything beyond death is, at best, fictitious, an imitation of life hastily knocked together, the furnished rooms of nonexistence. I realized that reality was here, here beneath that wonderful,

frightening tropical sky; among those gleaming swordlike reeds; in that vapor hanging over them; and in the thick-lipped flowers clinging to the flat islet, where, beside me, lay two clinched corpses. (*Stories* 303; unless otherwise indicated, all citations are to this edition)

The problem arises when we take these words at face value. For in the very last moment of the story, swamp and jungle vanish and Vallière finds himself unambiguously installed in the European bedroom; that is, in “the scenery of death: a few pieces of realistic furniture and four walls” (303). But Vallière is also the narrator. If it is true that he has died, how is he telling us his story?

The question tempts us to set Vallière’s claim to one side and skeptically review the details of the tropical expedition. When we do this, we soon find clues to its inveracity. For example, Vallière is a botanist, but his knowledge of plants seems strangely deficient. The only plant he identifies using binomial nomenclature is *Vallieria mirifica*—a name evidently derived from his own (297). In his next breath he refers, in good layman fashion, to “strange dark tangles of some kind” and uses the nonexistent word “porphyroferous” to describe tree branches (298-9). Another possible lack of scientific verisimilitude occurs when Vallière encounters a large swamp flower. He describes it as “presumably an orchid” (299). In the mouth of a botanist, the phrase seems a little too hesitant, too imprecise—somewhat like a marine biologist examining a crustacean and declaring it, “presumably a lobster.” In general, we may say this of Vallière’s knowledge of the jungle flora: it falls short of actual botanical expertise but is exactly the sort of thing we might expect from an intelligent man persuasively *faking* botanical expertise.

Now alerted to the game Nabokov is playing, we find reason to doubt other details. There are, for example, no such thing as the “hydrotic snakes” that pester the men in the swamp

(300).¹ The Badonians, on reflection, are also highly caricatural (“cobalt arabesques between the eyes”?) and their “big, glossy brown” physiques and “powerful stride” are more suited to Maasai tribesmen than to the pygmies and bushmen who typically inhabit tropical jungles (297). Gregson is Vallière’s “dear friend” and yet Vallière admits he is beginning to forget who Gregson is and why he is with him. And Cook, finally, is repeatedly described as, “a Shakespearean clown” (297). All of this invites us to wonder if the jungle adventure has been cobbled together from the imagination and reading of a European gentleman.

We are now in a position to clearly state the entire puzzle: “Terra Incognita” is a first person narrative that includes the death of its narrator. The paradox invites us to analyse the text more closely—whereupon we discover a contradiction between Vallière’s epiphanic certitude that the jungle is reality and Nabokov’s many hints that it is not. How is all this to be resolved? Before considering my proposal, let us review three critical assessments of the story.

Julian Connolly submits that “Terra Incognita” is the story of a struggle by a creative individual to escape from mundane reality into a realm of pure imagination. It is true, notes Connolly, that Nabokov “toys with his readers’ perceptions and perceptiveness” until he or she has “difficulty in determining what is real and what is illusion” (57) And it is true that this calls attention to the “elusive nature of ‘reality’” (57). But that is not the primary purpose of the story. On Connolly’s assessment, the wavering boundary between tropical jungle and European bedroom represents the struggle in the mind of the artist to, “resist the encroachment of a banal, seemingly sham reality and to cling to his dream of an exotic, free world.”

In this connection, Connolly considers the possibility that “Terra Incognita” is a “preliminary sketch” for *Invitation to a Beheading*—a novel Nabokov wrote around the same time. Cincinnatus, like Vallière, “harbors a vision of another world, a world of dreams, which

¹ “Hydrotic” is a rare word meaning, “causing a discharge of water or phlegm.” See also note 3.

he considers to be a more truthful or genuine reality” (57) Connolly notes that in both works the language of stage setting is used to suggest the artificiality of the mundane; and in both the protagonists believe that accepting the veracity of the mundane increases its prominence. At the end of the novel, as in the story, the duality collapses. On the day of execution, Cincinnatus gets up from the chopping block and, without further ado, walks off into his chosen realm while the mundane world disintegrates all around him in a whirlwind of “dust, rags, chips of painted wood, bits of gilded plaster, pasteboard bricks, posters” (*Invitation to a Beheading* 223).

There are some important differences, as Connolly concedes, but these can be accommodated by his thesis. For Cincinnatus, the mundane world dominates at the start of the narrative, and it is the realm of imagination that starts to encroach—an inversion of Vallière’s experience—while at the end of the novel Cincinnatus succeeds in throwing off the mundane while poor Vallière succumbs to it. *Invitation to a Beheading*, it seems, is not so much a companion piece to, as a mirror image of “Terra Incognita.” Connolly concludes: “Having sketched in broad strokes the desperate though ultimately futile struggle of an imaginative individual trying to break free from the bonds of routine existence, Nabokov went on to explore this struggle in more detail, and in *Invitation to a Beheading* he presents the triumphant victory of the creative imagination over the constraints of stifling convention” (63).

In his reading of the story Jonathan Sisson suggests that the ambiguous coexistence of jungle and bedroom is intentionally irresolvable. Sisson, like Connolly, thinks that “neither the narrator nor the reader can determine which of the two realities functions as the single underlying primary reality” (95). According to Sisson, “It is only in the superimposition of the two settings that the reader is deprived of an axiom of routine perception and thereby stimulated to a transcendent perception of the world” (98).

Sisson, in other words, thinks that we should see “Terra Incognita” as the literary

equivalent of a Buddhist koan—a paradox without a solution intended to provoke enlightenment. In fleshing out his argument, Sisson draws our attention to the story “The Strange Case of Davidson’s Eyes” by H. G. Wells. In this early science fiction fantasy, a man named Davidson is involved in a laboratory accident that produces a remarkable aberration of his sensory perception: He becomes blind to his immediate surroundings but his field of vision is not empty; instead, he sees a moving, incredibly detailed scene of an unknown island. Sisson believes this story provides “the structural model for ‘Terra Incognita’” insofar as both stories employ the exotic plot device of “bilocation” (143).

Wells, unlike Nabokov, suggests a scientific explanation for his bilocation. Davidson had stooped between the poles of an electromagnet when the incident occurred and the narrator mentions the possibility that this caused a twist in the fabric of space- time localised within Davidson’s, “retinal elements.” Nabokov, on the other hand, leaves us in the dark and, for Sisson, this is precisely the point: The lack of explanation ensures that the two realities maintain their primacy—a state of affairs that forces the reader to adopt a position of ontological skepticism towards the narrative from which may follow a higher, more enlightened, mode of perception.

Amelia Oliver claims that “Terra Incognita” continues a game that developed out of Nabokov’s butterfly-inspired interest in the “interplay between ocular function and imagination” (61). Like Connolly and Sisson, she thinks that the dual realities in “Terra Incognita” are “equally probable and ambiguous” and thus irresolvable (63). For her, the story is “an escapist attempt to expel an immediate reality,” at the boundary of which Vallière, *in articulo mortis*, peers into an alternative reality (71). Oliver’s view thus shares something in common with Sisson’s and—as we shall see—my own. Nabokov’s general aim, she thinks, is to “create effects of aesthetic artifice through his dizzying textual patterning, refracted images, involutions, textual encryptions and ocular illusions” that together provide the model for

discovering a transcendent dimension to reality: in “Terra Incognita,” as in nature, evidence of intelligible manipulation implicates the existence of an intelligent manipulator.²

I noted above that “Terra Incognita” presents a double problem: the internal incoherence of a first person narration that includes the death of its own narrator, and the contradiction between the narrator’s insistence that the jungle is reality and the author’s many hints that it is not. The three critical assessments we have just examined certainly enrich our understanding of the story—but none completely and straightforwardly resolves the two problems under examination. Another response is to wonder if I am being too literal-minded in my emphasis on these problems. Perhaps at the end of Vallière’s tale, Nabokov simply wants us to realise it has all been an outrageous lie. However, I am now going to argue that both problems can be resolved in way that salvages Vallière’s overall reliability and seems to be well supported by the fictional data; namely, by appealing to what Vera, Nabokov’s wife, declared to be her husband’s main theme: *potustoronnost*, or, “the Beyond.” (Boyd, 253)

Near the end of his book *Evidence of the Afterlife*, Jeffrey Long, an American oncologist and founder of the Near Death Experience Research Foundation, lists nine elements common to almost all near-death experiences (or “NDEs”) regardless of age, culture and social background and which he therefore takes to be nine lines of evidence for post mortem consciousness. One of those elements is that, “the level of consciousness and alertness during near-death experiences is usually greater than that experienced during everyday life, even though NDEs generally occur while a person is unconscious or clinically dead” (149 of Kindle edition). I am not suggesting that Nabokov had any familiarity with this sort of research—but

² Oliver postulates an explanation for the death of the first person narrator. She surmises that Vallière’s death merely, “draws attention to the inherent literary death of characters and their surroundings that comes with the conclusion of every story.” In other words, Vallière dies for the same reason a character in a dream “dies” when the dreamer awakes: The continued existence of both is contingent on being apprehended by a mind. This is an interesting idea but a very loose fit: it does not account for the ambiguous primacy of jungle or bedroom.

he may have had a similar idea in mind when he wrote his story. If our terrestrial life is just a prelude and preparation for the Beyond (and the Beyond our eternal state and Ultimate Reality), then it is reasonable to think that the Beyond will be more real to us than reality and, compared to it, our waking experience will seem a frail and desultory dream. A man who enters the Beyond and returns may, therefore, tend to think of what he saw as reality and what he now sees as a dream.

Vallière, I suggest, *is* on a sickbed in a European city at the time of the events he narrates. He does not die, but as his fever-wasted body lies on that sickbed, his consciousness makes transient contact with the Beyond—a realm so ultra-real that when Vallière recovers and returns to an ordinary state of consciousness, everything around him seemed, by comparison, like a dream.

If all this is so, one might reasonably ask why Vallière’s vision of the Beyond contains such sordid and sublunary details—the scientific errors; the despicable traitor Cook; and Cook and Gregson’s fight to the death.

Here I think it is helpful to remember that Vallière’s destination is not the jungle or the swamp but the Gurano Hills—a place which he does not actually reach and which has an elusive, almost mythical quality in the story. Vallière first sees them, “far beyond,” when the party emerges from the forest, describing “the tremulous silhouette of a mauve colored range of hills” (299). But, as they descend the slope, they soon become hidden by vapor. At the end of the story, as he lies dying on the rocky islet, Vallière half-expects the corpses of Cook and Gregson to get up and, “peacefully carry me off across the swamp toward the cool blue hills, to some shady place with babbling water” (303). The contrast between the heat and violence of the swamp and the cool and peace of the Gurano Hills is surely significant.³ Vallière, we

³ Some critics have urged that the abstruse vocabulary used in the story is generally evocative of filth and putrescence. “Hydrotic”, notes Yury Leving, means, “causing a discharge of sweat or urine” and “ipecacuanha,” an emetic, means, “vomiting root” (Leving, 792). Alexander

may conclude, is only in a forecourt of the Beyond.

This hypothesis helps us to make sense of the relevant details. Consider two points. One: Because Vallière is in a forecourt of the Beyond, he experiences the hyperacuity common to NDEs. And two: Because he is *only* in a forecourt of the Beyond, his consciousness remains clouded and confused by fever. This second point explains why Vallière mistakenly believes he is a botanist and applies nonsense descriptors (hydrotic, porphyroferous, *Vallieria mirifica*) to what he sees. And the first allows us to nevertheless take Vallière at his word when he says, “I realized that reality was here, here beneath that wonderful, frightening tropical sky.”

That Cook and Gregson murder each other is also, I think, comfortably compatible with our second point. Taking a hint from Connolly—who suggests that Gregson may represent the narrator’s cautiousness and Cook his predilection for adventure—I propose that these names and characters invite further speculation more amenable to my thesis. Cook, for instance, is selfish and carnal (“I have *seven daughters* and a dog at home” he says at one point—emphasis mine) and his name inevitably reminds one of food and so of bodily appetite. Gregson, too, is rather worldly in his own way—stubbornly pragmatic, myopic, preoccupied with details. Indeed, the failure to reach the Gurano Hills results from this very preoccupation with details: It is while both men “busied themselves in the thick bush, chasing fascinating insects,” that Cook and the natives slip away and with them the means of reaching the Gurano Hills. And while this may be a little wiredrawn, there is, in the name “Gregson,” a hint of *greg*—the root of the Latin word for “flock” (*grex, gregis*) from which we get the word “gregarious.” Gregson,

Dolinin has suggested that the story’s “black-leaved limia” (298) are derived from the Latin *limus*, meaning either “clay” or “filth” (Leving, 791). Even “Gurano” (a heavenly destination in my analysis!) is—Eric Naiman has pointed out to me (email correspondence)—suspiciously similar to *guano*. “The expedition,” he summarizes, “moves through a lot of muck!” This raises the possibility of further readings of the story—such as a coded critique of naturalism or a comment on the state of Russian literature. So long as we allow that Nabokov’s text may be polyvalent, these various possible readings need not be mutually exclusive.

as “son of the flock,” may therefore symbolise the commonplace and mundane mode of consciousness.⁴ Freud said that a man is all men when he dreams. It does not seem unreasonable to wonder if Cook and Gregson are aspects of Vallière’s own selfhood that he must leave behind if he is ever to reach the Beyond.⁵

Two final problems remain to be solved.

One: Why does Vallière say, “I knew that in a few minutes I would die” and describe his bedroom as, “fictitious, since everything beyond death is, at best, fictitious, an imitation of life hastily knocked together, the furnished rooms of nonexistence” (303)? My interpretation of the story is that Vallière wakes from his vision to find himself back in the real world of his bedroom—and this entails that he did *not* die and that his room is *not* fictitious. But recall: My overall claim is that “Terra Incognita” does not refer to an area of unmapped jungle between Zonraki and the Gurano Hills. It refers to the Beyond. And Vallière’s message, reduced to a single sentence, is this: *The Beyond exists and is far more real than reality*. It need not surprise us that the experience of being separated from the Beyond and returned to an inferior state of consciousness *feels* like death.⁶

⁴ One of the last things Vallière does is to pity Gregson and remember, “his wife and the old cook and his parrots and many other things” (303). This causally mentioned “old cook” is surely significant—perhaps hinting at a secret equivalence between Gregson and Cook, while Gregson’s “parrots” add a supporting detail to my avian reading of *greg*.

⁵ Since both Cook and Gregson die, shouldn’t Vallière be ushered into the Beyond? However, the death of Cook and Gregson need not be understood as showing that these facets of Vallière’s psyche have *in fact* been overcome. The purpose of the vision may simply be to teach Vallière that they *need* to be overcome.

⁶ The story “Mr. Skelmersdale in Fairyland” by H. G. Wells offers a “fictional case study” of a similar idea. It concerns a shopkeeper named Mr. Skelmersdale who is mysteriously transported into a literal fairyland and for several days enjoys an erotic dalliance with a fairy. On returning to his mundane existence, he discovers that the memory of that otherworldly bliss has destroyed his capacity for pleasure—and even romantic love: After meeting his fiancé, Millie, at church on Sunday, he tells a friend, “I seemed to forget about her even while she was there a-talking to me: (109).

Two: What is the significance of the notebook that slips from Vallière's hand in the very last sentence of the story? This is harder to explain. But it is notable that in Nabokov's other work featuring the supernatural ("The Vane Sisters" and *Pale Fire, inter alia*) the text itself becomes a locus for supernatural activity. Note, too, that it is at the very moment when Vallière has an impulse to write that his notebook slips into the Beyond—as if that were where it belonged. Connolly argues that starting a diary is a key step in Cincinnatus' escape from the mundane. The disappearing notebook tells us that where Cincinnatus succeeds, Vallière fails. In view of the forgoing analysis, however, we might also wonder if by leaving the notebook in the Beyond Nabokov wanted symbolically to indicate the affinity between the literary mode of consciousness and the transcendent mode of perception discussed by Sisson and Oliver.

In closing, I want to propose that it is possible to tessellate all four interpretations into one and in a way that preserves the key features of each. Consider the following, where the interpretations of Connolly, Oliver, Sisson and myself are—in that order—linked together into a single interpretation: In the 1930s, Nabokov published a story about a creative mind struggling to escape from the humdrum world into a realm of pure imagination. In this story (which uses an aesthetic of subtle ocular deceptions inspired by his interest in butterfly mimesis) two competing realities coexist in seemingly-irresolvable ambiguity. The purpose of that ambiguity is to stimulate the reader to a transcendent perspective of Nabokov's fictional world. And, indeed, it is precisely when one adopts such a perspective that the details begin to suggest a way to settle the ambiguity.

If we have to make adjustments to harmonize these four interpretations, I offer three points in favor of keeping the basic content and contours of my own. Its complexity is consistent with our background knowledge of Nabokov—a notorious artificer of intricate literary puzzles. Its operating assumption that the ambiguity is resolvable is consistent with the

most promising interpretations of other tricky novels and stories—which together suggest Nabokov liked to give his readers what they need to solve his puzzles. And its conclusion appeals to what was arguably the preoccupying theme of his literary output. Hamlet famously called the afterlife, “The undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveller returns” (3.1.81-2; *Norton Shakespeare* 1706).⁷ I submit that the contradictions found in “Terra Incognita” invite us to uncover a metaphysical fantasy about a traveller who discovered, and returned from, that undiscovered country.

⁷ Plausibly, the title of this story—like *Pale Fire*—is a Shakespearean allusion. Shakespeare’s name occurs twice in the story, while “Terra Incognita” is Latin for “unknown country.” This echoes Hamlet’s description of the afterlife in his most famous soliloquy. If so, the title “Terra Incognita” itself hints at the Beyond.

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