

NABOKOV'S TELEPHONE. PHONING INTO EXISTENCE*

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Abstract: The telephone in contemporary “Western” literature may be said to have acquired a certain metafictional relevance after the late-modern and postmodern art forms. One example of this interpretative approach can be found in the works of Vladimir Nabokov’s, where recurrent patterns can be perceived through the metafictional symbolism of the telephone. The aim of this essay is the analysis of the telephone in the Nabokovian literary world inside that symbolic status of a metafictional and metaphysical device. The symbolical telephone can be read in terms of the existentialist *Angst* for a disabled communication in a literary space where the boundaries between reality and fiction are blurred.

Keywords: English literature; Vladimir Nabokov; late-modernism; metafiction; telephone as literary symbol; Existentialism; *Angst*; communication in literature; mediality in literature.

Resumen: El teléfono en la literatura contemporánea “occidental” ha adquirido una cierta relevancia metafictional tras los períodos tarde-modernista y postmodernista. Como ejemplo de esta interpretación cabe mencionar las obras de Vladimir Nabokov, donde se pueden encontrar modelos recurrentes a través del simbolismo metafictional del teléfono. El objetivo de este ensayo es el análisis del teléfono en el mundo literario nabokoviano considerándolo dentro de ese estado simbólico de aparato metafictional y metafísico. El simbolismo telefónico se puede leer en términos del miedo existencialista – *Angst* – hacia una comunicación imposible en un espacio literario donde se confunden los límites entre realidad y ficción.

Palabras clave: literatura inglesa; Vladimir Nabokov; modernismo tardío; metafiction; teléfono como símbolo literario; Existencialismo; *Angst*; comunicación en literatura; medialidad en literatura.

The telephone destabilizes the identity of the self and other, subject and thing, it abolishes the originariness of site; it undermines the authority of the Book and constantly menaces the existence of literature (Ronell, 1989: 9).

The telephone is without any kind of doubt one of the most important “artefacts” invented in the last century. This device has brought about the blurring of several boundaries, especially those built up by Distance. The ringing machine has become a

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mythical bridge between different nations and people, disturbing the Time/Space duality that relativised older conceptions of the world –old *Weltanschauungen*. Nowadays, the telephone has given voice to all those cravings in the hearts of urban citizens that have found a soothing solution to their quandary about their solitude. In this way, it has become something more than a simple chatting object; the telephone is a projection of the human quest towards an eternal line of communication and information. In an age of tele-existence –*tele-* from Greek, meaning “distant”, especially “transmission over a distance”–, the telegraph, the telephone –and at the present time, cell phones and the Internet– have plunged the individual into a telephone web inside a hypersociety based in a new space-dimension where subjects share information in the cybernetic space of communicative devices.

This fact can be said to be a typical characteristic of human beings, as has been pointed out by Joseph Tabbi in relationship to the Net: “human beings become unique precisely because they inhabit and therefore can connect different kinds of space” (1997: 174-5). In this sense, now the individuals dwell in many different spaces, one of them being that hypersociety created by the telephonic space, where the subject fights against loneliness and starts the quest for communication.

On the other hand, the telephone may become the instrument of the Other, the fateful weapon seized by some kind of Freudian repressed which returns to haunt our common existence. A phone call is the opening of a gate to an out-existing reality –that hypersociety mentioned before. It shatters everyday life in order to introduce an external agent, and plunging the receiver into an unknown world. The notion of uncertainty marks the lifting of the receiver, and the acceptance of a foreign colonizing reality to enter into one's life. No-one really knows who or what is going to be at the other side of the line when picking the receiver up, even after the creation of answering machines or cell phones which localize the number of the phone call. There is always a certain degree of uncertainty in the receiver about the origin of the other side of the line.

This telephonic duplicity is what marks the appearance of telephones in several stories by Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977). His fictions, conceived as mirror worlds of the “real” one –that of the author's–, contain plenty of examples of the telephone as a metaphorical device, producing many different but interconnected meanings, over which one prevails: the impossibility of communication. Clearly expressed in the impotence of Cincinnatus C. to make himself understood in the imposed world of a penitentiary (*Invitation To a Beheading*, 1934, pub. 1935-6), the theme of communication is further explored in following works, both short stories and novels, some of them including this perturbing machine that creates a complex web of meanings and interrelations. In this sense, the aim of the following pages is to analyze the presence of the telephone not only as an obtrusive element in the life of the characters but also the artefact's elevation to a metafictional –sometimes metaphysical– level.

Nabokov creates a complex world characterized by its similarities to the real world and to his own life. In this mirror world the characters of his stories are forced to exist, although in many cases they seem not to fit the pattern –as in the case of Cincinnatus or Adam Krug. As Beverly L. Clark affirms, “the mirror reflects the world, but not mimetically.

Instead, the mirror distorts the merely tangible to increase its historical resonance. The mirror multiplies images, madly doubling, tripling, fracturing the realistic surface" (1986: 53). In Nabokov's creations there are lots of resonances of the "real" world, of his own perception of the world. There is an important bond between fiction and reality which trails beyond the borders of the written world. The different ontological levels which separate creation from creator are set into a fuzzy puddle leading to the destruction of borders. That is, the world of the "real" perturbs the fantastic by means of several references that the author creates. And this intrusion of the real world into the mirror image of the written work destroys the boundaries between both *Weltanschauungen* –understood as conceptions of the world. However, the remains of that boundary are not clearly fantastic or real, and in this sense, they stand in a fuzzy puddle –using Nabokovian imagery– where both are melted and interconnected.

The multiplication of images is what fractures the "realistic surface" of the new existence, laying bare the artificiality of the text –in Patricia Waugh's terms (1990). Among those images that are continually doubled and repeated, along with the squirrel (as in *Pnin*), the telephone occupies an outstanding position. According to the analysis offered by Larry R. Andrews (1982: 150), "Signs and Symbols" (1948) would be the epitome of metafictionality when the reader is imbued in the narrative world and creates his/her own interpretation of the ending. As William Carroll affirms: "[...] we will conclude that the third call is from the hospital. In so doing, we will have assigned a meaning to the signs based on something outside the closed system; we will have, in effect, participated with Nabokov in killing the boy" (quoted in Andrews, 1982: 150). In this short story, the telephone acquires a depth of meaning which goes over and beyond the written frame of the story. The outside world is implicated in the interpretation of the story. Furthermore, the external reality is the one responsible for the boy's death, as far as the reader interprets the third call as the notification of the son's suicide. Then, when we as readers pick the telephone up in its third call, we are plunging the "referential maniac" into suicide. Now the reader is the one who enters into the world of fiction, shattering those boundaries which differentiate the real from the mirror creation. In this case the telephone would be a clear example of what Patricia Waugh refers to as a "frame-break, [which] while appearing to bridge the gap between fiction and reality, in fact lays it bare" (1990: 34). Thus, although the telephone seems to implicate the reader in the fictional world, it rather shows clearly that all those interpretations given to the text are part of another ontological level, the level of reality, outside the borders of this fiction. The story is closed when the final punctuation mark is established, then, all the movement leading towards interpretation is part of the level of the "real", the realm of the reader. This ontological difference is marked by the telephonic device employed by Nabokov in this short story. The telephone creates that bridge between reality and fiction, although there is no-one on the other side of the line to answer the reader. The guardian of that mythical bridge cannot interact with the external reality outside the text, and therefore the grounds for speculation and interpretation are established.

Another aspect of this symbol is the literary representation of a telephonic communication and its inclusion inside the text. Nabokov presents the complications of

exposing a telephone conversation in a written text, in a fragment from *Pnin*: “Technically speaking, the narrator’s art of integrating telephone conversations still lags far behind that of rendering dialogues conducted from room to room, or from window to window across some narrow blue alley in an ancient town” (26). The idea of introducing other media inside a text is what Joseph Tabbi calls “mediality”: “mediality refers to the ways in which a literary text inscribes in its own language the effects produced by other media” (1997: 75). In this sense, the telephone in many of Nabokov’s narratives becomes an element of mediality that introduces the new space created by the telephone inside the text. But what is important for this analysis is the meaning this artefact acquires all along the stories. The telephone in Nabokov’s narratives becomes a recurrent element reaching the level of a symbolical figure—just like the puddle or the squirrel in *Bend Sinister* and *Pnin*, respectively. In this sense, it acquires the relevance of something mystified inside the mirror world of reality.

However, as a symbol, the telephone is subject to certain conditions of appearance to create its meaning. Its symbolical meaning in a general sense leads to two important world experiences in the flesh of the characters and the development of events: on the one hand, the telephone leads to the difficulties of communication inside that mirror creation – where characters are set in a puzzling existence in which they are isolated and prevented from grasping a crumb of meaning. On the other hand, this symbol leads to the unexpectability of events and the indeterminacy of future –creating a bond to the ontological level of the author as a God-like figure, who is the one who *seems* to arrange the whole situation presented in the written world, and linking in this way the figure of this God to the existentialist haphazard. In any case, it is impossible to slice one situation from another due to their interdependence.

Another thematic element introduced or reinforced by the presence of the telephone in Nabokov’s works is the impossibility of communication between individuals. Words collide against meaning in *Invitation to a Beheading*, where everything that is uttered by the characters is opposed to Cincinnatus C.’s quest for understanding. Although in this novel there is no presence of the telephone at all, its main theme –the childish stupidity of prison guardians against idealism in the prisoner who craves for comprehension– is directly linked to many inner meanings that can be applied to the telephonic presence. The same obstacles that Cincinnatus has to dodge to reach an impossible communication can be seen in other works by Nabokov where the centre of communication is the telephone. The difficulty of communication inside the mirror world is highlighted through sundry telephonic appearances. *Pnin*’s first phone call to the Clements’ house is a good example of this fact:

“When Joan, in her brisk long-limbed way, got to the compelling instrument before it gave up, and said hullo [...], a hollow quiet greeted her; all she could hear was the informal sound of a steady breathing; presently the breather’s voice said, with a cosy foreign accent: ‘One moment, excuse me’ –this was quite casual, and he continued to breathe and perhaps hem and hum or even sigh a little to the accompaniment of a crepitation that evoked the turning over of small pages.

‘Hullo!’ she repeated.

'You are,' suggested the voice warily, 'Mrs Fire?'
 'No,' said Joan, and hung up." (Nabokov 2000b: 26)

The recurrence of the device of the mistaken phone call returns to haunt the characters in Nabokov's stories. Here, Pnin is unable to fulfil communication with Mrs Clements in this first chance. No understanding is possible in a first telephonic meeting. However, Pnin, like many other characters in Nabokov's stories crave for that impulse of being understood. This yearning is what seems to move several characters and their behaviours. They suffer a kind of anxiety to express themselves into an existence inside the mirror world of letters. They suffer a kind of existentialist *Angst* which goads them to keep on moving, in this case, to carry on phoning. They have to phone themselves into existence. They feel that inner necessity to enter the realm of communication and information created by the telephonic hypersociety in order to release the suffering provoked by the craving for interrelation with other individuals, although in many cases they have to speak out just to feel alive. This anxiety links Nabokov's characters with the existentialist suffering portrayed in Samuel Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting For Godot* (1965) or in some Kafka's works, such as *Der Prozess* (1925). There is a compulsion towards the source of information and the impulse to speak oneself out into existence –this is the case of Beckett's characters. In Kafka's narratives, one actually finds references to the absolute object of despair and attraction that the telephone is: "Sometimes I absolutely dance with apprehension around the telephone, the receiver at my ear, and yet can't help divulging secrets" ("My Neighbour", quoted from Ronell 1989: 410). In this quotation the necessity of communication is agonizingly expressed, as well as the anxiety the telephone creates as a medium to other worlds, to an external reality outside that mirror world.

In many cases this foreign uncontrollable world –the telephonic space– is the source of anxiety of Nabokov's characters. This is the distress suffered by Albinus in *Laughter in the Dark* (1937) waiting for the never-coming phone call from Margot, his young lover (Nabokov 2000: 66). Or by the description of telephone numbers, supposed to be the keys to those doors guarding the outer world, in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1938-9, pub. 1941), depicted as "dead telephone numbers" (in an old notebook of late Sebastian, p. 33) or under the statement "telephone numbers proved delusions" (2001a: 96). Thus, the telephonic space is the dead simulacrum of a delusion, that is, a fantastic world that does not solve any of the individual's sufferings.

The characters in Nabokov's narrations are not only subject to a search for that outer reality, they also become the victims of that uncontrollable world which percolates through the fissures of the literary world. The telephone, as a medium of interrelating the mirror world and other possible foreign realities, creates a schism in the written world, becoming the source of unexpectability and unpredictability. It cannot be known when that outer reality is going to perturb the character. Thus, the telephone becomes, in many cases, a symbol of premonition of a future fiendish omen, as can be seen in *Bend Sinister*: "Adam Krug too, he too, he too, unclipped his rusty wobbly fountain pen. The telephone rang in the adjacent study. [...] They trembled more than usually because it was after midnight and he was unspeakably tired" (54-55). Or in "Signs and Symbols": "The telephone rang. It was an unusual hour for their telephone to ring. [...] Having more English than he did, it

was she who attended to calls. [...] 'It frightened me' she said." (602). In both examples the telephone becomes a disturbing presence because of the late hour of the call. After midnight almost any unpredicted phone call is always supposed to be the holder of bad news, especially if the characters expect some bad news –as the parents in the short story, who could be informed of their son's suicide. However, in the first case, neither the reader nor Adam is informed of the subject of the telephonic conversation in the moment of the phone call, whereas in "Signs and Symbols" the reader is offered this knowledge in the two first phone calls. The unpredictable outer world filters into the mirror world through the telephone, to penetrate into the characters' reality, becoming thus a perturbing element, carrying a fateful premonition. And in this way, this unpredictable outer world is directly linked to a superior ontological level, that of the author. The author is the only one who *seems* to control the telephone. The artefact is outside the possibilities of simple characters imbued in foreign locations, as Adam Krug in Paduk's world clearly reflects in the meeting between the two antagonists:

"The telephone emitted a discreet tinkle. Paduk attended to it. His cheek twitched as he listened. Then he handled the receiver to Krug who comfortably clasped it and said 'Yes.' 'Professor,' said the telephone, 'this is merely a suggestion. The chief of the State is not generally addressed as "*dragotzennyi*".' [...] The telephone rang again. Paduk listened. 'You are not supposed to touch knives here', he said to Krug as, with a sigh, he replaced the receiver."(Nabokov 2001b: 124-125)

The world where Paduk and Krug are immersed is directly controlled by an external agent, unknown both to the reader and to the character. And this agent manifests itself in the literary world by means of the telephone. The artefact becomes a bond between two different levels of knowledge: that of the characters, and an upper one which controls that layer. In this sense, the controlling level, being over the possibilities of the characters, should be directly related to the position of the author. This level is outside the novel, watching over and analyzing everything that happens in the inferior layer. It is the eye of the beholder that has to control everything, being then, the guardian of the mythical bridge between reality and fiction established through the telephone.

In this example, telephones are supposed to be controlled by Paduk's agents, but there are other cases which show the impossibility of controlling reality through the telephone. In *Bend Sinister*, Paduk's agents search for the lost son of Adam Krug, and Kol, an official, affirms: "There are four hundred telephones in this building. Your little lost child will be found at once" (180). David –Adam's son– is not only not found at once, but found dead, both things resulting from having mistaken the little child for another. In this sense, the presence of the telephone, all its implications and strength as a source of information, cannot be completely controlled. As Ronell affirms, "indeed the call is precisely something which we ourselves have neither planned nor prepared for nor voluntarily performed, nor have we ever done so. [...] 'It' calls, against our expectations and even against our will" (1989: 31). There is always a minimum of haphazard which goes beyond human control, which escapes from the hands of the characters of the literary world. Thus, telephones and

protagonists are portrayed to be confronted antagonists since protagonists need to control information while telephones introduce it without any clear pattern but haphazard.

There are lots of examples of this fact, to wit, in *Bend Sinister*, “Ember hesitated, then dialled fluently. The line was engaged” (36). It is a recurrent situation that the line is engaged or the telephone “might not work” (33). Or even telephone numbers, as keys to outer doors, are continually forgotten: “I could never remember Ember’s number. [...] the familiar number with the six in the middle resembling Ember’s Persian nose”(33); or in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*:

I went to the telephone instead. I thumbed the soft greasy book. [...] Starov... ah, there it was: Jasmin 61-93. I performed some dreadful manipulations and forgot the number in the middle, and struggled again with the book, and redialled, and listened for a while to an ominous buzzing. I sat for a minute quite still. [...] Again the dial turned and clicked back, five, six, seven times, and again there was that nasal drone: *donne, donne, donne...* Why was I so unlucky? (166)

Telephones may even become projections of foreign realities outside the focalised world:

He said he was sure foxy old Pnin had not really left yesterday, but was lying low. So why not telephone and find out? He made the call, and although there was no answer to the series of compelling notes which simulate the far sound of actual ringing in an imaginary hallway, it stood to reason that this perfectly healthy telephone would have been probably disconnected, had Pnin really vacated the house”. (2000b: 158)

In all these examples, the character/focalizer of the narration is always unable in a first attempt to fulfil communication through the telephone. There is always a hindrance which prevents the character from establishing a telephonic link to his source of knowledge –the other end of the phonic line. Then, main characters seem not to be allowed to spread their informative persona by means of this artefact. They are repressed in their mirror-world existence despite their cravings for freedom. And in this way, the telephone is not only a device from a supreme force to manifest itself into the narration, but also a kind of metaphorical death for the development of characters. An oppressive reality having been imposed over the characters, they suffer a disturbing agony of existence, marked by the *Angst* following the repression of the anxiety of understanding.

The telephone has already been presented as a holder of bad news, an ominous herald of misfortunes. Now, as a symbol of that metaphorical death, a special attention is needed to a fragment in *Bend Sinister*:

That sequence of small bar-shaped hoots was like the long vertical row of superimposed I’s in an index by first lines to a verse anthology. I am lake. I am tongue. I am spirit. I am fevered. I am not covetous. I am the Dark Cavalier. I am the torch. I arise. I ask. I blow. I bring. I cannot change. I cannot look. I climb the hill. I come. I dream. I envy. I found. I heard. I intended an Ode. I know. I love. I must not grieve, my love. I never. I pant. I remember. I saw thee once. I travelled. I wandered. I will. I will. I will. I will.” (37)

This description of the meaning of the engaged-line sound portrays the different implications the telephone has at the same time that it introduces the idea of the inner world of the telephone and its own existence in that world or hypersociety. The telephone, like death, is the universal equalizer. It establishes a bond from upper to lower classes as well as from any part of the world. In the telephonic world almost every living human being is recorded, it is like a kind of “superimposed I’s”, and this fact is also echoed in the “real” world through the figure of the telephonic guide. In this “soft greasy book” (Nabokov 2001a: 166) all the names, addresses and telephone numbers are registered in a kind of compilation of verse anthology. The guide becomes that metaphorical bunch of keys which can unlock any kind of realm towards information, always inside the telephonic hypersociety. The gathering powers of the telephone are recollected in its spell book, the telephonic guide –in the sense of the telephone as collector of people, and as an easy way to open the door to other’s life, another example in contemporary literature would be José Saramago’s *Todos os Nomes* (1997). The telephone is the “lake” where everybody is immersed under the waters of time and space. This cosmos has its own language, its own “tongue”, its own devices to communicate or to prevent communication. It is the world of the “spirit”, the realm of the soul, out of the physical human capacity, something like Plato’s cave where the shadows are made up from beeps and rings. The telephone becomes the harvester of names, the reaper of existences to be plunged into that sonic web. Like Death, the telephone collects everybody. It is therefore, the “Dark Cavalier”, the fifth horseman of Apocalypse, which of course, “cannot change” being an endless figure assuming the form which better fits at each age. The telephone, at the utmost craving of human existence, becomes that necessity of believing in the existence after this life, that anxious feeling towards the immersion on the infinity of existence and therefore immortality. It becomes the expression of the human wish of eternal existence in communication inside its realm. And this fact is what perturbs most Nabokovian characters. They are deceived by the telephone. The ringing artefact becomes a repression of that impulse towards eternity, revealing itself a perturbation of the frame of their mirror world. The telephone turns out to be a source of mystery –as in “Signs and Symbols”– with a fateful projection; the origin of perturbation through mistaken phone calls –as in *Pnin* (158); or in “Conversation Piece, 1945” (588) –or the gate towards disgrace, and therefore anxiety– as in *Laughter in the Dark* (45-46) end of chapter 4; in *Pnin* (83); or in *Bend Sinister* (148).

To conclude, the telephone in Nabokov acquires a symbolic status as a metafictional and metaphysical device. As a bridge between fiction and reality, it introduces the element of the frame-break in the Nabokovian mirror world, where the reader is even plunged into that literary world –as in “Signs and Symbols”. As a symbol, the Telephone –in capital letters because of its recently achieved importance– becomes a mythical “being” which turns out to highlight the difficulties of communication in both literature and reality. Opposed to the human craving for interrelation, the Telephone appears as the source of existentialist *Angst*, whose utmost purpose is to speak oneself out into reality; in this case, to *phone* oneself out into existence. The impossibility of reaching control of the artefact also introduces the blurring of ontological boundaries, and therefore, the figure of the author is supposed to be the god-like ruler of this universe, while haphazard is the controller

of the telephonic hypersociety. However, no-one seems to control the fateful ominous ringing which shatters any kind of soothing existence.

“Donne, donne, donne...”
(Nabokov 2001a: 166).

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