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FLESH AND VEIL: ANGLO-FRENCH WORDPLAY IN *ADA OR ARDOR*

Angsting about the departed soul of his mother/aunt Marina at the beginning of part 3 of *Ada or Ardor*, Van Veen scans for “an unequivocal, and indeed all-deciding, sign of continued being behind the veil of time, beyond the flesh of space. But no response came” (452). This is one of many purple passages in this novel, firmly bracketed as a dashed hope. Anxiety about immortal existence and the revenant motif are ubiquitous in Nabokov’s fiction; in the particular sentence under consideration, the dual metaphor of flesh and veil posits space and time as superficial illusions behind which an ulterior reality looms. The two metaphors connect to a plethora of images of veiling, screening, occlusion, and nakedness in *Ada*, such as Marina’s own first action scene in the novel, in which she “undressed in graceful silhouette behind a semitransparent screen, [and] reappeared in a flimsy. . .nightgown” (11). “[T]he veil of time. . .the flesh of space” is also a devilishly clever matrix of translingual puns. English *veil* recalls in spelling French *veille* “the day before; vigil; watch,” while *flesh* recalls in both spelling and sound *flèche* “arrow.” Both French words are associated with time and temporality. Time and temporality are among the professional obsessions of the Francophone American writer Van Veen. His *Texture of Time* is “an investigation of [time’s] veily substance” (563). Thus French, and Van’s scholarship, shimmers behind the surface of the English noun phrases and reinforces them both sonically and thematically. The catena Greek ἄρδης “point of an arrow” > English *arrow* > French *flèche* > English *flesh*, joining the novel’s principal setting (Ardis Hall) to its principal matter (carnal lust and incest), has been spelled out already by this point in the novel, in an analogously playful macaronic passage likewise focalized through Van’s polyglot wit (318; cf. 225, the etymology of *Ardis* incidentally learnt

during a game of Scrabble). *Veil* may reach back further still, to the mysterious “veil” (59, 98) Van senses between him and Ada early in part 1. Given the relevance of *flèche* to *time*—in French one says *la flèche du temps* “the arrow of time” (cf. “the ardis of time,” 185, 538; “the flesh of the present,” 402)—pairing of *veil of time* and *flesh of space* suggests another recombination, *veil of flesh*, with the attendant implication of transcendental consciousness that is the tenor of the metaphor of the veil in context and a favorite topic throughout Nabokov’s writings.

The activation of Anglo-French puns is not announced in this passage, as it is in the earlier one that enchains ἄρδις to *flesh*. Wordplay is unsupported by overt contextual cues, such as a word game. However, besides the direct example of that earlier passage to validate the subtextual presence of *flèche* behind *flesh*, two secondary indications of wordplay involving *flesh* and *veil* here are the flamboyant reduplicative syntax of Van’s thought about Marina and the remarkably original metaphors in which it is clothed. The phrases “behind the veil of time” and “beyond the flesh of space” stand in apposition to one another and are syntactically equivalent, a suggestive equation of time and space at the level of the grammatical clause. Moreover, Van’s grandiloquent application of the biblically charged words *veil* and *flesh* to the structure of spacetime reminds readers that we are peeking into the consciousness of a wordsmith.

The wordplay is at once gratuitous, with no obvious trigger in the surrounding passage and no payoff for the plot, and strangely necessitarian, as if the whole doubled world of the novel, flesh and veil, had been quilted from this very pair of inevitable phrases (but there are many such inevitable phrases in *Ada or Ardor*) (cf. Fry, “Moving Vans,” 123–26). Nabokov has Van evolve a striking simile for precisely this incestuously auto-pretextual quality of his (their?) novel, including the keyword *flesh*: “the great weeping cedar, whose aberrant limbs extended an oriental canopy (propped up here and there by crutches made of its own flesh like this book)” (204). In

Van's anxious ruminations on metaphysics following Marina's death, *flesh* and *veil* and their veiled French counterparts function as crutches in this exact sense, in that they supply hidden profundity and occluded stability to what might superficially seem morose and wispy musings.

REFERENCES

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