



“Verbal Adventures in the Inky Jungle”:
Marco Polo and John Mandeville in Vladimir Nabokov’s *The Gift*
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"Verbal Adventures in the Inky Jungle":
Marco Polo and John Mandeville in
Vladimir Nabokov's *The Gift*

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This paper seeks to examine a particular facet of Nabokov's authorial presence, namely the kinship between the figures of the author and the explorer. The act of exploration emerges as a powerful topos in Nabokov's fiction and drama, generally triggered by the fascination for the blank spot that still awaits a name. Mirroring the foundational gesture of the explorer, the author draws the cartography of a new fictional world and endows it with a nominal identity.

I would like to argue that one of the possible sources for the unstable pronominal behavior typical of *The Gift* can be found in Marco Polo's *Description of the World*, a text produced jointly by Marco Polo and a professional scribe, Rusticello di Pisa. John Mandeville's *Travels*, with their source appropriation and mystification, also seem to provide a relevant textual model.

This paper deals with the place and role of Marco Polo and John Mandeville in Nabokov's last Russian novel, *The Gift*, and with the literary models they seem to provide for the novel's protagonist, Fyodor Godounov-Cherdyntsev. The prudent verb "seem" in the previous sentence renders the idea of a putative source on which this paper would like to focus, together with the difficulty of talking about something that only seems to exist, but in the existence of which the Nabokovian critic strongly, fiercely wants to believe. Starting from my personal intertextual explorations and speculations related mainly to the figure of Marco Polo and, secondarily, Mandeville in *The Gift*, I would like to address a more general question having to do with the ways in which critical discourse is tempted to move on from annotation to interpretation when it investigates Nabokov's intertextual practices. This is of course a general question in literary studies, famously discussed by Umberto Eco in *The Limits of*

Interpretation, and it is always a fruitful question: how far can the reader stray from a visible intertext in order to establish more subtle, complex and ultimately far-fetched links between the two texts? How far can one go once one has clutched the inviolable shade of an intertext (as Kinbote puts it, quoting Matthew Arnold), an intertext in which one sees not “flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense” (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 63)?

In the case of Nabokov’s fiction, critical discourse has sometimes started from details (chronological, intertextual or other) in order to build wholesale interpretations.¹ “The detail is all”, so Nabokov used to proclaim, and the details in his texts are a good point to start a discussion on annotation and interpretation because of the patterns they form, because of the constellations of meaning they build. To the (re)reader, patterns of details may become mirages leading him astray, but the detour they create is an exciting one because of the opening effects it creates, because of the new light it sheds on the text. My discussion of Marco Polo and Mandeville in *The Gift* is precisely an example of such a pursuit of mirages. However, mirages have an intrinsic beauty and there is always a great deal of enthusiasm involved in literary research and in the discovery of landmarks, of signs leading to Nabokov’s sources and to the ways he used sources. This paper is both a celebration of intertextual investigations and a convoluted question: to what extent should one trust one’s intuition of patterns of echoing relations between Nabokov’s texts and the texts he alludes to without losing what Eco calls “hermeneutic common sense” (Eco 133), that sensible faculty which keeps the reader or critic on the right track, if such a thing exists?

Nabokov’s interest in explorers and naturalists, particularly in *The Gift*, has been studied in great detail by Dieter E. Zimmer and Sabine Hartmann in a paper published in *Nabokov Studies* in 2003, which uncovers an impressive amount of intertextual references present in chapter 2 of *The Gift*, the chapter which deals with Fyodor’s abortive

¹ The best example is provided by the chronological inaccuracy in *Lolita*, which has led a certain number of critics to question the reality of Humbert’s trip to Coalmont and of Quilty’s murder. From this perspective, the second part of the novel is seriously undermined by a series of incoherent dates. For a detailed analysis of this theory and for a refutation, see Brian Boyd, “‘Even Homais Nods’: Nabokov’s Fallibility, Or, How to Revise *Lolita*”.

biography of his famous father (Hartmann and Zimmer, “The Amazing Music of Truth”). Dieter E. Zimmer has also recently published a beautiful book on the Asian travels in *The Gift* (Zimmer, *Nabokov reist im Traum in das Innere Asiens*). Thus, the dense structure of references and allusions that Fyodor builds when talking about his father and appropriating his travels has become transparent, with whole quotes and episodes being traced back to famous or obscure sources.

Nabokov’s fascination with geographical exploration is closely linked to his proficiency as an entomologist longing, like Pilgram in “The Aurelian”, to stand “waist-deep in lush grass” and “net the rarest butterflies of distant countries” (Nabokov, “The Aurelian” 252). In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov refers to “the terra-incognita blanks map makers of old used to call ‘sleeping beauties’” (Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* 136). Undiscovered and unnamed spaces seen as sleeping beauties await the kiss of naming, of representation, of writing. It is through this magic encounter that fairy tales are born, and for Nabokov great novels are great fairy tales. The sleeping beauties attract not only the naturalist, but also the writer, for whom the discovery of a new world is, essentially, the invention of this new world. Writing and exploration are inseparable, since their common goal is to name the nameless:

The writer is the first man to map it [*the new world of the book*] and to name the natural objects it contains. Those berries there are edible. That speckled creature that bolted across my path might be tamed. That lake between those trees will be called lake Opal or, more artistically, Dishwater Lake. That mist is a mountain – and that mountain must be conquered. Up a trackless slope climbs the master artist, and at the top, on a windy ridge, whom do you think he meets? The panting and happy reader, and there they spontaneously embrace and are linked forever if the book lasts forever. (Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* 2)

In chapter 2 of *The Gift*, the naturalist-explorer and the writer correspond to two separate figures, that of the father, an eminent entomologist, author of a certain number of “fabulous voyages” (Nabokov, *The Gift* 15), and that of the son, who had always stayed behind and had been imbued with the magic of his father’s stories and with the foreign language of entomology. After having failed with his

first volume of poetry, Fyodor starts writing a biography of his father. The biography is a referential genre, but “the amazing music of truth” (Nabokov, *The Gift* 121) that Fyodor hears in his father’s writings and in the writings of the naturalists he worships becomes, for the novice, a siren’s song luring him away from the sacred goal of objectivity. Writing the father’s biography turns into a series of verbal adventures (Nabokov, *The Gift* 139) in an inky jungle (Nabokov, *The Gift* 138), in a dark and chaotic world of rough drafts, reading notes and recollections. The faithful biographer slowly projects himself into the story, with a change in pronouns signaling a treacherous shift in perspective. From a more or less neutral “he”, focusing on the father, the narrator adopts a plural “we” (a collective pronoun, actually an expansion of the first person, a disguised “I”, an amplified first person), and then an insolent “I” who claims to have discovered an unknown moth (*G*, 123), thus usurping the father’s place and thus claiming the privilege of naming. The heterodiegetic narrator, the narrative outsider, slowly becomes an autodiegetic narrator at the very center of the narrative, telling his own story instead of his father’s story. This is a classical scenario in a biographer’s life, since every biographer is a divided character, both a submissive servant and a rebellious subject. Several explanations of the pronominal fluctuations in *The Gift* have been given. Julian W. Connolly has interpreted them as signs of Fyodor’s struggle for authorial emancipation, as indications of the clash between self and other, between Fyodor the character and Fyodor the author (Connolly 196-219).² Nassim Berdjis has argued that it is the lack of distance between the writer and his material, the ardent proximity of the subject matter that prompts the biographer to project himself into the father’s story (Berdjis 200). This is where Marco Polo’s mirages come in. A different understanding of the pronominal fluctuations in *The Gift* can possibly be traced back to Marco Polo’s *The Description of the World*, a major intertext, overtly mentioned several times in the novel. A miniature of Marco Polo leaving Venice which decorates the father’s desk functions as a magical visual stimulus provoking Fyodor’s vision of his father’s travels, the emergence of his visionary voice following

² For a similar interpretation see Alexandrov, 129.

closely the progress of the paternal caravans.³ In chapter 2 of *The Gift*, Nabokov certainly relied on existing texts, which are clearly identifiable thanks to numberless echoes, hints, traces, but at the same time the highly elaborate intertextual construction of the father's biography is bathed in invention, marred or transfigured by fabulation, since Fyodor's artistic project of faithfulness to authority and gigantic, weighty, manly models fails and a playful usurpation replaces it. The beauty and the complexity of chapter 2 of *The Gift* lie precisely in the ambiguous encounter between skilful, lucid documentation and ardent subjectivity, between a yearning for influence and the birth of an original, insolent voice.

When taking a close look at Marco Polo's *The Description of the World*, one is struck by pronominal inconsistencies that remind one of those in Nabokov's *The Gift*, inconsistencies which, in the case of *The Description of the World*, stem from the double paternity of the text. As a matter of fact, Marco Polo's famous book was not written by the Venetian merchant. In 1298, in a prison in Genoa where he was detained at the end of a war opposing Venice and Genoa, Marco Polo dictated the story of his travels to a professional scribe, Rustic(h)ello of Pisa, an Italian writer who had already composed a certain number of Round Table epic poems in French and who signed his works as "maître Rusticien de Pise". *The Description of the World* is written in French by two Italian authors, therefore the work is claimed both by Italian and French literatures. Rusticello acknowledges from the very beginning the distinct roles he and Polo play in the production of the text. Marco Polo is the eyewitness and the explorer, whereas

³ This miniature brings together St. Petersburg, Venice and Asia in a single spatial knot. Similarly, Berlin, Venice, Russia and China meet in the poems Fyodor composes when waiting for Zina's arrival in the mysterious darkness of the Berlin night: "Waiting for her arrival. She was always late – and always came by another road than he. Thus it transpired that even Berlin could be mysterious. Within the linden's bloom the streetlight winks. A dark and honeyed hush envelops us. Across the curb one's passing shadow slinks: across a stump a sable ripples thus. The night sky melts to peach beyond that gate. There water gleams, there Venice vaguely shows. Look at that street – it runs to China straight, and yonder star above the Volga glows! Oh, swear to me to put in dreams your trust, and to believe in fantasy alone, and never let your soul in prison rust, nor stretch you arm and say: a wall of stone" (Nabokov, *The Gift* 176-177).

Rusticello is the methodical teller (although his “method” is highly idiosyncratic), who records the oral information and translates Marco’s Venetian dialect into the French language he was familiar with:

Pour savoir l’entière vérité sur les différentes contrées du monde, prenez ce livre et lisez-le: vous y trouverez les grandes merveilles de la Grande Arménie, de la Perse, des Tartares, de l’Inde et de bien d’autres pays, comme notre livre vous les contera méthodiquement, merveilles que messire Marco Polo, savant et illustre citoyen de Venise, raconte pour les avoir vues. Il y a un certain nombre de choses qu’il n’a pas vues, mais qu’il a entendues de gens absolument sûrs. Aussi donnerons-nous les choses vues pour vues et les entendues pour entendues afin que notre livre soit sincère, sans le moindre mensonge. Que chacun qui entendra lire ce livre ou le lira lui fasse confiance parce qu’il ne s’agit que de choses vraies. Car je vous fais savoir que, depuis que Notre-Seigneur a créé Adam notre premier père, il n’y a eu personne en aucune race qui parcourût et connût autant des différentes terres du monde que ce messire Marco Polo. Aussi a-t-il pensé que ce serait grand dommage qu’il ne fit mettre par écrit ce qu’il avait vu et entendu de sûr, afin que les gens qui ne l’ont ni vu ni entendu le connussent grâce à ce livre – et j’ajoute qu’il est resté bien vingt-six ans à s’informer dans ces différentes terres – et ce livre, comme il était dans la prison de Gênes, il l’a fait mettre en bon ordre par messire Rusticien, Pisan, qui était dans cette même prison en l’année de l’incarnation du Christ, 1298. (Marco Polo, *La Description du monde* 50-51)

The book is defined as “our book”, Marco Polo’s and Rusticello’s, a shared textual space with a narrator who is ample enough to include the scribe. With a certain awkward elegance, Rusticello introduces himself in the vast space of 1st person plural pronoun (“nous”) or hides himself in the impersonality of the French pronoun “on”, to such an extent that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the two figures. The subject-matter of the book is defined by the scribe as “nostre matiere” or “our subject-matter” (Marco Polo, *La Description du monde* 264-265) and, at times, the narrative act oscillates between the 1st person singular and plural: “Nous vous avons parlé de la Petite Arménie, je vous parlerai de la Turquie” (Marco Polo, *La Description du monde* 76-77). Gradually, the space of the voyage itself and the

space of the narrative (with its forward and backward movements from one topic to the other) are superimposed, with the effect of a total blurring of boundaries between the act of travelling and the act of telling:

Mais laissons ces gens-là! Nous ne vous parlerons pas de l'Inde maintenant, mais en temps en lieu, et nous reviendrons au nord pour parler du pays et retournerons par une autre route à la cité mentionnée plus haut de Kerman parce que, dans ces contrées dont je veux vous parler, on ne peut aller qu'à partir de la cité de Kerman.

(Marco Polo, *La Description du monde* 112-113)

In spite of this constant hesitation and mingling of “on”, “je” and “nous”, the scribe never seems to openly appropriate the feats of the merchant in his own name – he only claims a common narrative substance and a collaborative narrative act, visible everywhere in the mottled pronominal landscape of *The Description of the World*, totally indifferent to the use of homogeneous norms of designating the narrator and the hero. Nevertheless, these pronominal fluctuations ultimately create the impression that Rusticello intrudes upon and gains control of Marco's journey itself, not only of its verbal, narrative content. The scribe's shamelessness should not be exaggerated, since he is not the radical and ruthless appropriator of another hero's glory, but simply a careless and incoherent writer who sometimes gets carried away in the exotic whirls of a marvellous trip narrated to him in the narrowness of a prison cell.

This phenomenon of the uncertain subject, hesitating between “I” and “we” (for the narrator), between “he” and “we” (for the hero of the narrative), is highly unusual in medieval texts. These pronominal oscillations were extremely annoying to editors and authors of critical editions of *The Description of the World*. According to Henri Cordier, author of a monumental edition based on Henry Yule's English translation, the erratic pronominal slippages together with the markers of oral style necessarily have to be erased from any serious translation and critical edition of the book:

There is in the style, apart from grammar or vocabulary, a rude angularity, a rough dramatism like that of oral narrative; there is a want of proportion in the style of different parts, now over curt, now diffuse and wordy, with at times a hammering reiteration; [...] a frequent change in the spelling of the proper names, even when recurring within a few lines, as if caught by ear only; a

literal following to and fro of the hesitations of the narrator; a more general use of the third person in speaking of the Traveller, but an occasional lapse into the first. All these characteristics are strikingly indicative of the unrevised product of dictation, and many of them would necessarily disappear either in translation or in a revised copy.⁴ (italics mine, Yule-Cordier, *The Travels of Marco Polo* 84)

By imposing a uniform, orderly, rigid model of style and narrative, the irritated editor misses the rich and versatile spontaneity of Marco Polo and Rusticello's book. By wishing to preserve its content, he sacrifices its form, as if the two could be dissociated. When discussing late medieval exploration texts, Stephen Greenblatt identifies a certain propensity towards fragmentariness, discontinuity, heterogeneity due to the gradual discovery of an unknown world, to its surprises and unexpected wonders. Fyodor's biography of his father clearly displays this feature as well:

Compared to the luminous universal histories of the early Middle Ages, the chronicles of exploration seem uncertain of their bearings, disorganized, fragmentary. Their strength lies not in a vision of the Holy Spirit's gradual expansion through the world but in the shock of the unfamiliar, the provocation of an intense curiosity, the local excitement of discontinuous wonders. Hence they present the world not in a stately and harmonious order but in a succession of brief encounters, random experiences, isolated anecdotes of the unanticipated. (Greenblatt 2)

It is worth noting that three other major chronicles of exploration of the Middle Ages and of the Renaissance, in the European and in the

⁴ Since the editor formulates such strong opinions on the absolute necessity of revising the original text, his edition is not reliable when one wishes to investigate the oral style of the narrative or its collaborative nature. In this case, it is imperative to examine the original French text. An excellent bilingual edition is that of Pierre-Yves Badel quoted above. Henri Cordier openly describes his editorial method as one of clear dissociation between manner and matter: "To adopt that Text [*the original French text*] with all its awkwardness and tautologies, as the absolute subject of translation, would have been a mistake. [...] The process of abridgement in this text [...] has been on the whole judiciously executed, getting rid of the intolerable prolixities of manner which belong to many parts of the Original Dictation, but as a general rule preserving the matter" (Yule-Cordier, *The Travels of Marco Polo* 41).

Arab world, follow exactly the same pattern of collaboration between a professional scribe and an explorer who has returned from a long journey beyond the familiar boundaries of the known world: the 14th century friar Odoric of Pordenone, the 15th century Venetian merchant Niccolo di Conti, the 14th century Muslim traveler Ibn Batuta, all dictated or described their travels to another person, playing the secretary. However, in these cases there is no obvious sign of the scribe's interference, contrary to *The Description of the World*, where Rusticello's watermark cannot be missed. Nevertheless, the scribes are invariably proud of their enterprise, conscious of the importance of their task, of the historic act of committing the traveler's tale to paper. As the Arab scribe of Ibn Batuta lyrically argues in the introduction to the main text, without his help, "the pearl of these extraordinary travels would have forever remained in the drowsy obscurity of their shells" (*Voyages d'Ibn Batouta* 11-12). This kind of collaboration is supposedly at the center of *Pale Fire*, where Kinbote wishes to establish "a secret compact" between himself, the possessor of the Zemblan theme, and Shade, "the fireside poet": "I mesmerized him with it, I saturated him with my vision, I pressed upon him, with a drunkard's wild generosity, all that I was helpless myself to put into verse" (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 80). This is certainly not the case in *The Gift*, since the father is an accomplished writer himself, author of several learned volumes and no Kinbotian wild generosity is involved. Fyodor chooses his forefathers, or, as Borges famously argues in "Kafka and His Precursors", he creates his forefathers, but the models he wishes to follow are already examples of elaborate mystification – a strange case of faithfulness to unfaithfulness. Alexander Dolinin, in the notes to the Symposium edition, has already emphasized the fact that Pushkin's works that Fyodor quotes, *The Captain's Daughter*, *Maria Shoning* and *A Journey to Arzrum*, already display a great deal of freedom in the treatment of literary and historical sources (Nabokov, *Dar* 664). *The Description of the World* seems to offer another example of playful treatment of a given material, with a distinct approach, narrative and pronominal in nature due to Rusticello's intrusions. Gérard Genette, in *Palimpsests*, makes a distinction between intertextuality defined as co-presence – text A is present in text B – and hypertextuality defined as derivation – text A is not effectively present in text B, but B is derived from A (Genette

8-13). *The Description of the World* can therefore be seen as both a visible intertext, quoted and alluded to several times in chapter 2 of *The Gift*, and as a veiled hypotext, as a model of this chapter's narrative and pronominal strategies.

Nabokov's excellent knowledge of French medieval literature, which he studied at Cambridge, certainly made him sensitive to Rusticello's appropriation practices and gave him access to the original text. This leads us to another medieval text written in French, John Mandeville's *Travels*, a more delicate case in *The Gift*, much more of a mirage and a problem than *The Description of the World*. It is worth pointing out that the name "Mandevil" appears in *Pale Fire*, where it designates the two cousins Mirador and Radomir, as well as two place names, Mandevil Forest and Mt. Mandevil.

Marco Polo and Mandeville were the most revered exploration authors of the 14th and 15th centuries. When Christopher Columbus embarked upon his 1492 voyage of discovery, he was carrying these two books along, since they played a major role in the mental shaping of his expectations. As Dieter E. Zimmer suggests, it is not clear whether Mandeville's *Travels* are indeed a source of *The Gift*. Only one episode could be traced back to Mandeville's *Travels*, the drumlike roar Fyodor hears in a Tibetan gorge, but this is rather a canonical topos which can also be found in Odoric of Pordenone and Marco Polo (Hartmann and Zimmer 66). The medieval culture of repetition, of collective, continuous writing, impervious to modern notions of originality and individual authorship complicates the task of the contemporary reader, eager to clarify the status of one particular text in the intertextual framework of the novel.

Even if there is no unmistakable sign of Mandeville's direct presence in *The Gift*, one cannot help identifying striking similarities between Fyodor's biography of his father and the writings of the author whom we call John Mandeville. The notion of hypertextuality (derivation) appears once again to be more appropriate than the notion of intertextual presence. The Mandeville connection is therefore caught somewhere between the blinding clarity of obviousness and the shady illusions of an impalpable object. Solid intuitions and impressions replace solid proofs. Instead of referring to textual evidence, to unmistakable intertexts, it is only possible to evoke the influence of a type of approach, a hypertextual, derivative practice.

Mandeville's text, dating from 1370, is a remarkable case of literary forgery, with an authorial persona who dramatizes himself as the author of a certain number of travels borrowed from a wealth of different sources, mainly Marco Polo, Odoric of Pordenone, William of Boldensele and medieval lore in general. Paradoxically, Mandeville's *Travels* were more successful in popularizing the geographical and encyclopedic knowledge of medieval explorers than all his sources put together. Some critics consider Mandeville a postmodern author *avant la lettre*, an unfounded opinion, as Greenblatt argues, since the meaning of authorship in the 14th century was undoubtedly not the same as today (Greenblatt 165). Fyodor certainly does not go all the way in the construction of an explorer identity. He quickly dissipates the illusion of his personal participation in an Asian expedition and at the end of chapter 2 he abandons his text, lamenting the "secondary poetization" and the dilution to which he submits his material. He extricates himself from the inky jungle he himself created, condemning his biography as a series of vain, useless "verbal adventures" (Nabokov, *The Gift* 139).

Interestingly, according to some scholars, Marco Polo himself is a Mandeville-figure, an impostor and an *artifex* who never went to China but only used sources produced by other, genuine, travelers to build up his Asian narrative. Significant omissions are identified in *The Description of the World*, which a traveler through China would not have missed: no references to the Great Wall, to green tea or to the bandaged feet of Chinese women, no mention at all of Marco Polo and his family in the Chinese archives of the time (Wood). An obvious conclusion is that every traveler in an unknown land, every traveler who has awakened a "sleeping beauty" is necessarily a liar in the eyes of his readers. Paradoxically, such scholars deem Marco Polo's blanks and omissions to be signs of imposture, whereas some of his contemporaries called his book *Il Milione* for its exaggerations, embellishments, and shameless hyperboles. Poised somewhere between "not enough" and "too much", the traveler's credibility (and implicitly, his book's) is at stake in both cases. Nabokov's *The Gift* reflects on this twofold contradictory drive towards excess and omission in *The Description of the World* when Fyodor quotes a legend about Marco Polo's death:

In the twenties of the fourteenth century when the great explorer was dying, his friends gathered by his bedside

and implored him to reject what in his book had seemed incredible to them – to water down its miracles by means of judicious deletions; but he responded that he had not recounted even a half of what he had in fact seen. (Nabokov, *The Gift* 124-125)

By discarding notions such as completeness/incompleteness and verisimilitude, Marco Polo stresses the mysterious and ineffable plenitude of a trip that cannot possibly be exhausted by any narrative act.

Arguably, one can identify Mandevillian fits of mystification in *The Gift*, as well as Marcopolian, or rather, Rusticellian fits of mastery. Rusticello, the now forgotten scribe, and Mandeville, the self-styled traveler, are eminently Nabokovian figures, with their propensity to control, if not the actual space of exploration, which is inaccessible to them, at least the textual space of the narrative. Having said all this, having pointed out the Rusticello-Fyodor kinship, and, secondarily, Mandeville's appropriation of sources, having, in a word, anchored Fyodor in a medieval family of mystifiers, liars and manipulators, I feel I myself have got lost in the inky jungle of *The Gift* and have diluted the text with my own fancies, simply because there is no unmistakable sign of Rusticello and Mandeville in *The Gift*. Since annotation failed, I strayed into the space of speculative annotation, of tempting, irresistible, fanciful annotation. It is sometimes difficult to indulge in the intertextual analysis of Nabokov's fiction without a slight feeling of discomfort, without being afraid of insisting on inconclusive allusions, while missing other, deliberately foregrounded allusions. Nabokov's intertextual strategies form one of the most exciting and rewarding objects of critical study, but they are also potentially slippery and misleading objects. As Brian Boyd suggests in "*Pierre*, or the Ambiguities of Allusion" (on the presence, or rather the absence of Melville's *Pierre* in *Ada*), "Nabokov may distort or disguise allusions, but he also repeats and even insists on his key allusions and he makes each word count" (Boyd, "*Pierre*" 8).

Sadly, Rusticello and Mandeville are only intuitively there, they are a presence-absence, insubstantial, impalpable, yet their "inviolable shades" seem to tower above the narrative. Such intertextual presences-absences in Nabokov, which are somehow dubious or tenuous, devoid of strong, clear "pointers", become mirages which are exhilarating objects of intellectual chase. They are precious despite

their seeming emptiness and this paper intends to be an apology of such exuberant examples, which uncover the creative dimension of annotation and open up the space of interpretation. The world of Nabokov studies and our own reading experience would be much more gray and boring without such speculative annotations.

I am well aware of the fact that I am performing a strange, self-destructive act, both defending a personal point of view on the pronominal play in *The Gift* and questioning it at the same time. This double movement illustrates a common stance of the critic and rereader. What prevails, in the end, is the celebration of these Marcopolian and Mandevillian intertextual mirages, which are true to the spirit of the text, even if they fail to be true to its letter.

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