The Subjective Vision and Aesthetics of the Observer
in Vladimir Nabokov’s *The Eye*

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1. Foreword

One of the important things to understand V. Nabokov’s literature is his interest in the vision. The visual metaphors are accepted as a basic device in his literary worlds, and some of the titles of his works are connected with vision. Especially the titles *Соглядатай* (The Eye, 1930) and *Камера обскура* (Laughter in the Dark, 1932) are directly related with eyes. In this paper I will examine the function and the meaning of the vision in *The Eye* which is Nabokov’s fourth and shortest novel. When it was published first, many émigré critics didn’t show a special interest to this novel. Johnson notes that “Physically slight, the psychological mystery tale aroused only modest interest among critics…” (Johnson 1995: 130) Lee says that “The fourth novel, really a novella, is a minor work about the pitiful, failure-prone young Smurov.” (Lee 1976: 50)

In recent researches, however, scholars are paying more attention to the artistic achievements of this work: “*The Eye* is a remarkable work, rich in ambiguity and allusiveness. It provides a suggestive framework from which Nabokov’s subsequent fiction takes its unique shape.” (Connolly 1992: 17), “Nabokov’s great technical advance in *The Eye*, his bold handling of point of view, prefigures much of his later art: his almost insanely egocentric narrators; his glides back and forth between first-and third-person narration; his sudden focal shifts that jar one reality against another and force us to resolve their clash. (Boyd 1990: 348) The more remarkable utterance about this novel is Nabokov’s own reply to Alfred Apple’s question. To his question - “In which of your early works do you think you first begin to face the possibilities that are fully developed in *Invitation to a Beheading* and reach an apotheosis in the ‘involute adobe’ of *Pale Fire?’”- Nabokov gave an answer, “Possibly in *The Eye*, but *Invitation to a Beheading* is in the whole a spontaneous generation.” (Nabokov 1973: 74) Though Rylkova points out that “scholars have usually evoked this famous reply … to justify a preoccupation and fascination with this lesser known novel by Nabokov”(Rylkova 2002: 43), we have to acknowledge that Nabokov assigned a special meaning to this novel.

2. The vision and visuality in modern era

The Russian title *Соглядатай* means a spy, but in his English translation Nabokov called it *The
Boyd says that The Eye is a pun on “I”. (Boyd 1990: 348) As an observer the narrator “I” with his eyes sees and pursues the character Smurov. In this novel the images related with eye are play a very essential role. Nabokov’s interest in a vision is not his original approach, but we have to understand it in a modernist aesthetics. The one thing that draws a boundary between modern and premodern era is the understanding of vision. “The notion of the “observer” is a basic modeling metaphor of the modernist age.” (Grishakova 2006: 134) Philosophers and culture theorists emphasize that the modernism begins with the collapse of absolute gaze. Modernization overthrew the existing view on vision. It “entailed a decoding and deterritorialization of vision.” (Crary 1992:42) Jay says that “The modern era has been dominated by the sense of sight” (Jay 1988: 3), “we can identify a visual model of the modern era with Renaissance notions of perspective in the visual arts and Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality in philosophy.”(Jay 1988: 4)

Scholars agree that modernism begins with a crisis of a Cartesian vision. In Cartesian rationalism the observer is disembodied, and the seer is defined as a knower. Perspective and Cartesian ideas characterized by “monocular, disembodies, objective, and ahistorical vision.” (Jacobs 2001:7) However in modernist conception, the relations between seeing and knowing, self and other begin to be shaken. From the beginning of the modern era, to be more concrete, from the nineteenth century “Cartesian perspectivalism comes under increasing assault, its assumption of a detached, neutral observer discredited by a competing scopic regime traceable to the Baroque.”(Jacobs 2001:7) In the modern era the vision lost its stable and rigid properties and began to free from absolute self:

“Modernity coincides with the collapse of classical models of vision and their stable space of representations.” (Crary 1992:24) Crary also explains this phenomenon as an appearance of ‘subjective vision’: “the most influential figurations of an observer in the early nineteenth century depended on the priority of models of subjective vision” (Crary 1992: 9)

More precisely, however, the subjective vision and modern observer began to give more active influence on the art and the literature of the early 20th century. Grishakova points out that “Subjective and bodily aspects of vision become central within the new paradigms of knowledge that emerge in the late 19th-early 20th century”.(Grishakova 2006: 140) Jacobs says that “the Cartesian spectator’s posture of neutral detachment is increasingly denaturalized and subjectivized at the beginnings of the

1 In the foreword of English text Nabokov explains the procedure of a translation from the Russian title to the English: “The Russian title of this little novel is SOGLYADATAY (in traditional transliteration), pronounced phonetically ‘Sgly-dart-eye’, with the accent on the penultimate. It is ancient military term meaning ‘spy’ or ‘watcher’, neither of which extends as flexible as the Russian word. After toying with ‘emissary’ and ‘gladiator’, I gave up trying to blend sound and sense, and contented myself with matching the ‘eye’ at the end of the long stalk.” (Nabokov 1965: 7)

2 “Historians have debated whether discoveries in philosophy and optical research (with their affiliated origins) or the technological multiplication of images were chiefly responsible for this Western crisis of confidence in the eye.” (Jacobs 2001: 8); “The progress of physiological optics in the 19th century demonstrates that the world is to a certain extent “created” by the observer.” (Grishakova 2006: 140)
twentieth century, and the realist novel is gradually overtaken by the rise of modernism” (Jacobs 2001: 48-49)

As the Cartesian subject was going to lose his power as a rational, neutralized and detached observer, the relationship between the observer and the observed has been ambiguous, and this modernist observer began to take part in the reality as a monad. In modernism the subject and object of vision actively interact with each other, therefore observer becomes “both an autonomous individual unity and a mobile perceptual field”. (Grishakova 2006: 140) In this sense, Grishakova insists that “every observer is a creator of an imaginary world and thus an “artist” in its own right”. (Grishakova 2006: 141) From the émigré poet Vladislav Khodasevich most Nabokov’s critics have been pointed out that the essence of Nabokov’s literature is a creation of artists or the problem of artistic creation. The function of vision and the role of eyes are also connected with this thesis. In this paper, however, the creation of modernist observer rather than the creation or failure of artist will be more emphasized.

3. The Eye: the observer and the observed

The setting of The Eye is a Russian émigré community in Berlin after the Bolshevik Revolution⁴, which is frequently encountered in Nabokov’s early works: “The people in the book are the favourite characters of my literary youth: Russian expatriates living in Berlin, Paris, or London.” (Nabokov. The Eye 1965: 7) As pointed out by Connolly, in this novel “the narrator’s account of the experience divides into three parts.” (Connolly 1992: 102) In the first part he introduces the Russian émigré life and the hero’s suicide attempt. And in the second part the narrator traces a certain Smurov’s image reflected in other characters’ mind, and lastly in the third part it turns out that the narrator and Smurov is a same person.

The narrator ‘I’ working as a house tutor in a Russian émigré family is bitten at the hands of his mistress Matilda’s husband. As a friend of narrator’s tutees’ parents Matilda meets him in their house and seduces the passive and timid hero. After he is severely bitten by her husband Kashmarin in front

⁴ Nabokov introduces the historical background and characters in the foreword of his novel: “The time of the story is 1924-5. Civil War in Russia has ended some four years ago. Lenin has just died but his tyranny continues to flourish. (…)The expatriates in the Berlin of the book range from paupers to successful businessmen. Examples of the latter are Kashmarin, Matilda’s cauchemaresque husband (who evidently escaped from Russia by the southern route, via Constantinople) and the father of Evgenia and Vanya, an elderly gentleman (who judiciously directs the London branch of a German firm, and keeps a dancing girl). Kashmarin is probably what the English call ‘middleclass’, but the two young ladies at 5, Peacock Street obviously belong to the Russian nobility, titled or untitled, which does not prevent them from having Philistine reading tastes. Evgenia’s fat-faced husband, whose name sounds rather comic today, works in a Berlin bank. Colonel Mukhin, a nasty prig, fought in 1919 under Denikin, and in 1920 under Wrangel, speaks four languages, affects a cool, worldly air, and will probably do very well in the soft job into which his future father-in-law is steering him. Good Roman Bogdanovich is a Balt imbued with German, rather than Russian, culture. The eccentric Jew Weinstock, the pacifist woman doctor Marianna Nikolaevna, and the classless narrator himself are representatives of the many-faceted Russian intelligentsia." (Nabokov 1965: 8-9)
of the boys, the narrator shoots himself because of humiliation. He attempts to retain at least the dignity, but he does not have power to fight against the enraged husband. When he recovers from the shot in a hospital, he thinks that he is really dead. Since then the narrator switches from the character ‘I’ to the observer ‘I’, in other word ‘eye’. The narrator, “a morbidly self-consciousness young Russian émigré”(Johnson 1995: 130), at first showed a passive attitude to world and the others, whereas from now on he starts to observe actively the outer world. Most of all a certain newcomer Smurov draws his interest. At the end of the story Smurov turns out to be the narrator himself, but before that the readers cannot help following ‘I’s attempts to reveal Smurov’s real identity. In the process of revealing the real Smurov the narrator detached emotionally from the other characters collects diverse images of Smurov reflected in their mind. Because “poor Smurov only exists insofar as he is reflected in other brains”(E9). Though Smurov makes various impressions on the characters, the narrator, regardless of others’ judgments, tries to excuse for him and to define real Smurov. In the foreword Nabokov says that “the theme of this novel is the pursuit of an investigation which leads the protagonist through a hell of mirrors and ends in the merging of twin images.” (E9)

As the title alludes, the eyes play a very important role in understanding the theme of The Eye. Especially in the second part when the narrator begins to trace the Smurov’s images, he himself changes to a big symbolic eye. Smurov also is very sensitive to the vision. From the beginning we can see that Smurov shows overly sensitive reaction to other people’s gaze: “Yet I was always exposed, always wide-eyed; even I sleep I did not cease to watch over myself, understanding nothing of my existence, growing crazy at the thought of not being able to stop being aware of myself, and envying all those simple people – clerks, revolutionaries, shopkeepers – who, with confidence and concentration, go about their little jobs.”(E 17) The reason why he cannot stop watching himself is his fear of a vague reality. Actually he cannot stop observing himself, because he is wondering about his images reflected in others’ eyes. He feels a “humiliating constraint”(E13) in boys’ presence, more precisely in front of their clear gaze. The two boys keep observing him with their childlike4 innocent eyes without saying anything, and their curious staring arouses in him an odd and awkward feeling: “My pupils stood by, one on my right, the other on my left, imperturbably watching me.”(E19), “That scene remains in my memory like a tableau vivant: the brightly lit hall; I, not knowing what to do with my rejected hand; a boy on the right and a boy on the left, both looking not at the visitor but at me.”(E21) When he decides to shot himself after being bitten by Kashmarin, its direct cause is due to an intolerable insult in front of the boys. He attempts to retain his dignity as a human being, but the boys’ gazes askance and imperturbably watching the punishment to him make the narrator to fall in an irreparable despair.

4 Interestingly the two boys are not childlike in a sense of economy: “…but I did not dare turn on the lights: those boys had a strange, unchildlike bent for thriftiness, a certain odious housekeeping instinct.”(E 18) But they spontaneously turn on the lights to see the beating well.
Before he commits suicide, he sees himself in the mirror, which is the last scene associated with the vision in the first part. “A wretched, shivering, vulgar little man in a bowler hat stood in the centre of the room, for some reason rubbing his hands. That is the glimpse I caught of myself in the mirror.”(E26) When he sees his reflected figure in the mirror, he cannot compromise with his distorted image. This is the first time that he sees himself in reality as an observer. Before that he acutely responded to others’ gaze, but never tried to see himself. And now the appearance that he encounters in the mirror is “a wretched, shivering, vulgar little man.” Seeing him reflected in the mirror, he understands that this is his image which other people see, and feels frustrated.

He commits suicide to terminate his existence, but his deed brings a result of separation between the inner self and the outer character. When he woke up in the hospital, he does not understand whether he really died or not, but it is clear that he becomes an observer.

“I walked along remembered streets; everything greatly resembles reality, and yet there was nothing to prove that I was not dead… I saw myself from the outside, treading water as it were, and was both touched and frightened like an inexperienced ghost watching the existence of a person whose inner lining, inner night, mouth, and taste-in-the-mouth, he knew as well as that person’s shape.”(E31)

And from now on the narrator becomes observer and tries to find out Smurov’s real image. Of course we don’t know exactly that the narrator and Smurov are the same person until the end, but there are some clues enabling to guess this fact. Most of all, seeing an oscillation in the narrator’s attitude towards Smurov and his relationship with other characters, especially the love for Vanya, the readers go through confusion. The readers are embarrassed seeing that the narrator himself suffers from the obsession to Vanya, who is actually the object of Smurov’s love, though it is one-sided love of Smurov.

As said before the purpose of this paper is not a definition of Smurov’s identity, rather an examination of an observer’s function and meaning. As an observer the narrator sees the characters’ life and collects Smurov’s images reflected in their mind. After the rebirth he does not feel a humiliation, because he is not a wretched little man anymore, but an observer detached from the everyday life: “Ever since that shot (…) I had observed myself with curiosity instead of sympathy, and my painful past – before the shot – was now foreign to me. (…) In respect to myself I was now an onlooker.” (35) After being transformed into an onlooker, he turns his eyes into the people who live in the same building. They are Evgenia and Vanya, the sisters, Evgenia’s husband Roman Bogdanovich Khrushchov, and their family friends Mukhin and Smurov. The narrator shows great interest to Smurov more than anybody else. Smurov makes a favorable impression on narrator, and as a perceptive observer the narrator distinguishes in Smurov’s face the traces of sorrow and experience. His manner is excellent, and everything he says is intelligent and appropriate.(E40) All of these
features are not the objective judgment on him, but the result of the narrator’s subjective appraisal. In the narrator’s eye Smurov is shown a person with dignity, self-confidence and manly attraction. The narrator assures that “Vanya cannot help liking him immediately because of that noble and enigmatic modesty, that pallor of forehead and slenderness of hand.”(E40) Of course this is not Vanya’s opinion, but the narrator’s expectation. The narrator consciously reveals Smurov’s external behavior concealing his fear, anxiety and tension in the mind. When Smurov hears that “Kashmarin, an extremely rough and quick-tempered fellow, once thrashed a Frenchman nearly to death out of jealousy.”(E42), he responds with smile like this: “Oh, good. That’s what I like.”(E43) This response is very ridiculous, because Smurov himself was bitten to death by jealous Kashmarin. In his words the readers rather read Smurov’s severe self-consciousness.

The climax of this kind of appraisal for him is the narrator’s direct utterance about him: “He was obviously a person who, behind his unpretentiousness and quietness, concealed a fiery spirit.”(E43) Smurov reflected in the narrator’s eye is a quiet and intelligent person concealing a fiery spirit inside him, so he is the very man with whom any woman cannot help falling in love. The narrator emphasizes his charm and attraction as a man. However Smurov’s positive image changes into doubtful or negative in the relationship with other people. Weinstock who hired Smurov as a salesman in his bookstore is a paranoid person, and always fears whether there are spies around him.

“They are everywhere,’ he would say with quiet significance. ‘Everywhere. If I come to a party where there are five, the, perhaps twenty people, among them, you can be quite sure, oh yes, quite sure, there is at least one agent. (E48)

When the narrator gets to know Weinstock’s doubt, he recognizes that Weinstock alludes to Smurov: “Even if Smurov did exhale a certain air of mystery, even if his past did seem rather hazy, was it possible that he…?”(E49) However when the narrator directly observes Smurov, he never looks like an agent, rather a man giving off a fascinating image to woman.

I see him, for example, behind the counter in his neat black suit, hair combed smooth, with his clean-cut, pale face. When a customer enters, he carefully props his unconsumed cigarette on the edge of the ashtray and, rubbing his slender hands, carefully attends to the needs of the buyer. (…) And the lady who has bought the book, the red-lipped lady in the black fur coat, takes away with her a fascinating image: those delicate hands, a little awkwardly picking up the books, that subdued voice, that flitting smile, those admirable manners.(E49-50)

In this part the narrator once again pays attention to his masculine charm. Regardless of other people’s judgments about him, the narrator keeps demonstrating Smurov’s attraction as a man. We can see another Smurov’s image at Khrushchov’s house. Here Smurov “makes a somewhat different
impression on someone.” (E50) Smurov’s effort to boast his strenuous courage and strength to a woman culminates in the story that he had went on fighting the Reds. It is a story how he had escaped death in the railway station in Yalta, and with this story he wants to make a deep impression on Vanya. While talking military exploits, he never loses his ordinary calm manner: “He spoke in a calm, matter-of-fact, even slightly monotonous voice, as if talking of trivial matters.” (E54) After his story ends, the narrator describes carefully the other people’s respond.

Evgenia clucked her tongue sympathetically; Mukhin listened attentively and sagaciously, every now and then clearing his throat softly, as if he could not help being deeply stirred by the narrative and felt respect and even envy – good healthy envy – towards a man who had fearlessly ad frankly looked death in the face. As for Vanya – no, there could be no more doubt, after this she must fall for Smurov. (54)

The narrator is once more excited by Smurov’s brave behavior and people’s reaction. He is convinced that the two sisters must have been touched by his courageousness, and Mukhin must have been felt shame in front of Smurov. But this turns out to be a narrator’s complete misunderstanding. As I have already pointed out, Smurov’s continued interest is to gain women’s attention, but the narrator-observer internally assimilated to him would not see the real Smurov.⁵ For this reason we cannot trust the narrator’s statements, rather have to find the truth through the other people’s response or their comment on him.

Silence. Mukhin opened his gun-metal cigarette case. Evgenia fussily bethought herself that it was time to call her husband for tea. She turned on the threshold and said something inaudible about a cake. Vanya jumped up from the sofa and ran out too. Mukhin picked up her handkerchief from the floor and laid it carefully on the table. (E55)

The rigmarole of Smurov’s military exploits and his dramatic escape does not arouse an exclamation or an acclamation in the listeners, but make them embarrassed. The silence and after that their hurried manner remind a lot of things, but most of all we can guess that all of them realize Smurov’s lie. Mukhin’s comment that “Unfortunately, Yalta does not have a railroad station” (E55) clearly reveals the fact that Smurov lied, and this time he and the narrator really get into a state of confusion. This was unexpected and awful situations especially for the narrator. In this story the readers and the narrator come to see Smurov’s bluff and servility. Although his secret love for Vanya and his hope to look good man in front of her may be great, his unmanly begging to Mukhin to let this remain between the two of them brings the result to detach the narrator from Smurov: “So it’s true

⁵ Johnson points out that the psychological distance between the observing eye and Smurov changes after each scene: When the image is strongly positive, the distance between Smurov and the “I” is considerable, whereas when the reflected image is perceived as more negative, the distance shrinks. (Johnson 1995: 132-133)
after all that there is no riddle to Smurov, that he is but a commonplace babbler, by now unmasked?
So that’s what it is…”(E56) The narrator doubts that Smurov may be a commonplace babbler, however, he does not still have a confidence in him. To demonstrate his trust in Smurov, he begins to trace his other images. He thinks that the riddle is remained, the original is remained unknown.

However, the more the narrative progresses, the less we get to trust the narrator’s judgments on Smurov. As an observer he keeps seeing him, but he turns out to be an untrustworthy narrator. He is seeing Smurov, and at the same time pays attention to the other people’s point of view on Smurov. Most of all, what interests him is Vanya’s version of Smurov, because she is an object of his secret love. But once again Smurov misunderstands Vanya’s version of Smurov, because she is an object of his secret love. But once again Smurov misunderstands Vanya’s real mind. Though he sneaks into her room to ascertain if she preserves his presents or stuffs related with him (a yellow, dark-dappled orchid, a little volume of Gumilyov and a photograph taken with him), the things that he finds there are completely different from his expectation. His poor vision reaches the climax in seeing the relationship between Vanya and Mukhin. As Evegenia says firmly, their love is so clear, that nobody can miss it: “What do you mean you did not know? Everybody knows… It’s been going on for ages. Yes, of course, they adore each other. It’s almost two years now.”(E72) Though Smurov is seeing the people, he understands them as he wants and he does not care of true reality. As Smurov’s morbidity comes to the surface more and more, the narrator goes through more difficulty in justifying his object’s poor vision. To determine what is true and what is false in Smurov’s reality is not important in this paper, but instead we have to indicate the problem of Smurov’s absolute vision. He cannot be an absolute observer and does not have to be. When Smurov and the narrator would not abandon the privilege of absolute vision, they cannot be modernistic observers.

Meanwhile, another image of Smurov appears in Roman’s epistolary diary. Thinking that his diary contains a description of Smurov, the narrator desires to read at least one excerpt of it: “the urge to gain possession of this secret, to see Smurov through the eyes of future centuries, was so bedazzling that no thought of disappointment could frighten me.” (E81) However, what he found in this diary is a completely different image of Smurov. Smurov reflected in Roman’s mind is a “sexual lefty”: “Smurov’s entire appearance, his frailness, his decadence, his mincing gestures, his fondness for Eau de Cologne, and, in particular, those furtive, passionate glances that he constantly directs towards your humble servant – all this has long since confirmed this conjecture of mine.”(E85) Roman also assures that Smurov is a kleptomaniac. It seems that Smurov and also the narrator feel an intolerable humiliation hearing that he is a sexual lefty and kleptomaniac.

Like this, Smurov is reflected in various images in the other people’s eye. He looks a spy, a debauchee, a liar, a sexual lefty or a thief. After he commits suicide, the narrator tried to find a real Smurov free from the others’ vision, but in these diverse images of Smurov we cannot find at least one positive image. The narrator acknowledges that these people are just mirrors for Smurov: “I paused to think how much had happened lately, how many new people I had met, and how enthralling,
how hopeless was this house-to-house search, this quest of mine for the real Smurov. There is no use to dissemble – all these people I met were not live beings but only chance mirrors for Smurov”(E90) As soon as the narrator admits that all the people around Smurov is a mirror, they immediately lose their clearness and brightness, and change to shadows and shimmers on a screen. They were needed just to reveal a real Smurov, and now their role is accomplished. The next step is a return of a narrator’s eye to Smurov’s body. This process is realized in the mirror in a flower shop: “As I pushed the door, I noticed the reflection in the side mirror: a young man in a bowler carrying a bouquet, hurried towards me. The reflection and I merged into one. I walked out into the street.”(E97) And at last, through Kashmarin’s calling him Smurov, the two parts merge into one.

As said before, the problems who is real Smurov and whether the reunion of two parts is ideal for them are not essential to understand The Eye. The more essential is that there are various eyes seeing one object and no one of them has not absolute rights to define his identity. In modern era it is more important to understand the eyes’ rights of individual observers. In this sense it is necessary to pay attention to the last sentence of this novel

And yet I am happy. Yes, happy. I swear, I swear I am happy. I have realized that the only happiness in this world is to observe, to spy, to watch, to scrutinize oneself and others, to be nothing but a big, slightly vitreous, somewhat bloodshot, unblinking eye. I swear that this is happiness. What does it matter that I am a bit cheap, a bit foul, and that no one appreciates all the remarkable things about me – my fantasy, my erudition, my literary gift…I am happy that I can gaze at myself, for any man is absorbing – yes, really absorbing! The world, try as it may, cannot insult me. I am invulnerable. (…) I am happy – yes happy! What more can I do to prove it, how to proclaim that I am happy? Oh, to shout it so that all of you believe me at last, you cruel, smug people. (E103)

The claim that he is happy sounds paradoxical. He shows an ironic attitude against the people’s negative judgment on him. He calls them cruel and smug people, but in this process, the narrator reaches a status of a modernistic observer. It does not matter that he wants it or not, but regardless of his intention, he became a big unblinking eye. But this eye does not have a vision of an absolute being, on the contrary, the eye shakes and wanders not having confidence in external world. This does not mean that the eye loses the power of seeing, but it gains an ability to see things with its own vision. He criticizes the people because they see in him a cheap and foul person and do not appreciate all the remarkable things about him. But if the narrator is an observer with his own vision, we have to admit that the other people also have their own vision. It is not essential to distinguish whose vision is right and whose wrong in the modernist era. In The Eye every character including the narrator has his or her own subjective vision, and when the author collects every image reflected in their eye, he can create an artistic story related to Smurov.
Works Cited


