



uOttawa

L'Université canadienne
Canada's university

**FACULTÉ DES ÉTUDES SUPÉRIEURES
ET POSTDOCTORALES**



**FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND
POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES**

Philippe Villeneuve

AUTEUR DE LA THÈSE / AUTHOR OF THESIS

M.A. (English Literature)

GRADE / DEGREE

Department of English

FACULTÉ, ÉCOLE, DÉPARTEMENT / FACULTY, SCHOOL, DEPARTMENT

Three Early Nabokov Novels

TITRE DE LA THÈSE / TITLE OF THESIS

David Rampton

DIRECTEUR (DIRECTRICE) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS SUPERVISOR

CO-DIRECTEUR (CO-DIRECTRICE) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS CO-SUPERVISOR

EXAMINATEURS (EXAMINATRICES) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS EXAMINERS

Janice Piamengo

Geoff Rector

Gary W. Slater

Le Doyen de la Faculté des études supérieures et postdoctorales / Dean of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

THREE EARLY NABOKOV NOVELS

by

Philippe Villeneuve

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral studies
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the MA degree in English

English
Faculty of Arts
University of Ottawa

©Philippe Villeneuve, Ottawa, Canada, 2008



Library and
Archives Canada

Published Heritage
Branch

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque et
Archives Canada

Direction du
Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-48517-0
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-48517-0

NOTICE:

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

AVIS:

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.


Canada

ABSTRACT

Comments made by Vladimir Nabokov concerning both his fiction and literature in general have helped determine the critical attitude of his most influential readers. The consensus among them is that his novels are meticulously self-contained artifacts that are meant to be “investigated” according to his precepts. As a result, his early novels have garnered relatively little critical attention because it is assumed that they were written at a time when he had not yet arrived at a full mastery of the principles that would inform his more carefully crafted art in later years. This thesis will show how three early novels actually benefit from the kind of close reading critics have reserved for later ones. In order to do this, however, it engages with the sort of theorists that Nabokovians, encouraged by the Master’s dismissive comments, have tended to avoid.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

One full year before I began working on this thesis, Professor David Rampton agreed to meet with me once a week in order to discuss Nabokov. I would like to thank him for being much more generous with his time than his role as supervisor required.

Among other things, I am indebted to my parents for picking me up in Montreal and giving me my fifty-sixth (or thereabouts) second chance.

Finally, the support of my wife Magaly Orue is the main reason I have managed to get this far without giving up. Thanks to her, there are countless call-center jobs in New-Brunswick with the ghost of my name on them.

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
CONTENTS	iv
INTRODUCTION	v
CHAPTER ONE: Social Labels in <i>King, Queen, Knave</i>	1
CHAPTER TWO: Factitious Images and Dissociation in <i>Laughter in the Dark</i>	25
CHAPTER THREE: The Fool's Gambit in <i>Despair</i>	52
CONCLUSION	85
BIBLIOGRAPHY	88

INTRODUCTION

The long-standing conviction among Nabokov scholars that he meant what he said when he described his novels as puzzles has affected the critical reception of his work, and a tendency to see the one thing needful in Nabokovian criticism as various forms of detective work has ensued.¹ Whether they insist on identifying literary allusions, as Gavriel Shapiro does in *Delicate Markers: Subtexts in Vladimir Nabokov's Invitation to a Beheading*, or choose to locate the key to a novel in lepidoptery, as Brian Boyd does in *Nabokov's Pale Fire*, or reinterpret his whole oeuvre by finding in it oblique allusions to the after life, as Vladimir Alexandrov does in *Nabokov's Otherworld*, Nabokovians generally concur in positing the presence of clues throughout the narrative that encourage readers to find solutions to the plots' complexities. As a result, they often produce brilliant and original readings. In the introduction to his own solution of *Pale Fire*, Boyd makes a strong case for the usefulness of an approach that develops and encourages participative, creative reading aptitudes. And because these ingenious readings have helped stimulate interest in Nabokov's fiction, it might well seem churlish to find fault with the approach that produces them; however, at times it does serve as an obstacle for readers and can cause them to think about Nabokov's novels in unhelpful ways. Even adamant puzzle solvers confess it reached a low point with Joanne Morgan's *Solving Nabokov's Lolita Riddle* (2005). In her book-length study of *Lolita*, Morgan alleges that the novel is an encoded autobiographical retelling of

¹ Nabokov once compared the writing of *Lolita* to "the composition of a beautiful puzzle" (*Strong Opinions* 20). As to his fiction in general, he was fond of drawing a parallel with the composition of chess problems (*cf. ibid.* 11-12, 35, 117, 160-161). On the other hand, to the question: "Do you make a point of puzzling people and playing games with readers?", he answered "What a bore that would be" (*ibid.* 184).

molestation she believes Nabokov suffered at the hands of an uncle. Whether her belief springs from her solution, or her solution from her belief, is not easy to ascertain.

When it is wielded more carefully, the approach is still exposed to certain risks inherent in the practice of treating linguistic signs as clues. For example, it ascribes an importance to certain discordant elements of the narrative that seems incommensurate with their actual status in the text. In *Lolita*, the dates provided by its narrator Humbert Humbert do not add up. The inconsistency has led some to wonder whether the last part of his narrative is simply imagined.² Boyd himself rejects this claim, argues that Humbert's slip in dates was more likely a mistake on Nabokov's part, and concludes that "to build whole-scale interpretations on details that seem much more explicable as errors is fraught with danger" (*Even* 64). But to determine whether a manuscript or typescript reading November 16th instead of November 19th comprises an error or a clue, when the manuscript, typescript, and author remain silent, extends beyond the reach of tools at the disposal of criticism; we cannot verify empirically the status of the 16/19 ambiguity if physical evidence is unavailable, and the contradiction in dates will always merely "seem" more explicable as distraction than intention. In this particular case, the critic must make a personal aesthetic judgment and determine whether the novel is more satisfying to him if the dénouement is imagined by the narrator, in which case "16th" becomes an important clue. Others, however, will prefer keeping the reality of the dénouement intact and the criteria by which the novel's verisimilitude is judged consistent, and conclude that the missing three days are attributable to a typo in which "16th" should read "19th". But if personal aesthetic judgments provide a valid means by which the reader determines how he responds to certain texts, they do not

² Cf. Christina Tekiner's "Time in *Lolita*." In *Modern Fiction Studies*, 25 (1979): 463-69.

provide a valid means of resolving all the uncertainties inherent in the texts.

Yet the approach's greatest drawback lies elsewhere. The overriding tendency to search for clues designed to illuminate the internal treasure hunt of the puzzle novel obscures the importance of all sorts of extra-textual matters critics might otherwise have chosen to concentrate on. Nabokovians rarely use theory as a tool to interpret the texts. Moreover, when they do manage to leave the world of the text, as D. Barton Johnson does in his study of both *The Defense* and *The Gift* when he agrees to "move into the extra-literary world of chess history" (*Worlds* 4), they seek little more than a temporary expedient designed to validate or refute a solution already arrived at. This trend does not completely preclude other levels of discussion, but greatly reduces their scope in the critical debate. Ellen Pifer, for example, deploring the univocal tendency for puzzle solving she found in Nabokov criticism as early as 1980, published *Nabokov and the Novel* as an attempt to reassess the value of the novels' contents and reveal a moral dimension previous criticism had overlooked. Both Johnson (*Worlds* 3) and Boyd (*Pale Fire* 122), however, did not fail to point out that by doing so, *i.e.* by ignoring the puzzle logic of the novels, Pifer was not only neglecting an essential aspect of Nabokov's work, but the aspect which actually made him unique. According to them, the reader failing to assume the puzzle-solving approach is simply reading him incorrectly.

I would like to argue against this contention by offering a reading of his fiction that does not intend to compete with the *correct* approach, but rather to complement it by providing insights it is unable to provide on its own. Because Nabokov took the time to call the reader's attention to the many intricacies hidden in his texts, telling him where to look, so to speak, it would be presumptuous to disregard them completely. All the same, it does not

follow that the reader should likewise defer when he is told where *not* to look. For example, most critics have consistently avoided using theory to interpret Nabokov's texts, in part as a consequence of the intentional fallacy. Nabokov often professed disdain of general ideas and of literature as a vehicle for social reform, most notably in *Strong Opinions*, a work collecting his published interviews. He also made it a point to include a caveat to Freudians in the prefaces he wrote for the English translations of his early Russian novels. Hence, the supposition is that theory-inclined critics are likely to produce readings that the "Master" would not have sanctioned. But the fact is that, in all sorts of ways, Nabokov's assertions about literature cannot be taken at face value.

In his *Lectures on Russian Literature* (1981), Nabokov faulted Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* for, among other things, its depiction of Sonya, a "purely Romantic invention" (115), "the favorite figure of sentimental fiction, the noble prostitute, the fallen girl with a lofty heart" (125), and held that experienced readers are apt to receive the figure of the noble prostitute more cynically (98). The idea that a prostitute is incapable of performing, or less likely to perform, noble actions already suggests something of a contradiction in his critical strictures, since he routinely deplored the notion that character derives from social conditions. Moreover, the noble prostitute makes an appearance in his early short story "The Return of Chorb" (1925). In it, the wife of the eponymous protagonist dies during their honeymoon. Desperate to preserve her image, he revisits the itinerary of their trip "in reverse", and finally returns to the hotel room they had stayed in on their wedding night. Unable to stay alone in the room, Chorb hires a prostitute to keep him company. When he immediately goes to bed and falls asleep, the confused prostitute looks through his wife's trunk: "Blinking and cautiously stretching out her bare arm, she palpated a

woman's dress, a stocking, scraps of silk – all this stuffed in anyhow and smelling so nice that it made her feel sad" (153). Marina Turkevich Naumann claims that the girl is saddened because she now "understands Chorb's motives" (31) in hiring her. Here is a woman accustomed to the humiliating experience of offering herself to complete strangers on a daily basis, worthy of much compassion, yet also capable of displaying compassion herself, moved by another's grief for the loss of a loved one. The young writer Nabokov did not practice what the experienced, cynical reader Nabokov will preach, an inconsistency that is of course completely understandable within an oeuvre that spans so many years.

Like this early short story, some of Nabokov's early novels articulate ideas that he would later openly deride. A case in point is the presence in his second novel, *Korol', Dama, Valet* (1928) [translated as *King, Queen, Knave* by Nabokov's son and revised by the author in 1966], of the Freudian axiom that experiences in early life have lasting consequences on the individual's subsequent personality. Twenty years later, he would use hyperbole to make light of this idea in *Bend Sinister* (1948), a novel in which the character Paduk becomes a totalitarian head of state because he abstains from playing football with other boys as a child, is consequently bullied, and may have been abused by the school janitor (67). Again in his preface to *The Waltz Invention* (the play dates from 1936, although the English preface was written in 1966), Nabokov anticipates questions certain kinds of readers will ask concerning the protagonist's childhood, a totalitarian madman reminiscent of Paduk, but also dismisses them by adopting a derisive tone when formulating them: "What upsets him so atrociously when he sees a toy on a table? Does it bring back his own childhood? Some bitter phase of that childhood & not his childhood perhaps, but that of a child he has lost? What misfortunes, besides banal poverty, has he endured? ... Who am I to propose such

questions?” (iii). Nabokov’s parodic treatment in both cases of the abused-child-gone-awry theme seems to imply that it is absurd to blame character flaws and atrocities committed by adults on “banal poverty” or a few unpleasant incidents suffered early in life. Consider moreover this assertion made during an interview in 1968: “I also suggest that the Freudian faith leads to dangerous ethical consequences, such as when a filthy murderer with the brain of a tapeworm is given a lighter sentence because his mother spanked him too much or too little” (*Strong Opinions* 116). Clearly, Nabokov’s stance on the issue is firmly established. Yet a comparison between Franz Bubendorf, a character in *KQK*, and Fyodor Godunov Cherdyntsev, the protagonist of his last Russian novel *The Gift* (1938), invites us to entertain precisely the kind of ideas that Nabokov derides.

In *The Gift*, Fyodor’s aristocratic upbringing supplies him with a wealth of experiences that contrast with the debilitating ones of Franz’s provincial upbringing. His father bequeaths him his passions for lepidoptera and Pushkin as well as a haughty indifference for the war and revolution that disrupt millions of family lives, the same war that may have had a direct impact on Franz’s childhood by depriving him of his father.³ Whereas Fyodor receives a trilingual education at home from private tutors, Franz’s recollections of school, which should include historical, cultural, scientific facts, etc., only contain “grubby, pimply, slippery skin of some companion or other pressing him to join in a

³ Late in the novel, Franz’s uncle looks at pictures from the preceding century in a display window, and is touched “to think that those over-dressed kiddies were now businessmen, officials, dead soldiers, engravers, engravers’ widows” (234). Julian Connolly mentions that the “soldier” might refer to Franz’s eventual fate (*Early* 238), but if we consider that in a rare proleptic glimpse of the future, the narrator lets us know Franz survives the Second World War (138), that this particular soldier is dead, and that he was born in the previous century, then the dead soldier, if he does refer to anyone’s fate in the novel, more plausibly evokes that of Franz’s father during the First World War, of whom we are only told four things via one sentence: he was a seedy notary, he is now deceased, he was alive before the war, and he sometimes travelled second-class. A Nabokovian device of subsequent years would consist in conveying vital information about the protagonists in indirect or veiled fashion. If Franz is twenty at the time of narration (1927-1928), and if his father was killed in the First World War, then Franz became fatherless between the ages of seven and ten, a fact that may help shed some light on his troubled Oedipal relationship with his mother, “his first unhappy love” (92).

game or eager to impart some spitterish secret” (4). The adult lives of both characters shall not transcend the disparate circumstances of their respective childhoods. In Fyodor’s case, these circumstances endow him with a gift for expression and strong familial ties that later allow him to write poetry and enjoy an epistolary correspondence with his mother that covers frankly and in depth such topics as whether or not she was happy with her husband (103-106). On the other hand, Franz struggles to find something less banal to communicate to his mother than the description of his room, which he has, by the way, already mentioned in previous letters (95), while she “never wrote anything about her feelings in her infrequent letters” (94). The richness of Fyodor’s internal life is immeasurably more interesting than the vacuous penury of Franz’s: one is destined to have a bright future as a writer, the other as an employee in a clothing-emporium; one establishes a life-lasting meaningful relationship with the opposite sex, the other an ephemeral lust-driven affair with his aunt. The point is that it is difficult to accept Nabokov’s claim that early circumstances in the life of an individual do not contribute a great deal to determining who and how he turns out to be. What is a provincial public education really worth? How does the domestic situation in which a child is brought up determine his subsequent existence? When Nabokovians, convinced that the derisory tone of similar questions raised in Nabokov’s preface to *The Waltz Invention* comprises an authoritative - because authorial - stance, repeat that his fiction does not address these issues, and then proceed to pursue their puzzle-solving interests, they threaten to reduce his art to the complacent gloating of the privileged individual over those less favoured by fate. Obviously, much more than this is at stake in his fiction.

Along with *KQK*, the two other novels studied here were written in Berlin where Nabokov lived from 1923 to 1938 as an émigré, having left Russia following the Bolshevik

Revolution (he studied in Cambridge for four years before joining his family in Berlin): they are *Kamera Obskura* (published in 1933) [translated and revised as *Laughter in the Dark* by the author in 1937], and *Otchayanie* (published in 1936) [translated as *Despair* by the author in 1937 and revised by him in 1965]. D. Barton Johnson claims that these novels make up a German triptych of “crime stories in which Nabokov investigates the nature of evil” (*Sources* 18). The novels all depict German citizens in an unsympathetic light, and all involve adultery and murder. Thus they differ from Nabokov’s other novels written during his stay in Berlin, which tend to focus on the Russian émigré community and feature positive characters, many of whom are expatriates engaged with the recovery of a past denied them by a political regime. According to Naumann, Nabokov paid careful attention to detail in his émigré fiction in order to highlight the introspective faculty of characters endowed with a rich internal life, always looking for traces of the past in the present:

For him, ordinary details did not merely have a value of their own, nor serve only a descriptive or poetic purpose. They play a subtle, aesthetic role in his plots. It is precisely these seemingly irrelevant aspects of everyday life that are crucial for many of Nabokov’s central characters. Trivia are essential as tangible and sacred souvenirs for the émigré heroes, the artists in particular. (20)

On the other hand, the “German triptych” is often criticized for its perceived flat characterization and conventional plots. It is assumed that, because the impoverished internal lives of his German protagonists were meant to highlight by contrast the internal richness of his Russian ones, Nabokov created one-dimensional characters pursuing derivative and vulgar ends, and consequently paid little attention to details in these novels. But what if the attention we pay to them serves to complicate matters and preclude one-dimensional interpretations of character? The émigré characters (*e.g.* Fyodor) remain more fully realized individuals than the German ones (*e.g.* Franz), of course, but just as Nabokov applied

himself to highlight the circumstances that allowed the former to become who they are, he likewise applied himself to reveal the circumstances that did not allow the latter to become more than they have. Here is where an approach combining a puzzle solver's close reading with more eclectic approaches proves helpful, for it reveals how these "German" novels are carefully wrought works of art that deal with much deeper thematic issues than mere love triangles and murders.

As mentioned earlier, Nabokovians tend to focus on details and work at decoding images that refer to something beyond what they overtly signify. They see the text as containing clues acting as tears in the narrative's seam, revealing potentially different narrative loci and circumstances. Use of theory, however, reveals how these clues might be seen as serving an altogether different purpose. Various word games, repeated images, distorted allusions, etc. do indeed occur throughout the novels, but these complex signs – which Nabokov himself called "delicate markers" (*Bend Sinister*, xvii) - serve a purpose other than that of resolution, a purpose which a non-puzzle-solving approach can make more evident.

Nabokov's novels are replete with details acting as signs revealing forces affecting unwitting narrators and protagonists (the misleading signs appear in both first and third person narratives). His characters are unaware of reappearing phenomena they have perceived earlier and elsewhere in a different medium or form; the narratives they produce or are engaged in depict the reality they believe they are acting in. The clues often lead us, not to a solution of the problems posed by the text (in fact they often only manage to create the illusion of resolution), but to an explanation of the characters' fallibilities, shortcomings, and delusions. They reveal to what extent the characters' realities are complicated as a result of

various factors: mediated, mimetic, unacknowledged, or repressed desires; adopted modes of behavior, thoughts and emotions represented in popular culture; apophenia, or the tendency to impose patterns on reality; paramnesia, or the tendency to subsume the present into the past, socio-economic determinants, etc. All these evince a nexus of forces influencing the characters' understanding of themselves and their actions, a nexus operating outside their ability to fully discern its intricacies. If Nabokov's novels are written as puzzles, it is partly in order that his readers may attempt to solve them, but also in order that they may convey the sense of puzzlement of his protagonists, which is ultimately related to the puzzlement one feels at simply being alive. Such a contention allows us to move beyond the by now trite assessment of Nabokov as a master stylist whose preoccupation with formal questions often turn his characters into underdeveloped, lifeless automata (especially in the novels in question). Nothing could be further from the truth, for the automaton (in the sense that they do not act or think autonomously) quality of his characters emerges from their being so faithfully modeled on "real life", *i.e.* unaware of the complex causality underlying existence. By demonstrating both the limitations of the puzzle-solving approach and the applicability of the sort of theory Nabokovians tend to avoid, I hope to make clear how the misleading signs function in the novel, namely as devices revealing that his characters do not comprehend the full nature of the motives inciting them to act.

That external agencies shape the course of an individual's life, determining the ideas he holds about himself, about art, love, etc., goes against Nabokov's own convictions. He has been called a "supreme individualist" by Stephen Jan Parker, who goes on to say of his protagonists: "they appear largely free of the determining forces of environment and heredity and, as such, their behavior cannot be understood by theories of religion, psychoanalysis, or

Marxism [...] each of his protagonists is a discrete consciousness liberated from the everyday affairs of social man” (5-7). As an individualist, Nabokov disagreed with both the Marxist claim that autonomy is impossible as long as the lives of men are determined by economic forces, as well as the Freudian claim positing that conscience is merely an epiphenomenon governed by the dictates of the subconscious. But for the very reason that he prized individuality and autonomy as two of the greatest human values, he would have conceded that they are achieved with great difficulty following an overcoming of many obstacles. Although failure is the outcome of these struggles in all three novels (with the possible exception of Hermann in *Despair*), Nabokov takes great pains to depict their intricate unfolding in his German triptych. This is what the present thesis sets out to demonstrate.

A brief remark is in order concerning the version of the texts I make use of. The novels were written in Russian, and some years separate the original from their English translations. Throughout my thesis I will be referring exclusively to the English versions for a variety of reasons. Jane Grayson has already published a study of the variations between versions of the nine novels Nabokov originally wrote in Russian. Her study is thorough and limits itself to a descriptive catalogue of all revisions, deletions, and additions from one version to another. Each novel has moreover been the subject of numerous individual articles dedicated to the same purpose.⁴ More importantly, I have no desire to appeal to the author’s intention in my own reading of the novels, and citing revisions as proof of Nabokov’s

⁴ Among others, cf. Proffer, Carl R. “A New Deck for Nabokov's Knaves.” In *TriQuarterly* 17 (Winter 1970): 293-309; Raguet-Bouvard, Christine. “Les métamorphoses du corps: de *Camera Obscura* à *Laughter in the Dark* de Vladimir Nabokov.” In *Le Corps Dans Tous ses États*. Ed. Marie Claire Rouyer. Talence: Presses universitaires de Bordeaux, 1995. 227-236; Proffer, Carl R. “From *Otchaianie* to *Despair*.” In *Slavic Review* 27 (1968): 258-267.

wanting to say something differently from one version to another would involve having recourse to such a means.⁵ In the present study, I am interested in the meaning of text as embodied in its rigid, final form, not its diachronic fluctuations. Finally, Professor David Rampton, by cross-referencing all passages quoted with their Russian original, has rendered me the service of making sure no significant details were overlooked that might have tempted me to revise this position.

⁵ Those who know *Strong Opinions* will react more strongly to my study than those who have read neither it nor the prefaces to the English translations. This merely confirms my suspicion that the texts themselves do not embody most of Nabokov's views asserted later in life. If one manages to remain within the confines of the texts themselves, ignoring the paratext of Nabokov's later opinions, the contentions of the present study will appear much less outrageous than they do otherwise.

CHAPTER ONE

Social Labels in *King, Queen, Knave*

If you should think this is Utopian, then I would ask you to consider why it is Utopian.

Brecht *Theory of Radio*

Vladimir Nabokov began writing his second novel, *King, Queen, Knave* (hereafter *KQK*), in 1927 in Berlin, where it was completed and published the following year. It tells the story of Franz Bubendorf, a young provincial recently arrived in Berlin in hopes of working for his uncle, Kurt Dreyer, owner of a clothing emporium. He begins an affair with his aunt Martha, after which they plan to murder the incommensurable uncle and husband. The plan fails, Martha dies from pneumonia, and the novel ends in a commingled burst of avuncular grief and paramour relief. Unfortunately, this deceptively simple, even hackneyed plot and the characters enacting it have had a rather negative effect on the novel's critical reception.

Of the few who have taken the time to write about it, most critics have come down hard on what they see as the novel's somewhat crude approach to character and incident. According to David Rampton, Nabokov dehumanized Franz and Martha with a view to align the reader's sympathy with Dreyer. Rampton, however, judges that "the relentless exposure of [Martha's] shallowness and villainy makes Nabokov seem rather heavy-handed at times" (*Critical Study* 18), and consequently dismisses the novel's character depiction as unsubtle satirical portraits. Brian Boyd considers that Nabokov juxtaposed the "automannequin" subplot, in which Dreyer finances an inventor's mobile mannequins, with the main plot in

order to help readers evaluate the consciousness of the characters, and finds that Franz and Martha come off as “less than human” (RY 280). As a result, Boyd concludes, the novel suffers from a lack of psychological realism. Although Ellen Pifer insists that the characterization is complex enough to preclude reducing Franz and Martha to “cardboard figures” (18), she nevertheless thinks that Martha’s schemes to murder Dreyer transform her into a “dehumanized consciousness”, sunk “to the subhuman level of [her] own base perceptions” (45). Leona Toker also rejects the “lifeless cardboard” epithet for the novel’s characters, but maintains that “they lack what is commonly called the soul” (58).¹ Jeff Edmunds provides the most recent negative judgment on Franz and Martha’s characterization, dismissing them as mechanical characters cast in a “somnambulistic state” from which only “memory offers a way out” (170). He offers by way of contrast the positive traits of one of Nabokov’s most wide awake characters, Ganin in *Mary*, but we might also add those of Martin Edelweiss in *Glory*, Fyodor in *The Gift*, Van Veen in *Ada*, and Nabokov himself in *Speak, Memory*.

Another consequence of these assessments has been a tendency to focus on the formal structure of the novel. Nora Buhks shows how the motifs of dance and music structure the novel according to a “procédé ludique” (801), while Stephanie Merkel examines how a love triangle and murder plot constitute “major commedia ingredients” (86). Identifying commedia dell’arte as a structural model for *KQK* enables Merkel to discuss the role of the enigmatic and often overlooked Enricht, Franz’s landlord; she discerns his commedia counterpart in the Zanni, or “central plot-weaver” (89). Julian Connolly also

¹ Although Nabokov himself, or at least his ominous narrator, attributes a soul to his heroine, when he compares Martha’s involuntary memory to the photographer’s process of developing negatives: “And like that darkish solution in which mountain views would presently float and grow clear, this rain, this delicate pluvial damp, developed shiny images in her soul” (55).

singles out the importance of Enricht, but as a case study of a delusional individual convinced he is the creator of the world he inhabits. Connolly argues that the repeated diegetic appearances in the novel of its extradiegetic author discredit Enricht's claim and add a metafictional dimension to Nabokov's novel (*Early* 71). His study - certainly one of the more comprehensive to date - shows how Franz and Martha tend to negate the humanity of others by reifying them into objects of desire (54). For all its merits, however, it does not seek to explain how and why the protagonists have acquired these reifying outlooks; it articulates "the utter lack of control Nabokov's characters have over their own destinies" (70), but only by revealing how "Nabokov, the creator of the fictional world, toys with the aspirations of his characters to highlight both their limitations as characters and his own powers as creator" (72). What we are left with is metafiction, the self-reflexivity of literature tautologically pointing to its own artificiality (it is, after all, already called fiction).²

Metafiction serves an altogether different purpose when its examination of the dependant relationship between author and characters acts as a catalyst for an examination of non-authorial determinants that also limit the autonomy of the characters. This function of metafiction brings to mind Bertolt Brecht's theory of *Verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect. By repeatedly drawing the theatergoer's attention to the artificiality of his fictitious creation, Brecht invites him to recognize and reflect upon the artificiality of socially deterministic forces acting on the characters and on the theatergoer himself. To achieve this end, Brecht developed many devices, including that of *gestus*, or the enactment of actions expressive of attitudes dependent on socio-historical conditions: "the social gest is the gest

² Rampton voices similar objections: "I do not deny how crucial all the self-referential aspects of Nabokov's novel are for anyone interested in making sense of it, but I don't think they are there simply to remind us how the artist manipulates his material; nor am I convinced that they prevent us from reading *Korol', Dama, Valet* as an attempt to expose evil in the same way that (say) Dickens does, or as an expression of the author's contempt for certain kinds of people and values" (*Critical Study* 15).

relevant to society, the gest that allows conclusions to be drawn about social circumstances” (104-105). In his preface to *KQK*, Nabokov discouraged readers from finding labels behind his characters (viii), yet Franz, Dreyer, and Martha repeatedly embody *gestus*, for their reactions to given situations are indicative of mannerisms pertaining to social, not individual, idiosyncrasies. By failing to address this aspect of the novel, previous criticism finally gives the impression that Nabokov did not expose the causality that helped form the ideas and emotions of his protagonists. Although this issue is more specifically addressed in the Bildungsroman, literature that wishes to rise above unexplained polarizations of absolute good and evil must to a certain extent address it. Critics have unanimously noted that the personalities of Franz and Martha are self-centered, that they never transcend coarse organic desires and longings, but they have not taken into account how painstaking an interest Nabokov takes in these characters. Reading the novel’s critics, we know that all Franz and Martha are able to conceive as desirable is base and unimaginative, but we are no closer to understanding why they are unable to desire anything else for themselves. Although Toker claims that “the central theme of the novel is the suppression of the spiritual part of the self, a suppression that is, moreover, self-imposed” (58), I shall argue that if a dimension of individuality is indeed suppressed in *KQK*, it is far from self-imposed. I shall likewise attempt to answer Pifer’s claim that with this novel Nabokov broke “with the novelist’s traditional regard for historical process as the modern form of fate” (16) by offering a reading that reveals these historical processes at work in *KQK*, and thereby answers some of the questions overlooked by its previous critics.³

³ G. M. Hyde hints at the kind of reading I propose: “Despite Nabokov’s eschewal of overt social criticism [...] an inarticulate, brutalized peasant-cum-proletarian, with homicidal tendencies, is pitted against a shallow and corrupt high society which in its artificial refinement and emotional sterility is morbidly fascinated by

I want to begin with the concept of ‘typicality’, as developed by György Lukacs in *The Historical Novel* (1962). According to Lukacs, typicality does not necessarily indicate – although it can – the average or unremarkable quality of a character, but rather reveals “the genuine *hic et nunc* (here and now) of the inner motives and behaviour” (60). This *hic et nunc* is historical specificity. The type does not act; he is acted upon by the specific socio-economic conditions of his time. It becomes the writer’s duty to “flesh out these typical trends and forces in sensuously realized individuals and actions; in doing so he links the individual to the social whole” (Eagleton 26). Since, according to Lukacs, history is driven by class struggle, the historical specificity of a type is “fleshed out” in his class specificity. If a literary character behaves a certain way, he is representative of certain behavioral tendencies common to his class; if the same character inhabits a fictional locus populated by characters behaving in a radically different fashion, the juxtaposition is representative of behavioural patterns emerging out of socio-economic disparity. In the case of *KQK*, although most characters behave in a “less than human” fashion, the conflict and tragic outcome such behaviour produces originate in the irreconcilability of disparate socio-economic conditions.

In the novel’s opening chapter, Franz and Dreyer, travelling in the same train, react differently to a passenger’s disfigured nose. Whereas Franz experiences revulsion at this physiognomic anomaly, Pifer claims that Dreyer “sees just a funny nose” (21), that these conflicting reactions do not cast Franz and Dreyer as “reflections of a social-historical era but [...] representatives of human consciousness and its laws” (22). Dreyer would disagree with this statement, for as he looks at his nephew’s suit he reflects that the discordant

primitivism and animalism” (46). Hyde, however, limits his discussion of such issues to an examination of the symbolic value of clothing imagery in the novel.

opinions such a garment occasions in both men are attributable to their respective socio-economic conditions: “rather low quality but greatly esteemed by a frugal provincial” (9). Furthermore, Pifer ignores a later incident wherein the roles are inverted and Franz becomes representative of the “superior consciousness” she associates with Dreyer. The room Franz rents in Berlin produces inconsistent impressions: to him, it is “immaculate and distinct” and “it was hard to imagine anything better than the room that had caught his fancy” (48). On the other hand, Martha thinks it “a squalid hole” (52), and her husband remarks: “Good Lord, I must get him some other quarters. No nephew of mine should live in a slum” (220). This disparity of impressions is attributable to socio-economic disparity, for provincial Franz is accustomed to less while the opulent Dreyers are accustomed to more. In the case of the nose, Dreyer reacts with more than just a chuckle, for he also considers exploiting the man’s facial deformity as a display mannequin for his clothing store (16). His desire to obtain personal profit from another’s misfortune is derived from his way of reasoning as a prosperous entrepreneur, and is potentially more harmful than Franz’s reaction of disgust.⁴

Much of *KQK* contains evidence that Franz’s reaction, one which Connolly claims is symptomatic of an “aversion to images of raw physicality” (56), is an after-effect of socio-economic factors, in the same manner that Dreyer’s reaction is an after-effect of his tendency

⁴ In fact, Franz’s reaction is mitigated when compared to more pathological cases of biological revulsion. Consider, for example, the protagonist in Jean Lorrain’s “Le Possédé”. In Lorrain’s short story, a recovering ether addict’s shattered nerves transform every nose he encounters in a tramway into “des groins de vieux porc” (130). Franz at least has the decency to react strongly only towards an individual with abnormal nasal cavities. A literary precursor to Dreyer’s reaction likewise exists in Huysmans’ first novel, *Marthe*, in which the eponymous protagonist, an alcoholic prostitute, unsuccessfully attempts to give up her trade to live with Léon, an artist-journalist. Travelling by train, Léon finds a source of amusement in the diversity of noses he encounters: “l’artiste se gaudit de cette collection de nez; il y en avait des pieds de marmites, des nez à retroussis, des nez gibbeux, des pifs épatés et fendus” (42-43). Not unlike Dreyer evaluating a passenger’s disfiguration in terms of personal gain, Léon delights (“se gaudir”) in an array of fabulous noses, and even goes on to jot down – possibly as inspiration for future creations – some of the countenances nearby. The nose incidents in both novels foreshadow more harmful instrumental uses of others; Léon will grow tired of Marthe and abandon her to her ruin, while Dreyer makes Marthe into a mere sexual outlet (of which more below).

to think like a businessman. For Nabokov's text actually supports the Marxist belief that ideas and emotions derive from material conditions, and even anticipates the Situationist concept of psychogeography.⁵ Though the town he leaves is never named, the effects of a life confined there remain with Franz during his journey to Berlin, and beyond: "Franz still felt in his very bones the receding motion of the townlet where he had lived for twenty years" (2). These twenty years have been so uneventfully regular that as he travels he can tell with certainty that at that exact moment, while his sister and mother are having their morning coffee, the accompanying sounds consist in flapping curtains, cracking floors, and creaking walls (2). Repeatedly exposed to an unchanging penury of aural stimuli, Franz has ingrained these in the internal ear of his mind, so much so that when Martha goes to the washroom 156 pages and nine months later, Franz actually hears "the steady thick sound of his sister making water" (158). As a musicologist's internal ear is often graced with arias and symphonies, so Franz's is continuously haunted by the physical utterances of a house he no longer lives in or the biological articulations of a sibling he no longer lives with (in the same debilitating way that the internal ear of a discotheque employee must be populated in the morning with the previous night's deafening sounds).⁶ But these are not the only traces of his past that prove to be indelible. Of his mother Lina, "the depressingly familiar odor of her skin and clothes" (94) makes up the better part of his olfactory memory, probably because he has had to share with her a "cluttered attic" (55) as his bedroom and her sewing workshop, losing much sleep in the process. The maturation of Franz into a fully sentient being has been impaired by a confined milieu and the sensory deprivation such confinement occasions. All

⁵ Guy Debord's definition is to the point: "La psychogéographie se proposerait l'étude des lois exactes et des effets précis du milieu géographique, consciemment aménagé ou non, agissant directement sur le comportement affectif des individus" (204).

⁶ Buhks writes of *KQK*: "le thème musical inclut tout l'univers des sons: bourdonnements, crissements, sonneries, etc. que les personnages perçoivent sur le même plan que la musique" (803).

of a sudden a plethora of data aggresses his senses, which till then have been circumscribed in the repetition of “cracks” and “flaps”. Leaving his “townlet” behind must effect a reaction in him akin to someone taking a hallucinogenic drug for the first time, a kind of sensory disorientation exacerbated by an overflow of unfamiliar impressions. The sustained onslaught of debilitating stimuli encountered in a closed milieu has produced a stunted “memory of waxworks” (3) that includes a vomiting dog, a baby putting a used condom in its mouth and an old man’s mucus projected into someone else’s hand. It is not surprising that the bearer of such raw memories reacts more strongly to images capable of triggering their resurgence than one who bears more variegated and pleasant ones.

Pifer’s claim that Dreyer represents a type of consciousness capable of transcending the foulness of disgusting phenomena is questionable, for Dreyer’s powers can do nothing when he visits Lina’s living room and its “aged chandelier, with gray little glass pendants like dirty icicles” around which “flies were describing parallelograms” (7); this bleak setting helps shape the “victimized psyche” (Pifer’s phrase) of Franz, yet it only elicits a laugh from Dreyer. But this is not because of certain cognitive predispositions, but rather because the uncle spends a brief afternoon there, not the totality of his existence. Dreyer’s experience of it is as artificial as (say) that of a millionaire paying a ridiculous sum to spend a night in the cell of an infamous prison recently transformed into a thematic hotel in order to *experience* the thrill of delinquency. His perception of Franz’s domestic setting tells us nothing about its experienced reality. His inability to understand Franz’s world is stressed even further in his dismissive response to Lina’s problem of doing something with her son: “Well, why don’t you have him come to see me in Berlin? I’ll give him a job” (8). Franz is a stunted young man, emptied of substance by a debilitating upbringing. To this, Dreyer the moneyman

suggests the miraculous expedient of employment. There is irreconcilable incommunicability between the two as a consequence of their disparate social milieus.

Dreyer's attitude towards salesmanship contrasted to Franz's confirms this. Pifer writes that Dreyer "captures the essence of the daily magic of buying and selling. It is the magic by which human fantasies imbue material objects with enchantments men themselves have created" (40-41). However, the novel stresses the fact that when Dreyer teaches Franz how to allure customers, he is not doing so from personal experience, from actual forty-hour weeks spent behind a counter, but from "inutile imagination, demonstrating not the way ties should be sold in real life, but the way they might be sold if the salesman were both artist and clairvoyant" (69-70). From the subordinate perspective of the actual worker Franz, labour is described as "tedium" (80) and "a superficial trickle of repetitive events and sensations" (81) that ultimately transform labourers into display mannequins "arrested in a state of colourful putrefaction on their temporary pedestals and platforms" (81). As above, what ensues is individual consciousness dependent on material conditions: "His thoughts were characterized by the same monotony as his actions, and their order corresponded to the order of his day" (201), and Franz's interior monologue is ultimately reduced to the confused reiteration of an advertisement panel he sees daily on his way to work: "Clean your teeth with Dentrophile, every minute you will smile [...] clean your minute with your smile. Out we file" (*ibid.*). It is surprising that these passages have not prompted previous critics to suggest that in *KQK* it is alienating labour, not a self-imposed suppression of the creative faculties, which turns individuals into automatons. The employer is more enthusiastic than the employee about the nature of labour because he does not have to perform it, not because the former is more

romantic than the latter, or because “every good salesman has something of the conjuror in him” (41) as Pifer has it.

When Franz breaks his glasses on his first day in Berlin, he immediately realizes that buying a spare set is an extravagance he cannot afford: “Complicated but familiar poverty (that cannot afford spare sets of expensive articles) now resulted in primitive panic” (22). Though Nabokov dismissed and derided Marx throughout his life, this passage offers a striking illustration of the Marxist concept of “subsistence wages” as a minimum salary allowing only basic needs to be satisfied. Moreover, although Nabokov overtly and repeatedly claimed he was uninterested in social reforms, it does not follow that he was unaware or insensitive to hardships lower social classes endured because of the irrational distribution of wealth in a capitalist economy. Nor would he claim that such distribution was without effect in forming the cognitive subjectivity of individuals. We need only keep juxtaposing Franz and Dreyer’s attitudes to grasp how prevalently such an issue figures in this novel. On the train, Franz “suddenly clutched his side, transfixed by the thought that he had lost his wallet which contained so much” (3). The term transfixed, evoking impalement, or a sense of being pierced through, has a strong visual connotation, which leads us to question the appropriateness of its use here for such a trifling thing as a wallet.⁷ One is transfixed by pain at the prospect of losing a loved one, at being unexpectedly deceived by a spouse, but for a wallet? It nevertheless contains everything for Franz because his own existence has previously been conditioned by the exigencies of poverty. On this account, identification and understanding between uncle and nephew are impossible, for Dreyer, who

⁷ The term will occur on other occasions, once when Martha uses her umbrella to scrape off “the dead leaf her heel had transfixed” (51); and again near the novel’s end, the image, not the term, is evoked when Franz loses a paper bag in the wind: “The flimsy paper he had lost fluttered along the promenade [...] where an old man sitting in the sun meditatively pierced it with the point of his cane” (259). In both cases the wording, “dead leaf” and “flimsy paper”, might by association devalue the marks the loss of which transfixes Franz.

has enough spare cash to circle the world “completely half-a-dozen times” (15), would no doubt treat the thought of being “transfixed” at the fear of losing “a month of human life in reichsmarks” (3) with one of his trademark chuckles. Franz’s clutching about his pockets, desperately groping for his wallet, his “primitive panic” caused by broken glasses, are reactions that display Brechtian gestures alien to a man of Dreyer’s socio-economic status.

The hilarity caused by Franz’s myopia once deprived of his glasses, the slapstick description of his fumbling, tripping, knocking over, etc., that makes up the greater part of the second chapter, the horrendous transformation of Berlin into formless, undecipherable “blotches and blanks” (26) of colours bleeding into one another, all these are not the workings of a heartless writer cruelly toying with his puppet.⁸ Rather they illustrate the value a trifling apparatus such as a pair of glasses is endowed with, and what misfortunes may befall an individual unable to replace them. In fact Franz’s ordeal provides another example of Brechtian gesture; just as a man fleeing from a watchdog in one of Brecht’s play comes to represent the financial hardship of lower social classes, so Franz’s perilous wanderings come to represent the physical hazards of the selfsame class incurred as a result of the selfsame hardship. Toker reads the whole passage quite differently, as a missed opportunity to rediscover the visual properties of reality, to operate a defamiliarization of sight *à la* Shklovsky. Of the situation she writes: “the outlines of objects disappear, and the world picture, formerly a mosaic of concepts, acquires an artistic integrity” (59), and then goes on to quote a passage of the novel that does indeed depict Franz’s myopia as a kaleidoscope of “fantastic folds”, “discarnate iridescence”, and “great pink edifices”, but the sentence she cites ends in a burst of pain she fails to mention: “and suddenly a sunbeam, a gleam of glass,

⁸ As Gillian Tindall has it when she writes of *KQK*: “Most writers begin with a heart and only gradually develop anything much like a style: with Nabokov, the process seems to have been reversed [...] As a God without charity the inventor invites us to mock all round” (435).

would stab him painfully in the pupil” (23). The underdeveloped psyche of Franz may be unresponsive to the mystery of the world as Toker argues throughout her essay, but it remains unclear how a gleam of glass *transfixing* one’s eye can be an enriching experience. Moreover, it is doubtful that Nabokov would have affixed a positive value to the formless colours emerging out of Franz’s myopia, since a few pages later he derides, via Martha’s philistinism, modern abstract paintings in terms recalling those used to describe Franz’s ordeal: “thick blobs of paint, the messier and muddier the better” (36).⁹

In any case, to better understand the perils of Franz’s journey through the tramways of Berlin, one need only view Walter Ruttmann’s 1927 film *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, replete with scenes depicting the chaotic circulation of tramway traffic in Berlin circa 1927 and the perils it presented for the pedestrian making one false step. Franz without his glasses in Berlin is not unlike Pnin boarding a wrong train, and we know with whom Nabokov’s sympathies lie in the later work.¹⁰

The phantasmagoric effect of a teeming metropolis on the sightless Franz contrasts markedly with his “crude provincial dream” (24) of what Berlin would look like. He is completely disoriented, and it is not surprising that he will keep “apologizing for his infirmity” (27) when he arrives at the Dreyer residence. The lower class, it seems, is made to feel ashamed about a physical disability that its poverty cannot amend, and there is no

⁹ Nabokov’s frequent derisive dismissals of fashionable tastes and ideas he himself disapproved of do not make a case for his heartlessness or contempt towards the characters that espouse them, and the fact that he painstakingly provides background details to reveal how these characters did not autonomously arrive to espouse such tastes and ideas actually argues against such a view. After having cruelly derided the nightmare recurrently plaguing one of his characters in *Laughter in The Dark*, the narrator adds: “A poor woman indeed, and no object for derision”. In the light of such a passage, his attitude might be compared to that of two of his favourite writers in similar circumstances, Gustave Flaubert in regards to Emma Bovary, and James Joyce in regards to Gerty Macdowell, *i.e.* that of a writer sympathizing with individuals unable to break away from visions of the world and themselves produced, not by, but for them.

¹⁰ Nabokov might also have borrowed the idea for his automannequins from Ruttmann’s film, in which store windows display mobile mannequins not unlike the one described in the novel.

possibility of a successful exchange between the provincial nephew and the bourgeois aunt during their first meeting. For Martha is completely unaware of Franz's predicament as he struggles to overcome his disability and avoid potential mishaps which, needless to say, do occur more than once. Rather she is suffused with a sense of pride at the opportunity of displaying her material possessions, and is quite glad that a provincial nephew, an individual of lower social and economic status (thus easily impressionable), has materialized for such a purpose since her friends, of socio-economic parity with her, are not likely to be awed by a wealth they share with her: "She decided that she had stunned him completely with the sight of her small but expensive garden... and did not bother to ascertain if those poor wild eyes could distinguish a beach umbrella from an ornamental tree." (27-28).

Franz's meeting with Martha reveals how his upbringing has also shaped his notion of womanhood. He associates names containing the phoneme "Lin" to "bad women" (13): his mother is named Lina, by "whom he had been instructed to squeeze everything he possibly could" (27) out of his rich uncle.¹¹ For lack of experience with them, his perception of women is channeled by information a classmate once imparted. According to this "precocious expert" (6), dark down and transverse lines on a woman's throat are signs of passion and "all kinds of marvels" (*ibid.*). Puerile, confused notions of womanhood transmitted by another child at recess make up the adult Franz's authoritative gauge of sexuality, and these notions lead him to believe epidermal lineation and labial pilosity are

¹¹ Toker partially quotes the above passage in order to transfer Lina's greed upon Franz: "Franz arrives in Berlin from the province and is given employment by his uncle Kurt Dreyer, out of whom he is self-consciously, and first without a tingle of shame, determined to 'squeeze everything he possibly [can]'" (49). For all his faults, one character trait lackadaisical Franz does not possess is "determination", while his constant apologizing for clumsiness and inadequacies displays an overriding sense of "shame" throughout the novel. If the mother's sin must be visited upon the son, it should be noted that Lina's pragmatic dispatching of Franz is probably what instills in him a tendency to devalue life into a currency exchangeable for sexual gratification: "He knit his brows under her radiant and indifferent gaze and, when she turned away, mentally calculated, as though his fingers had rattled across the counters of a secret abacus, how many days of his life he would give to possess this woman" (12).

indicative of his aunt's lasciviousness. The fact that in the very next sentence he tries to determine the nationality of Dreyer by his clothes, and is mistaken, undermines all the criteria for evaluating others that a provincial upbringing has inculcated in him.

As the novel progresses, it becomes evident that Franz's view of women is indeed flawed, for this provincial transforms every *Berlin* woman into a potential prostitute. It is not that Franz is incapable of imagining women employed otherwise. He is perfectly able to think up a trade for a girl he is seeing about a room for rent, but assumes she will not disdain harlotry if solicited: "The girl was enchanting: a simple little seamstress, no doubt, but enchanting, and let us hope not too expensive" (47). Noting that back home in the "cloyingly familiar streets" (46) insistent gazes could not be cast on well-known neighbours, Franz reasons that city women must have harlotry in them because they are used to being regarded as such by anonymous pedestrians: "He was disguised as a stranger, and these girls were accessible, they were accustomed to avid glances, they welcomed them, and it was possible to accost anyone of them, and start a brilliant and brutal conversation" (47). Because these impressions are forestalled by expectations which have eroticized - before encountering them - city women contrasted with provincial women, they remain insubstantial. Experience at home anticipates experience at large, and what he expects he will see subsumes what he actually sees.¹² Incomprehension follows, and the insurmountable incompatibilities between different socio-economic realities become that much more important as a theme. Various

¹² Franz's idea of life in a metropolis is an idealized opposite of his experience of provincial existence. When in turn he has lived in Berlin and is disillusioned, his memory of provincial existence is itself subsumed in mere ideas, for it becomes an idealized opposite of his newfound experience of the metropolis. Late in the novel Franz nostalgically reflects: "This was the season of guitar music on the river at home, of rafts gently singing in the shadow of the windows" (198), yet we know that this is delusional because much earlier, when he still relied on remembered experience, he had told his aunt that his childhood smelled like the yawning mouth of a dog (83). The point is not that an individual is fixed in a socio-economic reality from which he can never elevate himself, but that the longer he remains in one, the more estranged he becomes to others, and the more factitious and chimerical his knowledge of them becomes, even if these socio-economic realities were once his own.

allusions in the novel, ignored or misunderstood by its critics, lend support to such a contention. On multiple occasions *KQK* alludes to two fictitious films, both starring the fictitious actor Hess: *The Hindu Student* (50) and *The Prince* (61). According to Jeff Edmunds, the former refers to two actual movies: “*The Hindu Student* -- a nonexistent film which is probably a conflation of *Das indische Grabmal* [The Hindu Tomb, 1921] and *Der Student von Prag* [The Student from Prague, 1913 and 1926]” (163). Conflated with *The Prince*, however, *The Hindu Student* more likely alludes to Ernst Lubitsch’s *The Student Prince in old Heidelberg*, which was playing in theatres the same year Nabokov was working on *KQK*.

In Lubitsch’s film, a Prince is sent to Heidelberg in order to study incognito, and manages to fall in love with a young barmaid named Kathi. But family matters back home require him to abandon Kathi and resume his royal duties when his uncle, the king, passes away. Franz and Martha both see this movie on separate occasions, and identify with the hapless lovers because the film reveals that the differences separating them are due to social obligations rather than their own affinities and emotions. These formal differences nevertheless prove insurmountable. As the Prince and Kathi talk of marriage adrift in a rowboat, the Prince’s tutor receives the news that they must return to the court at once. Likewise, when Dreyer reveals the news (he is about to make a hundred thousand dollars) that will interrupt his wife and nephew’s scheme of murder, all three are in a rowboat. In both cases, individuals are unable to overcome obstacles encountered as a result of social positions: Kathi and the Prince will finally marry spouses belonging to their respective social classes, while the pauperism of Franz cannot accommodate an aunt accustomed to a certain lifestyle, a fact he has already grasped in the early stages of the novel when, reflecting on the

reasons Martha cannot be his, he gives precedence to his uncle's financial prosperity over his actual existence: "She is not for me [...] She lives in a different world, with a very rich and still vigorous husband" (59).

Interestingly, both Franz and Martha muddle elements of the film's plot when recollecting it. Arriving home from the cinema, Martha reminds Dreyer of *The Prince*: "Oh you remember, the student at Heidelberg disguised as a Hindu Prince" (62). Oddly, when Franz sees the movie, the incognito is taken up by the actress, not the actor: "an actress with a little black heart for lips and with eyelashes like the spokes of an umbrella was impersonating a rich heiress impersonating a poor office girl" (92-93). Later Franz and Martha incorporate elements of the film's plot in their amorous parlance:

- "Let's pretend you are a Heidelberg Student. How nice you would look in a cerevis [in Lubitsch's film, a cerevis, or cap worn by German student corps, is offered to the prince as a token of his fellow students' acceptance]."

- "And you are a princess incognito?" (111)

An incognito princess in Lubitsch's film is superfluous because Kathi is not of royal origin. Another work that contains the character Franz imagines is Friedrich von Flotow's opera *Martha*, in which Queen Ann's maid of honor, Lady Harriet, adopts the pseudonym Martha in order to attend incognito the Richmond Fair. Von Flotow began composing *Martha* on his Wutzig and Teutendorf estates, in Pomerania, and Nabokov conceived of *KQK* "on the coastal sands of Pomerania Bay" (vii). While Martha attends the Richmond Fair in the opera, Martha in *KQK* attends a fair with Dreyer in Franz's hometown (8). The fair in *Martha* is a sort of soft slave market, in which women offer themselves as housemaids to the highest bidder. Martha, after seeing in Franz's room a painting depicting a "bare-bosomed slave girl

on sale [...] being leered at by three hesitant lechers” (53), later dreams herself into the picture: “But she was already lost in dream. Three lecherous Arabs were haggling over her with a bronze-torsoed handsome slaver” (76).

Since Nabokov disliked opera as an art form in general, *Martha* probably caught his eye via Joyce’s *Ulysses*, in which it appears as a leitmotif providing an ironic counterpoint to Bloom’s unconsummated adulterous liaison with Martha Clifford. Regardless of how Nabokov came across it, the opera’s treatment of love would have appealed to his characters. In von Flotow’s opera, *Lady Harriet*, “wearied of the ceaseless round of conventional pleasures at court” (viii), temporarily abjures her social position and disguises herself as a peasant in search of menial work. She falls in love with Lionel, the farmer who hires her, but finally returns to Queen Ann’s court and ignores Lionel’s desperate entreaty that she become his wife. Only when she discovers that Lionel is in fact the long lost son of the exiled Earl of Derby, and that they are consequently both members of nobility, can she call him to court and accept his offer of marriage: “Now no more I need repel him, Now my heart may tell its bliss” (209-210). Since Lubitsch’s film does not end in a union of the socially unequal lovers, Franz and Martha may have subconsciously interposed elements of a plot in which such an outcome was artificially guaranteed by the exigencies of the work’s genre, *i.e.* von Flotow’s comic romantic opera *Martha*.

In reality their scheming miscarries and the nephew and aunt do not marry. As for the Dreyer marriage, Nabokov depicts the dynamics of their alliance as a sadistic game of dissimulation that would exhaust the patience of most connubial partners. Early in the novel, when Dreyer abstains from answering his wife’s questions, he wonders whether he is not doing so “from a wish to irritate her with his silence” (40), while Martha, unexpectedly

delighted upon meeting Franz, dissimulates her reaction in “an inconspicuous bit of pantomime” (32) in order to deny her husband the satisfaction of learning he was right to invite his nephew. Repression of communication in order to hurt one’s wife or assuming false emotions in order to forbear pleasing one’s husband, these seemingly benign malevolencies doom this initially mismatched couple to frustration, estrangement, and finally infidelity.

The text repeatedly suggests that whereas Dreyer is inclined to enjoy the improvised, spontaneous pleasures of life, Martha is representative of *poshlost* or philistine vulgarity, that she is morbidly conventional. It is this aspect of her character Rampton singles out: “With Martha, Nabokov takes aim at vulgarity, malevolence and soullessness [...] He wants to deride the convention-bound existence of the wife of a wealthy businessman” (*Critical Study* 17-18). Yet, as he did with Franz, Nabokov “heavy-handedly” portrays an unpleasant character in order to obscure his light-handed treatment of what causes such unpleasantness. Is Martha conventional by temperament, with an “innate sense of correct relationships” (182) as the narrator has it, or has she adopted this posture as a reaction to past experiences? Franz’s arrival causes her satisfaction precisely because it shakes her from the propriety she has worshipped ever since her wedding night: “For the first time in her married life she experienced something that she had never expected, something that did not fit like a legitimate square into the parquet pattern of their life after the dismal surprises of their honeymoon” (41). What happens during their honeymoon is never revealed, although a later passage in the novel gives the impression it may have had something to do with the loss of her virginity: “he threatened her with a priapus that had already once inflicted upon her an almost mortal wound” (178). A painful experience may have led her to embrace propriety as

a defense mechanism against unexpected physical and emotional discomfort, and her conviction that “life should proceed according to plan, straight and strict, without freakish twists and wiggles” (10) probably grew out of such experiences. The episode suggests that it is not an innate love of convention that identifies Martha as a bourgeois wife, but rather certain unpleasant aspects of bourgeois domestic affairs that drive her to seek shelter in convention, which thus becomes a purely social, acquired dimension of her personality.

That such an attitude is antipathetic to Martha is confirmed by one of the novel’s rare passages in which she appears sympathetically. Reflecting on the effect Franz has had on her, Martha vaguely senses that he has allowed her to do what even her marriage could not: “What Franz had told her about his childhood was more important than anything she had actually experienced; and she did not understand why that was so, and argued with herself in an attempt to refute what impinged on her sense of conformity and clarity” (113). Martha here empathizes with Franz, feels directly implicated in his internal world, and is able to adopt his perspective in order to invest the same significance in experiences not her own as the person experiencing them. According to Axel Honneth, the capacity to empathize is the precondition of true knowledge between human beings. He alleges that when this *emotional recognition* between individuals is forgotten, reified relations ensue (66). Because conventional, reified relations prevail in *KQK*, Martha finds herself unsettled by the experience, and although it causes her unfamiliar happiness, she immediately seeks to return to the habit-induced comfort of “conformity and clarity”. The ability to break out of the propriety of reified conditions of existence only occurs as freak and fleeting chances in *KQK*, for the novel’s characters have long ceased to recognize one another’s humanity.

Of course, it is somewhat foolhardy to interpret Martha's personality uniquely as the offshoot of events that occurred during her wedding night. Moreover, I may be guilty of blowing things out of proportion when I say that first-time intercourse has entailed trauma, because Martha clearly enjoys the physical exertions of her trysts with Franz. But there are other elements in the Dreyer ménage that point to social practices that can help explain her unhappiness as a bourgeois wife. Much like Lina sending her son to Dreyer for financial purposes, Martha's father dispatches her to her future husband for similar reasons. The bankrupt father is "eagerly desperate she marry the Hussar" (65), a desperation that arises, no doubt, from the fact that the potential son-in-law "was getting rich with miraculous ease" (*ibid.*). Thus Martha is treated as an item in an economic exchange between two men. Though today's marriages, based on individual choice, may not fare much better in many respects, it is safe to assume that significant disappointments were incurred as a result of discovering too late unappealing characteristics of spouses chosen by others. And Dreyer does exhibit such characteristics. He relegates any extra-sexual dimension of Martha to inessential concerns, and considers the duty of listening to her speak "the preface and price of a submissive caress" (62). It is uncertain who is speaking when, after a brief paragraph summarizing Martha's existence prior to her marriage, the narrator concludes "and so on, not very interesting recollections" (66), but we can easily imagine Dreyer thinking the same whenever Martha unburdens herself to him. He has no use for her beyond her sexual function, and almost realizes that the reification she suffers as a result is the cause of their unhappiness: "In what way am I unhappy [...] Why should I want a hot little whore in my house?" (176). A few lines later, however, he is already thinking of arranging a date with "Isida" (177), a conflation of Isolda and Ida, his stenographer "girl friends" (154), whom he

has enjoyed in the past, both separately and together.

To be sure Martha is guilty of ceasing to recognize Dreyer's own humanity when she plots to have him murdered, but the events leading to such an outcome are more complex than previous critics have claimed. If mariticide is the logical recourse of adultery that seeks to legitimize itself, one may begin by asking out of what conditions did the desire for adultery emerge. In *Mensonge Romantique et Vérité Romanesque* (1961), René Girard opposes a tradition of Romantic literature, one that portrays protagonists with autonomously generated desires, to a tradition of Romanesque literature, one that exposes the external agents of desire. In the latter, the protagonist usually imitates a mediator, either a rival or an idol, capable of suggesting what is desirable. Such a pattern is briefly hinted at in *KOK*, when Martha, growing impatient with Franz's lack of initiative, recalls that her sister Hilda and Willy Wald's wife have had numerous lovers: "And yet Martha was already thirty-four. It was high time" (84). Mimetic desire nevertheless often works on a much more complex level, when the mediator suggesting infidelity is not another desiring subject, but dissatisfaction with one's present situation. Girard argues that Emma Bovary imitates the actions of heroines she has read about, not because they seem appealing in themselves, but because her own domestic existence has lost all significance: "le bovarysme [est] une déviation du besoin de transcendance"(68), "c'est parce qu'il n'ose pas regarder en face son néant qu'il se précipite vers un autre épargné, semble-t-il, par la malédiction" (72). A similar need for transcendence arising out of dissatisfaction with her marriage is what pushes Martha towards adultery, although her attempt to imitate adulterous precursors is derided by the narrator, who claims that by granting Dreyer sexual favours with calculation, she "had long

grown ready for harlotry”, and therefore “was no Emma, and no Anna” (101).¹³ Why Martha is singled out here remains a mystery, for as mentioned above, Dreyer believes he is himself granting her favours when he listens to her speak. Complex networks of exchange between individuals usually create obligations to reciprocate, and the practice of “paying” for sexual favours is not an exclusive characteristic of the Dreyer household. Within the novel itself, Ida and Isolda obtain a ski trip in Davos in return for sexual favours, and Erica, an ex-mistress of Dreyer’s, makes a point of always upgrading to a richer lover (173). In short, there is genuine incompatibility between Martha, “who after a miscarriage in the first year of her marriage had developed a morbid fear of pregnancy” (102), and Dreyer who does not “condone the unfrequency of her caresses” (102), and only a prejudiced commentator can pronounce the former a “harlot” yet exonerate the latter.

And so an incompatibility arising out of a marriage of convenience leads to adultery, which itself leads to attempted murder. If much has been written about the plot to murder Dreyer, little has been said about the way the text’s dénouement complicates matters. The novel does end in a death for which Dreyer can at least be held partly accountable. The morning following the failed attempt on Dreyer’s life, Martha is bedridden with pneumonia. Her husband is unable to comprehend the seriousness of her condition, for he is preoccupied with an imminent money deal which requires his departure, and as Martha asks for a glass of water he replies “I’m in a hurry [...] get it yourself” (257) although he does have time to eat two rolls, consult his watch, and eat a third, before he leaves. The fact is he denies his wife’s

¹³ Whether or not Nabokov’s parodic treatment sought to discredit the theme of the bourgeois housewife urged into adulterous relations by tedium and neglect, the fact that it has been dealt with seriously not only by Flaubert and Tolstoy, the two novelists alluded to, but by sources as varied as Arthurian lore, Nikolai Leskov, Raymond Radiguet, Rainer Werner Fassbinder (in a film aptly titled *Martha*) and even a popular ABC sitcom, (“Desperate Housewives”) to name but a few, says something about Martha’s representational value. The narrator’s derisive tone here does nothing to undermine the accuracy of her depiction as representative of a condition which, because it is so common among her literary peers, can be supposed common among her extra-literary ones as well.

simple request as petty retaliation for her failure to honour her part of an agreement made between the two. Martha had promised to remunerate Dreyer with intercourse in the event of his winning a wager, but her ensuing illness prevents her from doing so. Later that evening, after having called Isolda and “pleaded abjectly for a brief date” (261) as compensation for his wife’s failure to keep her word, Dreyer disappointedly reflects that Martha “was not a good loser” (264), still harbouring the lingering residue of the bitterness that occasioned his earlier irresponsiveness to her illness. His self-centered conduct that morning makes him oblivious to Martha’s condition and probably deals her the fatal blow, as the doctor reproachfully implies upon Dreyer’s return: “A woman has a pneumonia with a temperature of 106 and nobody bothers. Her husband leaves her in that state and goes on a trip” (264). Added to this, the reference to Bluebeard during his trip (263) suggests that Dreyer, much like Nabokov’s more famous Humbert, is indirectly responsible for his wife’s death.

A provincial thinking and acting like a provincial, a bourgeois housewife like a bourgeois housewife, and a wealthy businessman like a wealthy businessman, meet, collude, aspire and conspire in Nabokov’s novel. He often created characters chasing after selfish ends, oblivious to the suffering that came as a consequence of their using others to achieve these ends. In *KQK*, he created the same self-centered characters and revealed how they themselves, as well as others, suffered as a result of their egotistical pursuits, but in the process exposed the social circumstances out of which such egoism originates. In a discussion of Nabokov, Richard Rorty writes that there exist two kinds of books, those that help “us see the effects of our private idiosyncrasies on others”, and those that help “us see the effects of social practices and institutions on individuals” (141). Although Rorty places

Nabokov's fiction in the former, *KQK* functions as both, for one can still discern, through the novel's "dream of pure invention" (viii), light-handed glimpses of the "labels" (*ibid.*)

Nabokov feigned to have dispensed with.

CHAPTER TWO

Factitious Images and Dissociation in *Laughter in the Dark*

Nabokov's sixth novel, *Laughter in the Dark* (hereafter *LITD*), tells the story of Albert Albinus, an art critic who abandons his wife Elisabeth and their daughter Irma for a young cinema usherette/aspiring actress, Margot Peters. In the course of the narrative, which takes place in Berlin c. 1928, Margot resumes an affair with her first lover, Axel Rex, a cartoonist hired by Albinus to collaborate on a project; sometime after having lost both his daughter to illness and his eyesight in a car accident, Albinus learns of Margot's infidelity through the intervention of his brother-in-law, Paul; he briefly returns to live with his wife but sets out to kill Margot after discovering her whereabouts; in a fatal gun-tussle, however, he is ultimately killed by her.

The novel has been the subject of interesting critiques, particularly those devoted to the question of perception. Thomas Seifrid focuses on *LITD*'s allusions to *Anna Karenin*, arguing that both Nabokov and Tolstoy make repeated use of visual imagery to underscore their preoccupation with vision and its relation to cognition. But whereas Tolstoy "subscribes to the belief [...] that only if something is seen clearly can it be known, and to the still more powerful converse that seeing is constitutive of the truth" (3), Seifried argues that Nabokov also makes use of a second set of imagery, *i.e.* entrapment imagery, in order to undermine the "Tolstoyan conviction" (8) and illustrate a general condition of limited understanding arising out of man's limited vision. Barbara Wyllie likewise writes of the "central theme of physical and moral blindness" (68) in *LITD*, pointing out that Albinus' loss of sight is merely

the concrete realization of his moral blindness, a spiritual bankruptcy the reader had already deduced in the early stages of the novel, while Magdalena Medaric Kovacic makes the similar point that Nabokov “uses the twofold lexical meaning of sight as a physical concept and as a moral concept” (324) to illustrate the popular maxim that “love is blind”. My own reading will support such claims, but I propose to shift the focus a little and discuss how both Margot and Albinus’ restricted understanding or “blindness” and their consequent estrangement from the real emerge out of far more complex mechanisms than mere flaws of vision.¹

Let me begin by offering a reading of Margot similar to the one of Franz undertaken in the previous chapter, one that attempts to find an explanation for her estrangement in her upbringing and social origins. Whereas Franz’s childhood is little commented on in *KOK*, mere one-sentence glimpses interspersed here and there, Margot’s childhood is given a

¹ Previous critical studies of the novel have tended to focus on all three protagonists, including Axel Rex, the third party of the love triangle. His character has been unanimously interpreted as representative of the artist figure incapable of adjoining a moral dimension to his aesthetic pursuits. Rampton describes him first as “a portrait of the artist as indifferent God, toying with his amusing, helpless creatures” (*Critical Study* 21), and later as a “portrait of the artist as sadist” (*Vladimir* 48). Likewise, Connolly characterizes Rex’s art as “parasitical” and “sadistic”, an art “feeding on the misfortune of others” (*Early* 123), and adds that Rex often prompts these misfortunes in order to transform another’s suffering into a caricature or butt of a joke. Yet as a figure whose instrumental treatment of others reaches new heights of callousness, Rex comes off somewhat too dehumanized, and after wondering whether his counterpart might be found in real life, one is tempted to dismiss him as lacking in verisimilitude. Such a dismissal would overlook the historical conditions out of which Rex emerges, conditions that did give rise to characters like him a few years later during the Nazi regime. For example, Rex’s treatment of Albinus as a mere subject matter for his art rather than a moral being endowed with reason and the capacity to feel recalls Josef Mengele’s treatment of Jewish prisoners as mere subject matter for his research experiments. Tellingly, the Russian version of *LITD* begins with a description of Cheepy, a guinea-pig caricature created by Rex, to whom “the idea was first suggested [...] by a physiologist who was campaigning against vivisection” (Grayson, 40). The problem is that Nabokov does not provide socio-historical indicators that would make possible such an identification and help explain Rex’s behaviour, and his depravity consequently emerges out of a vacuum of intrinsic predispositions, or *motiveless malignity*. As a result, his character seems less fully realized than those of Margot and Albinus. For this reason, coupled with the fact that it is difficult to add anything new to the homogenous diagnoses previous critics have arrived at of Rex - a homogeneity no doubt arising from this ahistorical status - I have chosen to omit him in my discussion of the novel.

sustained description (pp. 24-40) in *LITD*, and to the best of my knowledge, previous critics have not reflected upon the broader thematic implications of the novel in the light of these pages. Because her mother's "red palm was a perfect cornucopia of blows" (23), Margot's "commonest movement" (25) consists of "a sharp raising of her left elbow to protect her face" (*ibid.*); she is "thumped" and "kicked" by her brother after being jilted by a lust-crazed youth (28); after leaving home she is encouraged by her landlady Frau Levandovsky – who hopes to turn a profit in the doing - to whore herself to a "lovesick young man" (30), only to be jilted once again after having become enamored of him. By the time she is sixteen, she is reduced to earning a living by spending the night with two Japanese gentlemen from whom she receives "three fifty in small change" (38) as remuneration, and becomes the unenthusiastic mistress of "a fat old man with a nose like an overripe pear" (38). Thus, the novel somewhat euphemistically tells us, Margot has resorted to prostitution in order to sustain herself while still a minor.

A disregard for the background Nabokov provides concerning Margot's childhood circumscribes the novel's thematic potential. A commentator like Boyd is right to speak of the novel's preoccupation with the contrast between art and its antithetic poshlost, and the latter's ensuing "cheap imagination" as embodied in Margot (*RY* 365-366), but if we take into account the details of her childhood, poshlost becomes not a thing to deride in itself but the outcome of a process. Such an approach reveals not only that Margot was not always what she has become at the novel's time of narration, *i.e.* the self-seeking exploiter of hapless Albinus, but also to what extent the hardships of her upbringing are responsible for such a transformation. Though Margot's personality is atrophied by this point in her life, insights into her childhood provide a view of a time when she was more vulnerable than

conniving, more preyed upon than preying. One might even suggest that the childhood Margot at one time resembled the eight-year old Irma and, indeed, a common episode in the lives of both characters establishes a correspondence between them, stressing the fact that the former was once as uncorrupted as the latter and discouraging seeing either character as an embodiment of immutable values. As a child, Margot, a porter's daughter, "liked nothing better than to chatter in undertones with the coalman's daughter, exchanging views upon the women who visited one of the lodgers..." (26). Many years later, Irma indulges in the same juvenile parlance, with none other than "the porter's little daughter", and learns from her that whistling heard on certain nights was that of "a man who had for the last fortnight been visiting the lady on the fourth floor" (159). Two individuals, representing radically opposing moral poles at the time of narration, are identified via the retrospective chapter recapitulating Margot's childhood. The reversibility of time that the non-linear nature of flash-back narration performs creates a state of diachronic simultaneity, one that allows a parallel comparison of non-synchronic periods in the lives of two characters. Because the young-adult Margot comes off as a deviation from the Margot-Irma child, her estrangement from an original self and her ensuing moral obliquity and "cheap imagination" must be interpreted in transitory and contingent, not rigid and predetermined, terms. The novel's thematic treatment of poshlost is consequently amplified with a concern for the agency bringing poshlost into being.²

² Margot's current state is transitory not only in relation to her past, but also to her future. When Albinus meets her alcoholic landlady, the "slatternly woman with bloodshot eyes" (76) inspires only repugnance in him. Yet before she lets him go, she recalls that: "They used to be after me, too, in the old days" (77). If Margot's character can be said to derive from Irma's, this identification with her landlady's past foreshadows her character's potential development into her landlady's present, an outcome still undetectable in her current state. Hence character as process is indeterminate because unfinished, or *in process*, and though Margot is a static character during the entire time of narration, these identifications reveal that she is neither a point of departure nor a point of arrival, but a stage in between.

Having said this, an identification of Irma and Margot remains problematic because it requires an act of exoneration some of us are not willing to make. Regardless of how she may have fared in youth, Margot, by depriving Irma of her father, becomes indirectly responsible for Irma's death, caused by her catching a cold at night while leaning out of a window in the hope of seeing her father return home. And, indeed, Margot's involvement is hinted at by an ominous pun. As Irma's illness worsens, Paul repeatedly tries to telephone his brother-in-law to inform him of his daughter's condition, but Margot ties up the line with prank calls, one in which "she ordered a coffin for a certain Frau *Kirchof*" (168). A few pages later, the name resurfaces when we are told the following of Irma: "every now and then a *hiccough* shook her" (173).³ The coffin Margot orders in childish play is destined for a child whose sickness and ensuing death deprive her of her childhood, and though we earlier sympathized with Margot while reading how the circumstances of her social milieu deprived her of her own childhood, most readers will suspend their sympathy when she throws a tantrum and denies Albinus' permission to go to his daughter's sick bed, menacing him with

³ Emphasis added. The Kirchof/hiccough pun – and readers unfamiliar with Nabokov's writing may wonder whether it does constitute a pun or a mere case of over-analysis – exemplifies a device Nabokov would employ more consistently in his later fiction. An entomologist fascinated by the workings of mimicry in the natural world, Nabokov loaded his own narratives with slightly altered recurring images vaguely hinting at manifestations of mimicry in his fictitious universe. Puzzle solvers have wielded these as veiled leitmotifs in order to establish connections between various parts of the narrative and arrive at conclusions concerning architectonics and subtextual meaning. Margot's prank calls alone contain a second example of this device at work, one that again associates her with Irma's illness. After Professor Grimm - of whom we have not heard yet and shall not hear again - receives a call from Margot fixing a midnight assignation with him, he hangs up and debates "whether this invitation was a hoax or the result of his fame as an ichthyologist" (169). A few pages earlier Irma, suffering from a fit of fever, had almost foreseen the "famed ichthyologist" while hallucinating about "a fisherman" (156). Like the Kirchof/hiccough pair, this one remains unsatisfying in that it brings into parallel two seemingly unrelated episodes yet provides no definite resolution or closure. Still, it embodies Rex's theory of coincidences, a theory that could easily stand-in for Nabokov's own in the light of his later writings: "'A certain man,' said Rex, as he turned round the corner with Margot, 'once lost a diamond cuff-link in the wide blue sea, and twenty years later, on the exact day, a Friday apparently, he was eating a large fish – but there was no diamond inside. That's what I like about coincidence'" (135). Because the symmetry of these coincidences is never perfect, or the recurring images always slightly distorted, the reader is left *almosting it*, to use Joyce's expression, constantly teased with glimpses of meaning that elude his reach. When we come to discuss Albinus, we will ask whether these recurring images do not serve an altogether different purpose than that of puzzle solving.

a petty “If you dare-”(172). Margot’s personality regresses to that of an eight-year old, while the eight-year old Irma has displayed moral wisdom beyond her age when, exposing herself to the fatal chill of the open window, she worries that no one will let her father in from the cold (159).

There is moreover another reason to check an identification between Margot and Irma. If an alignment of the two helps the reader discern the social factors that cause the deviation of the one from the other, and consequently Margot’s estrangement from an original self, it does little to account for her more pervasive estrangement from the real. If the influence of milieu alone suffices to explain the atrophying of her morality, it comes no way near to offering an exhaustive explanation for the atrophying of her cognitive faculties. It is attributable in part to socio-historical determinants similar to those that shaped Franz, true, but is also a ramification of her exposure to certain kinds of images and the hypnotic effect they have on her. Interested in the cinematic motifs found in *LITD*, Wyllie examines to what extent its characters’ exposure to cinematic tropes produces “cinematically informed imagination” (74). Kovacic does the same, writing that Margot’s “world view is modeled on second-rate films, and she understands life situations by analogy with various Hollywood melodramas” (319). In Nabokov’s novel, imaginations informed by silver-screen tropes abound, but they merely exemplify a concrete instance of a more general phenomenon, and it could be said that the cinema supplies a metaphor for a society preoccupied with the production and consumption of factitious yet highly suggestive images. That film merely offers the most recent development of a tendency that does not originate - and is therefore not confined to - the specific properties and workings of cinema is confirmed by Robert Stam who, discussing *Lolita*’s adaptation for the screen, suggests that in the twentieth century,

following a shift in the privileged medium of popular culture, “the societal imaginary is no longer inflected by romantic literature, as in *Madame Bovary*, but rather by Hollywood films” (108).⁴ Thus film merely supplies the latest technological innovation through which an identical experience takes place. Whether we focus on the impact of film on individual consciousness, or that of literature, a peer’s advice or example, instances when a forgotten or misremembered past overlaps with the present, to name a few, the experience is of one kind: the subject’s capacity to differentiate between legitimate and spurious impressions is affected and impaired because an objective reality is displaced, manipulated, and modified by a preceding manifestation of it.

Jean Baudrillard’s theory of the three orders of simulacra developed in *L’Échange symbolique et la mort* (1976) and further elaborated in *Simulacres et simulation* (1981) provides a useful starting point for delineating this experience. Whereas the simulacrum of the first order concerns the imitation of an original, as in the case of an artistic reproduction, the second-order simulacrum concerns mass reproduction, as in the case of the serial production of commodities, not designed to imitate something that came before it so much as to maintain an exponential process of reproduction. The distinguishing characteristic of the third-order simulacrum is that it functions as neither an imitation of what came before, nor as a guarantor of the capacity to mass-reproduce; rather, it is a signifier stripped of its referential value, or the signifier become the signified by ceasing to refer to anything beyond

⁴ Literature’s *inflecting* influence still persists in the age of cinema if we broaden our definition of literature to include celebrity gossip tabloids. Although reading is not “her forte” (168), Margot is nonetheless fond of perusing books containing “photographic studies of Greta Garbo” (79). The historian Richard Evans writes that the emergence of such “literature” had a depoliticizing impact on Germany’s youth in the 1920s: “What was undermining the political press in the 1920s was, above all, the rise of the so-called ‘boulevard papers’, cheap, sensational tabloids [...] Heavily illustrated, with massive coverage of sport, cinema, local news, crime, scandal and sensation, these papers placed the emphasis on entertainment rather than information” (120). Hence “literature” is as important a factor as film in Margot’s growing estrangement from the real.

itself: it is characterized by an absence, or simulation, for “to simulate is to feign to have what one doesn’t have” (*Simulacra* 3). Since it is no longer a reflection of what came before, it establishes itself as a precedent from which what follows will model itself on: “il y a des modèles d’où procèdent toutes formes” (*L’échange* 87). It is characterized not so much by what it is as by what it brings into effect, for the third-order simulacrum is a model that does not reflect meaning, but rather generates it, and an individual whose field of consciousness is occupied by such signs will expect objective reality to reflect *them*.

One example taken from Irma’s experience will help illustrate this notion. In *LITD*, Irma visits an elephant at the zoo and is disappointed that it is not as clean and hairless as a plush-toy elephant of hers. The link between the toy and real animal is not directly stated: the plush toy is mentioned in passing on p. 61, while the animal at the zoo is described a little later as follows: “the baby elephant, which turned out to have hardly any trunk at all and a fringe of short hair standing on end all along its back” (70). This plush- toy representation is a third-order simulacrum, obviously not modeled on a real elephant. Instead, the simulacrum creates an expectation of what the real elephant will be. Simulacra modeled on the unreal beget expectations of a reality modeled on simulacra. That the real cannot concur in this case is made more evident by the fact that the real elephant is itself represented in the simulacrum context of a zoo. This image of the real (an elephant confined, fed by caretakers, domesticated, sedated, showered, etc.) is as unfaithful to the real as is the plush toy, in the sense that both distort a reality Irma cannot access. A kind of counterfeit knowledge and its ensuing misassumptions occur when the mind, abused and deluded by this inverted referential order, no longer establishes the correct correspondences between reality and

representation. Throughout *LITD*, both Margot and Albinus continuously entertain ideas of themselves and each other that originate out of just such a context.⁵

Though non-cinematic means of estrangement shall provide the focus of my discussion, it does not follow that cinematic ones are absent in *LITD*. And in the case of Margot especially, the hardships of a full-dimensional existence at home, its familiar turmoil and violence, have led her to seek an escape into the anesthetic one-dimensional construct of cinema in more ways than one. In order to forget this period of her life, one during which the concept of paradise is grossly parodied as the “‘Paradise’ dance hall where elderly men made her extremely frank proposals” (27), the screen induced platitudes of cinema provide Margot’s drug of choice: “there was always that vision of herself as a screen beauty in gorgeous furs being helped out of a gorgeous car by a gorgeous hotel porter under a giant umbrella. She was still wondering how to hop into that bright world straight from the faded rug in the studio” (30). Like Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*, Margot deludes herself into believing in a bright future as an actress who, unlike Wilder’s heroine, does not even have the merit of resting on the accomplishments of a past cinematic career. She will pursue

⁵ Pursuing a cultural critic’s agenda, Baudrillard goes on to argue that the saturation in mass media of simulacra/signs serves the purpose of injecting value into otherwise useless products, thereby creating the illusion that purchasing the commodity will grant access to the image conveyed in the sign. For his part, Nabokov would have disowned this polemical aspect of Baudrillard’s work; he was uninterested in capitalist economy’s supposed use of the simulacrum as a tool to transform subjects into consumers. In *LITD*, however, he repeatedly depicts cognitive and affective faculties impoverished as a result of factitious images. The theorist and the novelist disagree only as to what generates these images; whereas the former locates its origin in mercantile propaganda, the latter locates it in certain characteristics of the acts of thinking and feeling that bring to mind David Hartley’s theory of associationism. According to Hartley, the senses often encounter external stimuli that trigger related images of past experiences stored in the mind, though often related by arbitrary associations not dependent on the actual images themselves. The mingling of the present and past images ultimately conjures a third one, unsubstantial and existing only in the meeting of the two images in the individual’s mind. Similarly, Nabokov’s factitious image is the imbroglio result of the mind’s complex activity, while Baudrillard’s simulacrum is the result of a coordinated effort by particulars with vested interests. Notwithstanding this difference, both the factitious image and the third-order simulacrum have the selfsame effect of distorting the subject’s grasp of objective reality.

her dream of cinematic fame by using Albinus' influence among moviemakers to launch her acting career.

Margot's dreams are shattered when a private screening of her debut performance reveals the truth about her acting skills, or rather lack thereof, yet the ensuing disillusionment that the disclosure of truth should have produced only amounts, in Margot's mind, to a negation of the "real" her erring reason has habituated her to. Rejecting the implications that the discovery of her inability to act should have entailed, she refuses to abandon her chimerical pursuit and merely displaces the site of its realization. Since access to the screen has been denied her, cinematic representations of reality will now supply the material with which she will determine the parameters of her off-screen existence. At one point during a diner with Albinus and Rex, Margot reacts (or acts again) as follows: "As she sat between these two men who were sharing her life, she felt as though she were the chief actress in a mysterious and passionate film-drama – so she tried to behave accordingly" (147). There is no need for histrionics here, no need to act a part since she already *is* involved in a love triangle. She proceeds to imitate behaviour suggested by the clichés of the screen, unable to realize that her being involved in the situation legitimizes any unscripted actions she might undertake; she does not need to imitate a feigned silver-screen depiction of a status she is ontologically endowed with. But in order for her to recognize phenomena, she must channel them through the legitimizing authority of their cinematic representation. Her unsuccessful acting career, for example, nevertheless supplies the rehearsals for "stormy scenes" (192) acted out in real life.

To claim that individuals borrow inspiration from cinema is not strikingly original today (although it probably was the year Nabokov wrote his novel), a fact that militates

against another discussion of the presence of this issue in *LITD*. However, as mentioned earlier, the cinematic precedent as prompter of off-screen behaviour displays only one manifestation of a more general tendency. As far as Margot is concerned, she has developed a dependence on the precedence of images in order to interpret and relate to phenomena confronted in the present. We may thus reformulate the above sentence, and broaden the scope of its applicability: *in order to be recognizable, phenomena must be channeled through the legitimizing authority of its pre-presentation.*

During a vacation at an Adriatic beach resort, Margot cries out “The water is wet” (114) while bathing. The silly oxymoron is in fact not her own, but that of a friend of her brother’s with whom she had bathed years ago: “fair-haired Kaspar on the edge of the lake shaking his arms as though he were quaking, and roaring ‘the water is wet, wet!’” (96). She relates to a present situation by recycling another’s linguistic expression in a similar situation, thereby mediating her relation to phenomena by interjecting memory between herself and them; a form of paramnesia ensues, one in which images of the present are subsumed in images of the past. Margot has experienced such states on other occasions as well: once, when reflecting that a footman had “the face of an English Lord” (126), no doubt founding her inference on the precedent of a “boulevard paper”, an actor’s impersonation of an English Lord, or even (why not?) a regular of the ‘Paradise’ dance hall; and again much earlier when, after having locked Albinus in his room in order to freely rummage about his lodgings, she separates the sounds uttered from the room from their source of utterance: “Margot slammed the door and, panting and laughing, turned the key from outside. (Oh, how the poor fat woman had banged and thumped and yelled!)” (62). Of course the unexpected appearance of a spurious fat woman in this case is the corollary of a déjà-vu, the

misremembered souvenir of Frau Levandovsky's own screams when Rex had earlier locked her in her room to steal Margot away (35). Like Franz hearing the sound of his sister making water when Martha urinates in *KQK*, Margot impresses – intentionally or not - indelible marks of her past unto her experience of the present.

So powerful is the pull of the past, that when no previous experience of phenomena exists, or exists but has failed to leave an impression, she simply does not see what stands before her: “She walked to the window while the baggage was being brought in. There was a big star in the plum-colored sky, the black tree-tops were perfectly still, crickets chirped...but she saw and heard nothing” (204). Moreover, when a phenomenon is not yet encountered but anticipated, Margot's imagination endows it with characteristics she has already been acquainted with. She pictures Elisabeth as a proxy of her own mother or the domineering Frau Levandovsky: “Also, to be judged by the photograph on his bed table, his wife was not at all as she had imagined her – a large stately woman with a grim expression and a grip of iron; on the contrary, she seemed a quiet, vague sort of creature...” (68). Margot's constant use of the past as a means of interpreting the present and future thus distorts her experience of the real and estranges her from it, a habit that almost always leads her to formulate gross misassumptions about it.

One of the more significant misassumptions deluding Margot is her belief that Albinus can help her launch her acting career. Her desire to leave a job she despises invests Albinus with reach beyond his grasp, and makes him into an opportune redresser of misfortunes, her longed-for benefactor. Infatuated with the young usherette, Albinus is all too willing to oblige, and a bilateral parasitic relationship ensues, but Margot's ambitions fall through for two reasons. Firstly, she dreams of a world no one (actors included) is made to

inhabit (the silver screen). Secondly, and more importantly, Albinus, like Margot, is also prone to misassumptions about the real and their attending estrangement.

Gerard De Vries and D. Barton Johnson explain Albinus' misassumptions as a result of his inability to collate sensory information of one kind with that of another to form a complete picture of data. They argue that the ability to do so, *i.e.* synaesthesia, offers privileged insight into beauty that Nabokov would not have granted a man capable of leaving his wife and daughter behind for the shallow, vulgar Margot (37-38). And indeed, following Albinus' accident, Nabokov's narrative repeatedly delivers comical instances of blind Albinus' erroneous translation of physical sound into mental sight. One example will suffice. Bedridden after his accident, Albinus hears an oculist speak nearby: "he had a soft unctuous voice so that Albinus pictured him as an old man with a clean-shaven priestlike face, although in reality, he was still fairly young and sported a bristly moustache" (250).

Though ineffective synaesthesia does play a part in Albinus' misassumptions following his accident, other factors come into play as well. When Albinus feels the hands of his clock and discovers it is night, Margot – who had been sleeping in the next room with Rex - lies to him and swears it is morning. Although his senses tell him otherwise, he is finally persuaded by argumentative caresses: "She did not much want to do it, but it was the only way. Now Albinus could no longer notice that the air was still cold, and that no birds were singing, for he felt only one thing – fierce, fiery bliss" (269). Here he is not led astray by his remaining senses, two of which provide him with accurate data (the cold air and absence of bird songs at night), but he lets his libido rewrite the time of day and deny all other evidence. For one as susceptible as Albinus is to the lure of concupiscence, synaesthesia is the least of his worries where Margot is concerned.

One must also take into account the matter of Albinus' many misassumptions before his accident. On occasion, his emotional state conditions the appearance of outward phenomena, blending internal and external landscapes. The morning following his first night spent by Margot's side, Albinus returns home to assess the damage and determine whether or not his wife has discovered his infidelity, and, if so, whether or not she can forgive him (she has in fact read a bawdy letter of Margot's the night before and left with her daughter to stay at her brother's). As he climbs into the lift that has taken him up to his apartment every day for the past nine years, he is reminded of the time it took him up with his wife and a nurse bringing their new-born daughter home for the first time (85). In a moment of irreparable loss, the impression of a familiar phenomenon translates itself into one of the most meaningful episodes in Albinus' life. He is not engaging with an actual lift, an inanimate, mechanical device whose exclusive function is upward and downward mobility. Rather, he engages with, or is overwhelmed by, his own distressed emotional state transcending the objective reality his senses happen upon. Certainly one among many benefits of human cognition is its ability to divert the mind's attention from cursory phenomena presented to the senses, but in Albinus' case, it acts as a barrier to sound judgment. And because raw, powerful emotions continuously overrule him, he repeatedly speaks or thinks in hyperbole and melodramatic extremes: "and then I'll kill myself", thought Albinus" (62); "she is still my wife and I love her, and I shall, of course, shoot myself if she dies by my fault" (91); "Good, then I'll kill her," he thought swiftly" (99); etc. That he never acts out such resolutions implies that he is more often than not overcome by transitory emotional agitation and cannot apprehend his surroundings or his situations from a detached point of view.

At other times, he displays habits of sensory apprehension identical to those of Margot. As Albinus receives a letter from a struggling artist he has been helping financially, he imagines Margot's father, whom he has never met nor knows nothing of: "in his mind there formed an extraordinary, vivid picture of Margot's dead father: he, too, no doubt had been a seedy, bad-tempered and not very gifted artist whom life had treated harshly" (49-50). Just as Margot imagined Elisabeth bearing characteristics of her mother and Frau Levandovsky, so Albinus imagines her father bearing the characteristics of an artist well known to him. Upon meeting Rex for the first time, Albinus' imagination proceeds accordingly: "Do you know, I had formed quite a different picture of you in my mind – short, fat, with horn-rimmed glasses..." (128). His misassumption here is later explained when Albinus' brother-in-law's physical appearance is described as that of a "plump gentleman in horn-rimmed glasses" (153).⁶

Thus continuously estranged from the real, both Albinus and Margot have little prospect of establishing a rapport with each other. Indeed, Nabokov makes a point of emptying their conversations of any significant exchange throughout his narrative, of depicting Albinus as the clueless victim of Margot's coarse, self-interested scheming. But if this point is so plainly made - to the extent that we almost become embarrassed at Albinus' obliviousness - why isn't he able to realize it himself? Surely even the most susceptible

⁶ It is noteworthy that positive figures in Nabokov's novels often inherit the bad habits of negative ones as a result of the latter abusing the former. In *LITD*, though Albinus and Margot are both prone to misassumptions, Elisabeth displays such a disposition as a consequence of her husband's abandoning her. At one point, she deludes herself into thinking Albinus' infidelity with Margot crowns an ingrained habit of his: "It seemed to her he had always been unfaithful. And now she remembered and understood (as one remembering a new language might remember once seeing a book in that tongue when one did not yet know it) the red stains – sticky red kisses – which she had noticed once on her husband's pocket handkerchief" (110). The red stains however have an altogether different origin; during his restoration of old paintings, Albinus sometimes worked with turpentine to remove recent coats of paints covering the original (93). Emotional ordeal caused by another's doing upsets Elisabeth and clouds her ability to discern reality. One could apply here the Freudian notion that delusions occur as a result of personal reversals and frustrations.

cannot be so gullible. And to explain away his gullibility as a corollary of the “lust burning a hole in his life” is unsatisfying because Margot - unlike Martha with Franz and Lolita with Humbert – is extremely parsimonious in granting him her favours; the caresses that blind him are too infrequently bestowed upon him to blind him incessantly. The possibility therefore arises that what initially attracts Albinus to Margot and ensures his continued enthrallment is not the physical component of lust, but a network of forces altogether alien to lust which he nevertheless mistakes for it. But does the text contain elements supporting such a possibility? If we proceed circuitously, it does.

Vladimir E. Alexandrov notes that *LITD* contains a possible allusion to John Cassian, the fifth century monk, when, during Albinus’ accident, a mail plane is seen flying to St. Cassien. According to Alexandrov, the reader who bears in mind Cassian’s belief “that children are born innocent of the sin of Adam” (9) will align his sympathies with Irma, the innocent victim of Margot and Albinus’ callousness. For our present purposes, *i.e.* the potential non-sexual nature of the “lust burning a hole” in Albinus’ life, a discussion of Cassian is apposite in light of Foucault’s essay “Le combat de la Chasteté”. In it, Foucault examines the central position the question of lust seems to occupy in Cassian’s writings on a first reading. Indeed, descriptions are given at length in his two major works, the *Institutes* and *Conferences*, of the strict rules that organize and regulate monastic life, all in the hope of achieving “une technologie de soi-même [...] une dissociation” (Foucault 20). However, though this dissociation is finally that of the spirit from the body, it does not consist in a negation of organic desires through ascetic mortification. Rather, it consists in a rigorous exercise of self-examination:

Il ne s’agit pas du tout de l’intériorisation d’un catalogue d’interdits, substituant à la prohibition de l’acte celle de l’intention. Il s’agit de l’ouverture d’un domaine

[...] qui est celui de la pensée, avec son cours irrégulier et spontané, avec ses images, ses souvenirs, ses perceptions, avec les mouvements et les impressions qui se communiquent du corps à l'âme et de l'âme au corps. Ce qui est en jeu alors, ce n'est pas un code d'actes permis ou défendus, c'est toute une technique pour analyser et diagnostiquer la pensée, ses origines, ses qualités, ses dangers, ses puissances de séduction, et toutes les forces obscures qui peuvent se cacher sous l'aspect qu'elle présente. [...] Il faut que la question soit toujours posée de façon à débusquer tout ce qui peut se cacher de "fornication" secrète dans les replis les plus profonds de l'âme. (23)

Thus the monk is expected via a *technology of the self*, not to repress sexual urges, but to discover their hidden recesses in the mind. If such an exercise is successful, the causality informing sexual thoughts, moods, emotions, etc. will appear in all its subterranean complexity, and will help elucidate the true nature of urges that seem sexual on the surface, but might in fact originate in the non-sexual activity of the mind.

Now Nabokov could not have read Foucault's paper fifty years before it was written, but if the reference to St-Cassien on p. 238 is meant to evoke the fifth century monk, as Alexandrov claims it might, we may suppose that he had read the same texts Foucault read and had come to similar conclusions. In the event that Alexandrov was mistaken, Cassian's ideas can still serve as a critical tool with which Nabokov's text can be read if internal evidence actually confirms that the roots of Albinus' infatuation with Margot are non-sexual. Is this then the case? Although Albinus has long sought to compensate for his wife's sexual demureness by indulging in extra-marital affairs, he has yet to act out such fantasies at the novel's beginning. What was originally conceived of as a release of sexual tension, continuously postponed over nine years, must certainly have grown into something other by the time it is finally realized. One would like to cite dissatisfaction with his marriage, his daughter, his work, or his station in life as new incentives that, accumulated over a protracted period of time, finally prompt Albinus to act, but the narrative does not provide such

evidence. On the other hand, Albinus' procrastination cannot be explained as the result of his not finding any suitable outlet, for it is unlikely that Margot has been the first woman to have appealed to him sexually during a nine-year period (in fact we are told on p. 20 she is not). How then can we explain his being roused out of inaction on this precise occasion and with Margot specifically?

When Albinus sees Margot for the first time, she is standing beside a "horribly purple curtain" (21). Why horrible? As a student, Albinus experiences his first love affair with "a sad elderly lady who later, during the War, had sent out to him at the front purple socks..." (14-15). Our attention is arrested by the mention of such a trifling detail as purple socks, yet the detail is significant enough to make up a part of Albinus' memory, and if it has managed to remain with him all these years, chances are it still intervenes on occasion by associating itself with images of the present. The curtain by which Margot stands is "horribly purple" because Albinus confounds it with the souvenir of an earlier love. Albinus may or may not be sexually attracted to Margot, but it is this subconscious association with his first sexual experience that legitimizes her as a new potential outlet for sexual release. It should be noted that Irma's plush-toy elephant was also purple. Like the simulacrum, Albinus' memory precedes the phenomenon and distorts its objective reality.

Actually, Albinus has seen Margot at least once before, some years prior to the one just mentioned. Browsing through various drawings he contemplates buying, Albinus happens upon one of a nude Margot - who had posed for art students two years earlier - depicting "her shoulder touching her *cheek*" (59), but finally prefers the artist's rendition of a hunchback. Though Albinus does not make an explicit identification when he eventually meets Margot at the "Argus" theatre, he still discerns in her "the melting outline of a *cheek*

which looked as though it were painted by a great artist” (21).⁷ An instance of paramnesia or déjà-vu must have given Margot an unfair advantage over others by conferring an aura of familiarity upon her.⁸ The first sight of a woman mediated once by the memory of one’s first sexual experience, a second time by the woman’s anterior artistic representation, must make a stronger impression than it would on its own. Though these two mediators end up strengthening the bond uniting subject desiring and object desired, they do so by instilling a distance between them; what lead Albinus to fantasize about adulterous liaisons nine years earlier might indeed have been sexual tension, but what drives him towards Margot as an apt outlet to realize such fantasies was the intervention of a sexual antecedent unrelated to Margot and one artistic, *i.e.* non-sexual, antecedent related to Margot. Though Albinus believes he has finally discovered the longed for means of gratification, he has already subsumed it in images of his subconscious. An act of dissociation or distancing between the two ensues at the moment they are brought together, one that develops into a pattern.

Numerous critics have used the concept of distance as a critical tool with which to interpret *LITD*. Connolly argues that Albinus’ habit of displacing faces and landscapes he encounters in real life into the paintings of old masters creates “an aesthetic distance between Albinus and reality [...] a damaging remove” (*Early* 121). Dabney Stuart likewise reveals how the mode of motion pictures provides the perspective from which the novel’s characters view themselves, leading to “Albinus’ penchant for the distancing of reality through art” (105). For her part, Leona Toker is interested in the reader’s inability to feel sympathy for Albinus’ tragic end because it is not far removed from Albinus’ own inability to sympathize

⁷ Emphases added here and above.

⁸ The episode also reveals how Albinus, prone to the pathos of the artistic representation of suffering (the hunchback), is nevertheless indifferent to actual suffering he causes (that of his wife and daughter) for the sake of a beauty (Margot) he has disdained in its artistic representation.

with Elisabeth on the occasion of their daughter's death. She argues that there is more at work in the novel than the poetic justice of a man justly rewarded for callously abandoning his wife and daughter. Rather, Toker claims, a constant shift of perspective, a "control of distances" (118) in narrative tone and viewpoints is what ultimately suppresses our usual sympathy for suffering (Toker cites Albinus' accident, of which we are given a perspective from an elevated, cosmic viewpoint, as an example of this).

As we have seen, Stuart's claim that cinema acts as a powerful tool of dissociation provides an accurate yet incomplete explanation of what prompts Margot's behaviour, but something altogether different is at work in Albinus' case. That he distances himself from the real is all too obvious. His relationship with Margot is chimerical and misguided to the point of being farcical, for he merely engages with a construct of his own desire. We are told early on of a recurring dream Albinus had during his wife's pregnancy: "at night he dreamed of coming across a young girl lying asprawl on a hot lonely beach" (17). Albinus' dream has a lasting impression on him and does not allow him to dismiss it. Once he has left his wife for Margot, the latter still does not fit the requirements of the dream. Undeterred, he strategically wills his dream into being by advising Margot he has "all sorts of plans...we'll go to the seashore" (94). It thus comes as no surprise when a little later Margot is found "spread-eagled on the platinum sand, her limbs a rich honey-brown, and a thin white rubber belt relieving the black of her bathing-suit: the perfect seaside poster" (112). Albinus has successfully displaced Margot from the real, and relocated her inside the dream landscape he has been haunted by all these years. The Margot Albinus dreamed of precedes the flesh and blood Margot and in order to abstract the usherette into the poster, Albinus will have to eliminate the uncooperative elements of the former. The first step concerns a makeover

which – not unlike Scottie Ferguson’s makeover of Judy into Madeleine in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* – remodels Margot into the image that precedes her: “Albinus taught her to bathe daily instead of only washing her hands and neck as she had done hitherto. Her nails were always clean now, and polished a brilliant red, on both fingers and toes” (92). Once this is accomplished, Albinus will get rid of the components of Margot’s existence that did not figure in his dream, such as her troublesome brother Otto whom he disposes of by handing him a “ten-mark note” (107). The representation or simulacrum, when it precedes the event or phenomenon, becomes the thing that happened or that is, at the expense of the actual event and phenomenon.

Albinus’ dream, made up of a static image, a “perfect seaside poster”, inverts the novel’s opening idea in which Albinus had dreamt of turning still paintings into animated short films. Instead of mobilizing a static image in the case of Margot, he ends up immobilizing animate life into a poster. A few pages later this process is elaborated on further:

Now Albinus saw her figure framed in the gay pattern of the beach; a pattern he hardly saw, so entirely was his gaze concentrated on Margot. Slim, sunburned, with her dark head of hair and one arm with the gleam of a bracelet still outstretched after her throw, she seemed to him an exquisitely colored vignette heading the first chapter of his new life. (113-114)

Abstracting Margot into a “framed...vignette” allows Albinus to fix his gaze on her more solidly, so much so that he *hardly sees* her surrounding environment. The object of desire, once reified, is apparently made less obscure because more easily apprehensible.

In the passage just quoted, Nabokov’s “new life” nod to Dante raises a few questions that help clarify how Nabokov, and possibly even Albinus himself, make use of the concept

of distance. Both *LITD* and *Vita Nuova* deal with the similar theme of the life-altering effect a chance encounter has, but in Nabokov's novel something horribly wrong unfolds. How then is the concept of distance used differently in the earlier work?

In *Vita Nuova* Dante relates his first meeting with Beatrice and the overwhelming aftereffects it has on him, resulting in his volition being overtaken by his desire: "no sooner do I call to mind the astonishing image of her beauty than the desire to see her overtakes me, and this desire is so powerful that it slays and destroys in my memory anything that might rise to restrain it" (28). Since such vulnerability is an unpleasant, humiliating feeling, Dante devises a means of displacing his reaction away from its object, yet still indirectly related to it. Dante consequently devotes himself to writing verses praising his love of Beatrice, and the successful transfer is made evident by the language in *Vita Nuova*. From the moment Dante makes the decision to write poetry praising Beatrice, images of overruling desire no longer refer to Beatrice but to writing: "I was moved by a desire to write more poetry" (30); "I was so seized by the desire to compose poetry" (35). Such a transfer enables Dante to impersonalize his desire and ultimately master it, when writing becomes the product of deliberation, not desire: "I decided to compose a poem" (39); "I decided to write" (44, 48, 51, 56, 63, etc.). Writing offers an expedient in *Vita Nuova* that enables Dante to transmute an organic experience into an inorganic one; it acts as an intermediary between the subject desiring and object desired, and the troubling sensation of powerlessness resulting from immediate contact is removed. Borrowing Benjamin's terminology, we might say that the object loses its aura once a distance is established between it and the viewer, or in this case, between the loved one and the lover.

The aftereffects of Albinus' first meeting with Margot recall those of Dante's meeting with Beatrice. Thoughts of Margot banish all other thoughts from Albinus' mind, and prevent any form of resistance whatsoever: "I'm going mad and nobody knows it. And I can't stop, it's hopeless trying" (13); "he could ignore the memory of her no longer" (22). The second chapter closes with Albinus' unconvincing self-injunction that he will no longer visit the Argus theatre: "Like to crush her beautiful throat. Well, she is dead anyway, since I shan't go there anymore" (23); the first sentence of the following chapter, however, which reads "She was called Margot Peters" (24), surprises no one. In fact Albinus' failed attempt to ignore Margot reveals, in his choice of words, an inability to view her as a being with an independent existence beyond the one he confers upon her; she necessarily dies the moment he refuses to see her. Added to Albinus' earlier contemplated murder -- "no, you can't take a pistol and plug a girl you don't even know, simply because she attracts you" (13) - his reaction here confirms that before he can engage in a paramour liaison with her, he must abstract Margot from the elements that do not correspond to his ready-made image of her: he figuratively kills her by subsuming her into the poster girl of the dream landscape. This expedient performs the same function of dissociation, or distancing, that writing performed for Dante. In both cases an intermediary regulates the rapport between the lovers but, because Albinus is no poet, he cannot transmute Margot into prose or verse, only transform her into a lifeless image conjured by a dream.⁹

So Albinus, in his dealings with Margot as a schematic, one-dimensional, reified stasis, inverts the idea he entertained in the opening chapter, *i.e.* animating still pictures.

⁹ In his reading of the novel, Laurie Clancy finds fault with Albinus for this specific reason, that unable to recognize true beauty, he contents himself with pursuing a vulgar fantasy by modeling it on the hackneyed, banal, and mediocre plot of the love triangle suggested by Hollywood (53).

Moreover, there is another inversion occurring in the novel's first chapter. Most critics discussing the novel have begun doing so by quoting the short opening paragraph: "Once upon a time there lived in Berlin, Germany, a man called Albinus. He was rich, respectable, happy; one day he abandoned his wife for the sake of a youthful mistress; he loved; was not loved; and his life ended in disaster" (7). No critic, however, has remarked that the novel's second sentence contains an inversion of truth, just as Nabokov's *Ada* opens with a first sentence famously inverting *Anna Karenin*'s opening sentence. Albinus was in fact dearly loved, by his wife, his daughter, and even his brother-in-law, but he himself did not love them enough to honor the ties that bound him to them. Furthermore, if Albinus' love in this passage is meant to refer to Margot, we have already seen that he does not love her; rather, he is enamored of an image.¹⁰

The opening sentences of the novel thus reveal an unreliable narrator at work. But who is he, and why should he lie? If the narrator is unreliable, we should note that the opening lines endorse the delusion of the protagonist at the close of the novel, namely that he (the protagonist) loved Margot but was not loved in return. Is the narrator himself Albinus, and has he, like Dante, distanced himself from a humiliating experience via writing? Are there any other peculiarities shared between narrator and protagonist? We know that Albinus "had often amused himself by having this or that Old Master sign landscapes and faces which he, Albinus, came across in real life" (8). At one point the narrator describes a landscape as follows: "the balcony high above the streets with the wires and chimneys drawn in Indian ink across the sunset" (19). We later learn that Rex used this very same ink, "performing miracles with Indian ink" (196). Thus both narrator and protagonist share the

¹⁰ In this respect, he is the immediate precursor of Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* who solipsizes Dolores Haze into "his" Lolita (cf. Durantaye, pp. 66-75).

habit of having phenomena encountered in real life signed by painters they are acquainted with. In any case, it would not be the first time Albinus dissociates himself from himself, for upon first having Margot visit him at home, in a moment of extreme emotional tension, he fails to recognize his belongings: “he laid one trembling hand round her waist and with her he looked up at the crystal chandelier as though he himself were a stranger” (60); seconds later, he fails to recognize his own reflection in a mirror, and perceives his own image from a third person perspective: “In a passing mirror he saw a pale grave gentleman walking beside a schoolgirl in her Sunday dress”(60).

Giving shape and body to an unrealizable desire in a fully developed and sustained narrative exorcises it; Albinus could dissociate himself from the taboo of an extra-marital liaison by examining it from the unengaged third-person perspective, a perspective that allows him to experience it vicariously. Ordering an imagined affair around elements associated with the brief sighting of an usherette (but there is no reason that even this part of the narrative is not imagined) would require him to construct a fictitious narrative around a fabricated plot. Hence he elaborates a fantasy around the stationary image of an anonymous encounter, not unlike his earlier idea of using animation to bring to life masterpieces of paintings. And, curiously enough, elements of the paintings he contemplates using in his animation project do occur in the narrative. The “frozen canal, and people on the quaint skates they used then, sliding about in the old fashioned curves” (9) of an old Dutch Master appear when Albinus, Margot, and Rex witness a figure skater’s routine: “A girl in white tights with a silvery, fluff-hemmed short skirt had come running across the ice on the toes of her skates and, having gained impetus, described a lovely curve...” (150). The next painting of “a wet road in the mist and a couple of riders” (9) foreshadows the “two cyclists crouched

over their handlebars” (236) Albinus will swerve to avoid, thereby incurring his accident and blindness. Finally, he considers giving his film a cyclic structure, beginning it in a tavern in which a “little man in red” (8) is seen and “ending it all with the first picture” (9); it is in a cinema (the twentieth century’s version of the tavern as popular place of escapist entertainment) that he first meets Margot, whose “bright red frock”¹¹ is mentioned on pp. 26, 32, 64, and the film he sees on this occasion enacts the final outcome of the novel; tumbled furniture, a man with a gun, and a girl receding in both cases (*cf.* pp 20 as well as 291-292).

The appeal of arguing for such a hidden subtext on the grounds of the evidence quoted is the happy effect of the puzzle-solver approach. It is certainly gratifying to convince ourselves we have arrived at a plot’s overlooked meaning by noticing strange correspondences between its images. In this case, however, the evidence offers little more than the frustrating sense of approximation mentioned earlier, with more than one missing link leaving our solution less tangible than we could wish for. Incomplete reconstruction of a puzzle’s internal logic usually calls for gaps to be filled with surmising, a practice more appropriate to conspiratorial thinking than literary criticism. Moreover, this solution suggests that the dissociation in question is a product of Albinus’ making. If Dante manages to distance himself from the troubling object of desire through his own design by a show of strength, the same cannot be said of Albinus. His dissociation from the real Margot, far from being remedial, is a harmful delusion that ultimately causes his undoing in the narrative’s overt plot. Like Margot, Albinus is continuously deluded by the external agency of factitious images originating and operating outside the sphere of his design and influence. The narrator

¹¹ Edmund Wilson also expected that the red frock would make an appearance in the final scene. After reading the novel he wrote to Nabokov: “I thought the unfortunate hero was going to develop color audition and detect the whereabouts of the girl by hearing her red dress, or something” (Karlinsky 58).

himself gives the novel's protagonists too much credit when he speaks of "the free city of the mind" (8), for the reader can judge to what extent ideas, moods, and desires in *LITD* are distributed between one another according to forces and motives the characters are unaware of. It is for such a purpose, to reveal to the careful reader what his careless characters cannot grasp, that Nabokov fills his narrative with so many "clues".

But what happens when the character is also the narrator producing the clues? The attempt to answer this question shall organize my deliberations in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

The Fool's Gambit in *Despair*

There is a subtle man, and the same is deceived.

Melville *The Confidence-man*

In Nabokov's seventh novel, *Despair*, the chocolate manufacturer Hermann Karlovich believes he has found his identical double, a vagrant named Felix Wohlfahrt. The former murders the latter hoping the corpse's identity will be mistaken, upon which his wife is to collect his life insurance and meet him abroad, but when the body is discovered it quickly becomes apparent that no similarities exist between the two men. The novel ends as the police are about to arrest Hermann.

The first ten chapters of *Despair* comprise a manuscript written by Hermann shortly after the murder. He is aware his plan has failed from the outset of narration (he has read various newspaper accounts of the case while awaiting his wife's arrival in Pignan), but withholds this information from us. The novel, via the retrospective narrative, presents an agitated consciousness and memory struggling to construct a *post hoc* account of recent events. Hermann's memory is impaired by awareness of failure and frequently confuses elements of past scenes with earlier or later ones. Added to this, he makes numerous unrestrained self-aggrandizing boasts that discredit the objectivity of his self-portraiture, so much so that R. Victoria Arana has called *Despair* "an allegory about narcissistic art works" (126-127). These combined traits undermine Hermann's reliability as narrator, and have in turn lead Stephen Suagee to advise readers not to attempt to disentangle the reality of what is

narrated from the shortcomings and fantasies of the narrator remembering: “We can try to sort real from unreal, but since we must use as a reference the document of a self-deluding neurotic, the task is futile” (58).

Other critics show less enthusiasm for discrediting altogether the narrative’s overt reality, although they agree on the subject of Hermann’s insanity.¹ William Carroll writes: “Nabokov reifies insanity as no one else ever has. *Despair* represents an important stage in his long exploration of paranoia and the more extreme forms of lunacy” (83). In an early article, Julian Connolly states that Hermann’s readiness to mislead the reader, usually followed by his playfully admitting to having done so, “suggests that the speaker possesses a divided soul” (*Dostoevsky* 156). Some years later, he reexamined Hermann’s deceitfulness, and interpreted it as an offshoot of self-delusion, his refusal to recognize “an unpalatable truth he does not wish to acknowledge” (*Nabokov’s* 145), *i.e.* his wife’s affair with her cousin Ardalion. The ensuing narrative offers a kind of exercise in pathological self-transformation through denial. For his part, John Kimney describes the narrative voice of *Despair* as “the utterance of a deranged individual whose personal form of expression reveals sexual aberrations and scatological predilections” (103). Finally, René Roelof Overmeer holds that the text embodies what he calls *alienated writing*: « une écriture nourrie par la conscience que ses relations avec l’espace-temps qu’elle implique sont continuellement changeantes et problématiques et déterminées par des forces que l’écriture met en mouvement mais ne contrôle pas » (61). In his essay, Overmeer argues that Hermann lacks control over his existence, causing anxiety and despair to surface in his writing, also

¹ Barbara Wyllie alone goes as far as Suagee when she writes that “in *Despair* [Nabokov] presents the reader with a text that is overwhelmed by the flawed psyche of Hermann Karlovich, obliterating every means by which to establish a context of actuality, obscuring entirely any evidence of an independent, controlling authorial presence in the crazed fabric of the narrative” (39).

characterized by a lack of control.

Because he radically denies the possibility of ascertaining the veracity of the incidents described in the narrative, Suagee differs from these critics by refusing to explain “why Hermann is insane” (60), and remains convinced that readers doing so will only “pursue each clue to its baffling cul-de-sac” (61). And indeed, how does one diagnose a sickness when the patient freely admits to providing a description of symptoms he may not be suffering from? Hermann’s admission of deceitfulness incites Robert Rogers to write that “psychoanalysis must lay down its arms before the problem of creative foolery in *Despair*” (164). But granted that the unreliability of a mad narrative makes it difficult to verify the facts referred to in it, if we wish to avoid circular logic, we must nevertheless manage to discern symptoms of madness at work in the narrative before we dismiss it as unreliable on the grounds of its being the product of madness. Does it suffice to say that Hermann is mad because he claims he is not (8), moments after telling us that one of his essential traits is a “light-hearted, inspired lying” (4)? Answering in the affirmative would involve us in an Epimenides paradox, for we would thereby accept as truth the liar’s statement that he lies, but not his statement that he is not mad.

However, if we look, not at what Hermann’s words refer to, but rather at the way they act as referential signs, we can begin to identify how, if not why, madness manifests itself in his linguistic expressions, in order to finally determine whether or not it *does* manifest itself. Though critics vary as to the causes of Hermann’s madness, there is a consensus that it takes shape in a language that has ceased to act as an expression of a reality existing independently from the words expressing it. The words Hermann uses have severed themselves from the world Hermann lives in, and the novel’s most significant instance of this

occurs when he claims to have found his double for, as we come to realize sometime before he does, “there never is a double in *Despair*, then, only Hermann’s desire for one” (Stuart 118). Is it possible to explain this desire for resemblance as indicative of experiences more common than the marginal one of madness? In Nabokov’s novel this desire is obviously objectionable because it leads to murder, and Kimney writes that *Despair* investigates “the deadliness of resemblances or doubles with respect to society in terms of communism, to human beings in terms of narcissism, and to true art in terms of imitation” (101). I would like to look at each point separately, in order to determine whether Hermann’s words, by failing to refer to an external reality in respect to the three cases identified by Kimney, evince symptoms imputable to insane or normative modes of thought.

Hermann as thinker, or “the deadliness of resemblances with respect to society in terms of communism”

Hermann informs us of his sympathy with the communist cause when he proclaims his faith in the imminent realization of its political agenda: “communism shall indeed create a beautifully square world of identical brawny fellows, broad-shouldered and microcephalous” (20). Later, he notices an “allegorical meaning” underlying his resemblance to Felix:

This remarkable physical likeness probably appealed to me (subconsciously!) as the promise of that ideal sameness which is to unite people in the classless society of the future [...] I visualize a new world where all men will resemble one another as Hermann and Felix did [...] a world where the worker fallen dead at the feet of his machine will be at once replaced by his perfect double smiling the serene smile of perfect socialism. (158-159)

In both instances, Hermann affixes homogenization as the intended aim communism strives towards. In light of the novel's outcome (the heterogeneity of Hermann and Felix), it would seem that Nabokov discredits such an aim by having an undiscerning madman serve as its mouthpiece. Nabokov's authorial comment thus might be interpreted as a condemnation of a socio-economic theory of man that fails to perceive and appreciate the specificity of individual existence. Yet an accurate presentation of the theory resulting from direct engagement with its literature reveals that this exact condemnation was previously formulated by the founding theorist of communism, Karl Marx. Consequently, what initially seems to be little more than a straightforward parody of communism on Nabokov's part finally involves something much more complex and significant in terms of characterization.²

The fact that Hermann first speaks of communism, then shifts to socialism, evinces a certain doctrinal haziness, a hodgepodge of ideas that may have elicited the following remark by Dabney Stuart: "to call [Hermann] a Marxist is to grant him an inappropriate sense of academics" (123). In fact Hermann seriously misconstrues the basic axioms of communism, and delivers an apology for the exact conditions of labour Marx finds so appalling in a bourgeois economy. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx laments the dehumanizing loss of individuality caused by industrial modes of production that convert human movement into mechanical movement: "Owing to the extensive use of machinery and to division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character" (479). Specificity of individual labour is the first thing that disappears when the worker is no longer expected to possess

² David Rampton does something similar with Nabokov's use of Dostoevsky in *Despair*. Both Hermann's mockeries and Nabokov's "bravura dismissals" (83) targeting Dostoevsky provide misleading guides for understanding the relation between the two authors' works in *Despair*. Other approaches, including an engagement with Dostoevskian text and scholarship, bring to light many affinities between *Despair* and *Crime and Punishment*. Cf. "Critical Choices: Reading Nabokov's *Despair*." In *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 38.1 (2002): 75-87.

skills dependent on a specific aptitude or specialized knowledge acquired over lengthy periods of time and with great personal endeavour (e.g. dexterity of manual movements in hand-made products), but is reduced to a cog performing simple, repetitive movements, easily acquired by all with little or no effort (e.g. push-button motion of machine-made products). Marx was consistent throughout his writings in this respect, and repeated elsewhere the same indictment of alienating labour as process of homogenization: in *The Capital*, he writes that under capitalism men “reduce their individual private labour to the standard of homogeneous human labour” (326); and again in *The Grundrisse*: “Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference” (240). In this last case the labourer is divided from the product of his labour because it no longer reflects a contribution specifically his, only a contribution easily guaranteed by the next labourer, for all men, regardless of sex, age, educational background, etc., have the physical and mental abilities to push a button or pull a lever. Under such conditions, labour ceases “to be organically linked with particular individuals in any specific form” (241). The conditions Marx denounces allow the worker’s indifferent replacement as he falls “dead at the feet of his machine”, conditions Hermann believes communism promises to instate. Marx anticipated a process of individuation would soon follow the elimination of class struggle and abolishment of capitalist conditions of production, so that what Hermann believes communism is striving towards is actually what it seeks to break away from.³

³ Subsequent Marxists have interpreted Marx’s views along the lines represented herein: Antonio Gramsci coined the expression “cultural hegemony” to designate the practice of exporting values from the centre towards the periphery as an attempt to eliminate difference; both Walter Benjamin and later Theodor Adorno believed that monoculture was the end result of a culture industry preoccupied with the production of

Clearly, communism presents a “deadly threat to society in terms of resemblance” only if we accept Hermann’s deformation of it. But his version of communism merely reflects a confused and subjective processing of recondite source material. The specificity of a painstakingly-wrought system of ideas is suppressed and subverted in an individual act of appropriation which channels and consequently modifies meaning through its shortcomings and limitations. By deforming the ideas, Hermann’s words cease to refer to an external reality, and we can now attempt a first answer to the question formulated above: does this non-referential use of language reveal pathological symptoms?

As misinterpreter of Marx, Hermann is definitely not representative of madness or anomaly, but of general reading practices, or better yet, of general thinking practices that do not or cannot always rely on first-hand contact with the texts developing the ideas they claim to uphold. It is the fate of abstruse philosophical theories concerning the social, economical, political, religious, etc. organization of man to meet with general incomprehension, misreading, and misrepresentation when their assimilation occurs in unpropitious circumstances (the polemical histories of most ideas attest to this). Marina Kanevskaya argues that the tendency to misconstrue is an irrefutable proof of Hermann’s insanity, *i.e.* his pathological habit of “project[ing] his willful interpretation on different objects around him” (28). But in this Hermann, far from exhibiting symptoms of madness or anomaly, comes off as remarkably typical. For one, he is not much different from Smurov, the protagonist of Nabokov’s *The Eye* (1930). Though Smurov holds anti-Marxist views, he also fails to address the actual theory when he formulates his refutation and concludes his caricature-

commodity, not art; Herbert Marcuse analyzed how society in the advanced stages of industrial development had become highly effective at recovering dissent and sedition, transforming them into more marketable products, ultimately laying the groundwork of a *one-dimensional* world man could no longer avoid being a part of. Thus Hermann’s communist vocation is unorthodox because it defends a state of affairs communists have unanimously and continuously denounced.

dismissal with an *ad hominem* outburst: “Everything is fluid, everything depends on chance, and all in vain were the efforts of that crabbed bourgeois in Victorian checkered trousers, author of *Das Kapital*, the fruit of insomnia and migraine” (28). Moreover, this aspect of Hermann brings to mind one of J. G. Ballard’s trademark counterintuitive observations in which he finds an affinity between Leopold Bloom and Adolph Hitler. In “Alphabets of Unreason”, Ballard writes of the “information overflow” that threatens to overwhelm the average man in the twentieth century where hyper-developed and highly sophisticated systems of mass communication impart a wealth of data on a daily basis continuously superseded by the incessant flow of new incoming data. According to Ballard, Bloom and Hitler - otherwise as unlike each other as Hermann and Felix - are representatives of this condition of modern man:

Hitler was one of the rightful inheritors of the twentieth century – the epitome of the half-educated man. Wandering about the streets of Vienna shortly before the First World War, his head full of vague artistic yearnings and clap-trap picked up from popular magazines, whom does he most closely resemble? Above all Leopold Bloom, his ostensible arch-enemy, wandering around Joyce’s Dublin at about the same time, his head filled with the same clap-trap and the same yearnings. Both are children of the reference library and the self-improvement manual, of mass newspapers creating a new vocabulary of violence and sensation. Hitler was the half-educated psychopath inheriting the lavish communications system of the twentieth century. (223)

The nature of production and distribution of information in an age of proliferating communication both determine the nature of its consumption as well as the final shape it assumes in the mind. We know that Hermann has been deprived of a university education by the outbreak of the First World War (4), yet he repeatedly depicts himself as an *ex cathedra* repository of superior wisdom: he condescendingly dismisses his wife’s political views as “habitual and trivial” (20), while he self-assuredly presents his own as authoritative; he considers himself enough of a connoisseur of art to declare Ardalion, his wife’s cousin and

lover, “a rotten painter” (30); he holds no modest opinion of his literary genius, for he begins his narrative thus: “If I were not perfectly sure of my power to write and of my marvelous ability to express ideas with the most grace and vividness” (3), yet is unable to complete the sentence. He flaunts a wealth of erudite knowledge that events continuously debunk, exposing the clueless, incoherent, deluded ramblings of a “half-educated” man.⁴ His personal metaphysics offer another example of this.

Hermann, for whom Marxism gets “the nearest to absolute truth” (124), holds metaphysical views that go against one of Marx’s strictures, views that moreover come into conflict with his erroneous interpretation of communism’s intended aim. Marx categorically rejected religious beliefs in God, not on the basis that some are more plausible or agreeable than others, but because he firmly believed that they all function as ideology, a means by which the bourgeoisie legitimizes its domination and oppression of the proletariat. As to Hermann, he does not reject the notion of God *per se*, but more specifically this notion as envisaged by others. Of God he writes: “the fairy tale about him is not really mine, it belongs to strangers, to all men; it is soaked through by the evil-smelling effluvia of millions of other souls that have spun about a little under the sun and then burst” (101-102). His appeal for the

⁴ Ballard’s “half-educated” epithet seems needlessly divisive when applied to the early twentieth century, and even more so today. With the emergence of the hyper-specialization of knowledge in academic discourses, there is cause to include educated man in the phenomenon described. Where each discipline spawns areas of specialization that isolate scholars from one another, communication is hindered, and a dependence on expository summaries of areas of non-specialization ensues: professionals more and more have recourse to internet search engines, Wikipedia, word-of-mouth, vulgarization anthologies, time-saving cinematic adaptations, etc. as sources of information. The end result is that ideas and works discussed between individuals have been encountered and assimilated in second-hand forms, creating networks of exchange in which non-referential language is the norm (in the sense that the language refers to the mediation of ideas, not the ideas themselves). Joyce foresaw such a situation, and used newspaper headlines as a metaphor to illustrate it. In the “Aeolus” episode of *Ulysses*, which takes place in a newspaper office, the narrative is divided by headlines, headings ridiculously reductive or unrepresentative of the sections they introduce. Because the cognitive subject has a limited capacity to process and store information, and because innovations in means of communication ceaselessly increase the amount of information produced and distributed, modern man, like Hermann, must contend with and finally content himself to a certain extent with misconstrued, deformed opinions, or *headline* ideas.

individual's right to choose a God of his own making – the concept of God thereby made acceptable - clashes with both Marxism's categorical rejection of the concept and his political vision of monolithic men united in homogenized labour. If men are to be subjected to identical conditions of existence, why would they require discrete representations of God? The internal contradiction within Hermann's set of convictions arises from the fact that he completely misses Marx's point about ideology, for he also rejects the notion of an afterlife, once again not on the ground that it functions as a negation of an exploitative reality, but because he is terrified at the prospect of being incapable of determining whether the beings that greet him in the hereafter are genuine or not: "what guarantee do you possess that those beloved ghosts are genuine; that it is really your dear dead mother and not some petty demon mystifying you, masked as your mother and impersonating her with consummate art and naturalness?" (102). A morbid obsession with suppositious states of being to follow the present, earthly one is not an aspect of the "absolute truth" Marxism sought to propagate, but rather an aspect of what it perceived as "an absolute lie" and sought to eradicate. It is difficult to imagine an earnest Marxist preoccupied with the same concerns that worry Hermann in the following passage: "when the dearest being I know in this world meets me in the next and the arms I know stretch out to embrace me, I shall emit a yell of sheer horror, I shall collapse on the paradisiacal turf, writhing" (103).

So Hermann misconstrues. But the opposite scenario, one in which he were to display an aptitude for sustained intellectual exercise and accurate interpretation applied to various fields, although it would not be indicative of madness, would nevertheless be much more anomalous than the present scenario, in which he merely projects subjective interpretations unto objective realities. Though it has the potential to develop into either the endearing

cosmopolitan humanism of Leopold Bloom or the xenophobic nonsense of a Fuhrer (not to mention the many “median” types in between), it is the common, not the exceptional, plight of man under modern conditions of communication. If we are going to declare Hermann insane based on evidence provided in his narrative, we must look elsewhere. And since Ballard speaks of psychopathology in Hitler’s case because his “clap-trap” leads to disproportionate hatred and mass murder, the next logical place to look at is Hermann’s murder of Felix.

Hermann as murderer, or “the deadliness of resemblances with respect to human beings in terms of narcissism”

Although we might disagree with it, the legal system does not automatically equate murder with madness. If such were the case, the insanity defense would be pleaded indiscriminately, and verdicts would universally exonerate the accused. Accordingly, the law looks for motives in each specific case that help establish the state of mind of the killer and determine whether or not he was in full possession of his mental faculties at the time of the crime. Brian Boyd insists that Hermann’s motives for murdering Felix are “virtually non-existent” (RY 383). At best, we discern the motive of crime for crime’s sake, an act committed by a megalomaniac for whom “self is the key word [...] Hermann sees his crime as a work of art and himself as the consummate artist” (*ibid* 384). Helen Oakley agrees, writing that in *Despair* “the criminal act is not just a means to an end but it is also an aesthetic pleasure in its own right” (482). Narcissistic Hermann, enthralled by his discovery of what he believes is a marvel of resemblance, remorselessly exploits this similitude by

murdering Felix in order to become the genius that committed the greatest crime ever conceived by human mind. In short, Hermann commits the crime simply because it is the perfect crime.⁵

There is truth in this contention, but matters can be complicated if we break down Hermann's motive for murder according to Aristotle's theory of causation. In this case, the material cause of the murder is the physiognomic identity between two individuals (without it, there can be no prospect of success, hence no murder); the efficient cause is the bullet lodged in Felix's back; the final cause is Hermann's desire to make a profit by collecting his life insurance (here I differ from Boyd's perfect crime incentive); finally, the formal cause is Hermann's erroneous assumption that the material cause, the likeness of murderer and victim, exists both inside and outside his mind. Why is this important? Because Hermann would never have conceived the final cause (both the one I propose as well as Boyd's) as a possibility if he had taken the time to verify all the evidence denying the similitude, and the efficient cause would consequently never have been triggered (pun intended). The final-cause motive of the murder, its *telos* or purpose, is prompted into being by a delusion, a similitude that never was. The real reason for, or first motor of, the murder is Hermann's inability to discern objective reality, and his stubborn refusal to admit such an inability. But since the agent leading to murder - a perceived similitude where there is only dissimilitude - does not refer to anything real, we may do well to ask ourselves whether or not the testimony relating the murder refers to events that actually take place.

In a sense, it does. Nabokov made use of two kinds of sources for his treatment of

⁵ Hermann's presumption leaves no room for modesty, since he arrogantly declares the superiority of the crime he has conceived to those conceived by both famous criminals and renowned writers of crime fiction: "But what are they - Doyle, Dostoyevsky, Leblanc, Wallace - what are all the great novelists who wrote of nimble criminals, what are all great criminals who never read the nimble novelists - what are they in comparison with me? Blundering fools!" (122).

murder in *Despair*. The first is topical, and D. Barton Johnson has unearthed actual crimes committed in Berlin in the late 1920s involving murderers' attempts to cash in life insurance policies after performing identity switches with their victims. As extra-textual commentary on topical events synchronous with the writing of the novel, Hermann's language does refer to something external.⁶

Most critics have chosen to focus on a second kind of source in *Despair*, the frequent allusions to literary texts. Carroll surveys these and concludes that "Nabokov has condemned Hermann to live in a symbolic world where literary allusions form a constricting and menacing web" (102). Thus the self-proclaimed autonomous narrator actually inhabits a universe structured by literary antecedents. Likewise, Alexander Dolinin observes how Hermann, ensnared in an "intertextual trap", frequently misquotes or incorrectly attributes literary passages, and in the process exposes his limited knowledge of the classics he claims his own narrative will outdo.⁷ Gary Adelman switches to a focus on Dostoevsky, but arrives at similar conclusions: "The pathological hero is doomed to the inexorable plot of a Dostoevsky novel [...] The intertextuality to Dostoevsky is Hermann's despair" (106). So does Connolly, who argues that though Hermann repeatedly derides the Russian writer, he nevertheless confirms, by emulating so many character traits of Raskolnikov, "the continuing cogency of Dostoevsky's conception of 'crime and punishment'" (*Dostoevsky* 160).

⁶ Cf. "Sources of Nabokov's *Despair*." In *Nabokov at Cornell*, ed. Gavriel Shapiro. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003. 10-19. Johnson also notes that Hermann's mention of an "oaf with vampirish tastes" (173) may have been alluding to Peter Kürten, the Düsseldorf serial killer arrested in 1930. Johnson cannot explain the rationale of this allusion – there were no schemes involving life insurance/identity switch in Kürten's case – and consequently does not give it the credence he does to cases whose schemes are closely emulated by Hermann. Though I do not propose a rationale for such an allusion, the novel actually contains another passage that supports it. At one point, Hermann notices one characteristic that distinguishes him from Felix: "On my forehead a vein stands out like a capital M imperfectly drawn" (17). In 1931, Fritz Lang released *M*, a film loosely based on Kürten. In the film, the murderer (played by Peter Lorre) is captured after a blind salesman draws an M on the back of his coat to help police identify him.

⁷ Cf. "The Caning of Modernist Profaners: Parody in *Despair*." In *Cycnos*. 12.2 (1995): 43-54.

Thus it is via Hermann's repeated allusions to *Crime and Punishment* that a second reference to an actual murder is made in *Despair*. Connolly rightly insists that Hermann is a literary double of Raskolnikov, in that both find justification for murders motivated by financial motives in abstract ideas concerning their superiority (Raskolnikov's *Übermensch* theory and Hermann's artistic genius). That being said, Hermann has another double in Dostoevsky's novel, *i.e.* the detective Porfiry Petrovich. Porfiry tirelessly taunts and toys with Raskolnikov, exploits his hypochondria and exhausts him psychologically in order to provoke an unintentional confession. Late in the novel he describes his method thus: "And I am willing to bet that you suppose I am trying now to cajole you by flattery. Well, perhaps that is just what I am doing, he, he, he! Perhaps, Rodion Romanovich, you ought not to believe what I say, perhaps you should never believe me completely" (389). For his part, Hermann claims "light-hearted, inspired lying" (4) is one of his essential traits and freely acknowledges he fills his narrative with pitfalls for the reader: "I am merely producing gleeful sounds. The kind of glee one experiences upon making an April fool of someone. And a damned good fool I *have* made of someone. Who is he? Gentle reader, look at yourself in the mirror, as you seem to like mirrors so much" (24).⁸ Evidently, both characters enjoy misleading their audience and admit doing so. Porfiry dangles fabricated evidence as a decoy before a distraught suspect, hoping his shattered nerves will take the bait. He is convinced Raskolnikov is guilty based on psychological profile (he is the only client of the murdered pawnbroker who did not come forward to claim his pawned wares, and he faints in a police station while the crime is being discussed), but since he has no forensic evidence to support

⁸ Wladimir Troubetzkoy calls Hermann "un trompeur professionnel" (194) playing a monumental April Fools' joke on the reader, but concludes, like Dolinin, that the joke is ultimately on him: "Nabokov a accentué et enrichi l'intertextualité de son oeuvre au point que son héros est noyé dans la littérature dont il est originaire et qu'il n'est qu'un mannequin littéraire" (204).

this, he simply makes it up. Likewise, Hermann's narrative eccentricities at times seem to endow him with the profile of a psychopath capable of murder, but what if the evidence he provides for murder in the novel proves fabricated upon closer examination?

There are numerous places named in *Despair*: Berlin, Dresden, Moscow, Paris, Pignan, Pilsen, Prague, Reval, Roussillon, St-Petersburg, and Zwickau. These toponyms all correspond to the topographical coordinates of their extra-literary counterparts. For example, Berlin is not capriciously placed outside Germany, or Moscow separated from St-Petersburg by a mere twenty minutes walking distance. When Hermann describes the site of the murder, however, all loci suddenly find themselves inexplicably dislodged from their familiar locations.

Felix is murdered in the village of Waldau near a lot of land purchased by Ardalion. The latter provides Hermann with a map of the area, "a three hours drive from Berlin" (33), but this map proves to be very curious indeed, since it seems to defeat its purpose by locating useful information on how to get there in its margins. Hermann asks the reader to visualize the following: as he holds the map, Berlin (point of departure) is located somewhere near his left elbow (ergo off the map); a railway travels as far as Koenigsdorf, or Hermann's wristwatch (also off the map), at which point it changes direction and heads towards Eichenberg, or Hermann's waistcoat button (again, off the map). A bus covers the seventeen kilometers separating Koenigsdorf from Waldau, or Hermann's left thumb nail (thus located on the very edge of the map's left side). The information concerning Eichenberg is given because Hermann plans to take the Berlin train to Koenigsdorf, from there take the bus to Waldau, murder Felix, and then walk to the station in Eichenberg to take the train back to Berlin.

For a number of reasons, this map proves one of the most puzzling oddities found in the novel. What do we make of a document that marginalizes the information it is meant to convey? If only a portion of this information makes it onto the map's periphery, what does the remaining graph describe? And if the map is merely a document of the areas surrounding Waldau, not of Waldau itself, then why cite it as a guide to facilitate orientation? Does it make sense to use a map of Toronto in order to explain to someone how to get from one place to another in Ottawa simply because one does not have a map of the latter city at hand? If there is reason to doubt Hermann's sanity, then surely this is it.

But the map's most striking oddity lies elsewhere. Even if Hermann is using the wrong map, his directions are clear and precise, and we cannot fail to get from Koenigsdorf to Waldau if we follow them because they indicate the exact distance between point A and point B (seventeen km), and even suggest a convenient mode of transportation (we are told that a bus makes the trip three times a day). Unfortunately, clarity and precision are useless without accuracy. If Hermann travels three hours northward from Berlin (left elbow) to get to Koenigsdorf, this should place him somewhere in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Koenigsdorf, Waldau, and Eichenberg are common toponyms in Germany, but none are found north of Berlin. Maybe Hermann is holding the map upside-down? A number of Eichenbergs and Waldaus are located south of Berlin, but only in Kassel are they found walking distance from each other. The problem is that the only Koenigsdorf near a Waldau is in North-Rhine Westphalia, and they are forty-eight km apart, not seventeen as Hermann claims. There is another glitch: three hundred km separate the Waldau in North-Rhine Westphalia from the nearest Eichenberg, the one in Kassel, obviously an impossible distance to cover on foot in one day. Furthermore, the Waldau in Kassel is 386 km from Berlin, the one in North-Rhine

Westphalia 622 km; in 1930-31, neither distance could have been covered by car in three hours. Obviously, Hermann has taken the liberty to significantly reconfigure topographical coordinates here, but to what end?

Actually, another incident takes place in a topographically inaccurate location before the murder occurs. Hermann meets Felix in Tarnitz, located somewhere in Saxony (63), where he plans to arrange a later meeting between the two in Waldau. The problem, once again, is that the only *real* Tarnitz found in Germany is a street located in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, not a town in Saxony. A meeting is arranged in a non-place to arrange a murder committed in another non-place. Following the murder, Hermann wonders what might have happened if the meeting in Tarnitz had never taken place: “Yes thus [Felix] would still be sitting to this day, and I would keep remembering him, with wild anguish and passions; a huge aching tooth and nothing with which to pull it out; a woman whom one cannot possess; a place, which, owing to the peculiar topography of nightmares, keeps agonizingly out of reach” (63-64).⁹

⁹ Suagee argues that Tarnitz is “a kind of illusion within the book” (56) on the grounds that it is a construct of Hermann’s confused memory. He notes the following remnants of Hermann’s past found in Tarnitz: Felix’s stick appears there after Hermann dreams of it, though there is no sign of it during their earlier meeting in Prague (thus it is dreamt into being); the name Carl Spiess on a fishmonger’s sign recalls a homonymic fishmonger Hermann knew in a Volga village (*Despair* 68); double-trunk birch trees appear there but also near Ardalion’s lakeside lot; Hermann notices a familiar woman buying a carpet from a familiar Tartar. The woman turns out to be Christina Forsmann, a girl “whom Herman had known carnally in 1915” (67). Suagee does not mention two additional clues to strengthen his argument, namely the presence in Tarnitz of daisies: earlier, Hermann had explained that a field of daisies encountered in a dream “foretold meeting again one’s first lover” (22), thus the reference to Christina Forsmann, as well as the suggestion that the episode may have been dreamt. The second clue is Hermann’s comment associating Felix with an “aching tooth and nothing with which to pull it out” (68) had the meeting never taken place. Along with daisies, Hermann has also revealed that “to dream you had lost a tooth portended the death of someone you knew” (22). Thus if a Felix unmet in Tarnitz evokes a tooth Hermann cannot pull out, there is no evocation of death, *i.e.* no murder. Notwithstanding these, one difficulty remains if we wish to attribute the illusory nature of Tarnitz to Hermann’s faulty memory. Whether or not Tarnitz exists at all, Hermann is not the only character who erroneously locates it in Saxony. Early in the novel, Felix says he has worked the previous year as a gardener in a small village in Saxony (10). A few pages later he adds that the village is not far from Tarnitz (13). How could Felix have made the same mistake Hermann will later make when he travels to Saxony and comes across Tarnitz? If we answer that Hermann the author simply makes up Felix’s statement, he still consciously manipulates another’s testimony in his text, and in the process reveals an intention to locate Tarnitz in Saxony. Authorial intent, not faulty memory,

Let us ponder the implications of this confession. Hermann claims that had he avoided meeting Felix in Tarnitz, there would have been no murder, that he merely would have kept remembering him like a “place out of reach” located in the “peculiar topography of nightmares”. We now know that two loci in the novel fit this description: the Waldau and Tarnitz where the murder and meeting are supposed to have taken place do not exist on any real topographic map. This might lead us to believe that both the meeting and the murder never occurred (if the places where the acts are believed to have occurred do not exist, then the acts themselves cannot have occurred, at least not in a locus external to the imagination conceiving them), but then why write a 212-page confession insisting they did? Surely here we have clear evidence of madness: either Hermann is masochistically driven towards self-incrimination and seeks to convince others (and himself) he is guilty of murder, in which case the topographical inaccuracies are simply a slip on his part due to distraction or carelessness, or he is sadistically driven to induce others into error and false accusation by, once again, convincing them of his guilt, in which case the inaccuracies act as a gauge by which he measures his cunning against the reader’s percipience. In the first case, Hermann makes himself into a Christ-figure, a martyr bearing the yoke of a sin he has not committed. In the second, this “*trompeur professionnel*” becomes a Satan-figure, tempting others into the sin of righteousness by inducing them to accuse an innocent man. Both cases offer clear instances of delusional behaviour.

But, of course, we are not expected to go as far as the above sentences suggest. And in fact there is no reason to correlate madness with intentional acts of wrongful self-incrimination and deception of readership. If such were the case, “mad” Hermann would nevertheless have wielded enough lucidity to dissimulate non-loci in his narrative that have

conjures the topographical inaccuracy, and consequently the illusory meeting held there.

escaped detection by careful readers for over seventy years now. In the name of character consistency, it seems highly improbable that a purportedly mad narrator could uncharacteristically have displayed on this single occasion enough astuteness to elude a slew of rational literary critics.¹⁰ Moreover, the non-correspondence of topographical coordinates in fiction and the world is a liberty Nabokov would himself make use of in his later fiction such as *Pale Fire* and *Ada*, albeit in a radically different manner; whereas the loci are consistently dislodged and renamed in the latter works, Hermann merely dislodges (and never once renames) loci on two occasions in *Despair*, both of them related to the murder. Yet as writer of a “leisurely tale” he is not bound to faithful and consistent reproduction of the extra-textual world, and if he is caught telling a fib here and there, such non-referential use of language is not indicative of madness, but of the fiction writer’s prerogative of independent invention. As a result, we cannot assume that Hermann’s narrative will always accurately reflect objective and extra-textual realities, but let me reiterate the premise with which I began this essay: unreliability is not necessarily indicative of madness until we have proven that previous symptoms of madness exist to which we can then add that of unreliability (mad men may lie, but not all liars are mad). There are numerous reasons why Hermann might give false information about a murder that may or may not have occurred,

¹⁰Although critics can prove fallible. In Chapter four, Lydia tells Ardalion that her husband is travelling to Dresden, upon which the painter asks Hermann to send his “kindest regards to the Sistine” (65). The reference is to Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna*, located in the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister (Gallery of Old Masters) in Dresden. Claire Rosenfield makes an understandable mistake and assumes that Ardalion’s reply is intended to unmask a hack-artist “who believes that the Sistine Chapel is in Dresden” (77). She also claims that “the imperceptive narrator” (84) is one of the devices Nabokov employs to reveal Hermann’s madness. If so, Nabokov misses a superb opportunity to display this imperceptiveness at work by having his protagonist/narrator make the same misassumption Rosenfield makes. The point is not to fault Rosenfield’s otherwise insightful discussion of the novel; as a cultural signifier, the word Sistine conjures in most, if not all of us, the chapel in Rome before it does the painting in Dresden. Rather, the fact that Hermann does not make the misassumption should arouse suspicions concerning frequent examples of his obtuseness, which he might be using as a decoy distracting us from the astuteness he wields elsewhere, as in the case of the topographical inaccuracies that have remained undetected for so long. Thus the great April fools he is playing on his readers might be the obtuseness he displays with his clap-trap deformations and misconstruing noted earlier, all ultimately feigned.

some of which I have already suggested, and not the least being that he is writing a detective novel.¹¹ If Hermann's narrative does not contain a *real* murder (because the place a murder has occurred in is not *real*), then what we are left with is a plot relating a man's efforts to write a murder story. And since, as Oakley points out, the murder story's "generic triad of victim, villain, and detective" (480) is short one player in *Despair*, *i.e.* the detective, we can assume that the reader is meant to play the part in this radically new kind of detective story. Up to this point, we have not managed to solve the mystery of the root of Hermann's madness where his deformed communism and possibly false self-accusations of murder are concerned. But if we, the readers, are meant to act as detectives, does it not make sense to look for such evidence in relation to Hermann the writer?

Hermann as writer, or "the deadliness of resemblances or doubles with respect to true art in terms of imitation"

The novel's opening sentence delivers an unmitigated declaration of Hermann's self-assurance as writer. He considers the murder he devises an unsurpassed masterpiece (195), but since the world refuses to recognize it, he employs his "power to write and marvelous ability to express ideas" (3) in order to create a masterpiece analogous to the first. Critics disagree. Kimney insists that though Hermann "perceives himself as an ingenious, successful husband, criminal, and writer" (104), his lack of formal control over both events unfolding and figures of speech describing these events exposes "a failed criminal and writer" (107-

¹¹ One reason we can rule out, however, is denial, or a plea of innocence; the criminal hoping to exonerate himself of the charge of murder would not go about freely admitting his involvement, providing countless incriminating evidence against himself, and then dissimulate the counter-evidence acquitting him in an obscure footnote sure to be overlooked. If such were nevertheless the case, critics could diagnose Hermann as stupid, not mad.

108). As mentioned earlier, numerous critics discuss Hermann's debt to literary antecedents, and consequently dismiss his claims of originality as ill-founded. Of these, G.M. Hyde is certainly the harshest: "his 'novel' [is] a schizoid projection of shameless borrowings from Dostoyevsky (with a dash of Turgenev here and there) and an unforgivable misappropriation of one of Pushkin's greatest lyrics" (109). For his part, Boyd believes that Hermann's failure as a writer arises out of his egocentrism: "Hermann's bloated sense of self and his obliviousness to everyone else makes [sic] him for Nabokov the antithesis of the artist" (*RY* 385). The theory of both Harold Bloom and Gilles Lipovetsky can extend the implications of such assessments. As a writer unsuccessfully seeking to eschew a past tradition that resurfaces in his narrative, Hermann is representative of Bloom's "anxiety of influence".¹² As a writer gloating over a disproportionate sense of importance and self-complacency, yet producing little but slipshod formlessness, he is representative of the vacuous individualism that Lipovetsky finds prevalent in most post-modern fiction. However, to cite both these theorists, one must first agree with the critics' harsh judgment of Hermann's literary achievements. I would like to argue that his frenzied narrative dissimulates a care for design and innovative experimentation. For if his art comes off as disorderly and imitative on the surface, emanating an almost Dionysian lack of control, at times a concern for symmetry and innovativeness characteristic of the Apollonian underlies it.¹³

¹² Connolly claims that *Despair* presents "the desperate attempt of a character to defend himself against the potential influence of others by arrogating to himself the powers of a creative artist" (*Early* 144). In fact he later uses the expression "anxiety of influence" (154) to characterize Hermann's discourse, but in relation to the theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, not Bloom's.

¹³ Although I do not intend to make explicit use of Nietzsche's theory of aesthetics here, it is interesting to note that the Dionysian-Apollonian conflict ties in with the theme of the double in the novel. Hermann's personal life is in shambles (unhappy marriage, struggling business) and the identification between himself and another - significantly named Felix - may be read as a Dionysian dissolution of painful discrete existence through a process of undifferentiation (the Dionysian return to original unity). The Apollonian impulse restores Hermann's individuality by converting this unfruitful identity into the incentive to create an artistic narrative (the Apollonian drive towards beauty and form). That the Dionysian strain is the dominant one in Hermann's

Unarguably, lack of narrative control is the salient characteristic of *Despair*. On occasion, Hermann must remember himself in the middle of a frenzied outburst: “My hands tremble, I want to shriek or to smash something with a bang [...] Must be calm, must keep my head” (4). Elsewhere, he unwittingly incorporates pet peeves of his, such as the “ignoramus” habit of calling certain tales “paradoxes” (108), into his own speech patterns (118). He thus shows a tendency to blur the outlines between self and other, as in the following incident in which he mistakenly attributes his assertion to others, committing a kind of inverted-plagiarism. Discussing the topic of resemblances with Ardalion, Hermann mentions the following: “People have told me I remind them of Amundsen” (41) - although he has earlier confided to us: “Somebody told me once that I looked like Amundsen” (16). The “somebody” becomes “people”, the singular plural, because Hermann vaguely recalls telling the reader what someone had noticed about him once, but then confusedly projects this aside by making it into another’s unsolicited remark supporting the original one. If the identity of the second person commenting on the resemblance is none other than Hermann, then the first might prove just as insubstantial. Such dissolution, or splitting up, of identity occurs again in the novel when Hermann splits himself in two in order to watch himself make love to his wife¹⁴, so that the reader is finally left asking if the whole narrative is not merely comprised of various externalizations of Hermann’s agitated internal states. And indeed, consider the imagery with which he describes these states: “if anything did echo in my vast inward wilderness it was merely the dim sensation of some force driving me along” (8); “There must have been a tremendous stock of shag inside me. I hide in the natural jungle

case seems confirmed in his confused hope that communism will bring about an undifferentiated labour force capable of suppressing individuality.

¹⁴ Hermann calls this double “imp Split” (27), an anagram of “limp tips” that would explain the need for a surrogate lover.

that has grown out of me” (21). It is no wonder that Hermann unfolds a hopelessly disjointed narrative replete with non-sequiturs, devoid of the structural coherence and visionary innovation we have come to expect of Nabokov.

Of course Hermann’s text, at other times, does fulfill such expectations. The closing sentence of chapter ten is a case in point: “let the reader imagine the position of a man living under a certain name, not because he cannot obtain another passp-” (196). Here, Hermann is interrupted by a maid come to clean his room, upon which he abandons his manuscript in mid-sentence (actually in mid-word). Oakley argues that because Hermann initially intends to write ten chapters, while the interruption forces him to write an eleventh one, this and other examples undermine the view he holds of himself as architect “of the most flawless narrative structures” (491), with the final effect being not one “of smooth control but of deconstructive anarchy” (493).¹⁵ To be sure, a writer exposed to the vicissitudes of the contextual space in which he writes does not enjoy the self-control and composure normally required for sustained intellectual efforts. One thinks of Charles Kinbote, narrator-writer of *Pale Fire*, who warns the reader on the novel’s first page of “a very loud amusement park outside [his] present lodgings” (9) that ultimately proves a “carousel inside and outside [his] head” (21). Can a man whose equanimity is so easily disrupted be expected to perform the exacting task of writing a commentary on a 999-line poem written by a friend recently assassinated, as Kinbote claims to have done?

But what does Hermann do with his source of distraction? If he meant to write ten chapters, he could simply have picked up where he had left off when subsequent favorable circumstances will allow him to begin the eleventh one. However, because the sentence

¹⁵ Connolly interprets the incident along similar lines: “Hermann cannot even control the formal structure of his manuscript. Determined to write a ten-chapter work, he finds himself forced to add an eleventh chapter” (*Early* 156).

fragment of the unfinished chapter is kept, it ceases to convey a sense of lack of control to become a stylistic device that *shows* rather than *tells* of an interruption. This distinction is crucial in light of the novel's last chapter, written when Hermann resumes his manuscript. The last two pages of the chapter, dated the first of April, *tell* of Hermann's predicament as he is seconds away from being apprehended by policemen, a fact that casts serious doubt on the events described therein. For it is unlikely that Hermann would have had time or been able to write down events as they occurred, events that by their very nature would have deprived him of the ability to write (it is doubtful that policemen would stand patiently by while a murderer puts the finishing touches on his manuscript). The fact that the last paragraph is actually spoken as an open challenge to the police makes the likelihood of its being recorded in writing even less plausible. Hermann would have been interrupted by policemen entering his room in the same way his maid interrupts him in the previous chapter, albeit, one presumes, much more violently, for the effectiveness of an arrest is its unexpectedness meant to catch the criminal unawares. It is unlikely that a maid, whose employment requires discretion, manages to surprise Hermann, while police conspicuously reveal themselves beforehand and stand idly by awaiting the criminal's instructions. More likely, the last pages of the novel anticipate an outcome Hermann imagines is inevitable (but only if a murder has occurred, something we are unable to ascertain without ignoring evidence that lead us to believe otherwise). As such, they cannot claim to report actual facts, unless Hermann is writing them after his arrest in police custody. Such *post hoc* writing is found in the opening pages of the eleventh chapter, where the events leading to the maid's interruption in and of the previous chapter are given after the fact, not during. The interrupted writing itself is broken-off, left unfinished like the tenth chapter's last sentence; it

shows us the interruption. Uninterrupted writing enjoys the luxury of polish and smooth closure; it *tells* us of an interruption. The interruption that does take place is left as is because it exposes by comparison the contrived artificiality of the other, factitious, interruption; whatever does happen to Hermann at the end of his “leisurely tale” cannot correspond to the events he describes, events that militate against synchronous textual encapsulation.¹⁶

I do not wish to emphasize the possibility that the novel’s dénouement is merely imagined. What matters is that as a writer Hermann recovers from an unforeseen difficulty, converting it into a stylistic device that acts as a clue about a subsequent passage. Because he manages to find a use for it, the unfinished chapter’s mid-sentence break, rather than expose his lack of control, reveals his function as organizing principle, his ability to utilize unexpected aspects of his text to serve a specific end. In this case, as a token of the illusory nature of the events described in the eleventh chapter, the sentence break calls our attention to the real final chapter of the novel, *i.e.* the tenth one, in that it is the last chapter that can be said to describe actual events. As such, Hermann attains the ten-chapter target he had originally decided on. Moreover, far from being an example of derivative or imitative art, Hermann’s sentence break anticipates the endings of two famous twentieth-century novels,

¹⁶ One might argue that the last pages are not polished, that the paragraphs are short and fragmentary, symptomatic of a writer pressed for time and rushing narration. But there are some indications that they are the fruit of deliberation, not haste. The double-spaces interspersing the paragraphs, a device used for the first time in the novel, imply a span of time gone by in-between the writing of each, a fact we can confirm in the penultimate paragraph, for it begins with a description of an action Hermann could only have committed during the interval between the writing down of the paragraph and the previous one - one cannot peep at a window while writing (and in fact Hermann writes “I have peeped”, not “I am peeping”). Now if time passes by between each paragraph, consider the following difficulty. In the fourth to last paragraph, Hermann notes that a gendarme is making his way through a crowd of a hundred-heads, presumably to arrest him (the same gendarme had asked to see Hermann’s passport that very morning, so that he can have no doubts about the fugitive’s identity and whereabouts). How then do we explain that the advancing gendarme has not yet reached Hermann by the penultimate paragraph, or that he is no longer to be found among the crowd that seems to have swallowed him up? The stakeout hypothesis is out of the question for such police tactics, subject to violent outcomes, do not admit the presence of “gaping” spectators, much less that of variegated spectators such as “butcher boys, flower girls, a priest, two nuns” (211). One is tempted to conclude that Hermann is not writing hastily because there is no gendarme closing-in on him, nor such an implausible hundred-headed crowd gawking outside his room.

James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Both authors end their works with incomplete sentences that, like Hermann's, serve a specific purpose: Joyce's unfinished and unpunctuated last sentence indicates the loop-like structure of the text by referring the reader back to the novel's uncapitalized opening sentence, while Pynchon's final sentence break hints that a rocket may have landed in the narrator's vicinity.

Another passage Oakley cites to illustrate Hermann's lack of narrative control is the third chapter's alternate openings. Here, Hermann hesitates between three potential ways of beginning his chapter, a hesitation reflecting indecisiveness uncharacteristic of the self-assurance he claims to possess a few moments later: "And speaking of literature, there is not a thing about it that I do not know" (45). The reason he gives for the three openings is freedom of choice: "I offer several variations to choose from" (43). Now an accepted truism holds that narrative is a contingent construct dependent on the arbitrary choices of the writer, a truism from which we often deduce that the choices made prejudice the ones disregarded by keeping them out of the narrative. In Hermann's case however the three openings are not exclusive of one another and in fact introduce three leads the narrative will eventually pursue: the first one names the location Hermann escapes to after the murder (Pignan); the second introduces Orlovius, Hermann's lawyer who will make various appearances as the novel proceeds; the third imagines what Felix is doing at a certain point in time prior to his subsequent reinsertion in the narrative. Hermann's alternate openings may thus be warning the reader that the tale overtly exposed in *Despair* is merely one of three (but why stop at three?) developed simultaneously in the narrative.

The overt, ostensible tale in *Despair* tells the story of a man who mistakes a stranger for his double and shoots him in order to collect his own life insurance. For his part, Brian

Boyd points to a covert tale unfolding in unison with the overt one when he convincingly shows that a series of “pointed parallels between Felix and Ardalion suggest [...] it is Ardalion himself Hermann wants to dispose of” (RY 387-388). Of course Hermann’s narrative does not tell the story of Ardalion’s murder because Hermann does not kill him, but it does tell the story of Hermann’s desire to kill him by transferring it unto another victim. Thus a narrative substrate delivers a second tale unfolding in conjunction with the ostensible one. Can we detect a third one? As strong a case as Boyd’s could be made that Lydia is the recipient of Hermann’s homicidal urges, and with some panache one could even claim that the narrative includes encrypted evidence that she is in fact murdered. At one point, Lydia mistakes the sex of the victim in Doyle’s “The Problem of Thor Bridge”, remembering a man rather than a woman [“*he* somehow fixed the revolver to the bridge” (144)], a possible indication that Hermann himself mistakes the sex of the victim in *Despair*.¹⁷ How so? Throughout the novel the idiosyncrasies of Hermann and Lydia are interchangeable; she is “given to superstition” (22), while he later becomes “superstitiously keen” (97); she is “fond of recounting her dreams” (22), and he will recount for us his dream of a horrific dog made of worm fat (96); he makes a riddle out of “chocolate”(50), she makes a riddle out of “Ardalion” (105); he even admits conflating himself with Lydia once when he reveals that the fear of mirrors he has claimed to suffer from is in truth one of his wife’s quirks (21-22). It would thus not be the first time husband and wife overlap if Hermann mistakes the victim’s sex in *his* detective story.

Admittedly, more evidence is required if I am to make a convincing case. When, in

¹⁷ Emphasis added. William C. Carroll first identified “The Problem of Thor Bridge” as the Doyle story Lydia struggles to remember (92). Cf. “The Cartesian Nightmare of *Despair*.” In *Nabokov's Fifth Arc*. Ed. J.E. Rivers and Charles Nicol. Austin: Texas UP, 1982. 82-104. Matters are only complicated when we take into account the nature of Maria Pinto’s death in Doyle’s story: a suicide that tries to pass itself off as a murder.

order to persuade her to go along with his scheme, Hermann tells Lydia he has a long-lost twin brother named Felix, he adds that this brother once “poisoned the woman who kept him” (139); we know Hermann becomes “Felix” in Pignan. Furthermore, Lydia is associated with Felix (the murdered, not the murderer) when Hermann mentions that were it not for Tarnitz (which we are not sure exists), he would simply recall Felix as “a woman whom one cannot possess” (64); we know that Lydia is such a woman, since during one of his disassociation performances, she yawningly asks her husband to bring her a book, thereby abruptly dispelling his illusion that they were engaged in intercourse (28). Finally, consider that Hermann refers to Lydia in the past tense on one occasion (22), and on another more bluntly as “The poor dead woman” (24). One might argue that this last statement is not meant to be taken literally, that Lydia is merely “dead” because Hermann no longer loves her. Yet even when he speaks figuratively, his language often refers to concrete events, as when he compares tree roots to “the broken springs of decrepit furniture in a house where a madman had dreadfully died”(6); the simile here does not work as a conventional figure of speech (its imagery is too specific), but rather as a concrete universal: it refers to an actual incident known to Hermann, and is meant to convey universal meaning based on personal experience. Although it is a poor concrete universal because there is no necessary relation between its parts (*e.g.* beds on which mad men die do not necessarily have broken springs), it suggests that even when Hermann is speaking figuratively, there is some degree of factuality in what he is saying.

As above, my intention here is not to make a full-proof case for the existence of such a contentious subplot, but to hint at the possibility that Hermann’s narrative contains elements that unfold at various levels, a kind of contrapuntal discourse using multiple voices

simultaneously. As such, the three openings of the third chapter do not act as tokens of the writer's ineptness but as a device foreshadowing the formal complexity his narrative assumes, one that reveals a masterly command of text. And here Hermann again proves innovative, not imitative. The procedure of proposing three openings is one Flann O'Brien would use a few years later in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) which famously begins with three different openings, introducing three subplots that unfold throughout the novel in a contrapuntal narrative. In O'Brien's novel, however, the subplots are developed separately; they are not told simultaneously in one voice, but must await their turn as they are taken up, dropped, taken up again, etc., so that it would be more precise to talk of sequential, not contrapuntal, narrative in his case. It says something of Hermann's skill that as brilliant a work as O'Brien's cannot make as complex a use of a device as he does. So much for Hermann's derivative, unoriginal art. As to our overarching attempt to determine whether his use of non-referential language is indicative of madness or not, here again he looks eminently sane, for his words prove multi-referential - a fact he seems aware of: "Polymnia" (47), he tells us, is the name of a girl he was fond of drinking beer with as a youth. Notwithstanding the Muse's invocation - a classic literary device - the etymology of the name is what arrests our attention: many hymns. And indeed, we come away from *Despair* dizzily wondering how many hymns (not to mention in which scales) Hermann has been singing, and if he has been singing these for our amusement, or his own.

By way of conclusion, I would like to address potential objections to claims made on behalf of Hermann's literary genius. How can I reconcile the fact that a man prone to misinterpretation and obtuseness can at the same time elaborate a convoluted narrative

structure laden with puzzling clues exposing the potentially illusory, non-referential nature of what is told therein? It seems more likely that the narrative's intricacies are the work of the extra-diegetic author Nabokov commenting on the shortcomings of the diegetic author Hermann. Indeed Boyd states that the parallels between Ardalion and Felix "form a sort of private code which eludes Hermann's attention" (386). Likewise, Rampton argues that a double-voiced discourse confers a "multi-levelled" structure on *Despair*, but that the "meaning of the novel depends on the reader's appreciating the distance between the narrator and the implied author" (*Vladimir* 54). Hermann's amoral aestheticism and reliance on literary tropes implicitly convey Nabokov's dislike of certain kinds of persons and fictions (e.g. doppelganger, confessional and detective fiction, Dostoevskian pathology, etc.), and we are meant to come away from the novel condemning its narrator as impercipient and shallow rather than espousing the immodestly high opinion he holds of himself.¹⁸

To such an objection I would reply that Hermann's obtuseness at times is so ridiculously exaggerated as to evince necessary duplicity on his part. Are we seriously expected to believe that he does not even recognize what his own face looks like (if he readily admits his intention is to fool us, shouldn't we suspect the main premise of the novel might be disingenuous)? Such an obtuseness can only be feigned, and mixed with an unmitigated boasting of one's superiority, it purposefully exposes a self-infatuated, incognizant dullard, only to better dissimulate the occasional subtleties of text that allow him to make a fool of those who come to look for the blunders and therefore miss the dextrous stroke. From the moment our minds are made up about this error-prone narrator, we

¹⁸ To be fair, Rampton is not completely satisfied with an assessment of the novel restricted to a simple author/narrator dichotomy, and goes on to suggest that the presence of Dostoevsky in *Despair*, because it fails to comply with Nabokov's strictures (or at least the ones we gather from his paratextual *obiter dicta* concerning Dostoevsky), "escape[s] his own desire for absolute mastery" (*Reading* 86) and adds an additional dimension to an already multi-dimensional narrative structure.

construct rigid patterns of behaviour and narration he is not expected to depart from, and lowering our guard, fail to review our assumption once such departures occur, just as Hermann repeatedly fails to review his erroneous identification to Felix. Hermann's *morosophia*, or fool's wisdom, works by constantly brandishing foolishness in order to conceal occasional cunning, and one wonders if Nabokov, by brandishing his famous caveats that Freudians, Dostoevskians, Marxists, etc., "keep out" of his novels (strictures most of his critics have subscribed to), did not ultimately proceed in a similar fashion.

The problem with this counter objection is that it sets up an unsolvable debate as to whether Hermann is mad or just pretending to be, a debate that has already proven interminable in the case of another famous literary character. I would like to offer a more satisfactory one.

On the novel's opening page, Hermann thinks up a superb metaphor to illustrate the difficulties of beginning a narrative. He compares such difficulties to a man running to catch a motorbus in motion and hesitating for fear that a miscalculated jump at an inopportune moment will not attain its mark. Now after having exposed himself as a megalomaniac coward (he unflinchingly shoots a man in the back) throughout ten chapters, Hermann begins his eleventh one by telling us that "perhaps the essential, though hidden, feature of [his] soul is tenderness" (198). The reader pauses, trying to recollect hints of such tenderness, without much success. But what does Hermann do in the following sentence? He boards a "motorbus" that will take him away from the hotel where he has written the previous chapters. Has the erratic persona mercilessly ridiculed over and over again been nothing more than this, a mere mask? Do the first ten chapters comprise a writer's protracted calculation before the jump, a monumental hoax postponing the real point of departure of the

tale? If inferring a reality from fiction proved a daunting task when signs of madness pointed to the narrator's unreliability, what are we to make of this and other equivocal signs that point to the radical unreality of the narrative *per se*?

In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth has a superb metaphor of his own, one that illustrates the "secret communion" between author and reader that occurs in certain cases, e.g. the kind of collaboration that takes place when the reader discovers Boyd's "covert parallels". Whenever he catches a narrator mistaking commonly known matters of fact, he can be said to collude with the author who, though silent, exposes his unwitting narrator's ignorance. Booth describes such a process as follows: "we travel with the silent author, observing as from a rear seat the humorous or disgraceful or ridiculous or vicious driving behavior of the narrator seated in the front" (300). To be sure, we can easily imagine Nabokov and his reader winking at each other in the backseat, enjoying a good laugh at the expense of the driver Hermann struggling with the rusty gears of his motorbus but, as we have seen, there are just as many passages in Herman's narrative that bespeak cleverness as there are ones that betray madness. Now Nabokov calls his protagonist a "neurotic scoundrel" in his foreword, and claims that "Hell shall never parole Hermann" (xiii). In the same foreword, however, he shows himself more lenient towards another of his protagonists when he states that "there is a green lane in Paradise where Humbert is permitted to wander at dusk once a year" (*ibid.*) That he should be so adamant in condemning Hermann yet willing to grant a pedophile a "one day respite" (Field 234) shows that perhaps even he was not fully aware of his character's narrative dexterities, dexterities that might have mitigated his sense of Hermann's despicability by casting some doubts on his culpability (the culpability, of course, is not meant to be completely dismissed). We might want to rethink

seating arrangements, and imagine Nabokov and Hermann arguing about the meaning of a roadmap's directions (hopefully a clearer one than that of Ardalion), but since their argument can only come into being via the intercession of the close-reader's active participation, there is no reason to exclude him from the front-seat fray. In the end, the narrative texture of *Despair* is much too rich, the clues too various, and the characterization too complex to permit readers to invoke Nabokov's metaphor about his characters being mere "galley-slaves" (*Strong Opinions* 95). Unless of course these characters, with a little coaxing from the reader, can sometimes be shown to be in full revolt against their master.

CONCLUSION

At the outset of this thesis, I undertook a one-author study devoted to three of Nabokov's early novels, motivated by the desire to suggest ways of reading him that did not strictly follow the guidelines previously established by his foremost critics. As I proceeded, investing more and more effort into interpreting how these texts were carefully put together by their author, how they work as semiotic constructs designed to convey multiple levels of meaning, it became evident that some of these guidelines, along with the approach they inform, could not be avoided altogether. But the fact that this approach figures more prominently with each succeeding chapter should not invalidate the claims made in my introduction. Undoubtedly, I could not have arrived at certain conclusions about the novels if I had not paid close attention to certain signs that seem to plead for a puzzle solver's attitude. But whereas most Nabokovians tend to overestimate the importance of isolated images in order to synthesize their findings, I have tried to make some rather more modest claims about Nabokov's conception of characterization, while raising questions about the significance of the patterns that invite readers to think about puzzles and solutions. A discordant piece of a puzzle, one that does not quite fit, can be used to discredit the veracity of the other pieces and point to the true, hidden subtext in which it does fit. Or, it can be used to demonstrate how the individuals responsible for assembling all these pieces together into a coherent, meaningful whole - the characters and narrators - have undertaken a task that exceeds their capacities. This is not to say that readers should not come away from these novels wondering whether or not Albinus really left his wife for Margot, or suspect that Hermann may not have killed Felix after all. These are possibilities one can entertain

because the texts hint at them in very oblique and clever ways. However, the combinational density of any literary text (made up of thousands of linguistic signifiers all susceptible to be treated as “clues”) hints at an almost infinite number of other possible “solutions”, a fact which should check, or at the very least attenuate, our desire to cry “Eureka” when we espy the outlines of one of these provisional solutions. More importantly, I hope readers will come away from the readings offered here with a sense of having discovered something new about characters such as Franz, Martha, Margot, Albinus, and Hermann, who are not as crude, one-dimensional, and derivative as previous critics have suggested.

And what have we discovered about these characters? One constant that has emerged in all three chapters is a case for rehabilitating characters Nabokov was not sympathetic towards. He called Franz “cowardly and brutal” (*Strong Opinions* 296), Margot a “common young whore” (*ibid.* 83), and Hermann a “neurotic scoundrel” (*Despair* xiii). Yet if the reader accepts the readings I have proposed herein, these and other characters do not fare so badly. True, as shameless exploiters of others or crafty plotters of murder, preying on the gullible and innocent, they are guilty of much cruelty and merit our indignation and contempt. Cruelty is a vice Nabokov never tired of speaking out against, most eloquently in his *Lectures on Don Quixote*, in which he compared the laughter of minor characters at the expense of the protagonist Quixote to the laughter of a spectator attending Christ’s martyrdom (55), and argued that readers joining in the mirth were missing the point: the hopelessly anachronistic knight and his unsuccessful quest for chivalry in a disenchanting world are meant to appeal to our capacity for compassion, not derision. In regards to his own early fiction, he hoped his readers would respond in a similar manner, that they would sympathize with the abused and downtrodden such as Irma, Elisabeth, and Felix, rather than

with the abusers such as Martha, Margot, and Hermann. All the same, the response Nabokov expected Cervantes' book would elicit from an intelligent and sensitive readership is not the popular response the book has received over the years by very competent readers who have not hesitated to laugh profusely at what they take to be the knight's hilarious misadventures. Nabokov's reading of *Don Quixote* was thus an extremely personal one, unorthodox in that it clashed with the dominant, authoritative readings of Cervantes' novel. My readings of his early novels also clash with the dominant, authoritative ones offered thus far by Nabokovians. But what they have in common with Nabokov's reading of Cervantes is more than just an unorthodox standpoint; they both share a strong tendency to sympathize where sympathy has usually been withheld. And in the event that I am mistaken, that there is no grounds for us to sympathize with Nabokov's "beastly [...] mournful monsters" (*Strong Opinions* 19) as he himself called them, I believe there is still enough in his German triptych to help us identify the reasons his loathsome characters acquired objectionable traits, antipathetic emotions, and harmful urges. The puzzle-solver approach is unable to arrive at either of these conclusions on its own, but complemented by the ideas of certain non-Nabokovian theorists, it may begin to do so.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary sources: selected works by Nabokov

Bend Sinister. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Despair. Trans. Nabokov, 1937; New York: Vintage, 1989.

The Eye. Trans. Dimitri Nabokov, 1965; New York: Vintage, 1990.

The Gift. Trans. Dimitri Nabokov and Michael Scammell 1961; New York: Vintage, 1991.

Glory. Trans. Dimitri Nabokov, 1971; New York: Vintage, 1991.

King, Queen, Knave. Trans. Dimitri Nabokov, 1966; New York: Vintage, 1989.

Laughter in the Dark. Trans. Nabokov, 1937; New York: Vintage, 1989.

Lectures on Don Quixote. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/ Bruccoli Clark, 1983.

Lectures on Russian Literature. New York: Harcourt Inc./Bruccoli Clark Layman, 1981.

Pale Fire. New York: Vintage, 1989.

Strong Opinions. New York: Vintage, 1990.

The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov. New York: Vintage, 1995.

The Waltz Invention. Trans. Dimitri Nabokov; New York: Phaedra, 1966.

Secondary sources

Adelman, Gary. *Retelling Dostoyevsky: Literary Responses and Other Observations*.

London: Brucknell UP, 2001.

- Alexandrov, Vladimir E. "The Fourth dimension of Nabokov's 'laughter in the Dark.'" In *Nabokov at Cornell*. Ed. Gavriel Shapiro. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003. 3-9.
- Appel, Alfred, Jr. *Nabokov's Dark cinema*. New York: Oxford UP, 1974.
- Arana, R. Victoria. "The Line Down the Middle' in Autobiography: Critical Implications of the Quest for the Self." In *Fearful Symmetry: Doubles and Doubling in Literature and Film*. Ed. Eugene J. Crook. Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 1982. 125-137.
- Ballard, J.G. *A User's Guide to the Millennium*. New York: Picador, 1996.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *L'Échange Symbolique et la Mort*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976.
- . *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1994.
- Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1961.
- Boyd, Brian. "'Even Homais nods': Nabokov's fallibility, or, how to revise *Lolita*." In *Nabokov Studies* 2 (1995): 62-86.
- . *Nabokov's Pale Fire: the Magic of Artistic Discovery*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1999.
- . *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1990.
- Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theatre : The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willett. London: Eyre Methuen, 1978.
- Buhks, Nora. "Sur la structure du roman de Vl. Nabokov 'Roi, dame, valet.'" In *Revue des études slaves* 59 (1988): 799-810.
- Carroll, William C. "The Cartesian Nightmare of *Despair*." In *Nabokov's Fifth Arc*. Ed. J.E. Rivers and Charles Nicol. Austin, TX: Texas UP, 1982. 82-104.
- Clancy, Laurie. *The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*. London: Macmillan, 1984.

- Connolly, Julian W. "Dostoevsky and Vladimir Nabokov: The Case of *Despair*." In *Dostoevsky and the Human Condition After a Century*. Ed. A. Ugrinsky and V. Ozolins. New York: Greenwood Press, 1986. 155-162.
- . "The Function of Literary Allusion in Nabokov's *Despair*." In *Slavic and East European Journal* 26 (1982): 302-313.
- . *Nabokov's Early Fiction: Patterns of self and other*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992.
- Debord, Guy. *Oeuvres*. Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 2006.
- De La Durantaye, Leland. *Style is Matter: the Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007.
- De Vries, Gerard, and Barton D. Johnson. *Nabokov and the Art of painting*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2006.
- Dolinin, Alexander. "The Caning of Modernist Profaners: Parody in *Despair*." In *Cycnos* 12. 2 (1995): 43-54.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Trans. Jesse Coulson. Ed. George Gibian. New York: Norton, 1975.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Edmunds, Jeff. "Look at Valdemar! (A Beautified Corpse Revived)." In *Nabokov Studies* 2 (1995): 153-171.
- Field, Andrew. *Nabokov, his Life in Art; a Critical Narrative*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1967.
- Girard, René. *Mensonge Romantique et Vérité Romanesque*. Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1961.

- Grayson, Jane. *Nabokov translated: a Comparison of Nabokov's Russian and English Prose*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Honneth, Axel. *La réification: petit traité de théorie critique*. Paris: Gallimard, 2007.
- Huysmans, Joris-Karl. *Romans I*. Paris: R. Laffont, 2005.
- Hyde, G. M. *Vladimir Nabokov: America's Russian Novelist*. London: M. Boyars, 1977.
- Johnson, D. Barton. "Sources of Nabokov's *Despair*." In *Nabokov at Cornell*. Ed. Gavriel Shapiro. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003. 10-19.
- . *Worlds in Regression: Some novels of Vladimir Nabokov*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1985.
- Kanevskaya, Marina. "The Semiotic Validity of the Mirror Image in Nabokov's *Despair*." In *Nabokov at Cornell*. Ed. Gavriel Shapiro. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003. 20-29.
- Karlinsky, Simon (ed.) *The Nabokov-Wilson letters: correspondence between Vladimir Nabokov and Edmund Wilson, 1940-1971*. New York, Harper & Row, 1979.
- Kimney, John: "The Three Voices of Nabokov's *Despair*." In *Russian Language Journal* 34 (1980): 101-108.
- Lorrain, Jean. *Contes d'un Buveur d'éther*. Paris: diffusion Inter-forum, 1975.
- Lukacs, György. *The Historical Novel*. Trans. Hannah Stanley Mitchell; London: Merlin, 1962.
- Medaric-Kovacic, Magdalena: "Nabokov's *Kamera Obskura* as an Avant-Garde Ornamental Novel." In *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 19.3 (Fall 1985): 314-327.
- Merkel, Stephanie. "King, Queen, Knave and the Commedia Dell'Arte." In *Nabokov Studies* 1 (1994): 83-102.

- Naumann, Marina Turkevich. *Blue Evenings in Berlin: Nabokov's Short Stories of the 1920s*. New York; New York UP, 1978.
- Oakley, Helen. "Disturbing design: Nabokov's manipulation of the detective fiction genre in *Pale Fire* and *Despair*." In *Journal of Popular Culture* 36.3 (2003): 480-496.
- Overmeer, René Roelof. "Du Jah au 'je' errant: Le Désespoir du *Despair* de Vladimir Nabokov." In *Etudes de Lettres* 4 (1988): 59-67.
- Parker, Stephen Jan. *Understanding Vladimir Nabokov*. South Carolina: South Carolina UP, 1987.
- Pifer, Ellen. *Nabokov and the Novel*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980.
- Raguet-Bouvard, Christine. "Vladimir Nabokov: *Camera Obscura* et *Laughter in the Dark*, ou La confusion des textes." In *La lecture du texte traduit, Palimpsestes* 9 (1995): 119-134.
- Rampton, David. "Critical Choices: Reading Nabokov's *Despair*". In *Forum for Modern Language Studies*. 38.1 (2002): 75-87.
- . *Vladimir Nabokov: A Critical Study of the Novels*. Cambridge; Cambridge UP, 1984.
- . *Vladimir Nabokov*. New York: St. Martin's P, 1993.
- Rosenfeld, Claire. "*Despair* and the Lust for Immortality." In *Nabokov: The Man and His Work*. Ed. L.S. Dembo. Madison: Wisconsin UP, 1967. 66-84.
- Rogers, Robert. *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1970.
- Seifrid, Thomas. "Nabokov's Poetics of Vision, or What *Anna Karenina* is doing in *Kamera Obskura*." In *Nabokov Studies* 3 (1996): 1-12.

Stuart, Dabney. *Nabokov: the Dimensions of Parody*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana state UP, 1978.

Suagee, Stephen. "An Artist's Memory Beats All Other Kind: An Essay on *Despair*." In *A Book of Things about Vladimir Nabokov*. Ed. Carl R. Proffer. Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1974. 54-61.

Tekiner, Christina. "Time in *Lolita*." In *Modern Fiction Studies* 25 (1979): 463-69.

Tindall, Gillian. Untitled review of *KQK* in "New Statesman", 4th October, 1968. In *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Norman Page. Routledge: London, 1982. 435.

Troubetzkoy, Wladimir. *L'ombre et la différence: Le Double en Europe*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1996.

Tucker, Robert C. *The Marx - Engels Reader*. New York: Norton, 1978.

Von Flotow, Friedrich. *Martha, or, The fair at Richmond : a Comic Romantic Opera in Four Acts*. New York: G. Schirmer, 1902.

Wyllie, Barbara. *Nabokov at the Movies*. Jefferson, N.C.: Macfarland & Company, 2003.