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FAILURE TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE OTHER IN NABOKOV'S *DESPAIR*

> I won't hide it: I am so unused to being well, understood, perhaps, – so unused to it, that in the very first minutes of our meeting I thought this is a joke, a masquerade trick […]. And there are things that are hard to talk about – you'll rub off their marvelous pollen at the touch of the word […].
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> V. Nabokov, *Letters to Vera*, July 1923

Despair is often seen as part of Nabokov's triptych (devoted to criminals and their crimes).[1] However, *Despair* is very different from the other two novels set in Germany. Only in *Despair* is the main character a writer, and only in *Despair* does the main character conceive a crime as a perfectly executed murder of his double. He also equates a criminal act with "one line in the book."[2] *Despair* was also the first novel that Nabokov chose to translate into English himself. It was published in England in 1937. This was part of his campaign to transition from the Russian émigré literary circles to the wider world of French and

[1] In Barton Johnson's words: "In the 1920s and early 30s, Nabokov was writing two kinds of novels: those with chiefly Russian characters, and those with German characters. The Russian novels, such as *Mary*, *The Defense*, *The Eye*, and *Glory*, are concerned with the themes of nostalgia and identity. The German novels, such as *King, Queen, Knave, Laughter in the Dark*, and *Despair* are crime stories in which Nabokov investigates the nature of evil. Dieter Zimmer [Johnson continues] is undoubtedly correct in seeing the German triptych as Nabokov's attempt to utilize genre literature and film as modes for the stark exploration of the moral dementia he saw around him. His protagonists do not merely lack feeling; they have no sense of the pain inflicted on others." D. Barton Johnson, "Sources of Nabokov's *Despai*r," *Nabokov at Cornell*, ed. Gavriel Shapiro (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 18.

[2] Vladimir Nabokov, *Despair* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 122.

British literature.[3] Despite his efforts to succeed, *Despair* initially went largely unnoticed by English readers. The Russian-speaking reviewers of *Despair* (published as *Otchaianie* in 1932-1934), for their part, either saw traces of autobiography in it or considered Nabokov, alongside Pushkin, Gogol, and Dostoevsky, in the context of the traditional themes of evil and genius, madness, and crime and punishment. They also criticized Nabokov's artificial ("robot-like") stylistic smoothness, bemoaning his soullessness and an imminent tragic failure as a writer.[4] Years later, Brian Boyd drew a line between Nabokov and his character from the vantage point of the 1980s:

> Where Hermann sees his crimes as a work of art and himself as the consummate artist, Nabokov explores both as the negation of all he understands by art. For him art is not an occasion of self-display, but a chance to reach beyond the self, not an indulgent pastime but a moral positive, a means of defining human existence and an intimation of something beyond.[5]

Arguably, the task of capturing "something beyond" is present at different levels of writing and translating *Despair* into English.[6] This article examines the relationship between the narrator, Hermann, and his victim, Felix, which I submit reflects the inner artistic turmoil that Nabokov most likely experienced in the 1930s. I consider Hermann's final interaction with Felix as an *avant la lettre* example of performance art, with Hermann being the artist, while Felix performing the function of the artwork and the audience.

To the best of my knowledge, *Despair* is the first (and maybe the only) work of literature (that is not dedicated to performance art) to include a detailed description of a live performance.[7]

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[3] Aleksei Zverev, *Nabokov*. Zhizn' zamechatel'nykh liudei (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2001), pp. 235-240.
[4] *Klassik bez retushi. Literaturnyi mir o tvorchestve Vladimira Nabokova*, ed. N. G. Melnikov (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2000), pp. 113-130.
[5] Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 384.
[6] "For Nabokov, English, a semi-foreign language, remained like a beautiful, desired *other* whom a suitor tries to charm, to seduce, to possess but can never fully attain: he reinvented it like a lover who endows the object of his passion with perfections no-one can see. Whatever the merits of Nabokov's 'fabulous, unheard-of-English,' they result from his position outside the language and the desire to conquer it." Alexander Dolinin, "Nabokov as a Russian Writer," *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, ed. Julian W. Connolly, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005), p. 55.
[7] No students of Nabokov have so far described this scene as an example of performance art. It is not known whether Nabokov himself saw it as such in the 1930s. Most likely, not. According to RoseLee Goldberg,

In this particular case it illustrates Hermann's inability to recognize Felix (the only person who is prepared to "taste" Hermann's life) as his irreplaceable other. I apply Simone de Beauvoir's conception of "the other" in order to explain why this interaction ended in Hermann's failure "to reach beyond [his] self."[8] I also examine the exacerbating conditions that Nabokov purposefully created for his writer-criminal (such as his mental illness).

Hermann Gets Felix Interested in His Scheme

Exactly how unoriginal/untalented was Hermann? In the words of Adam Gopnik, "all masterpieces are inherently a little loony. They run on the engine of their own accumulated habits and weirdness and self-indulgent excesses. They have to, since originality is, necessarily, something still strange to us, rather than something that we already know about and approve. […] [A]rt is a business not of clear narratives but of troubled narrators."[9] Hermann is one such "troubled" narrator who succumbs to the throes of creating a virtual masterpiece. But he needs "other people [to] believe his projection of events."[10] Hermann needs Felix to have faith in his plan of getting money to the extent that he will be willing to accompany Hermann to a deserted place and put on his clothes. We are talking here not about coercion but about ultimate trust and utter cooperation. Felix desperately needs money and is prepared to take part in any meaningful collaboration. What this collaboration is going to look like is one of the unknowns and its outlines are worked out in the process of their lengthy interaction during their second meeting.

They start by discussing sparrows and squirrels, and briefly talk about Felix's service during WWI. Felix opens up and shares his dream:

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performance art was not used as an independent medium in the first third of the twentieth century. The initial forms of what was later described as performance art were used by their practitioners as a means of testing out their avant-garde ideas before "expressing them in objects," such as paintings and sculptures. RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 3rd edition, p. 8. Many later live performances were filmed or photographed to ensure their permanence. However, the film director Reiner Werner Fassbinder, in his adaptation of *Despair* in 1978, reduced Hermann's lengthy preparation of Felix to look like him to a bare minimum.

[8] Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, p. 384.

[9] Adam Gopnik, "The Corrections," *The New Yorker*, October 22, 2007, pp. 70, 76.

[10] Vladislav Khodasevich, "Retsenzia: Sovremennye zapiski, book 56," *Vozrozhdenie*, November 8, 1934: pp. 3-4, reprinted in *Klassik bez retushi. Literaturnyi mir o tvorchestve Vladimira Nabokova*, ed. N. G. Melnikov (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2000), p. 120.

> I'd like to have a friend who'd always be ready to share his slice of bread with me and who'd bequeath to me a piece of land, a cottage. Yes, I'd like to have a real friend. I'd work for him as a gardener, and then afterwards his garden would become mine, and I'd always remember my dead comrade with grateful tears. We'd fiddle together, or, say, he'd play the flute and I the mandolin.[11]

Hermann wants Felix to guess his occupation and share his first impressions. He entices Felix to believe that he is an actor looking for an understudy, that is, Felix himself. Felix is unimpressed and shows his disappointment. Hermann invites him to have a drink and some food which he hopes will make Felix amenable. Over the supper Hermann breaks into a long monologue about his own garden or gardens, which is an obvious response to Felix's account of his dream to serve as a gardener. He goes as far as to concretize Felix's dreams by providing "framed labels," "a watering can," and "a shadow of romantic melancholy." He says:

> When still a child, I loved to look after our garden and did I know my job: I had a small watering can, Felix, and a small mattock, and my parents would sit in the shade of an old cherry tree, planted by my grandfather, and look on with tender emotion, at me, the small busybody (just imagine, imagine the picture!) engaged in removing from the roses, and squelching, caterpillars that looked like twigs. […] My sappy boyhood was perfumed through and through with all those flowers and fruits, whereas the neighboring wood, huge and thick, cast over my soul a shadow of romantic melancholy."[12]

Hermann continues to lull Felix into embracing his dreams but realizes that he sounds more like an elderly woman "who has had a drop too much."[13] Hermann changes his subject abruptly, this time insisting on presenting himself as an amateur musician, again, in obvious reference to Felix's dreams mentioned earlier: "In real life I love music too, and can play several instruments. On summer evenings I sometimes take my violin to the nearest grove [...].[14] Felix

[11] Nabokov, *Despair*, p. 75.
[12] Ibid., p. 83.
[13] Ibid., p. 85.
[14] Ibid., p. 86.

feels estranged and is ready to leave. "Because," says Felix, "it is unkind of you to pull a poor man's leg. First, I believed you. I thought you you'd offer me some honest work. It's been a long dreary tramp coming here. Look at the state of my soles … and now, instead of work – no, it doesn't suit me."[15]

Hermann has to modify his narrative and admit to half of his plan, that is, the intention to steal a big sum of money. Before making his admission, Hermann takes Felix to a nice hotel, persuades him to take off his dirty clothes, take a bath, and put on Hermann's clean shirt and underwear. Then Felix goes to bed.[16] Hermann's plan to make Felix wear his clothes voluntarily starts working along with his making significant adjustments to his initial story. Felix livens up completely when he hears the word "robbery" ("Robbery?" asked Felix again, with new life in his eyes").[17]

Nabokov as a Co-founder of Performance Art

Chapter Five is a long chapter, weaving its way through Hermann's several attempts to test the depths of Felix's gullibility. Eventually (in Chapter Nine), Felix not only accompanies Hermann to a secluded wooded area on the lake, but allows Hermann to shave him, manicure his nails and even clip his toenails. When Felix puts on Hermann's clothes, he is ready to be shot. Hermann kills him without hesitation. The four-page description of the process of preparing Felix to look like Hermann is a remarkable example of performance art, decades before the term was invented in the 1950s and widely recognized in the 1970s.

> "To start with, you must have a shave."
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> "A shave?" Felix repeated after me, with silly surprise. "How is that? I've got no razor with me, and I really don't know what one can find in a wood to shave with, barring stones."
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> "Why stones? [..] I've brought the instrument, and I'll do it myself." […]

[15] Ibid., p. 87.
[16] Ibid., p. 93.
[17] Ibid., p. 94.

> I took a handful of snow, squeezed out a curling worm of soap into it, beat it up with the brush and applied the icy lather to his whiskers and mustache. He made faces, leered; a frill of lather had invaded one nostril: he wrinkled his nose, because it tickled.
>
> "Head back," I said, "farther still."
>
> Rather awkwardly resting my knee on the footboard, I started scraping his whiskers off; the hairs crackled, and there was something disgusting in the way they got mixed up with foam; I cut him slightly, and that stained it with blood. When I attacked his moustache, he puckered up his eyes, but bravely made no sound, although it must have been anything but pleasant: I was working hastily, his bristles were tough, the razor pulled.
>
> "Got a handkerchief?" I asked.
>
> He drew some rag out of his pocket. […]
>
> "Wait a bit," I said, "that's not all. Your eyebrows need improving: they are somewhat thicker than mine."
>
> I produced scissors and neatly clipped off a few hairs. [...] Felix meanwhile had attired himself in my shirt and drawers; his feet were still bare, I gave him socks and garters, but noticed all at once that his toes needed some trimming too... He placed his foot on the footboard of the car and we got in a bit of hasty pedicuring. They snapped loud and flew far, those ugly black pairings, and in recent dreams I have often seen them speckling the ground much too conspicuously. [...] Finally, gingerly taking his comb, I smoothed his greasy hair well back from brow to temples.
>
> He was ready now.[18]

The randomness of the bleeding cut and the appearance of a grubby handkerchief coupled with the hasty unpremeditated pedicure that accompany the emerging subtle changes in Felix's appearance create a sense of spontaneity – the kind of spontaneity that makes performance art so different from static forms, like classic sculpture and painting. In 1952, Harold Rosenberg offered his description of "action painting" (a variety of performance art) as an event: "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in

[18] Ibid., pp. 166-167, 169-170.

which to act – rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on a canvas was not a picture but an event."[19] In *Despair* "the event" continues long after Hermann fires his fatal shot: "I remember various things: that puff of smoke, hanging in midair, then displaying a transparent fold and vanishing slowly; the way Felix fell; for he did not fall at once [...]."[20]

My argument is that the very curious lengthy interaction between Hermann and Felix in Chapter Nine is similar to some celebrated examples of performance art, such as those by Gunter Brus, Chris Burden, Bruce Nauman, Marina Abramovic, and Janine Antoni, to name just a few. Like Hermann, Antoni prefers to work with the familiar, even identical, to create her art objects. She plunges into a tub of lard, following the example of Archimedes, who supposedly used his own body as his main instrument. She uses her long hair to paint her "crime scene," hoping that the viewer will be able to spot all the clues that she has left behind. Antoni uses chocolate and soap to mold her own busts, saying that she likes washing herself with herself and nourishing herself with herself. The viewer is left to watch the gradual disappearance of the replicas' ears, hair, and facial features, the process Antoni finds fascinating.[21]

In her TED talk (2015), aptly titled "An Art Made of Trust, Vulnerability and Connection," Abramovic recalls one of her very first performances in 1974 that lasted six hours. She faced a table with 76 objects "for pleasure and pain," including a glass of water, a rose, a razor, a knife, and a pistol with one bullet. She invited her audience to treat her as an object as well, and apply any objects on the table to her own body. She ended up being cut in several places and half naked, with the pistol barrel pressed against her temple. She was not raped though: because, ironically, that seemed too easy for her audience. Abramovic believes that performance art must involve "complete trust," the kind of trust she experienced with her partner of twelve years, whose role was to prod real arrows and loaded pistols at where her heart was.[22] Performance in Catherine Wood's definition "connote[s] a space not just for performed action, but a space of active relations: a space in which things happen. [...] Setting itself as a

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[19] Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters": http://timothyquigley.net/vcs/rosenberg-ap.pdf (Accessed on 20 May, 2024).
[20] Nabokov, *Despair*, p. 171.
[21] *Art: 21. Art in the Twenty-first Century*. PBS DVD Video. Season Two. 2003.
[22] Marina Abramovic, "An Art Made of Trust, Vulnerability and Connection" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4so_Z9a_u0&t=381s (Accessed on 20 May, 2024).

counterpoint to the crafted and rehearsed nature of theater, performance in art was about an unskilled performer who might reveal something about themselves, unmasked, as it were."[23]

Without realizing it, Hermann throws himself into making live art, which always reaches outside its own confines and presupposes a fair share of unpredictability and even danger. Its existence is contingent on the existence of others, such as Felix – "an arena in which to act" – and policemen who are expected to identify Felix's dead body as Hermann's body. The latter didn't comply. Not to mention that Hermann, in his own words, was "denied the blessed grace of spontaneity."[24] In fact, live performance might not be Hermann's artistic medium of choice. He repeatedly shunned any kind of motion and open-endedness, preferring to work with still or dead matter.

By providing a lengthy description of Felix being prepared to look like Hermann and by making the two characters probe their sameness and difference, Nabokov seems to be commenting on the fickle nature of the writer's rapport with his/her audience. As I am going to show, it is not the writer who should look for his exact doubles in order to be understood and recognized, it is the other way round – it is the reader who is to seek authors/literary texts to identify with.

Writer-Reader Creative Symbiosis

In November 1932, when he was still writing and revising *Despair*, Nabokov was overcome with emotion from interacting with his live audience during one public reading in Paris. He described his feelings the same night in a letter to his wife:

> The real enjoyment began, however, when I took up *Despair*. I read 34 pages. They [the audience] got everything. I read, speaking modestly, absolutely remarkably. It's awfully silly to write about this, but I really was on form. And somehow, from the very beginning, there was a gleam of success, and the audience was good, simply wonderful.

[23]Catherine Wood, *Performance in Contemporary Art* (London: Tate Publishing, 2024), 2nd edition, pp. 10, 34.
[24] Nabokov, *Despair*, p. 16.

> Such a big, sweet, receptive, pulsing animal, grunting and chuckling in the places I needed, and then obediently dying out again.[25]

Unlike his reviewers (who read the finished product or its installments in Russian periodicals), Nabokov's listeners that evening were vicariously partaking in the creation of his novel. Hermann's relationship with Felix is similarly dynamic and relies on Felix's complete engagement and cooperation, which Hermann fails to appreciate.[26] His relationship with his other audiences is stale and static. On the surface, Hermann's new novel is very reader-oriented. He repeatedly calls readers' attention to this or that ramification of the plotline. He feels certain of his intended audience's full support. But the more Hermann opens himself up in order to get closer to his readers, the more he loses sympathy in their eyes. On several occasions, he mentions a nameless Soviet writer/editor whom he sees as a benevolent competitor and whom he hopes to impress with his new project. This plan remains unrealized. We know that before succeeding in impressing Felix with his stories, Hermann fails to interest his own wife in his writing. We recall that Lydia (an avid reader of trash literature) was unable to finish Hermann's other novel, thus refusing to recognize or acknowledge his remarkable imagination and creativity.

With Felix, Hermann develops the kind of writer-reader creative symbiosis that thirty years later was praised by Simone de Beauvoir in her lecture "What Literature Can Do?" (1964):

> For me, the reader, what is important is to be fascinated by a singular world that intersects with mine and yet is other. [...] [I]n order for the reading to be gripping, I must identify with someone: the author. I must enter into his world and his world must become mine. [...] I abdicate my "I" in favor of he who is speaking, and yet I remain myself.[27]

The reader, according to Beauvoir, does not lose her otherness, but her open-mindedness allows her to receive what cannot be communicated but experienced, namely, "the taste of

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[25] Vladimir Nabokov, *Letters to Vera*, trans. and ed. Olga Voronina, Brian Boyd (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 223.
[26] "Yes, what tormented me above all, when recalling things, was Felix's submissiveness, the ridiculous, brainless, automatous quality of his submissiveness." Nabokov, *Despair*, p. 177.
[27] Simone de Beauvoir, "What Can Literature Do?", *"The Useless Mouths" and Other Literary Writings*. ed. Margaret A. Simons (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2021), p. 201.

another life. I am thrown into a world that has its own values, its own colors. I do not annex it to myself, it remains separated from mine and yet it exists for me. [...] This is why Proust was right to think that literature is the privileged place of intersubjectivity."[28]

In her analysis of Beauvoir's novel, *The Mandarins* (1954), Toril Moi focuses on the matters of reading and writing and acknowledgement as manifested in the interactions of its characters. She writes: "I am not going to analyze the politics in the novel. Rather I'll focus on the protagonists' generosity, their openness to the reasons and explanations of others. The absence of denigration is all the more striking because the characters are so far from perfect. […] Yet they still try to take their interlocutor's point of view seriously, and generally make an effort to see what the other sees."[29] Such generosity of spirit becomes evident in the characters' discussions of literature and writing in general: "In these discussions [Beauvoir] sets up explicit parallels between book-to-reader and person-to-person communication. Throughout the novel Beauvoir interweaves her own theory of literature with the question of how to relate to other people, how to live in a world with others."[30] According to Moi, Beauvoir's characters (despite their differences and political affiliations) are highly conscientious readers and open-minded interlocutors. In real life, many readers fail their authors, hence a number of unrecognized and unacknowledged masterpieces.[31]

Was Nabokov himself a conscientious and generous reader in the 1930s? Most likely, not. He was too vulnerable and competitive. In a letter from April 8, 1932, to Vera Nabokov, Nabokov writes "I read [Gaito] Gazdanov's story. It's very weak. […] I have just read in *Poslednie novosti* the stupidest and most vulgar article by [Georgii] Adamovich about the stupidest and most vulgar novel by [D. H.] Lawrence. One pederast writing about another."[32]

In *Legend, Myth, and Magic* (1934) Ernest Kris and Otto Kurz tell stories about artists' clandestine visits to their competitors' studios, often in disguise. They go there either to learn each other's trade secrets or in order to leave behind some almost invisible signs of their

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[28] Ibid.
[29] Toril Moi, "Acknowledging the Other: Reading, Writing, and Living in *The Mandarins*," *Yale French Studies*, No 135/136, *Existentialism, 70 Years After* (2019), p. 101.
[30] Ibid., pp. 101-102.
[31] Moi qualifies reading as an important act of acknowledgement. Ibid., p. 105.
[32] Vladimir Nabokov, *Letters to Vera*, p. 175.

interference with their competitors' works.[33] "This attitude is most clearly expressed in the famous story describing the rivalry between Apelles and Protogenes. […] Apelles visits Protogenes' house on Rhodes and, in his host's absence, draws a [very] fine line on a panel. Without making his presence known in any other way, he leaves [his mark] behind as a kind of visiting card. Protogenes recognizes the hand of Apelles, paints a second, even thinner line over that of Apelles, and hides when Apelles repeats his visit in the hope [of] witnessing Protogenes' discomfiture. Apelles [...] succeeds in painting a third line on top of the second one."[34]

Viewed from this perspective, Felix's act of leaving behind his walking stick, bearing his name and surname, at the scene of Hermann's "ideal" crime might also be construed as an indication of his ingenuity and even artistic superiority.[35] In other words, Felix might be seen as Hermann's equal and not as his gullible victim. This realization comes to Hermann a bit too late.

In her earlier essay "Pyrrhus and Cineas" (1944), Beauvoir submits that the main function of "the other" is to create a void, a need that makes our own projects possible: "In order for the object that I founded to appear as a good, the other must make it into his own good, and then I would be justified for having created it. [...] We need others in order for our existence to become founded and necessary."[36] Beauvoir insists that one's scornful attitude toward the other will ultimately lead to despair: "The time of scorn is also that of despair."[37] Hermann's despair at the

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[33] Ernest Kris, Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist. A Historical Experiment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 96, pp. 120-124

[34] Ibid., p. 96. *Legend, Myth, and Magic* was published in the original German in 1934 as *Die Legende vom Kunster: Ein historischer Versuch*. Numerous references to painting and painters in Hermann's account prompt me to surmise that Nabokov might have consulted this study at the time of writing *Despair*. The story of an unfortunate ape at the zoo that supposedly served as an impetus for Nabokov's *Lolita* might have had other sources as well. Kris and Kurz mention Titan Epimetheus, who "made a human figure out of clay, for which piece of imitative aping Jupiter turned him into an ape, and banished him to the Pithecusan islands" (Kris, Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic*, p. 86). This quote is from the section "The Artist as Magician." Interestingly, *Lolita*'s precursor was called "Volshebnik," or "Magician."

[35] In fact, the first reference to the performance art or installation appears early on in the narrative, when Hermann goes back to the slopes the next day after his first encounter with Felix: "I had no trouble in finding the exact spot where he had sprawled the day before. I discovered there a golden cigarette-end, a dead violet, a scrap of Czech newspaper, and – that particularly impersonal trace, which the unsophisticated wanderer is wont to leave under a bush: one large, straight, manly piece and a thinner one coiled over it. Several emerald flies completed the picture." Nabokov, *Despair*, p. 17. The excrements were not mentioned in the Russian version of *Despair*.

[36] Simone de Beauvoir, "Pyrrhus and Cineas," *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2021), p. 129.

[37] Ibid. In her novel, *L'Invitée* (*She Came to Stay*, 1943), Beauvoir presents a somewhat Nabokovian solution to one's dealings with the Other – the Other (Xavier) ends up being murdered by the main character, Francoise, who finds Xavier's presence threatening to her relationship with her lover and even to her own existence. Later Beauvoir described her ending in *L'Invitée* as "dead," "contrived" and "clumsy," which brings to mind Nabokov's description of his English translation of *Despair* in 1963: "the result seemed to me artistically clumsy." Toril Moi, *Simone de*

end of his novel results from his fooling himself into regarding Felix as a component of his own endeavor of producing a masterpiece, and not a Beauvoirian free individual, who first creates the need for such literary works to be written and published.

Despair and Its British Audience

In August 1936 Nabokov made several attempts to switch from John Long (that previously published his *Camera Obscura* in English) to Hutchinson & Co publishers on the assumption that the "public for which Messrs. J. Long are working might fail to appreciate *Despair* on account of its rather peculiar character [...]."[38] In November 1936, Nabokov continued with his efforts to get Hutchinson & Co interested in his novel. He went as far as explaining some subtleties of Hermann's behavior: "nature had endowed him with literary genius, but at the same time there was a criminal taint in his blood; the criminal in him, prevailing over the artist, took over those very methods which nature had meant the artist to use.[39] It is not a 'detective novel.'" "I cannot help feeling that *Despair*, were it produced to the right sort of public, might prove quite a success for you and for me," Nabokov continued. He supported his inkling with several positive Russian reviews. "I cannot imagine why, in spite of my previous letters, you avoid discussing this matter with me, and I do hope to hear from you now,"[40] Nabokov wrote in conclusion. Hutchinson & Co informed Nabokov that they had made no plans for publishing his novel and "that their readers were not enthusiastic, especially in regard to [his own] translation."[41] Would Nabokov think at that time about the bad luck of his wretched character?

Beauvoir. The Making of an Intellectual Woman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 116; Nabokov, *Despair*, pp. XI-XII. Nabokov, *Despair*, p. XI.

[38] Vladimir Nabokov, *Selected Letters 1940-1977*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov, Matthew J. Bruccoli (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), pp. 16-17.

[39] One day Hermann goes on a business trip to Prague and by accident meets a man (Felix) whom he thinks to be his exact double. Hermann is not only stunned by what he perceives as a marvellous and miraculous resemblance but he sees Felix as a means of getting money and notoriety. He persuades Felix to take his place while he himself would be somewhere else and promises to pay him money for his assistance. He takes Felix to a deserted forest, makes him change his clothes, shaves him, and even clips his toenails. Then he shoots him. All in hopes that his wife Lydia will collect the insurance money once his fake body is found. He praises himself for devising a crime that nobody else has previously committed. No man alive. No literary character, including those of Dostoevsky. Hermann falls into a writing frenzy for he resolves to present the story of his crime to the world. That is the exact story that the reader gets.

[40] Ibid., pp. 17-18.

[41] Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov*, pp. 429-430.

Hermann's Heightened Vulnerability

For his revised English translation of *Despair* (1965) Nabokov made several adjustments, such as substituting Hermann's distortion of the plot of Shakespeare's *Othello* for Pushkin's "The Shot." Such adjustments were made to help his English-speaking readers navigate more safely through the muddy waters of a Russian author's narrative. He also added a completely new episode describing a sense of dissociation that Hermann experiences happily and willingly in Lydia's company:

> I am referring to a well-known kind of "dissociation." With me it started in fragmentary fashion a few months before my trip to Prague. For example, I would be in bed with Lydia, winding up the brief series of preparatory caresses she was supposedly to be entitled to, when all at once I would become aware that imp Split had taken over. My face was buried in the folds of her neck, her legs had started to clamp me, the ashtray toppled off the bed table, the universe followed – but at the same time, incomprehensibly and delightfully, I was standing naked in the middle of the room, one hand resting on the back of the chair where she had left her stockings and her panties. The sensation of being in two places at once gave me an extraordinary kick; but this was nothing compared to later developments. In my impatience to split I would bundle Lydia to bed as soon as we had finished supper.[42]

This episode and several other episodes (already present in the 1934 version), which describe Hermann "suddenly feel[ing] limp, dizzy, dead-tired, as after some long and disgusting orgy,"[43] suggest that Hermann may have suffered from some form of epilepsy, a disease that was familiar to his creator. Galya Diment was the first to suggest that Nabokov might have suffered from a "mild form of epilepsy," which he denied or ignored most of his life.[44] Diment suggests

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[42] Nabokov, *Despair*, pp. 27-28.
[43] Ibid., p. 14.
[44] See Galya Diment, "Nabokov and Epilepsy. Evidence that Vladimir Nabokov suffered from a mild form of the condition," *TLS*, August 2016.

that Nabokov endows some of his characters with epileptic fits, Hermann, however, is not on this list. It is doubtful that Nabokov took his own signs of epilepsy lightly, given how this disease affected his cousin, Nicolas Nabokov, with whom he was very close in the 1920s:

> Vincent Giroud (the biographer) met Nicolas Nabokov in the 1920s, and the composer confided in him that "seizures could assault him on the street, on the steps of the metro, or in a restaurant," and that he then experienced both crippling fear and amazing "moments of clairvoyance" […]. Nicolas was, according to [Giroud], very good at masking his seizures, often through what Iwaszkiewicz called, using a Russian word, "Dostoevshchina," or "Dostoevskian stuff," which usually means over-the-top emotionalism and melodrama, "bad living, drinking, completely Russian outbursts which were terrifying in the orderly compartmentalized world of the West."[45]

In this account, the manifestations of epilepsy are associated with Dostoevsky or *Dostoevshchina* [overemphasized inner turmoil] and with some allegedly negative traits of Russian character.

Dostoevsky is by far the most famous Russian writer who became the subject of several case studies of epilepsy. Dostoevsky's medical history as well as his diligent efforts to familiarize himself with contemporary medical advances, court procedures, and forensic evidence were well known to his contemporaries, both students of medicine and writers.[46] He used this knowledge to understand his own condition and as material for his fiction. From his first signs of epilepsy in the 1840s to Dostoevsky's death in 1881, patients who suffered from epilepsy were expected to commit murders, often in a state of delirium, having no recollection of what they had done. In more advanced stages, patients were reported to suffer from idiocy, loss of memory (towards the end of his life, Dostoevsky would himself have brief episodes of seeing familiar faces as strange and unfamiliar) and overall degeneracy, something that Dostoevsky was very much afraid of.[47] Dostoevsky's presence in *Despair* is easily discernable. Hermann

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[45] Ibid., p. 8.
[46] See James. L. Rice, *Dostoevsky and the Healing Art: An Essay in Literary and Medical History* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985).
[47] See Rice, *Dostoevsky and the Healing Art*.

repeatedly pokes fun at the author of "Crime and Slime" and feels confident about outsmarting Dostoevsky-the-writer and his wretched criminals.

In his *Lectures on Russian Literature* – written in 1940 in preparation for his emigration to the US – Nabokov informs his presumed audience about his "consulting doctors' case studies" in order to classify "Dostoevsky's characters by the categories of mental illnesses by which they are affected [...]." The first disease on his list is epilepsy. "The four well-marked cases of epilepsy among Dostoevsky's characters are: Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*; Smerdiakov in *The Brothers Karamazov*; Kirillov in the *Possessed*; and Nellie in *The Humiliated and Insulted*."[48] Nabokov proceeds with brief descriptions of each character.

Nabokov was most likely familiar with Freud's essay on Dostoevsky, "Dostoevsky and Parricide," written in 1927-28 and published in English in 1931, in which Freud suggests a connection between what he describes as Dostoevsky's "alleged" epilepsy and his potential for murder.[49] However, Nabokov's approach to Dostoevsky's characters and their characteristics is closer to that of a famous Russian psychiatrist, Vladimir Chizh, in his study *Dostoevsky as a Psychopathologist*, published in 1885:

> There are four epileptics in Dostoevsky's fiction: Nellie in *The Humiliated and Insulted*; Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*; Kirillov in *The Possessed*; and Smerdiakov in *The Brothers Karamazov*. It would have been strange had Dostoevsky confined himself to describing just one epileptic episode or just one character afflicted by epilepsy.
> He was the only author to describe the peculiar mental makeup of an epileptic and the uniquely individual warning signs of an oncoming seizure.
>
> Dostoevsky's all four epileptics were mentally unbalanced people. […] It is a well-known fact that while some epileptics possess abilities of genius, their mental makeup is nearly always characterized by some pathological deviations from the norm.[50]

[48] Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, p. 107.
[49] Sigmund Freud, "Dostoevsky and Parricide" (1928 [1927]). In *The Future of and Illusion. Civilizations and its Discontents* and *Other Works*. In *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XXI (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), pp. 173-196.
[50] Vladimir Chizh, *Dostoevsky kak psikhopatolog*. Moscow: Universitetskaia tipografiia, 1885, p. 53.

Like Chizh, Nabokov singles out Dostoevsky's fictional accounts of senile dementia, hysteria and psychopathic behavior.[51] To my mind, Chizh makes his most revelatory contribution to Dostoevsky studies in his summation of the plot of *The Idiot*:

> Whether knowingly or by accident, Dostoevsky expresses a great idea: the reason epileptics are rarely cured completely is not only because practical medicine is not sufficiently advanced but also—and to a much greater degree—because of the adverse effect on mental health of people's living conditions and the complete disregard for an appropriate lifestyle that would sustain a healthy mind—both on the part of society in general and those at risk of developing mental problems in particular.
>
> The poignant dramatism of the novel is in that it never occurred to the people surrounding Myshkin—despite their being sufficiently educated, sympathetic toward him, and even loving him—to be protective of his fragile mental state. Instead, in their blithe ignorance, they drove him, little by little, into a state of severe derangement. And none of those unmindful murderers ever repented of what they did […].[52]

All of the above inclines me to suggest that Nabokov intentionally added an extra layer (his progressing mental illness) to Hermann's personality in order to highlight his vulnerability as a writer and human being. Nabokov's 1965 Foreword to *Despair*[53] evinces his reluctance to re-experience the indifference of British publishers in 1936, or the degree of danger that Hermann reached in interacting with other people while writing his novel. Not only does he lose his mind, but he also loses control over his narrative, which "degenerates into a diary" and ends up having eleven chapters instead of the planned ten.[54]

[51] Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, pp. 108-109.
[52] Chizh, *Dostoevsky*, p. 57.
[53] Nabokov is not only cruel to his fictional character, he is similarly cruel to his younger self who was responsible for creating Hermann in the first place some 30 years before. "I also know how pleased and excited I would have been in 1935 had I been able to foreread this 1965 version. The ecstatic love of a young writer for the old writer he will be some day is ambition in its most laudable form. This love is not reciprocated by the older man in his larger library, for even if he does recall with regret a naked palate and a rheumless eye, he has nothing but an impatient shrug for the bungling apprentice of his youth." Nabokov, *Despair*, p. XII.

Nabokov in the U.S.

"An artistic harmonious balance between the reader's mind and the author's mind"[55] that Nabokov promoted in his introductory lecture to his class on Masters of European Fiction (taught at Cornell from 1948 to 1958) should be taken with a grain of salt. All the masters in question were conveniently dead by then and could not object to Nabokov's "loving" dissections of their works. At Cornell, Nabokov taught courses on Russian and European literature in translation. His copious notes and lectures have been collected posthumously as *Lectures on Russian Literature* and as *Lectures on Literature*. The Public Library in New York has many books from Nabokov's own library that show many annotated comments by Nabokov on the pages of the English editions of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Kafka's *Metamorphosi*s, Flaubert's *Madam Bovary*, and Proust's *Swann's Way*, to name but a few. He used these editions to prepare for his famous lectures. In his marginal notes Nabokov primarily complained about the inadequate translations and suggested his own versions. Nabokov's zealous editorial exercises had the nature of self-therapy. Not daring to criticize the works themselves, he directed his critical ardor toward their imperfect "doubles." He would sometimes suggest certain changes and omissions in the original texts themselves. Above all, Nabokov taught his students how to read a literary text, encouraging some of them, like Alfred Appel, Jr., to become conscientious readers and interpreters of his own works.[56]

In one of my publications, I discuss in greater detail the circumstances that allowed Nabokov to manage and manipulate his American readers in the 1940s-1960s.[57] These included his publication of a series of autobiographic essays in *The New Yorker, Harper's Magazine, The Atlantic Monthly,* and *Partisan Review* in the 1940s and early 1950s. The essays made his readers aware of Nabokov's Russian heritage and the details of his unique biography. When

[54] Nabokov, *Despair*, pp. 208, 197.
[55] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 4.
[56] See Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, edited, preface, introduction, notes Alfred Appel, Jr. (New York, 1970). Tatiana Gershkovich reveals that the older Nabokov wanted his readers to embrace his formula of "moderate multiplication[s]" of his own self only to find that such a goal was largely unreachable, as was the case with Carl Proffer's *Keys to Lolita*. Gershkovich, *Art in Doubt: Tolstoy, Nabokov, and the Problem of Other Minds* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2023), pp. 88-89. I see Nabokov's American students as his Beauvoirian others, compelling him to provide extended commentaries to various masterpieces. These included his mammoth translation of and commentary to Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, the work he wanted to be remembered by along with *Lolita*.

Lolita was published in 1955, nobody drew parallels between the Nabokov of his essays and his deranged main character. Nabokov also wrote detailed explanatory introductions to his Russian novels published in their English translations in the 1960s-1970s. In other words, after he left Europe in 1940, Nabokov succeeded in creating an intellectual environment for his safe and secure interactions with a specific contingent of readers who called him a magician and didn't object to his occasional bullying.

Coda

The conclusion of *Despair* allows me to suggest that in the mid-1930s Nabokov was not quite ready yet for – or more precisely, did not yet have the means to achieve – the kind of symbiotic relationship with his readers advocated for by Beauvoir. Nor was he willing to admit to his dependence on any "others," such as his readers.[58] Nabokov's apparent neglect of his readers reaches its culmination in Koncheyev's instructions to the young writer Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev in *The Gift* (1937): "The real writer should ignore all readers but one, that of the future, who in his turn is merely the author reflected in time."[59] Such statements can best be rationalized by the following quote from Ernest Becker in which he praises Freud for exposing people's fundamental dishonesty about reality: "We don't want to admit that we do not stand alone, that we always rely on something that transcends us, some system of ideas and powers in which we are embedded and which support us."[60]

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[57] Galina Rylkova, "O 'chitatele, tele i slave' Vladimira Nabokova," in *Vladimir Nabokov. Pro et Contra*, vol. 2 (St. Petersburg: Russkii khristianskii gumanitarnyi institut, 2001), pp. 360-376.
[58] On Nabokov's professed indifference, even cruelty, to his audience see Durantaye, *Style is Matter*, pp. 30-31.
[59] Nabokov, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage International, 1991), p. 340.
[60] Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York, 1997), p. 55.

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