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LOVE, DEATH, NABOKOV:
LOOKING FOR *THE ORIGINAL OF LAURA*

““E fface / expunge / erase / delete / rub out / X / wipe out / obliterate,” reads the by-now most famous last index card, if not quite most famous last line, of the past century’s modernist prose. One verb or phrase of annihilation from the list has been quite literally scratched out – and equally absent, as critics will not tire of pointing out, is most of the novel.¹

It is hard not to feel ambivalent about “Nabokov’s last book.” A certain self-reflexive anxiety is eerily built into the fragments themselves. Perhaps manuscripts do not burn, in Mikhail Bulgakov’s unsettling formulation, and we are witness to a certain magical (but certainly not Platonic?) immortality of creation, as suggested in the final phrases of an early passage from Nabokov’s *Laura*:

Only by identifying her with an unwritten, half-written, rewritten difficult book could one hope to render at last what contemporary descriptions of intercourse so seldom convey, because newborn and thus generalized, in the sense of primitive

¹ All otherwise unmarked parenthetical citations are from the recent Knopf edition: Vladimir Nabokov, *The Original of Laura* (New York: Knopf, 2009). For an overview of the publication history of *The Original of Laura*, see John Lanchester’s piece, “*The Original of Laura* (Dying is Fun) by Vladimir Nabokov,” *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. LVI, No. 20 (December 17, 2009): 16-20.

organisms of art as opposed to the personal achievement of great English poets dealing with an evening in the country, a bit of sky in a river, the nostalgia of remote sounds – things utterly beyond the reach of Homer or Horace. Readers are directed to that book – on a very high shelf, in a very bad light – but already existing, as magic exists, and death, and as shall exist, from now on, the mouth she made automatically while using that towel to wipe her thighs after the promised withdrawal (21-25).

Two provocations interlace on these index cards: first, the claim that literary intercourse remains poorly written because still too new a subject; and second, that the book itself, bad light and high shelf notwithstanding, is always already there.

Nabokov made a similar observation about cinematic depictions of sexuality in *Strong Opinions*, after viewing Tony Richardson's disappointing adaptation (despite the genius casting of Anna Karina as Margot) of *Laughter in the Dark* in 1969:

I was appalled by the commonplace quality of the sexual passages. I would like to say something about that...In recent films, the porno-grapple has already become a cliché though the device is but half-a-dozen years old. I would have been very sorry that Tony Richardson should have followed that trite trend, had it not given me the opportunity to form and formulate the following important notion: theatrical acting, in the course of the last centuries, has led to incredible refinements of stylized pantomime in the presentation of, say, a person eating, or getting deliciously drunk, or looking for his spectacles, or making a proposal of marriage. Not so in regard to the imitation of the sexual act, which on the stage has absolutely no tradition behind it. The Swedes and we have had to start from scratch, and what I have witnessed up to now on the screen – the blotchy male shoulder, the false howls of bliss, the four or five mingled feet – all of it is primitive, commonplace, conventional, and therefore disgusting...The lack of art or style in those paltry copulations is particularly brought into evidence by their clashing with the marvelously high level of acting in virtually all other imitations

of natural gestures on our stage and screen. This is an attractive topic to ponder further and directors should take notice of it. (*SO* 137)

Sexual passages in literature have a far longer tradition behind them than do those on the screen, but Nabokov nevertheless felt himself to be breaking new ground: with *Lolita* and *Ada* certainly, and *Laura* could have been his third perverse monument.

As for the escapist fantasy of literary immortality, this too rings familiar. Richard Rorty has suggested that Nabokov deliberately confuses literary with personal immortality throughout his oeuvre: however, while one might seem to achieve the former through art, such “immortal” status unfortunately has no bearing on “the claim that you will actually *be* out there, beyond the walls of time, waiting for dinner guests.”²

The built-in tension between Nabokov’s wager with eternity and the publication history of posthumous *Laura* certainly accounts for part of the work’s appeal: I challenge readers *not* to compare the remnants of *Laura* to the trick photography recording Adam Lind’s hotel-room suicide some twenty-five notecards in. There is a morbid and lucrative fascination to any such final event: “These automatic pictures of his last moments and of a table’s lion-paws did not come out to[o] well; but his widow easily sold them for the price of a flat in Paris to the local magazine *Pitch* which specialized in soccer and diabolical *faits-divers*” (sic, 49-51). No further comment seems necessary.

* * *

In truth, critical writing about *The Original of Laura, A novel in fragments* (2009) feels nearly impossible. Nabokov’s voice chides from beyond, or at least from the Translator’s Introduction to his *Eugene Onegin*, that an “artist should ruthlessly destroy his manuscripts after publication, lest they mislead academic mediocrities into thinking that it is possible to unravel the mysteries of genius by studying cancelled readings.”³ It is

² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 151-52.

³ Vladimir Nabokov, “Translator’s Introduction,” from Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*. Edited and Translated by Vladimir Nabokov. Rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press,

a tricky business to disobey the maestro while relying on his authority to sell the unfinished product, but in this case *Laura* is all that we have. Nabokov was the first to break his own injunctions in the same *Onegin* project, parsing discarded draft variants and incomplete additions with an historian's glee. Critics shrug and nervously follow suit, only to step into what looks like a cleverly prepared trap (opportunism; academic mediocrity). If Nabokov habitually arranges his chess pieces in such a way as to resist an external critical methodology, this text more than any invites a kind of naïve sleuthing, a preliminary exegesis rather than an intervention.

Twenty-first century readers are more familiar with false fragments and unreliably suicidal narrators than actual incompleteness; with Barthes' "death of the author" than dead authors. But *The Original of Laura* is more of a Romantic fragment than a postmodernist novel, and it leans heavily on the supporting biographical legend – in place of a Person from Porlock, death in a drafty Swiss hospital. When there are only bright patches to look at, we realize just how much Nabokov's art relied on structure. Some of the content is there in the fragments, but without the confession frame of *Lolita*, the poem and commentary diptych of *Pale Fire*, or the Xeno's arrow trajectory of *Ada*, the peculiar contract between author and reader is gone.

Yet *Laura* proves too tempting to let alone. The triangle at its heart – Philip Wild, Flora Wild, and Ivan Vaughan (but who is Nigel Dalling? A.N.D? Eric?) – offers up two men, both writers "after a fashion," and one lovely and depraved little *femme fatale*, all liquor and omoplates. This is hardly new material, either for Nabokov or for literary fashion, and clearly that is part of the point. Nabokov barely steps off the springboard of parody in *Laura*, but we may be right to sense something new here, or at least a deeper crevice of underexplored Nabokoviana.⁴

Lolita became a phenomenon because it hit a nerve. It poked and probed a culture where it badly hurt, provoking rage and nervous laughter *à la Freud*, as well as countless imitations, responses, and translations across genre and media. *Ada*, a novel more or less

1975), 15. Aleksandar Hemon points to this same passage in his review, "Hands off Nabokov: Why *The Original of Laura* should never have become a book," *Slate Magazine* (Nov. 10, 2009).

http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2009/11/hands_off_nabokov.html

⁴ I borrow Appel's well-known coinage. See Alfred Appel Jr. "Lolita: The Springboard of Parody," *Nabokov: The Man and the Work*. Ed. L.S. Dembo (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 106-43. Similar in sensibility is Carl Proffer's *Keys to Lolita* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

about intellectual narcissism and self-referential sterility, remains undervalued and less understood, but repeated the provocation in a different key.⁵ A completed *Laura* might have perplexed and incensed once more. Where would post-Romantic readers be without wicked young succubi, fatal loves, darkly ambiguous sexuality, or a genius's Poisonous Opus that will cost someone's life? *Laura* teasingly promises to expose all of the above. The more closely we read, the more we begin to squirm.

What is *Laura* really about, as best we can tell? Evidently, and like the previously penultimate *Transparent Things*, the story attempts an imaginative exploration of death (dying is fun), but this time, death as an erotic and artistic experience. Even a casual perusal of the cards reveals major and minor characters dying of love or loving to die. Philip Wild discovers death as both a science and art form – the ultimate solipsistic art of the twentieth century, perhaps. It is a safe starting bet that the maestro is not being entirely serious, but such is the new pet perversion of this text: beyond incest or pedophilia, a kind of literary necrophilia, or in Wild's case auto-necrophilia.

That is to say, in this heartbreakingly final fragment of a Nabokov novel, we can make out the traces of one of the great Romantic topoi sketched out, as if in white chalk on a blackboard, and then – as best as time would allow – undone.

* * *

The Original of Laura circles compulsively around death and the erotic, erotic death. Neuro-madman Wild self-effaces pleasurably. The adultery novel-within-the-novel (*My Laura*) somehow causes the original's (Flora's) death: Ivan Vaughan effectively kills his mistress by writing her. A scattering of minor characters and back stories *en passant* involve love-murders and love-suicides. A kind of automaton sexuality, states of intoxication, and the strange borderland between dreaming and waking that defines hypnosis (and soulless Flora's entire life) serve as half-way houses to the final full stop.

All of it is ripe for analysis, and *Laura* has the usual digs at Freud that we have come to expect, and be somewhat bored of, in Nabokov. Flora is classified and

⁵ See, for a start, the new edition of Brian Boyd's *Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness* (Christchurch, NZ: Cybereditions, 2001).

condemned by her precocious tastes: “At eleven she had read *A quoi revent les enfants*, by a certain Dr Freud, a madman” (89). Is it any wonder then, that “Only some very expensive, super-Oriental doctor with long gentle fingers could have analyzed her nightly dreams of erotic torture” (55)? *Nota bene* the mocking epithet “super-Oriental” and that her much-antlered obese husband Wild is similarly introduced by a “silly female interviewer” in a “silly radio series (‘Modern Eccentrics’) as ‘a gentle Oriental sage, founder of—.’” (Sadly, the text breaks off here, with “insert cards” circled in the lower right hand corner, 185).

The most novel conceit in *The Original of Laura* is Wild’s fantastic ability to auto-obliterate and come back to tell the tale. He claims, “I taught thought to mimick an imperial neurotransmitter an aw[e]some messenger carrying my order of self destruction to my own brain. Suicide made a pleasure” (sic, 127). Wild’s science, art, or meditative practice (Nabokov’s last novel was composed in the mid-1970s, after all) reads as a nightmare of fashionably edgy psychobabble, the literalization of some awful metaphor. Cue Nabokov’s scathing voice: isn’t this what every Freud or Jung acolyte dreams of, so to speak?

There is no missing it: sex = death. Considering how little there is of *Laura*, it is astonishing how much of the material is spent reinforcing the cliché: see the “more than masturbatory joy” of self erasure (139); the claim that “the process of dying by auto-dissolution afforded the greatest ecstasy known to man” (171); or finally, “I hit upon the art of thinking away my body, my being, mind itself. To think away thought – luxurious suicide, delicious dissolution!” (243).

So much for Wild, the dull point of the romantic triangle. But the somewhat sharper writer “after a fashion” does something similar, though there is less auto to his annihilation. Ivan Vaughan (whom I will posit as the author of *My Laura*, a double of Vladimir Vladimirovich, Van Veen, and all the other V.V.’s of Nabokov’s fiction) murders his mistress via the written word.⁶ Perhaps the cuckolded Wild “erases” her in

⁶ I intuit a strange echo here not only of E.T.A. Hoffman, but of Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s *Eve of the Future Eden*. In this decadent novel, an aristocrat hires Thomas Edison to create an improved woman, based in form on the beautiful but vulgar creature with whom he has fallen irrevocably in love. *L’Eve future* was first published in 1886, and is the little-known source text for the term “android.” Trans. Marilyn Gaddis Rose (Lawrence, Kan.: Coronado Press, 1981). As Villiers de l’Isle-Adam plays a central

revenge? Or perhaps that happens in Ivan's novel? The slippage between truth and fiction is made even more bewildering by the genuine, as well as literary, gaps in the material.

Nota bene that Ivan speaks to his mistress in Russian, in bed. Flora's eyelids flutter when her new lover suddenly murmurs *dushka moyá*: "she didnt meet Russians often this should be pondered" (sic, 19). Behind her masks and fluttering *eventails*, Flora is a descendant of Nabokov's rootless and ruined émigré girls, a younger relation of Nina from "Spring in Fialta," and a similarly pretty but easy casualty. The title of that story cameos as a painting by Flora's grandfather; Linde, the original émigré, moved to the wrong country for realist painters, bringing along his son Adam and wife Eve. With such ancestors, nothing good can ensue.

Do Ivan and Flora share anything besides three languages and original sin? Is Ivan the hidden hero of the story, or a knave akin to Axel Rex from *Laughter in the Dark*? All we know is that the "I" of the book "is a neurotic and hesitant man of letters, who destroys his mistress in the act of portraying her" (121). Though the blurb describes his work as "a roman a clef with *clef* lost forever," the maddening masterpiece fools no one. A copy is slipped to husband Wild by the "demonic hands" of a mysterious Velvet Valet. Old friend Winny Carr runs into Flora holding a paperback *Laura* at the train-station of Sex (!). Despite the protests of the original, Winny insists that Flora keep reading, to "come face to face with yourself at every other corner. And there's your wonderful death. Let me show you your wonderful death...It's not quite at the end. You'll scream with laughter. It's the craziest death in the world" (225-27).

It is clear from the opening cards, when Flora/Laura's "exquisite bone structure immediately slipped into a novel – became in fact the secret structure of that novel" (15), that the poor girl's skeleton was required elsewhere from the start. A scene from her delinquent girlhood offers another glimpse of the pillow book to come: taught by a sweet and depraved Japanese schoolmate, Flora paints "her left hand up to the radial artery (one of the tenderest areas of her beauty) with miniscule information" in French and Russian fairy script, to cheat on exams (91). One way or another, this body is all book. Such beauty comes at a price.

role in Edmund Wilson's 1931 *Axel's Castle: A Study of the Imaginative Literature of 1870 – 1930*, it seems reasonable to assume that Nabokov was at least somewhat familiar with the French symbolist writer.

The deadly pattern begins a generation back. Flora's father Adam ignores his ballerina wife's lovers, but commits suicide when he learns "that the boy he loved had strangled another, unattainable boy whom he loved even more" (47-49). Murder prompts suicide; love, both. The death of his twelve-year-old daughter Daisy (bicycle, country road, backing lorry) somehow inspires the ludicrous Hubert Hubert's attempt to deflower Flora; innuendo on this last proper name is, naturally, unavoidable. *Lolita*-like leitmotifs continue throughout, updated gruesomely: Wild's first love is "Young Aurora Lee (who was to be axed and chopped up at seventeen by an idiot lover, all glasses and beard)" (205). And so forth.

Recalling another earlier Nabokov classic, both Adam's fall and Wild's fantasies explicitly toy with homosexuality and gender ambiguity. Adam Lind chops the final "e" off of his name and kills himself over a boy. Wild dreams of caressing his murdered nymphet, but his thrust "cupped hand from behind between your consenting thighs" discovers a faunlet (203). He assures us, "Speaking as an authority on dreams, I wish to add that this was no homosexual manifestation but a splendid example of terminal gynandrim. Young Aurora Lee...and half-impotent old Wild formed for a moment one creature" (205). Yet the very next sentence gives the lie, for "in a more disgusting and delicious sense, her little bottom, so smooth, so moonlit, [was] a replica, in fact, of her twin brother's charms, sampled rather brutally on my last night at boarding school" (205-7). Something similar occurs in "Eric's notes" (whoever that is), explaining his taste for "finishing off at my ease against the softest part of her thigh" (235, the preferred sexual quirk of *TOOL*, just as *Ada* has a preferred position). He explains, "This predilection might have been due to the unforgettable impact of my romps with schoolmates of different but erotically identical, sexes" (235).

As in *Ada*, male and female variants of the same essential substance recur. While Adam dies, his wife Lanskaya dances in the ballet *Narcisse et Narcette*. A simile invokes "delicate siblings" best hidden apart in orphanages, on cold nights (143). Even Wild, in the last few notecards, is said to have had a half-sister, "a fat dreamy pigtailed creature who died before reaching puberty" (269). Is Wild Hazel Shade as an adult male? Will all of Nabokov's other novels appear in this book? As in *Transparent Things*, ghosts haunt fabula and plot, like the spectral photographers moving through the crowd at Flora's

graduation. See also the “lamentation in Heaven and laughter in Hell” when Flora and Ivan meet (9), and the fact that Hubert Hubert, technically innocent in this version of the Hubert and Flo story, dies in an elevator, presumably going up. The real spectres and doubles haunting *The Original of Laura* are Nabokov’s previous novels.

But who exactly is the original of Laura, or of Flora? The girl has a rather ambiguous charm. Her breasts look a dozen years younger than her twenty-four years of age, but look again: “Her frail, docile frame when turned over by hand revealed new marvels – the mobile omoplates of a child being tubbed, the incurvation of a ballerina’s spine, narrow nates of an ambiguous irresistible charm (nature’s beastliest bluff, said Paul de G watching a dour old don watching boys bathing)” (19-21). Is the original of Flora a Frank or Phil? The conjugal scene does nothing to dispel the queerness: see obese Wild “reclining on cushions: she sitting in the fauteuil of his flesh with her back to him. The procedure – a few bounces over very small humps... and he holding her in front of him like a child being given a sleighride down a/short slope by a kind stranger” (197-99). Clearly, Nabokov is mocking the psychoanalytic readings to which *Lolita* was subjected, that gleefully suggested little Dolores masked a Dominick, and the nympholept narrator, latent homosexuality in the author.

In *Ada*, Van Veen accuses Proust of playing the very same trick with Albertine/Albert in *A la recherche du temps perdu*. And yet another discernable pattern in *Laura* is a web of allusions to the great and notorious homosexual writers of the last century. Wild’s very name, on at least one card Wilder, plus that of Thornton (193) suggest the American novelist and playwright Thornton Wilder. Was his *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* – see *The Old Bridge*, a painting by Flora’s grandfather (45) – to have been another intertext, or dismembered source text, for *Laura*? Edmund Wilson wrote letters to both Wilder and Nabokov; one hardly imagines the latter would have loved the work of the former; other connections are elusive.

Nabokov has a fondness for telling names and multi-tiered allusions. Ivan nakedly Frenchifies Wild as the cuckolded “Sauvage” of his novel, yet Wild (the original) claims *his* first language is French when he calls his wife a *filie* in the full Parisian sense of the word. Is the English “original” hiding behind both Gallic masks Oscar Wilde? Wild’s chalked mental sketch and its effects on his body could well be an inverted portrait of

Dorian Gray.⁷ To cross and confuse literary genealogies a bit more, a riff on the famous Proustian madeleine-memory passage prompts Wild to mentally amputate his toes: “I was enjoying a petit-beurre with my noontime tea when the droll configuration of that particular biscuit’s margins set into motion a train of thought that may have occurred to the reader even before it occurred to me. He knows already how much I disliked my toes” (157).

What is the meaning of this medley of homosexual writers? To change genders but not orientation, the abrupt *in medias res* opening sentence (“Her husband, she answered, was a writer too – at least after a fashion”) is pure Virginia Woolf.⁸ Of course many other allusions do not fit the pattern: the fat man’s gesture, slamming a marble paperweight next to his unfaithful wife, seems stolen from Tolstoy’s *Pierre*; and the cast-off mackintosh lover borrowed from Joyce. But perhaps these remainders, the excess allusions with which Nabokov litters his prose, resemble the authentically extraneous details beloved of nineteenth-century realists – except with the exact opposite effect, of conveying artifice and literariness.

Thus far, death, *le petit mort*, allusions to authorial sexuality, and to psychoanalytic readers. Then there is the oddly privileged state of intoxication. A drunken Flora meets Ivan in the opening pages of a party which “seemed to have degenerated into a lot of sober eyes staring at her with nasty compassion from every corner, every cushion and ashtray, and even from the hills” (5). Leaving his hotel room in the morning, she requests more liquor, a quickie, and a taxi. Hubert Hubert, an Englishman, made his fortune in “not quite legal transactions in the traffic of wines” (53).

Is there something Dionysian in all this intoxication? Is Flora a holy harlot, a parody priestess-in-training when she loses her virginity at “barely fourteen” on some broken steps – “all that remained of an ornate public toilet or some ancient templet...the site of a duty she had resolved to perform” (77)? The broken temple could be a misplaced floramor, a relic like the broken glass and lacy rag that are “the only signs of an earlier

⁷ As Eric Naiman notes in the review, “*The Original of Laura*, by Vladimir Nabokov,” Special section to *The Chronicle* (December 6, 2009).

⁸ David Gates points out the similarity to Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* in his *New York Times* review, questioning why Brian Boyd found the opening sentence so innovative. David Gates, “Nabokov’s Last Puzzle,” *New York Times* (November 15, 2009). See also Brian Boyd, “The Original of Laura,” *The Financial Times* (November 23, 2009).

period of literature” (83) among the vulgar delinquents’ modern games. It is almost impossible to resist these tantalizing, generalizing myths and ur-symbols.

Even when sober, Flora lives as if intoxicated, or hypnotized: “Of art, of love, of the difference between dreaming and waking she knew nothing but would have darted at you like a flatheaded blue serpent if you questioned her” (85-87). She is an automaton; she is enchanted. The elusive and maddening object of desire is already half-dead. Notice the echo in a later notecard: “Electroencephalographic recordings of hypnotic ‘sleep’ [] very similar to those of the waking state and quite different from those of normal sleep; yet there are certain minute details about the pattern of the trance which are of extraordinary interest and place it specifically apart both from sleep and [waking]” (209). If Flora has been permanently hypnotized, then by whom, by what? What does it all mean?

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Love and death are leitmotifs in all of Nabokov’s works, but in *The Original of Laura*, a quantitative difference becomes qualitative. Not only is *Laura* expressly about the coupling of Eros and Thanatos, to name the formula, but the topos is even “theorized.” There is plenty to look at even in the few cards that we have. Nabokov made notes (for himself? for Wild?) on Buddhism, on Nietzsche – and Freudian/Jungian psychoanalytic fashions lurk behind nearly everything.

The trendy “Eastern” mysticism in *Laura* is especially eye-catching. Wild is not just fat, but a “meditative idol” (231). A note card headed “OED” offers the following lists and definitions:

Nirvana [] blowing out (extinguishing), extinction, disappearance. In Buddhist theology extinction...and absorption into the supreme spirit.

(nirvanic embrace of Brahma)

bonze=Buddhist monk

bonzery, bonzeries

the doctrine of Buddhist incarnation

Brahmahood=absorption into the divine essence.

Brahmism

(all this postulates a supreme god) [215]

The next card continues in the same spirit:

Buddhism

Nirvana = “extinction of the self” “individual existence”

“release from the cycle of incarnation”

“reunion with Brahma (Hinduism)”

attained through the suppression of the individ[ual] existence.

Buddhism: Beatic spiritual condition

The religious rubbish and mysticism of Oriental wisdom

The minor poetry of mystical myths [217]

If this background research was not intended to make it into the finished novel, Wild’s notes, which presumably were, offer a flood of thought on the same topic and similar in tone:

A process of self-obliteration conducted by an effort of the will. Pleasure, bordering on almost unendurable ecstasy, comes from feeling the will working at a new task: an art of destruction which develops paradoxically an element of creativeness in the totally new application of totally free will. Learning to use the vigor of the body for the purpose of its own deletion, standing vitality on its head (213).

All this harmonizes perfectly with the (authorial?) “Notes” at the end of the book: “the art of self slaughter”; “TLS 16-1-76 ‘Nietz[s]che argued that the man of pure will...must recognize that there is an appropriate time to die’”; “Philip Nikitin: The act of suicide may be ‘criminal’ in the same sense that murder is criminal but in my case it is

purified and hallowed by the incredible delight it gives” (265).⁹ Nabokov was willing to go to some pains to research his pseudo-study of love and death.

In the 1920 *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud introduced the concept of the “death drive”; the terminology of Eros and Thanatos came later. But variations on that theme, the desire for death, form the missing heart of *Laura*. In my reading, Nabokov’s last novel is essentially a brilliant parody, or the start of a brilliant parody, of the often-seized upon connection between love and death.¹⁰ Nabokov’s characters actively and openly seek self-obliteration: erase the self through the sexual act; attain at least momentary release; hope for mystical reunion; or as grotesquely imaged in Wild’s twin fantasy, form “for a moment one creature.” Wild’s experiments merely make the metaphor literal. Why imagine that death and ecstasy are one, when you can experience it? Wild assures us that “the process of dying by auto-dissolution afforded the greatest ecstasy known to man” (171). Why love at all? Simply, die.

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Of course, *Laura* is hardly the first Nabokov work to challenge psychoanalysis, brute generalizations, or the Romantic equating of love and death. As Jennifer Shute writes in the entry “Nabokov and Freud” in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, “Nabokov’s antipathy to psychoanalysis scarcely requires documentation” (413).¹¹ Leland de la Durantaye picks out as the most “felicitous formula” from “atop his favorite hobbyhorse” one Nabokov rant against “the oneiromancy and mythogeny of psychoanalysis.”¹² Scores of critics have been eager to follow Nabokov’s lead and toss in their own grievances against psychoanalysis. Others maintain that it is hardly possible in the modern age to reject Freud; Harold Bloom has called Nabokov a “great (and ignorant,

⁹ TLS and the date point to an article from the *Times Literary Supplement*; one Philip Nikitin appears as a minor character in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*.

¹⁰ For a wonderful parallel, if not intertext to *Laura*, we might recall the 1975 Woody Allen film “Love and Death,” a satirical romp at the expense of the classic Russian novel.

¹¹ Jennifer Shute, “Nabokov and Freud,” *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*. Ed. Vladimir Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995).

¹² Leland de la Durantaye, “Vladimir Nabokov and Sigmund Freud, or a Particular Problem,” *American Imago* Vol. 62, Issue 1 (Baltimore: Spring 2005): 59.

in this) hater of Sigmund Freud.”¹³ And Michael Wood has speculated persuasively that “Freud is more of a rival than he looks, and needs to be caricatured as the fool who rushes in where Nabokov plans delicately to tread. The ground is not empty, but sacred; that is why the angels and the slightly less fearful novelist are going softly.”¹⁴

A run through the most glaring jibes at Freud and Freudian readers in *The Original of Laura* is in order. I have noted the dreadful “deflowering Flora” motif. An awful modern painting, beloved by the same *fille*, is called “Glandscape (receding ovals)” (25). The disguised Ivan brings his mistress “strelitzias (hateful blooms, regalized bananas really)” (39, felicitously close to the Russian for arrow, *strela*). Hubert gives Flo an obscene chess set featuring “tickly-looking little holes bored in the squares to admit and grip the red and white pieces: the pin-sized pawns penetrated easily, but the slightly larger noblemen had to be forced in with an enervating joggle” (65). She, “after a few minutes of play [] grew tired of it, put a rook in her mouth, ejected it clowning dully” (69-71). In the ruckus that ensues when Hubert plunges a hand under her sheets, raspberry jam is spilled. Did the reader fail to notice that Mother was gone because the maid had mistakenly bought asparagus?

We can hardly skip the gruesome setting of Lanskaya’s death near a memorial fountain: “The fountain took quite a time to get correctly erected after an initial series of unevenly spaced spasms. The potentate had been potent till the absurd age of eighty” (101). But above all, Wild’s “art” itself is Freudian, is precisely oneiromancy and mythogeny. His notes even reveal that Wild discovered the way “to woo death” in a “recurrent dream of my childhood” (249), where a nasty smudge on the wallpaper grew claws and came after him. Rorshach indeed.

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The literary practice of coupling Eros and Thanatos is far older than its psychoanalytic exploration; its twentieth-century critical proponents have been many and diverse. I would like to conclude by suggesting another possible villain or rival haunting

¹³ Harold Bloom, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Lolita* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1993), 2.

¹⁴ Michael Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 121.

The Original of Laura: Denis de Rougemont, author of the grandly ambitious work of literary criticism, *Love in the Western World*.

According to de Rougemont,

The outstanding find made by European poets, what distinguishes them first and foremost among the writers of the world, what most profoundly expresses the European obsession by suffering as a way to understanding, is the secret of the Tristan myth; passionate love at once shared and fought against, anxious for a happiness it rejects, and magnified in its own disaster – *unhappy mutual love*.

Let us pause at this description of the myth.

The love is *mutual* in the sense that Tristan and Iseult ‘love one another,’ or, at least, believe that they do. Certainly their mutual fidelity is exemplary. But *unhappiness* comes in, because the love which ‘dominates’ them is not a love of each for the other as that other really is. They love one another, but each loves the other *from the standpoint of self and not from the other’s standpoint*. Their unhappiness thus originates in a false reciprocity, which disguises a twin narcissism. So much is this so that at times there pierces through their excessive passion a kind of hatred of the beloved. Long before Freud and modern psychology Wagner saw this. (Rougemont 1982, 52-3)¹⁵

Nabokov surely knew, or knew of, de Rougemont’s work; the two men met in person at least once at a disastrous dinner party in Vevey, Switzerland.¹⁶ *L’Amour et l’Occident* first came out in 1939, was revised in 1972, and was available in English as of 1956. It would have been difficult to miss entirely, in one language or the other.¹⁷

¹⁵ Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

¹⁶ According to Stacy Schiff, hostess Topazia Markevitch had “racked her brains for someone else to invite” with the notoriously difficult Nabokovs: “It must be someone intelligent, it must be someone who knew how to read, it must be someone who was anticommunist. She settled on the Swiss writer Denis de Rougemont, whom she briefed before the meal. He was not to speak of left-wing causes, half seriously or otherwise. The dinner began swimmingly, de Rougemont following his instructions to the letter. Midway through the meal he made an anti-Zionist comment. The air turned arctic.” *Vera: Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Modern Library, 1999), 335.

¹⁷ Amusingly, when the *National Review* published a list of “100 Best Non-Fiction Books of the Century” not long ago, Rougemont’s *Love in the Western World* made number 84 and Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory*, number 90.

To make it personal, in 1959 Rougemont committed the ultimate sin: he wrote about *Lolita*. In the essay “New Metamorphoses of Tristan” from *Love Declared*, he blithely concluded that Nabokov’s masterpiece offered still further proof for his universal theory.¹⁸

Adultery today leads only to divorce or exhausts itself in commonplace liaisons. It no longer offers a serious support to what Freud once called the *élan mortel*, secret of the Tristanian love. And the absence of the sacred dims the passions, which awareness of a profanation once caused to burn so brightly. We are left with two sexual taboos, strangely respected by our mores in rapid transition from a primitive sense of the sacred to a scientific hygiene: nymphet-love and incest (Rougemont 1963, 51).

Lolita goes straight for the first remaining taboo. *Ada*, which chooses the second, came out in 1969. Have we stumbled onto a hidden early spark for that novel? Has Nabokov been doing nothing but mocking his readers and fellow writers since the 1960s? See again:

If loving nymphets was not, in our day and age, one of the last surviving sexual taboos (with incest), there would be neither true passion nor true novel, in the “Tristanian” sense of these terms. For the necessary obstacle would be missing between the two protagonists, the necessary *distance* by which the mutual attraction, instead of being mitigated or exhausted by sensual gratification, is metamorphosed into passion...

Let us leave aside for the moment the profound differences that separate this ironic and witty novel from the somber epic... (Rougemont 1963, 49).

¹⁸ See *Nouvelles métamorphoses de Tristan*. Preuves, Paris 96 (février 1959): 14-27. Also in: Denis de Rougemont. *Love Declared: Essays on the Myths of Love* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963).

One can only imagine how the dreadful misreading of “mutual attraction,” the pat equation, and the dismissal of all “profound differences” between works of art to impose one common myth of origin, could have rankled Nabokov. There is more:

Of course, from the initial *coupe de foudre* to the death of the separated lovers – the consequence of a forbidden love that exiles them from the community and consumes them without truly uniting them – the great moments of the Myth are easily identifiable. Has the author been aware of them? Certain episodes of the novel would suggest that this was the case, allusions to the most typical situations and peripeties of the Tristan legend. But it is curious to note that on each occasion a touch of irony accompanies the allusion (Rougemont 1963, 52).

Rougemont admits that Lolita and Humbert’s deaths are “as sordid as the death of the legendary lovers was triumphant in the twelfth-century and Wagnerian versions,” and suggests that this is because Humbert and Lolita never truly arrived at unhappy reciprocal love. He concludes that this work is a *Tristan manqué*. What a reading of *Lolita*, and what an obstinate refusal of its humor and parody!

Rougemont’s essay, in fact, seems one of the rare pieces of writing to fully justify Nabokov’s hatred of “mythogeny.” Nabokov could not allow such a terminal cliché to slide by. It is too general, too blind, and hence too cruel – although, as is so often true of the objects of his most savage parodies, not entirely comfortably wrong.

If *Lolita* parodied romantic love as possession, and *Ada* took on love as narcissistic obsession, then in *Laura* the genuinely fading writer attacks the banal cruelty of viewing love as always, at heart, a longing to die. Rivals, leave love alone. The book that *The Original of Laura* intended to be is a hysterical but vicious attack on just this mythogeny – if not on Rougemont himself, in passing. How many carpets can Nabokov pull out from under a Freudian or Tristan-minded reader before she finally cries defeat? What if the author presents the following portrait of a (broken) marriage: Freud-toting hypnotized boy/girl/child meets Buddha-shaped neuro-mythologist, who loves to die?

In such a reading, the strange circumstances of the *Laura*'s publication only painfully underscore Nabokov's punchline. This lover of literature, at least, had no desire to die.

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