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THE LAST MUSE ESCAPES THE TEXT

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*TRANSPARENT THINGS AND THE ORIGINAL OF LAURA*

**T**adashi Wakashima calls *The Original of Laura* “the companion piece to *Transparent Things*,” and indeed these two novellas strike the Nabokov reader with some similarities: the central theme of death, the mysterious narrator(s), 26 chapters and frequently used alliterations (109). There are also differences within these similarities. As for the death theme, *Transparent Things* focuses on the hereafter that seems to exist parallel to the world of the living, which the ghosts observe and talk about; in contrast, *The Original of Laura* concentrates on the act of dying as an experiment in deleting oneself. Moreover, the impressions of these two works are distinct. Reading *Transparent Things*, we continuously feel a kind of oppression, something uncanny, dark and stuffy, just as Hugh Person feels at midnight on the very day of his father’s death: “It was not a ghost, however, that prevented him from falling asleep, but the stuffiness” (19). Contrastingly, *The Original of Laura* feels light, open, spacious and breezy – even though this might be simply attributed to the fact that the unfinished work is like a half-built house with a lot of empty spaces. In *Transparent Things*, death is called “*it*,” something mystically unnameable. The only instant of dying in the work is described as “to pass from one state of being to another,” accompanied with “incomparable pangs of the mysterious mental manoeuvre” (104). In *The Original of Laura*, we find very little concern about the hereafter. Philip Wild is obsessed with

deleting himself. He tries to commit suicide not by physical means, but by means of a thought experiment, wherein he imagines erasing the lines representing his legs, torso and head drawn on a mental blackboard.

A process of self-obliteration conducted by an effort of the will. Pleasure, bordering on almost unendurable ex-stacy, comes from feeling the will working at a new task: an act 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 (Wild's notes, 213).

As the original title *Dying Is Fun* suggests, Philip even gains the “ecstatic relief of getting rid of” his toes when he believes that he has succeeded in erasing them (D5, 139). There is neither interest in, nor influence of or intervention from the hereafter. Strangely enough, death, as if being observed as a test subject under the glaring light of a laboratory, does not cast a shadow.<sup>1</sup> The experiment is considered a tactic, so to speak, for extinguishing death itself by thought, in which Philip paradoxically uses vigor to delete his life. His method sounds reminiscent of what Mr. R. recognizes in the face of death (Wakashima 113-14).

Contrary to what he has expected, Mr. R. feels that his trivial sentiments have become gigantic, incomparably larger than the universe, and that he is going to die with “the total rejection of all religions” and “in the total composure in the total death” (88). Similar to Mr. R. having to abandon leaving behind his recognition as the author of a great book, which would be a new Bible, Philip dies of a stroke leaving his experiment in self-deletion unfinished. As in Nabokov's short story “Ultima Thule,” where the reader is told that the essence of things unknown to human beings has been revealed to a character, but the essence itself is not revealed, their achievements remain unknown to the reader as well as to the other characters of the works.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip's self-deleting system may remind some readers of a game named “Hangman.” The game requires a player to add lines, one by one, until a hung man appears while Philip's system requires a practitioner to delete the lines representing a man, one by one, until nothing remains, which is the end of the game.

## ARMANDE AND FLORA

Observing the details of these two novellas, we see some specific episodes, physical characteristics and personality traits that are shared among the characters. Mr. R.'s last letter describing such recognitions sent to his publisher parallels Philip's last letter to his secretary; neither of the authors' directions in the letters is followed.<sup>2</sup> Hugh passes his hatred of his hurting feet down to Philip, who so badly, even more than Hugh, loathes his pestering and smelling toes that he tries to sacrifice them first to the experiment. Mme. Chamar's obesity in *Transparent Things* is also mimicked by Philip in *TOOL*, who is incomparably troubled by his fat belly and bowel ailments. Probably the most interesting similarities can be seen between Armande and Flora. Armande's coldness, promiscuity, self-centeredness, blondeness, and Russian genealogy are all inherited by Flora. However, Flora is less troubled than Armande, unlike her husband, who suffers from?? the "inheritances" more terribly than those characters in *Transparent Things*. "Unlovable," "vile-tempered" Armande is "essentially unhappy" while Flora seems satisfied with herself and her life (62). As her sudden lyrical reaction to Hugh's proposal indicates,<sup>3</sup> Armande in her own way loves him, who desperately adores her, but her eccentricity cannot help but spoil their marriage. Flora, who decides to marry Philip out of mere attraction to his fame and fortune, seems to have no affection for her husband.

Armande is finally strangled by her husband, as he struggles in a nightmare to help her (actually not her alone but an amalgam of Armande and a few other women he has met) escape from a burning house. We could categorize Armande, among many of Nabokov's female major characters who are mercilessly killed as if being punished for their unfaithfulness, like Martha of *King, Queen, Knave*, Nina of "Spring in Fialta," and Lolita (who is "unfaithful" from Humbert Humbert's viewpoint). Martha conspires with

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<sup>2</sup> We hear a similar tone in the beginnings of these letters: "Miss Ure, this is the MS of my last chapter which you will, please, type out in three copies – I need the additional one for prepub in Bud, or some other magazine. (Last Chapter, 185)"; "Dear Phil, This, no doubt, is my last letter to you. I am leaving you. I am leaving you for another even greater Publisher. In that House I shall be proofread by cherubim – or misprinted by devils, depending on the department my poor soul is assigned to" (*Transparent Things* 82).

<sup>3</sup> "All at once she gave in, and the minor miracle happened. A shiver of tenderness rippled her features, as a breeze does a reflection. Her eyelashes were wet, her shoulders shook in his clasp. That moment of soft agony was never to be repeated – or rather would never be granted the time to come back again after completing the cycle innate in its rhythm; yet that brief vibration in which she dissolved with the sun, the cherry trees, the forgiven landscape, set the tone for his new existence with its sense of 'all-is-well' despite her worst moods, her silliest caprices, her harshest demands" (55).

her young lover to kill her husband – she actually contrives murder and manipulates Franz – but before carrying it out, she gets pneumonia. Left alone by both her husband and her lover, who overlook her serious condition, she dies. Nina is killed as the only victim in a car crash, in which her husband and friend are also involved but manage to survive. Lolita dies in labor along with her stillborn baby, outside of Humbert’s memoir, despite his hearty wishes for her to live a long and happy life at the close of his writing. We feel as if she were forbidden to live a normal life even after she leaves Humbert, along with her robbed childhood, behind. Needless to say, not all of Nabokov’s unfaithful female protagonists are punished by death. An exception is Margot of *Laughter in the Dark*, who constantly betrays and deceives the protagonist, finally murders him and runs away unpunished.

In contrast with these female characters, Flora is treated exceptionally and surprisingly favorably. Flora, who only “dies” as Laura, the heroine in the novel written by her ex-lover, survives all and lives on after the end of *The Original of Laura*. She is allowed to live her life as she likes, however shallow and infantile it may be. Even with more rejections than acceptances towards the male characters around her, she is neither punished nor even denied because of her immoral behavior. When she hides her husband’s slippers out of childish spite, her behavior is that of a twelve-year-old girl, which her body is described to resemble (“the cup-sized breasts of that twenty-four year old impatient beauty seemed a dozen years younger than she” # 8, 15). When she is actually twelve years old, she kicks her mother’s lover, Hubert H. Hubert, in the crotch to stop his groping of her body under the bedclothes. The reader feels that this is what twelve-year-old Lolita should have done to Humbert, her mother’s husband at the time, instead of being seduced by him, even though that would have made the novel impossible. Flora does not remember her father and dislikes her mother. She will not allow her first boyfriend to kiss her mouth, and leaves him for good once he suggests a movie instead of love-making. Unlike the other female characters mentioned above, Flora is so self-sufficient that she seems to need neither to love nor to be loved. As far as we know, she really loves or sticks with no one. Armande does not seem to develop any serious attachment to anyone around her either, including her mother, friends, and lovers; she struggles in vain to seek her true “other half” in Hugh as if they were chopped from each other by Zeus. Flora’s loneliness is not tragic and her self-sufficiency is rather pleasant.

Another unique feature about Flora in *TOOL* is the reader-response: according to several assessments, the reaction to Flora is that we do not dislike her personality; on the contrary, we find ourselves somehow attracted by her as a character with such self-sufficiency and self-centeredness. We should note that she is described not without sympathy, or not without eliciting sympathy from the reader, in a truly particular way. Ivan Vaughan's unemotional style, on some exceptional occasions, makes us find ourselves feeling what is happening *inside* her: "The party 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 of the spring night framed in the open French window" (#3, 5). Michael Wood astutely discerns in his review, "'Nasty compassion' makes us (or at least me) sympathetic to Flora, however irritating she might be otherwise" (14). He is not the only reader made to have sympathy for her here. In addition to "nasty," "sober eyes," repeated "every" in "every corner, every cushion and ashtray," and perhaps the picturesque latter half of the sentence, too, make us believe that we can feel what Flora feels – the intense loneliness she suddenly faces at the height of intoxication, accompanied with a kind of sweetness – and convinces us of the narrator's concealed affection for her. We are not given an opportunity to feel Armande's unhappiness from within, or to sympathize with her, in such a delicate way.<sup>4</sup>

#### *BETWEEN TRAINS: NINA AND FLORA 1*

Another female protagonist whom Flora is apparently made to overlap with is Nina of "Spring in Fialta." As Michael Dirda has pointed out, a passage of *The Original of Laura* sounds as if it were an excerpt from the story (C4):

Every now and then she would turn up for a few moments between trains, between planes, between lovers. My morning sleep would be interrupted by heartrending sounds – a window opening, a little bustle downstairs, a trunk coming, a trunk going, distant telephone conversations

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<sup>4</sup> We could sympathize with Armande, for instance, when she exceptionally appears to be a tender love, as cited in the previous note, but the passage is described from Hugh's point of view; that is, we feel what is happening to her only from *outside*.

that seemed to be conducted in conspiratorial whispers (Wild remembers, 263).

Also in “Spring in Fialta,” Victor hears Nina bursting in and out while on her way somewhere, and he remembers her wavering “between trains”:

One summer morning . . . my family was away in the country and I was lolling and smoking in bed when I heard the bell ring with tremendous violence – and there she was in the hall having burst in to leave (incidentally) a hairpin and (mainly) a trunk illuminated with hotel labels . . . (424).

How familiar to me were her hesitations, second thoughts, third thoughts mirroring first ones, ephemeral worries between trains. She had always either just arrived or was about to leave . . . Had I to submit before judges of our earthly existence a specimen of her average pose, I would have perhaps placed her leaning upon a counter at Cook’s, left calf crossing right shin, left toe tapping floor, sharp elbows and coin-spilling bag on the counter, while the employee, pencil in hand, pondered with her over the plan of an eternal sleeping car (417).

Like Philip, who remembers Flora appearing “for a few moments between trains, between planes, between lovers,” Victor remembers Nina as wandering between thoughts, worries or trains. Though Flora sounds practical and decisive, while Nina appears indecisive, both are remembered as being “between trains.” However, “Nina between trains” is also associated with refugeism, having no place of her own, or no one to depend upon, as seen in Victor’s dream: “lying on a trunk, a roll of burlap under her head, pale-lipped and wrapped in a woolen kerchief, Nina fast asleep, as miserable refugees sleep in god forsaken railway stations” (425). Contrastingly, “Flora between trains” sounds like she is on the move toward somewhere she loves to go and where she could be happy, rather than implying her forlornness. At the provisional ending of the novel, she is “on the station platform of Sex, a delightful Swiss resort” (Z, last §; 223). The “Z” written on the card just indicates the last chapter, but it reminds the “Spring in Fialta” reader of Nina folding her body Z-wise on the couch, when she sees Victor at a party after a long period of separation. Flora is probably waiting for Ivan after a three-year interval. As she says to her friend, “I am not going anywhere. I’m expecting

somebody,” she is not going anywhere for herself. Nevertheless, in the unfinished last chapter, we somehow feel not only the open air of a mountain resort surrounding her, but also her future favorably open around her and, as at the end of *Pnin*, we feel we cannot say “what miracle might happen” to her in the future (191).

#### *IMPRISONED IN THE TEXT, ESCAPING THE TEXT: NINA AND FLORA 2*

Such a liberating effect emerges from Flora herself, too, especially in her attitude toward the text written about her as well as the author of the text, her ex-lover. On the station platform, she is sitting on a bench with the paperback of *My Laura* on her lap. The paperback edition is “issued virtually at the same time as its much stouter and comelier hardback edition.” That is, nearly two years have passed since it was published, but she has just bought the copy at the station bookstall (Z, 223). Flora shows disinterest in her ex-lover’s book, whose major theme is herself, even with the scene of her death. When Winny Carr notices her on the bench, Flora is not reading the book, and when Winny suggests that she read the book and tries to show her the place where she dies, Flora remains cool both to her friend’s suggestion and the description of her own death. Answering to Winny’s desire for her to enjoy the story of herself, she just says she doubts “if she could force herself to start reading it.”

Oh, you must! said Winny. It is, of course, fictionalized and all that, but you’ll come face to face with yourself at every 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.

“You’ll miss your train,” said Flora (Z2, 225; Z3, 227).

We are surprised again at Flora’s cold reaction to the book and, more than that, at Ivan’s cruel treatment of her, his ex-love. In his book, he makes Laura/Flora die the “craziest death in the world,” and his novel is not even closed by the episode. It would be rather understandable if their affair had ended forever three years ago, but now she is probably waiting for Ivan at the station. Even though it is “[n]othing very exciting” as she tells Winny, the situation and her attitude confuse us. It may be another instance of

her extreme indifference towards others. In any case, Flora is not keen to know about her death described there and she does not bother to open the book. As Wakashima observes, “she seems as though to refuse being drawn into a work of fiction, and at the same time to lightly wave aside the fate of dying” (116). Flora’s refusal to read the book must be a definite protest of the heroine against the author, an anthropomorphic deity.<sup>5</sup> Flora has been compared with texts by Ivan: “her exquisite bone structure immediately slipped into a novel – became in fact the secret structure of that novel, besides supporting a number of poems” (#8, 15). She is not identified with a finished book or even a part of one, but with “an unwritten, half-written, rewritten difficult book” that makes such ambition attainable as “to render at last what contemporary descriptions of intercourse so seldom convey” (#12, 23). After reading such poetic and mystic descriptions of Flora, it is more difficult to imagine how her death, the “craziest in the world,” could be written by the same author.

Nina of “Spring in Fialta” is also compared with a text, or associated with a text<sup>6</sup>: “Again and again she hurriedly appeared in the margins of my life, without influencing in the least its basic text”; “In a bookshop she nodded to me from a page of one of her husband’s stories, a page referring to an episodic servant girl, but smuggling in Nina in spite of the author’s intention”; “Occasionally, in the middle of a conversation her name would be mentioned, and she would run down the steps of a chance sentence, without turning her head” (424). During her life, she is put into her husband’s text (of all things, as a “servant girl”) or in the margins of the pages of a book of Victor’s life; after death, she is found in an article in a newspaper and then in Victor’s sentimental memoir. She is not given a chance to reject being involved in those texts, and we feel such fate may not be so unsatisfactory for her, unlike Lolita. Should she be asked, Lolita would decisively refuse to “share [with Humbert] the immortality” which he has created in “the refuge of art” (309). This is the only hope for Humbert; but

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<sup>5</sup> There are some mysteries concerning cards X and XX. They are considered to be put before the last chapter; however, they describe Flora and Ivan dating in a central European resort after a three-year separation, which is obviously what Flora is expecting in the last chapter. There is not only chronological uncertainty but also the problem of the narrator: abruptly, “I” begins to narrate the section. Ivan seems to have dropped the objective, third-person narration for some reason. Moreover, the Flora described in the section does not look like the same person we have seen in the Z cards. According to “I,” Flora is “brimming with religious fervor and yet miserably, desperately fearful,” and she pretends wry gaiety when responding to his mocking insult. These inconsistencies remind us that what we have at hand is but some sections of an incomplete novella.

<sup>6</sup> In regard to Nina associated with texts, see Nakata, 110.



for *Lolita*, it is nothing but another imprisonment even after death, in a text of his own, by and only for himself.

Compared with Nina or Lolita, we find Flora surprisingly liberated as a character. She owns a copy of her ex-lover's novel – though in a cheaper, soft-covered edition, which she just happened to buy at a station bookstall long after its publication – and she rejects or ignores his text, specifically the section concerning her death. Of all of Nabokov's characters, Flora is the first and last who is allowed to reject the text – in truth, her rejection is of Ivan's work, not Nabokov's, but given that Ivan Vaughan is obviously Nabokov's alter ego, she rejects nothing but Nabokov's text. It is most unimaginable that Nabokov, the last author to cater to popularism, would consider writing something that matched the age of feminism. However, he lets his last heroine liberate herself from imprisonment in the text: something impossible for his other female protagonists to do, even if they wished to. Flora is the muse, inspiring both Ivan and Nabokov; at the same time, she is allowed to refuse to remain a muse for anybody, in any text written by anyone. And over again, she will be inspiring readers as a muse and anti-muse forever, for there is no end to the last and unfinished work by Nabokov.

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