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PLAYING THE FOOL:
FAILURES OF CREATIVE PROCESS
IN *KING, QUEEN, KNAVE*

Taken together, *King, Queen, Knave* (1968; hereafter cited as *KQK*) and its Russian precursor, *Korol', dama, valet* (1928; hereafter cited as *KDV*), form an exuberant shapeshifter: a work that yields insightful readings from seemingly as many critical angles as there are playing cards in a standard deck. Among recent analyses, the work has been studied in the context of games and play,¹ the *commedia dell'arte*,² Weimar surface culture,³ and perception via Hoffmann's "The Sandman" and Freud's uncanny.⁴ The profound differences between the two novels have also been well studied. Proffer notes that "almost every page of *King, Queen, Knave* differs from its Slavic model,"⁵ calling the English revision "in effect a new novel,"⁶ while Dolinin describes the English not only as far different from, but in important respects far

¹ Thomas Karshan, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011).

² Siggie Frank, *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012).

³ Luke Parker, "The Shop Window Quality of Things: 1920s Weimar Surface Culture in Nabokov's *Korol', dama, valet*," *Slavic Review* 77, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2018.128>.

⁴ Irene Masing-Delic, "Bloodied Eyes, Dancing Dolls, and Other Hoffmannian Motifs in Nabokov's *King, Queen, Knave*," *Nabokov Online Journal* XIII (2019), https://www.nabokovonline.com/uploads/2/3/7/7/23779748/13_2019_4_masing-delic.pdf.

⁵ "A New Deck for Nabokov's Knaves," in *Nabokov: Criticism, reminiscences, translations and tributes*, ed. Alfred Appel and Charles Newman (Evanston, Ill: The University, 1970), 308.

⁶ "A New Deck for Nabokov's Knaves," 294.

weaker than the Russian,⁷ reversing Nabokov's own pronouncement about his "sagg[ing]" original.⁸

The brutality and vulgarity of *King, Queen, Knave* unsettle readers and have led scholars to puzzle out possible motives for these elements of the revision. One factor in the changes may be the impulse to make 1928 Berlin a more obvious precursor to its Third-Reich iteration. Toker notes Nabokov's addition, in *KQK*, of "the remark that in the future Franz would be 'guilty of worse sins than avunculicide' (*KQK* 138)" and concludes that "Franz's development [in the translation] anticipates the development that thousands of German youths would undergo in the next two decades" under Hitler's regime.⁹ At the same time, Toker and others¹⁰ acknowledge that the darkness in *KQK* was already present in *KDV*. She cautions that "at the end [of *KDV*], Franz remains disconcertingly alive....The story of Franz is not over when the curtain falls,"¹¹ while Parker makes clear how sensitive Nabokov was, in *KDV*, to the violence lurking beneath the surface of Weimar Germany.¹² The chronological gap between the novels plays a role in Grayson's analysis, too, though her work foregrounds Nabokov's artistic development rather than world events. She demonstrates that *KQK* is typical of Nabokov's later English style¹³ and argues that, in the context of responses to *Lolita* and of his work on *Ada*,¹⁴ Nabokov designed *KQK* "not to ape pornography, but to parody it, and to parody the image of himself as a pornographic writer."¹⁵

In this article, I argue that the parody in *KQK* has even broader resonance than that established by Grayson. Like Grayson, Toker, and others, I find support for my argument in chronological context, taking as my starting point Nabokov's 1966 interview with Alfred Appel,

⁷ "Nabokov as a Russian writer," in *The Cambridge Companion To Nabokov*, ed. Julian W. Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 51-53.

⁸ "Foreword," in *King, Queen, Knave* (New York: Vintage, 1989), ix.

⁹ *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 63.

¹⁰ Toker suggests that "the waxlike Franz is about to step out of the fictional gallery of waxworks into the historical chamber of horrors [...and] is presented as a Nazi in the making" (64). Connolly, noting a passage also cited by Toker, points out that "in revising the novel, Nabokov even suggests that Franz would become a participant in Nazi atrocities later in life. The revised version contains a passage referring to Franz in the future as an old man 'guilty of worse sins than avunculicide' (138)," "*King, Queen, Knave*," in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (Garland, 1995), 205. See also Masing-Delic, "Bloodied Eyes, Dancing Dolls," and Parker, "The Shop Window Quality of Things."

¹¹ *The Mystery of Literary Structures*, 64.

¹² "The Shop Window Quality of Things," 405.

¹³ *Nabokov Translated: A Comparison of Nabokov's Russian and English Prose* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 109-11.

¹⁴ *Nabokov Translated*, 112-13.

¹⁵ *Nabokov Translated*, 116.

Jr.¹⁶ In the next section of this discussion, I establish the links between this interview and the role that parody, card games, and creativity play in *KQK*, then take a closer look at how changes made in the translation fit into my reading.

Nabokov quips to Appel that “parody is a game.”¹⁷ *Self-parody*¹⁸ can complicate the game, but in *KQK*, self-parody occurs at a significant distance: of forty years, of a different language, of marked textual changes, and even of a different name. In short, the Nabokov of 1966 is a different writer from the Sirin of 1928. While so much distance may diminish the complexities of self-parody for the author, they complicate the reader’s role, for, as Diepeveen asserts, in modernist parody the reader must be able to *recognize*:

recognition was the audience’s central anxiety and/or pleasure: recognition of insincerity, which implicitly or explicitly was an asserted recognition of the properties of a targeted source, and recognition of excess or of something askew or discrepant in the mimicking work. Deceptive genres presuppose an audience capable of recognizing what is only implicit, yet central to the parody or hoax—an audience possessing what Hutcheon terms “ideological competence,” which includes “the familiarity of the reader with the text parodied” (Hutcheon 1985:95). Without this competence there is no parody, no possibility of recognizing the hoax—leaving readers with either bad verse, or a forgery.¹⁹

“Recognition” suggests another link between parody and games, here in the vein of “find what the sailor has hidden.”²⁰ While “recognition of excess or of something askew or discrepant” in *KQK* seems a given – the reader is unlikely to overlook the “too-muchness” of Nabokov’s translation, with its triple threat of parody, pornography, and *poshlost*’ – a greater challenge lies in discerning “what is only implicit, yet central to the parody,” what Hutcheon describes as “an integrated

¹⁶ “An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov,” *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 8, no. 2 (1967), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1207097>.

¹⁷ “An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov,” 138.

¹⁸ Hutcheon notes that “[Self-parody] is a way of creating a form out of the questioning of the very act of aesthetic production (Poirier 1968, 339 cf. Stackelberg 1972, 162),” strengthening the argument I outline here; *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Methuen, 1985), 10.

¹⁹ *Modernist Fraud: Hoax, Parody, Deception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 78-79. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198825432.001.0001>. Emphasis original.

²⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York Vintage, 1989), 310.

structural modeling process of revising, replaying, inverting, and ‘trans-contextualizing’ previous works of art,”²¹ or more simply, “repetition with critical difference.”²² Diepeveen suggests how high the stakes are: if the reader does not solve the puzzle, the work ends up a failure – and so, in a successful parody, the reader assumes the role of co-creator that Nabokov celebrates in “Good Readers and Good Writers.”²³

The link between parody and play illuminates the ludic elements already clearly present in the novel. While Karshan reads the work as “based on the metaphor of a card game” and notes that, in the English introduction, Nabokov “compared himself to a poker player (viii), supporting the idea of author as card player which had begun as early as Aikhenvald’s review in *Rul’*,”²⁴ I believe that a different card-related metaphor best represents the translation process for this novel: the metaphor of the transformation deck, a standard set of playing cards in which all non-face cards are turned into pictures, with the caveat that the pips (the small suit symbols that represent the card’s value – e.g., three clubs or six diamonds) must be incorporated into the new design, ideally without being moved.²⁵ Nabokov describes a process quite like making a transformation deck in the foreword to *KQK*, where he explains that “my main purpose in making [the revisions] was not to beautify a corpse but rather to permit a still breathing body to enjoy certain innate capacities which inexperience and eagerness, the haste of thought and the sloth of word had denied it formerly. Within the texture of the creature, those possibilities were practically crying to be developed or teased out” (ix).

These possibilities, the implicit elements that the reader must recognize if the parody is to succeed, all relate to the creative process. In *KQK*, Nabokov develops them in the context of his dialogue on creativity with Vladislav Khodasevich; he signals as much in the 1966 Appel interview, conducted in the same year he began revisions to his son, Dmitri’s, literal English translation of *KDV* (*KQK* viii-ix). Asked by Appel if he remembers any of the “evening guests” who frequented the Nabokovs’ tiny flat in Paris in the 1930s, Nabokov replies, “I remember Vladislav Hodasevich, the greatest poet of his time, removing his dentures to eat in comfort, just

²¹ *A Theory of Parody*, 11.

²² *A Theory of Parody*, 20.

²³ In *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt, 1980), 2.

²⁴ *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play*, 83.

²⁵ Yasha Beresiner, “The Joker in the Pack,” *Country Life*, April 29 (2020): 56. ProQuest.

as a grandee would do in the past.”²⁶ Asserting his regard for Khodasevich, then adding the homely detail of the poet gumming his food, parallels the interplay of high and low in *KQK*. The parody in *KQK* is of creative practice itself, and the most ridiculous elements of the translation, rather than ruining the work with vulgarity or broad humor, form part of a pointedly serious artistic game: whether the reader knows Nabokov’s work on art and creativity well enough to *recognize* the parody. My analysis proposes a remedy to the long-standing discomfort that critics and readers have expressed about this particular self-translation: those elements that come across as preposterously vulgar, ridiculous, and over the top are not merely Nabokov playing the fool; they are central to understanding the parody. Seeing how vulgarity and creativity work in concert may not make readers like *KQK* any better, but it is an approach that illuminates the creative process of this profoundly metaliterary writer.

When I refer to creativity, I have in mind Nabokov’s precise analysis of how literary composition occurs. He explores this process in a series of essays beginning with the 1937 “Pouchkine, ou le vrai et le vraisemblable”²⁷ and culminating in “The Art of Literature and Commonsense” (hereafter cited as “ALC”), composed circa 1951 and published only in 1980.²⁸ Each of the essays²⁹ was written years after Nabokov completed *KDV*. The novels of the 1920s contain traces of what will become Nabokov’s artistic credo, but Nabokov does not articulate this credo for publication prior to 1937 (“Pouchkine”).³⁰ By the time Nabokov transforms *KDV* into *KQK*, however, he has polished his creative formula, and its presence can be felt throughout the revised novel. Simply put, in “ALC” Nabokov sets forth a bipartite creative process that he labels “inspiration” and opposes to “commonsense.” He refines the catch-all English term “inspiration”

²⁶ “An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov,” 12.

²⁷ “Pouchkine ou le vrai et le vraisemblable,” *La nouvelle revue française*, March 1, 1937.

²⁸ Although Updike, in his introduction to *Lectures on Literature*, places “ALC” among the lectures Nabokov first gave in 1941, at Wellesley (ed. Fredson Bowers [New York: Harcourt, 1980], xxii), the volume’s editor does not clearly place it as a Wellesley or a Cornell lecture, and Boyd describes it as “one of the few pieces that survive from [Nabokov’s] creative writing course” at Stanford in June 1941 (*Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991], 31.). Alexandrov establishes that the version published in *LoL* took shape in 1951, *Nabokov’s Otherworld* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), 57, 237 fn 3. What matters for the present discussion is that “ALC” post-dates *KDV* and pre-dates *KQK*.

²⁹ Each subsequent essay is a revision of “Pouchkine.” In addition to “ALC,” the other essays in this series are “The Creative Writer,” *Bulletin of the New England Modern Language Association*, January, 1942, and “Inspiration,” in *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage International, 1990). See Kristen Welsh, “Rapture, Sweat and Tears,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 54, no. 2 (2010), 334-53, for a fuller discussion of this cycle; see also Kristen Welsh, “Crisis of Poetry: Nabokov, Khodasevich, and the Future of Russian Literature” (PhD dissertation, Yale, 2005), 33-60.

³⁰ Welsh, “Crisis of Poetry,” 183-87, 200-204.

(“ALC” 377) by introducing the reader to two Russian terms, *vostorg* and *vdokhnovenie* (“ALC” 378), which more precisely convey the components of the process. Although the latter term, *vdokhnovenie*, is translated as “inspiration,” Nabokov suggest that his Russian terms “can be paraphrased as ‘rapture’ and ‘recapture’” (“ALC” 378) – embracing the alliteration that Grayson identifies³¹ as a marker of his English translations, and creating a neat parallel between the Russian and English terms.

Nabokov enters into conversation with Khodasevich as he composes the essays in his inspiration cycle:³² “[f]or every wrong approach to literature [Khodasevich] criticizes, Nabokov offers a parallel set of questions and answers, frequently using the same turns of phrase.”³³ In particular, Nabokov’s bipartite formula for inspiration owes much to Khodasevich’s 1924 essay “On Reading Pushkin,”³⁴ while the opposition between inspiration and commonsense comes, in turn, from Khodasevich’s 1927 essay “The Foolishness of Poetry,”³⁵ the work that, as Malmstad notes, “perhaps more than any other [of Khodasevich’s essays] earns the right to be called a literary manifesto.”³⁶ Implicit in the opposition Khodasevich establishes between, on the one hand, *mudrost’* (wisdom) and *glupovatost’* (Pushkinian foolishness) and on the other, *zdravyi smysl* (common sense), is common sense’s partner, plain *glupost’* (stupidity), a concept against which Khodasevich rails in a 1942 letter to Gorky, concluding that “in the poetic realm...we are ‘endangered’ by stupidity” (*gluposti*).³⁷

“The Foolishness of Poetry”³⁸ plays a key role in Nabokov’s revision. The writer who transforms Sirin’s *KDV* into Nabokov’s *KQK* has already embraced Khodasevich’s (and Pushkin’s) notion of “foolishness” (*glupovatost’*, embodied by *vostorg/vdokhnovenie*). In the revision, Nabokov exaggerates the “stupidity” (*glupost’*) of his characters and their endeavors,

³¹ *Nabokov Translated*, 204; 208-10.

³² Welsh, “Rapture, Sweat and Tears,” 335 fn 5.

³³ Welsh, “Rapture, Sweat and Tears,” 336.

³⁴ “O chtenii Pushkina. (K 125-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia),” in *Vladislav Khodasevich: Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, ed. I.P. Andreeva, S.G. Bocharov, et al. (Moscow: Soglasie, 1997). See Welsh, “Rapture, Sweat and Tears,” for a discussion of the links between “On Reading Pushkin” and “Pouchkine.”

³⁵ “Glupovatost’ poëzii,” in *Koleblemyi trenochnik (Izbrannoe)*, ed. N. Bogomolov and V. Perel’muter (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1991).

³⁶ “Poëziia Vladislava Khodasevicha,” in *Vladislav Khodasevich: Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh*, ed. J. Malmstad and Robert P. Hughes (Moscow: Russkii put’, 2009), 5.

³⁷ “Letter to M. Gorky. August 1924,” in *Vladislav Khodasevich: Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh.*, ed. I. Andreeva and Bocharov (Moscow: Soglasie, 1997), 477.

³⁸ For a more thorough discussion of this essay, see Welsh, “Rapture, Sweat and Tears,” 336-38; 345.

taking key elements of his process and making them ridiculous. These changes evoke barks of laughter, and sometimes, disgust, in the reader. The changes can be read as Nabokov playing the fool: giving readers more of what they seem to want in the wake of *Lolita*³⁹ while, with a wink, using some of the more ridiculous (or *glupyi*) changes to point to his artistic credo, testing the reader's recognition.

The new pictures Nabokov paints onto his original *KDV* deck, and with which he surrounds his king, his queen, and his knave, hinge on *vostorg*, *vdokhnovenie*, and on a set of keys that he has hidden in plain sight: inexperience, eagerness, haste of thought, and sloth of word, the faults he ascribes to his younger literary self in the foreword to *KQK*. Nabokov transforms *vostorg*, "rapture," in *KQK* by literalizing it. He plays up the sexual connotations of the word, which he describes in "ALC" as "hot and brief" (378), "the primary spasm of inspiration" (379). For example, whereas Martha, in the Russian, brings in a "silver case with Viennese cigarettes" (*serebrianyi iashchichek s venskimi papirosami*, *KDV* 186), in the English Nabokov spotlights the cigarettes' phallic and oral connotations by describing the item as "a little silver case with Libidettes (Viennese cigarettes)" (*KQK* 86). Although Nabokov writes of setting "cruel traps" in the English edition for readers who would approach his work through Freud (*KQK* x),⁴⁰ the ideologically competent reader will not only avoid the trap, but understand it as an exaggerated form of *vostorg*. A similar exaggeration seems to be at play when Nabokov describes the picture hanging in Franz's boarding-house room. What had been, in *KDV*, first a "portrait of a naked woman on the wall" (161) and then "a portrait of a woman wearing only stockings" (164) becomes "a picture above the bed [that] showed a naked girl leaning forward to wash her breasts in a misty pond" (*KQK* 48) and "a bare-bosomed slave girl on sale [who] was being leered at by three hesitant lechers" (53). In *KDV*, the discrepancy between the two pictures goes unremarked, and the motif of "the picture in Franz's room" disappears from the novel. In *KQK*, however, Franz notes that the picture has changed and, "puzzled," decides that the first picture "must have been in some other room" (53). This motif returns twice more in *KQK*: once, when Franz is writing to his mother, and bowdlerizes his description of the room to include "the beautiful picture of a lady in an Oriental

³⁹ Grayson, *Nabokov Translated*, 114-16.

⁴⁰ Masing-Delic, who analyzes the relevance for *KQK/KDV* of Freud's interpretation of E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman," suggests that "to see Oedipal desire for one's maternal lover and hatred of the overbearing father-figure Dreyer in Franz's actions, as well as his eye-phobias as a Freudian fear of castration by the 'father,' could be one such 'cruel trap,'" "Bloodied Eyes, Dancing Dolls," 20.

setting” (95); and once again at the novel’s end, when a feverish Martha tries to entice Franz onto the dance floor (252-53).

Vostorg in *KQK* is sexually charged for both Franz and Martha, but her “rapture” combines bodily lust with greed, which in this context is more sinister: Martha desires wealth, and is willing, even eager, to kill her husband in order to get it.⁴¹ Dreyer’s “rapture,” however, is essentially asexual.⁴² In *KDV*, this rapture may be linked to commerce, which, as Toker argues, possesses its own artistry;⁴³ Parker supports Toker’s point, identifying the Russian version of Dreyer as “the real genius and motor of [his] commercial enterprise”⁴⁴ and concluding that this is a more subtle and sympathetic character than the English one, whom Parker labels “a buffoon.”⁴⁵ Indeed, Dreyer’s English twin seems to have been flattened, appearing more like the playing cards that the give the novel its title.⁴⁶

While Dreyer is overall less multifaceted in *KQK*, his artistic yearnings are stronger. The relationship between art and commerce, which in *KDV* seems positive and, possibly, genuinely artistic, becomes equivocal or tinged with real failure in *KQK*. In *KDV*, the young Dreyer wants to be a world traveler, an adventurer in a pith helmet (274); there is no suggestion of artistic interest. In *KQK*, he has artistic yearnings (“In his boyhood Kurt had wanted to be an artist—any kind of artist—but instead had spent many dull years working in his father’s shop,” 223); these appear to have been passed down from his father, who “had wanted to be an actor..., and had ended as a moderately successful tailor” (223). Along with the addition of artistic yearning and inheritance, there is a poignant omission: in Russian, the paragraph begins, “He secretly realized that he was a businessman by accident, not for real” (on vtaine soznaval, chto kommersant on sluchainii, nenastoiashchii, 274); Nabokov’s English version leaves out any equivalent of *nenastoiashchii* (not genuine/not real). In short, the later Dreyer may still be a businessman “by accident,” but he is also the real thing. When Nabokov writes that “the greatest artistic satisfaction he ever derived

⁴¹ See, for example, chapter 6 of *KQK*.

⁴² Although Dreyer desires Martha, especially early in the novel, there is no evidence of genuine, reciprocated passion between Dreyer and his “beautiful marble wife,” *KQK* 224. Martha’s greed and shrewdness are explicit, and it seems that Dreyer, in marrying her, has engaged in the kind of transaction on which heterosexual marriage has traditionally been based. See, for example, *KQK* 65-6, 113-14; *KDV* 173, 204.

⁴³ In Toker’s analysis, “considering [Dreyer] an artist manqué” is a misreading, because he “is a true artist as far as business is concerned,” *The Mystery of Literary Structures*, 51.

⁴⁴ “The Shop Window Quality of Things,” 410.

⁴⁵ “The Shop Window Quality of Things,” 410.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Karshan, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play*, 85.

was from his commercial ventures during the inflation” (*KQK* 223), it is clear that, however strong his yearnings, Dreyer displays creativity only of a mercantile and worldly type.

The second part of Nabokov’s formula, *vdokhnovenie*/recapture, is essentially a scientific process: “When the time is ripe and the writer settles down to the actual composing of his book, he will rely on the second serene and steady kind of inspiration, *vdokhnovenie*, the trusted mate who helps to recapture and reconstruct the world” (“ALC,” 378-79). Recapture requires careful observation and a methodical reconfiguration, aided by imagination, of what has been observed. While in *KQK* Nabokov makes rapture/*vostorg* overtly sexual for Martha and Franz, and emphasizes its commercial nature for Dreyer, he embeds more subtle flaws in recapture/*vdokhnovenie*. Martha misreads texts, situations, and people,⁴⁷ demonstrating her poor powers of observation, but it is Franz and Dreyer who undergo the more significant transformations in *KQK* with respect to *vdokhnovenie*.

Confronted with the array of neckties, dog toys, and other items he must be responsible for at his uncle’s emporium, Franz bumbles about, unable to identify the item being requested (*KQK* 70-73, *KDV* 175-77). The myopia⁴⁸ that undermines Franz’s perception overall⁴⁹ also thwarts him in the store; he feels no rapture toward these everyday goods, and so makes no effort to overcome his visual limitations. However, sexually enraptured by Martha, his focus on her is sharp, revealing

⁴⁷ See, especially, G. Khasin, “Mezhdú mikro i makro: povestvovanie i metafizika v romane V. Nabokova *Korol', dama, valet*,” in *V.V. Nabokov: Pro et Contra*, St. Petersburg: Russkii Khristianskii gumanitarnyi institut, 1997, 2:619-49.

⁴⁸ In both novels, the first mention of eyes or eyesight comes with the narrator’s description, from Franz’s point of view, of the elegantly dressed man with the disfigured face (perhaps a victim of mustard gas in the First World War, or an advanced-stage syphilitic) whom Franz encounters on the train to Berlin: “the absence of eyelashes lent his blue eyes a startled expression,” *KQK* 3. In *KQK*, both the physical appearance of the eyes and the interpretation of their expression are somewhat changed from “otsutstvie resnits pridavaló vypuklym, vodianistym glazam nevol’nuú naglost’,” *KDV* 132. In *KDV*, it is Martha who reveals to the reader that Franz has poor eyesight, when she notices that “the young man in glasses” (*molodoi chelovek v ochkakh*) is looking at her stocking-clad legs (*golyi shelk ee nog*, 135). In *KQK*, this passage stands, with minor modifications (7), but Nabokov introduces Franz’s glasses earlier, when Franz leaves the compartment in which “the ruddy egg woman sat next to the monster” (4; 133) to look for a more appealing seat. When Franz is “struck by [the] extraordinary thought” that he might ride in a second-class carriage, “this thought was so sweet, so audacious and exciting, that he had to take off his glasses and wipe them” (5); in *KDV*, this thought made “his heart stutter and sweat appear on his forehead” (*dazhe serdtse zapnulós i na lbu vystupil pot*, 133). Thus, in his revision, Nabokov removes any hint that Franz may, like the protagonists of “*Lik*,” “*Sovershenstvo*,” and other works, be afflicted with heart pain, and introduces the possibility that Franz’s glasses not only help him to see, but somehow skew his perception of the world: the *KQK* passage seems to be Franz’s doomed attempt to “conquer the temptation” (5) to indulge in the more expensive journey. Masing-Delic develops the idea that Franz’s glasses “are ‘corrective,’ yet create delusions” (1) and catalogues many references to Franz’s eyesight in “*Bloodied Eyes, Dancing Dolls*”; see especially 8-9.

⁴⁹ For example, “Without his glasses he was as good as blind,” *KQK* 22, *KDV* 144; see also *KQK* 30, 34; *KDV* 150, 152.

an attempt at recapture/*vdokhnovenie*: “He would compute within half an inch the exact degree to which she showed her legs while walking about the room and while sitting with her legs crossed, and he perceived almost without looking the tense sheen of her stocking.... By means of those rapid glances he made a complete study of her” (*KQK* 82). Franz believes that he is compiling an almost clinical guidebook to Martha Dreyer, yet inexperience and eagerness, two of the qualities that Nabokov assigns to his own younger self, come to the fore in *KQK* and undermine Franz’s efforts. In both versions, that “[he] perceive[s] almost without looking” (*chuvstv[uet], pochni ne gliadia*) conveys Franz’s eagerness and haste of thought; he sees Martha as if via peripheral vision, skewing his perception in the literal sense.⁵⁰ Significantly, in *KQK*, Franz’s analytical tools are not only sloppily deployed, but have become less sophisticated, suggesting inexperience, one of Nabokov’s own early flaws. The simple linear measurement he makes when he “compute[s] within half an inch the exact degree to which [Martha] showed her legs” is present in both versions, but in *KDV*, Franz also uses trigonometry: “[on] znal sinus i kosinus temnoi priadi, dugoobrazno prikryvavshei ukho” (184; [he] knew the sine and cosine of the dark lock of hair that arced around to cover her ear, translation mine). In *KQK*, Nabokov dulls Franz’s scientific and mathematical precision, rendering him less capable of artistic (re)creation and bringing his artistic endeavors into sharp contrast with the process of recapture described in “ALC.”

When Franz tries to find “some little fault [in Martha] on which he could prop his mind and sober his fancy” (*KQK* 82; *khot' kak[oi]-nibud' nedostat[ok], na kotorom on mog by operet' mysl' i otdelat'sia ot beznadezhnogo volneniia*, *KDV* 184), he cannot. He sees the woman of his dreams, not the real Martha in context.⁵¹ While in both versions he seeks a “saving flaw,” in *KQK*, he also wants that flaw to “sober his fancy.” Failing to find it, he “slip[s] back into his private abyss even deeper” (*KQK* 82).⁵² Thus, in *KQK*, Franz is both intoxicated with desire and mired in

⁵⁰ For more on the narrative and thematic functions of blindness and perception in this novel, see, in addition to Masing-Delic, Khasin, “Mezhdu mikro i makro,” 625-27, 635-36, 638-39, 646, who argues that “Nabokov constructed the entire novel around the theme of blindness” (“ves’ roman postroen Nabokovym vokrug temy slepoty,” 635); Ellen Pifer, *Nabokov and the Novel* (Harvard University Press, 1980), 18-48; Aleksandr Dolinin, *Istinnaiia zhizn' pisatel'ia Sirina* (Saint Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2004), 49-50, and Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, “King, Queen, Sui-mate: Nabokov’s Defense Against Freud’s ‘Uncanny,’” *Intertexts* (Lubbock, Tex.) 12, no. 1 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1353/itx.2008.0001>.

⁵¹ Martha makes a corollary error: Khasin notes how Martha misperceives Franz’s unfocused attention – in reality, simple nearsightedness – as awe when he first visits her in the garden (“Mezhdu mikro i makro,” 639.).

⁵² The Russian simply says that “on ne v silakh byl dol'she smotret” (he did not have the strength to look any longer), *Korol', dama, valet*, in *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda* (Saint Petersburg: Symposium, 2001), 2:184.

solipsism. Nabokov adds a telling phrase, underlined here: Franz “anticipated the banal but to him unique movement of her alertly raised hand when one end of a tiny comb would slacken its grip on her heavy bun” (*KQK* 82, *KDV* 184). What the Franz of *KQK* does see, he erroneously considers unique. In both novels, Franz embarks on a process akin to *vdokhnovenie*. The Russian diminishes (“pochti ne gliadia”), then reasserts (“znal sinus i kosinus”) Franz’s observational skills. Nabokov makes the English less equivocal: by the passage’s end, Franz’s data collecting has been shown to be elementary and off-kilter, and his interpretation of that data, wrong.

For Dreyer, as for Franz, in *KQK* Nabokov further undermines the artistic skills with which Nabokov-Sirin originally endowed him. As noted above, Dreyer *could* be an artist – he has both imagination and a memory – but in *KQK*, while he lacks *vostorg*, recapture/ *vdokhnovenie* represents his signal artistic weakness. In a passage that is a favorite of critics, Nabokov writes that Dreyer’s “interest in any object, animated or not, whose distinctive features he had immediately grasped, or thought he had grasped, gloated over and filed away, would wane with its every subsequent reappearance” (*KQK* 106; *KDV* 199). What the English Dreyer “grasped” – or “*thought he had grasped*” (emphasis mine), another English addition that calls Dreyer’s *vdokhnovenie* into question – the Russian Dreyer perceives with more direct visual acuity: Dreyer “looked sharply” (*smotrel zorko*) to establish his “first keen observation” (*pervo[e] ostro[e] nabliudeni[e]*). Nabokov-Sirin suggests that Dreyer’s perception in *KDV* is accurate; what he sees so sharply, he “assessed correctly” (*pravil’no otseniv*), actions of which his English counterpart is incapable.

Dreyer resists detail and specificity. Taken figuratively, his perception in both novels is flawed, but even here, Nabokov changes the text in *KQK* to Dreyer’s artistic detriment. Both novels make clear that Dreyer’s errors of perception put him in danger: in a passage that contains seeds of *Invitation to a Beheading* and is very similar in both versions, Dreyer seeks out the criminal nature in those around him (*KQK* 208; *KDV* 265-66), then returns home and sees “his wife and nephew in the garden. They were standing motionless side by side, watching him approach. And he felt a pleasant relief at seeing at last two familiar, two perfectly human faces” (*KQK* 209; *KDV* 266). In playing this game, Dreyer errs. His first mistake comes in not reading the criminal traces in Martha and Franz’s faces that he sees in everyone else, for at this point the two are making final plans for his murder. The second mistake comes in recognizing Martha and Franz as “perfectly human,” but not understanding that their “perfect humanity” contains the capacity for great evil.

Dreyer also resists the *work* of *vdokhnovenie*-recapture. In both novels, Dreyer is a pragmatist; his pragmatism puts him in danger, for his resistance to “seeing anew” blinds him to Martha and Franz’s plot. In the revision, however, Nabokov seemingly paradoxically emphasizes both Dreyer’s pragmatism and his sloth, and increases the price Dreyer pays for his laziness. Unlike Franz’s errors, Dreyer’s cannot be ascribed to inexperience; Dreyer is fooling himself, priding himself on acute perception while being led by his own laziness – his sloth of *thought* – to ignore new or key information.

Nabokov establishes Dreyer’s resistance to “re-seeing” in the passage cited earlier, where he writes that Dreyer “no longer considered” (*uzhe bol’she ne dumal*) the possibility of an object changing after his initial impression had been recorded. In the English, “The bright perception became the habitual abstraction” (*KQK* 106)⁵³ and “it was too boring to think that the object might change of its own accord and assume unforeseen characteristics. That would mean having to enjoy it again, and he was no longer young.” These revisions harm Dreyer’s status as a would-be artist. The English, with Dreyer finding such reevaluation “too boring” and even the prospect of “enjoying again” an object too tiring, leaves an atmosphere of blame around him; it is his own laziness that prevents him from fulfilling his creative desires.⁵⁴

When, against his will, Dreyer does have to “re-see” and reclassify something, he is disappointed not only at the changes in the object, but at having to go through the reevaluation

⁵³ “Draier perestaval smotret’ zorko posle togo, kak mezhdru nim i rassmatrivaemym predmetom stanovilsia priglianuvshiiisia emu obraz ètogo predmeta, osnovannyi na pervom ostrom nabliudeni,,” KDV 199. Literally, “Dreyer stopped looking sharply once there stood between him and the subject he had examined the image of that subject that appealed to him, based on his first keen observation.” The English phrase “habitual abstraction” does not have an equivalent in the Russian original; it does suggest, much more strongly than the Russian, a link with Viktor Shklovsky’s writings on *ostranenie*. As Dolinin demonstrates, Nabokov’s distaste for Shklovsky (“Tri zametki o romane Nabokova *Dar*,” in *V.V. Nabokov: Pro et contra* [Saint Petersburg: Russkii Khristianskii gumanitarnii institut, 1997], 1:724) and his literary ideas play a key role in the Shirin section of *The Gift*. Dolinin also notes that “it is hardly accidental that Nabokov proclaimed his rejection of the formal(ist) method precisely in conjunction with Khodasevich’s death” (“Edva li sluchaino Nabokov zaiavil o svoem nepriatii formal’nogo metoda imenno v sviazi so smert’iu Khodasevicha,” “Tri zametki,” 725), given that Khodasevich wrote that “Formalism is Pisarevism inside out – aestheticism taken to the point of nihilism” (726; “Formalizm est” pisarevshchina naiznanku – èstetizm, vodedennyi do nigilizma,” “Tri zametki,” 726, quoting Khodasevich, “O formalizme i formalistakh,” *Vozrozhdenie*, March 10, 1927). Karshan establishes persuasive links between Shklovsky’s commentary on *Eugene Onegin* and “Nabokov’s parodic procedures in *Pale Fire*” (*Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play*, 209), suggesting that Nabokov’s views on Shklovsky had evolved by the time he created *KQK*. Yet, with the emphasis on Khodasevich’s ideas in *KQK*, if Kurt Dreyer seems stuck in a state of “automatization” (*avtomatizatsiia*), it is unlikely that Shklovskian *ostranenie* will come to his rescue.

⁵⁴ See Welsh, “Rapture, Sweat and Tears,” 339-41 and “Crisis of Poetry,” 44-69, for more discussion of Nabokov’s response to “laziness” in Russian literature of the 1920s and 1930s.

process at all. This resistance proves costly. After bumping into a former lover and her young son, Dreyer summarizes the meeting for himself: “On the whole—an unnecessary encounter. Now I shall never remember Erica as I remembered her before, Erica number two will always be in the way, so dapper and quite useless, with the useless little Vivian on his tricycle” (*KQK* 176; *KDV* 245). While both versions label this “an unnecessary encounter” (*naprasnaia...vstrecha*),⁵⁵ Nabokov emphasizes Dreyer’s exasperation in the English by adding – and repeating – “useless.” Nabokov strengthens the implication that Erica’s son, unnamed in the Russian, is also Dreyer’s by giving him a name, Vivian, that heightens the boy’s prominence in the text, especially for readers who recognize the name as a frequent moniker of Nabokov’s anagrammatic stand-ins. In short, *KQK* emphasizes Dreyer’s resistance to new impressions while hinting strongly that this resistance has consequences.⁵⁶ Dreyer’s perceptions have ossified. Erica claims that Kurt is “lacking in common sense” (*KQK* 174, emphasis mine; in Russian, she calls him “pustiakovyi,” frivolous, *KDV* 244), but Kurt’s response to this meeting shows that, where he *should* be “frivolous” – in receiving new impressions, in observation, in memory – he is blindly practical. Kurt has become a pragmatist, not an artist.⁵⁷

Dreyer is too lazy to embark on his own artistic projects – even his automata are created by someone else. Martha and Franz, however, each endeavors to create stories. Here, Nabokov’s essays and lectures beyond the creativity cycle come into play, setting forth his expectations about originality and the relationship between the literary work and the real world. In his lecture on *Mansfield Park*,⁵⁸ Nabokov explains the problem of “real life:” “An original author always invents an original world.... *There is no such thing as real life for an author of genius*: he must create it himself and then create the consequences” (emphasis mine).⁵⁹ Even as early as 1930, Nabokov responded to his brother Kirill’s poetic efforts by insisting on originality in the artist’s engagement

⁵⁵ That is, unnecessary according to Dreyer. In terms of Nabokov’s narrative, this scene is quite necessary, as, for example, Pifer (*Nabokov and the Novel*, 42-43) and Connolly (“*King, Queen, Knave*,” 208) have noted.

⁵⁶ Masing-Delic argues that little Vivian is indeed Dreyer’s son, which makes this misreading particularly costly for Dreyer, “*Bloodied Eyes, Dancing Dolls*,” 12-14.

⁵⁷ Galimova suggests that Martha begins the novel as a steely-souled pragmatist, but, bowled over by her genuine love for Franz, is drawn toward the irrational world of the fairytale (*skazka*) by the novel’s end, “*Tri karty: Pikovaia dama Pushkina i Korol’, dama, valet Nabokova*,” *Russkaia literatura* (Saint Petersburg, Russia) 1 (2003): 114-15, <https://go.exlibris.link/R8rFgDC6>. If this is the case, Martha’s path and Dreyer’s seem to be inversions of one another.

⁵⁸ Delivered in the early 1950s at Cornell; Bowers, *Lectures on Literature*, viii; Updike, “Introduction,” xxi.

⁵⁹ “*Jane Austen: Mansfield Park*,” 10.

with the world around him.⁶⁰ The nexus between life and art – the artistic work in/and “reality” – also, unsurprisingly, forms part of Nabokov’s exploration of creativity in *KDV/KQK*. Once again, the English translation exaggerates elements that relate to this nexus, pounding home Nabokov’s views with revisions that, on the surface, seem over the top, but that circle back to Nabokov’s artistic credo. Quite simply, art cannot be copied from life, nor can life, in turn, be treated as an artistic text; Martha and Franz commit both of these cardinal sins, and in *KQK*, Nabokov makes changes that draw the (ideologically competent) reader’s attention to these acts.

Early in their acquaintance, Franz intrigues Martha with tales of his childhood, even as she finds those tales unsettling (*KQK* 113; *KDV* 203). There is no evidence that Franz is doing anything but recounting episodes from his lived experience; as a lesson or even a story, these narratives “are more important than anything [Martha] had actually experienced” (*KQK* 113; *iarche i vazhnee vsego, chto ona i vpriam’ perezhila, KDV* 203) but they do not qualify as “magic,”⁶¹ for Franz does not have the storyteller’s gift of imagination. When Franz does try to craft a story, instead of filtering the data he collects about Martha through his imagination, providing a conduit to “intimations about the otherworld,”⁶² he superimposes that data on an existing template, his “first-love text;” for the inexperienced artist, this endeavor is akin to creating “literature by numbers.”

To criticize Franz’s contemplation of a longed-for first love as a “youthful premonition” (“iunosheskoe predchuvstvie’), as Nabokov terms Ganin’s first imagining of Mary,⁶³ would elevate it beyond its worth. Franz’s first-love text is vulgar and banal, and in *KQK*, Nabokov greatly expands the passage. Here, I quote it at length, with additions underlined:

His love for his mother was never very deep but even so it was his first unhappy love, or rather he regarded her as a rough draft of a first love, for although he had craved for her affection because his schoolbooks of stories (My Soldier Boy, Hanna Comes Home) told him, as they had from immemorial time, that mothers always doted upon their sons and daughters, he actually could not stand her physical appearance, mannerisms, and emanations, the depressing, depressingly familiar odor of her skin and clothes, the bedbug-

⁶⁰ *Selected Letters 1940-1977*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Harcourt, 1989), 8, 10.

⁶¹ “Good Readers and Good Writers,” 5-6.

⁶² Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld*, 33.

⁶³ *Mashen'ka*, in *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda* (Saint Petersburg: Symposium), 2:69.

brown fat birthmark on her neck, the trick she had of scratching with a knitting needle the unappetizing parting of her chestnut hair, her enormous dropsical ankles, and all the kitchen faces she made by which he could unerringly determine what she was preparing—beer soup or bull hodes, or that dreadful local dainty Budenzucker.

...Perhaps, in spite of everything his mother missed him now? She never wrote anything about her feelings in her infrequent letters.

(*KQK* 93-94; *KDV* 191-92)

The revision emphasizes both that Franz is engaging in a creative act (“a rough draft of a first love”) and how very badly he executes it. Franz sins doubly against Nabokovian creativity. His creation plagiarizes the pabulum of his schoolboy reading, and the result is preposterously contrary to the real-life model, his mother. He remembers his mother’s flaws with grotesque clarity – again, an instance of Nabokov making things ridiculous in *KQK* – but shuts his eyes to them as he “recaptures” his observations, his eagerness and inexperience forcing them to fit into a “rough draft of a first love.”

Franz’s revised first-love text, with Martha filling the heroine’s role, is speculative: “As Franz passed through the first two rooms, he pictured how in an instant he would push open that door over there, enter her boudoir; ...for a split second he saw before him his own receding back, saw his hand, saw himself opening the door, and because that sensation was a foray into the future, and it is forbidden to ransack the future, he was swiftly punished” (*KQK* 85; *KDV* 186). Some force, fate perhaps, upon whose territory Franz has trodden with his dirty boots, stops this flight of fancy in midair, leaving him to crash to the ground, “hungry, sweaty, and impotent” (a formula absent from the Russian), without either the full seduction he had tried to foresee or even the first kiss that Martha had planned (*KQK* 85-87; *KDV* 186-87). This passage sheds light on the ethical ramifications of Franz’s artistic shortcomings. His reverie is not the anticipatory memory practiced by Nabokov’s true artists such as Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev or even Ganin, but rather the Russian Symbolists’ error of trying to model (real) life after art – in Franz’s case, after *bad* art and

with an incompetent artist holding the pen.⁶⁴ In the revision, Franz's artistic sin becomes more conscious and more violent: in *KDV*, his sin is attempting to know ("znat") the future. In *KQK*, he *ransacks* it, compounding the sin of forbidden knowledge with clumsy brutality.

Martha, like Franz, relies on flawed models. Connolly cites her "quasi-authorial impulse,"⁶⁵ but Toker declares her "an anti-artist rather than an *artist manqué*."⁶⁶ Indeed, while Martha may share Franz's eagerness and Dreyer's sloth, she, far more deliberately than Franz, attempts to (re)write the *fabula* of real life.⁶⁷ From the beginning, the would-be co-authors envision their narrative differently: while Franz is trying to write a first-love text, Martha starts with an adultery text that quickly grows to include a murder plot.⁶⁸ Having initiated the affair (*KQK* 84; *KDV* 185), Martha easily realizes her adultery text, which meshes with Franz's first-love text. Martha then lures Franz into her murder plot (*KQK* 135-36; *KDV* 219-20), which she cobbles together from third-rate novels and "a second-rate encyclopedia" (*KQK* 162-63; *KDV* 236-37). Nabokov uses the encyclopedia to force a confrontation between Martha's novel-inspired fantasy and the world usually considered real when she discovers that "those absolutely safe poisons" that she "was absolutely certain...existed" do not (*KQK* 165; *KDV* 238). The English passage remains close to the Russian, with the exception of a single added phrase that further removes

⁶⁴ Nabokov's changing relationship to the Russian Symbolists, and especially to the work and legacy of Aleksandr Blok, has been well chronicled. Boyd details Nabokov's affinity with Symbolism's guiding principles and notes that "in *The Gift*, his major contribution to Russian literature, his thoroughgoing attempt to revalue the Russian literary tradition by an attack on Chernyshevsky continues the rejection of utilitarian materialism with which Symbolism began" (*Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990], 93; hereafter cited as RY). Boyd also acknowledges Nabokov's dislike of Blok's *The Twelve* (RY 156-57) and his progression away from the movement (RY 404). Dolinin discusses the traces of "the mature Nabokov's dual relationship to Blok's poetry and philosophy" ("dvoistvennoe otnoshenie zrelogo Nabokova k poëzii i filosofii Bloka") in *Lolita* ("Nabokov i Blok," in *Istinnaiia zhizn' pisatel'ia Sirina*, 336), concluding that the various echoes of Blok that surround Humbert Humbert are "not by a long shot the 'life-creating beam' of the Pushkin tradition in Blok's poetry, but his 'life-creative' behavior – the 'romantic poet' Humbert Humbert, like all his real-life prototypes, is accused of what Khodasevich called 'the enactment of one's own life as if in the theater of burning improvisations'" (otniud' ne "zhivotvornyi luch" pushkinskoi traditsii v poëzii Bloka, a ego "zhiznetvorcheskoe" povedenie – "romanticheskomu poëtu" Gumbertu Gumbertu, kak i vsem ego real'nym prototipam, vmeniaetsia v vinu to, chto Khodasevich nazval "razygryvaniem sobstvennoi zhizni kak by na teatre zhguchikh improvizatsii" ("Nabokov i Blok," 337.).

⁶⁵ "King, Queen, Knave," 207.

⁶⁶ *The Mystery of Literary Structures*, 52.

⁶⁷ As Connolly writes, "Genuine artists, from Nabokov's perspective, may exercise total control in the realm of fiction or art (*S[trong] O[pinions]* 69), but they may not exert such control over beings around them," "King, Queen, Knave," 207.

⁶⁸ Franz does not immediately understand that Martha intends to kill Dreyer, thinking only that she is planning to divorce him. Averin points out that the reader may be caught similarly unawares, with Nabokov partially obscuring this critical point in the plot (*Dar Mnemoziny: Romany Nabokova v kontekste russkoi avtobiograficheskoi traditsii* [Saint Petersburg: Amfora, 2003], 275).

Martha's efforts from true art: "I've read in a detective story about shady little cafés where one gets in touch with sellers of cocaine" (*KQK* 164, addition underlined; *KDV* 238). The English-language reader thus has every reason to place the source of Martha's belief in untraceable poisons in the detective story, making the link between her farcically evil plots and her sub-par reading material unmistakable.

Even composing a short, ostensibly simple text, Martha stumbles. When she tries to cast a spell on Dreyer, both novels show that, far from being an artist, Martha is little better than a(n incompetent) sorceress.⁶⁹ Although the spell-casting scene's importance is well established in the critical literature, it is worth noting here that, shifting from Russian to English, Nabokov introduces changes that make Martha more ridiculous and more sinister. Although haste and eagerness affect Martha's actions in this scene, Nabokov's revisions make both Martha's purpose and her incompetence more obvious, lending the scene a broadly, if darkly, comical tone while distracting the reader from the scene's key conflict.

In this scene, Martha uses words as threats and weapons. Both versions elide her goal of causing Dreyer's death, but Franz is frightened well before Martha begins scribbling in her notebook: he fears that their affair will be discovered, and Martha's demeanor and facial expressions, as the two play husband and wife in the Dreyers' home, further set him on edge. The most powerful threat comes from Martha's speech. The Russian uses both semantics and grammar to express her focus and growing menace. Martha threatens him: "I ne smei pugat'sia – ia budu tebe govorit' "ty" vsiakii raz, kak mne vzdumaetsia, slyshish'?" (*KDV* 213; And don't you dare be frightened—I'm going to use "ty" [the familiar second-person singular] with you whenever it occurs to me, do you hear?; "smei," "tebe" and "slyshish'" are second-person familiar forms). Martha crosses the linguistic boundary from the formal to the familiar, making good on her threat while it is being uttered. Nabokov loses these subtle elements of menace in English; the sentence becomes, "And don't you dare be frightened—I'll speak to you as tenderly as I wish any time I feel like it—do you hear?" (*KQK* 126); he must trust the reader to supply the threatening tone.

As the scene continues, Martha casts her spell. The changes Nabokov makes in this passage most clearly reveal the intensification, in *KQK*, of Martha's failings. Consequently, I will quote at

⁶⁹ And, indeed, Galimova points out that Martha owes much to the title entity in Pushkin's *Queen of Spades*, a card invariably viewed as evil or witch-like, "Tri karty" 113. Karshan links Martha to Pushkin's Hermann, noting that she "reduces the world to a projection of her one-dimensional will," *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play*, 85.

length, with additions and significant changes underlined. After dinner, Martha and Franz await Dreyer's return. Martha becomes increasingly peeved at his uncharacteristic lateness, and a call to his secretary reveals that Dreyer had left his office almost four hours earlier. Spurred by the icy streets and the memory of an earlier auto accident, Martha begins to urge her husband's death:

She settled down on the sofa again, with the address book in her lap. She doodled some lines on a page. Then wrote her family name, and slowly crossed it out. She looked at him askance, once more wrote Dreyer in large characters, slitted her eyes, and started blacking it out. The pencil tip broke. She tossed the book and the pencil to him, and got up.

The clock tocked rather than ticked, the tock clicked and clocked. Martha stood before him as if trying to hypnotize him, to transfer some simple thought to his young dull brain.

The front door banged in the unbearable silence, and Tom's rejoicing voice burst forth.

"My spells don't work," said Martha, and a bizarre spasm distorted her beautiful face.

(*KQK* 127-28; *KDV* 214)

Martha's scribbling occurs near the witching hour of midnight. Nabokov makes the link direct in the English, where Dreyer's secretary, who in the Russian says nothing about the current time, first tells Martha that it is "'only midnight,'" then corrects herself to "'almost midnight'" (*KQK* 126). After the phone call, the reader can almost hear the clock striking twelve as Martha starts to write.

The sentence that begins "Martha stood before him" was originally "Marta stoiala pered nim i smotrela, smotrela, smotrela, slovno vnushala emu chto-to" (*KDV* 214). *Vnushat'*, defined as "to suggest," "to instill," or even "to inspire," carries a strong connotation of coercion and even violence. Nabokov replaces *vnushat'* with two English verbs: "to hypnotize" and "to transfer." Instead of the force of *vnushat'* and the hypnotic repetition of *smotrela*, Nabokov ends up with the more direct, and weaker, "telling" verbs, *hypnotize* and *transfer*, a change that lends Martha an even stronger tinge of *poshlost'*, of the carnival side-show or travelling con-artist.

Nabokov changes “He’s come” (prishel, *KDV* 214) to “My spells don’t work” (*KQK* 128), having Martha dismiss Dreyer’s return as her own ineffectiveness, and perhaps compensating for the change from crossing out “Dreyer” thrice – a spell-like number – to only twice. This dismissal, including as it does a direct acknowledgement that Martha is practicing witchcraft, changes the nature of the scene in the broader context of the novel. In both versions, Martha threatens Franz and attempts to kill her husband by “crossing him out;” in both versions, Martha – and the reader – soon learn that a death *has* occurred: Dreyer was late because his car ran head-on into a tram, killing his chauffeur. This information makes it appear that the spell did work, but was simply misdirected. As it turns out, this interpretation, too, is a partial misreading. Having the spell kill the chauffeur is possible only if spells work backwards in time: Martha scribbles in her notebook just a few minutes before Dreyer’s return, and after calling Dreyer’s secretary, who in both versions informs her that Dreyer had left the office around 8 p.m. (that is, at least three hours before the phone call). It is almost certain, then, that the accident and the chauffeur’s death occurred hours before Martha wrote anything at all. Her writing had nothing to do with either.

Some critics point out that Martha never finishes the spell, abandoning it after the pencil point breaks.⁷⁰ But the spell *will* work: not as Martha intended it, but as she cast it. Rather than being incomplete, the spell is flawed. In her second misreading—her belief that her spell killed the chauffeur—Martha overlooks not only the chronological impossibility of having done so, but her own lack of precision. In both versions, she “wrote *her own* family name” (napisala *svoiu* familiiu, my emphasis), “Dreyer.” That word, thanks to her state of legal matrimony, applies as much to her as to Kurt, and as a German woman, rather than a Russian one, her surname is not differentiated from her husband’s by gender. By sharing his name, she ensures herself a share in his estate after his death. Here, through her greedy carelessness, she also ensures herself a share in the fate she would craft for him. Martha’s ill-intended crossing out of “Dreyer” works by causing her own death.

To drive home the difference between Martha’s efforts and true creativity, Nabokov inserts some English word-play of his own just after Martha completes her spell: “the clock ticked” (tikali chasy) becomes: “The clock tocked rather than ticked, the tock clicked and clocked.” The mature

⁷⁰ For example, Connolly, “*King, Queen, Knave*,” 208.

Nabokov is showing off his prowess, letting himself play while Martha flounders. Although in both novels the spell works as Martha cast it, only in *KQK* can the reader discern the author at work, laughing at his character from beyond the page. In *KQK* Nabokov also grants Martha a possible insight into her fatal error, albeit one that she is too ill to recognize fully – but an insight that the ideologically competent reader will consider. As noted above, the motif of “the picture in Franz’s room” makes a final appearance in *KQK* that is missing from *KDV*. Martha, shaking with fever and tipsy with champagne, betrays her lust for Franz in both versions, but, as in earlier passages, Nabokov adds to the overtly sexual content in *KQK*: “Her partner in full erection against her leg...and again most of Martha’s leg was in Weiss’s crotch, and he moaned as his cheek touched hers, and his fingers explored her naked back” (*KQK* 252), compared to “her cavalier, the flying dancing master, attempted, smiling, to touch her temple with his cheek and at the same time was groping her naked back” (*KDV* 290). As in earlier passages, these additions may jar the reader (or please the reader who thinks of the post-*Lolita* Nabokov as, above all, a pornographer). Quite possibly, the additions prevent the reader from noticing the return of the picture motif, another element absent from the original passage: “She placed her hand on [Franz’s] dear bony shoulder. How happy they had been in the rhythm of that earlier novel in those first chapters, under the picture of the dancing slave girl between the whirling dervishes” (*KQK* 252-53).⁷¹ Both Martha and the reader thus circle back to the book’s beginning, but here with new awareness that Martha exists *inside* a novel and that she is being punished for practicing black magic and *zhiznetvorchestvo*, while Nabokov looks on, safely outside the frame. The joke is, ultimately, on Martha; it is the price Nabokov makes her pay for misreading, for poor writing, and for evil goals. The ideologically competent reader, having followed Nabokov’s playful changes in his translation, will get the joke – even if choosing not to laugh.

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⁷¹ In *KDV*, Martha simply “placed her hand on [Franz’s] shoulder” (polozhila ruku k nemu na plecho, 290).

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