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DARK CHAMBERS:  
NABOKOV AND THE SECOND SENSE

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While the visual in Nabokov's oeuvre has gained much scholarly attention,<sup>1</sup> sound has been relegated to a relatively silent existence within the Nabokovian *sensorium*, and thus to the status of the second, or – to use Daniel Barenboim's phrase<sup>2</sup> – “neglected” sense that is assigned to it by the Western tradition, in which, as Hannah Arendt summarizes, “from the very outset ... thinking has been thought in terms of seeing,”<sup>3</sup> with vision privileged over the other senses.

Nabokov, too, seems to embrace the tradition of “ocularcentrism” or “visuocentrism.”<sup>4</sup> Declaring himself lacking in any “ear for music,” he claims to “think in images” and to be “born a painter,” and he praises the visual apparatus, “that monstrous masterpiece of evolution.”<sup>5</sup> Both his fictional and nonfictional writings strongly emphasize the visual – be it in the shape of visual memory, as in his autobiography, or his use of ekphrasis,<sup>6</sup> or in the numerous references to the visual arts in his fiction.<sup>7</sup> A “keen sense of visual detail”<sup>8</sup> distinguishes not only Nabokov, but also many of his characters, as, for example, Victor, the gifted young painter in *Pnin* whose “eye was his supreme organ,” or Vasilij in “Cloud, Castle, Lake,” who is endowed with “precious, experienced eyes.”<sup>9</sup> But Nabokov's valorization of vision hardly entails some

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<sup>1</sup> Shapiro, *The Sublime Artist's Studio*; Bouchet, “Crossbreeding Word and Image”; de Vries and Johnson, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Painting*; Shapiro, “Images”; de Nervaux-Gavoty, “Exposition, surexposition et décomposition prismatique”; Bozovic, “Nabokov's Visual Imagination.”

<sup>2</sup> Barenboim, “The Neglected Sense.”

<sup>3</sup> Arendt, *The Life of Mind*, 110.

<sup>4</sup> Terms used in Levin, *The Listening Self*, 30, and O'Callaghan, *Sounds*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 35, 14, 17; Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 3

<sup>6</sup> Bouchet, “Crossbreeding Word and Image”; Bozovic, “Nabokov's Visual Imagination.”

<sup>7</sup> Shapiro, *The Sublime Artist's Studio*; de Vries and Johnson, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Painting*.

<sup>8</sup> Shapiro, *The Sublime Artist's Studio*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Nabokov, *Pnin*, 78; Nabokov, *Stories*, 434.

disregard of the auditory, or what Leigh Eric Schmidt calls, in reference to ocularcentrist culture generally, “a diminished hearing.”<sup>10</sup> Quite the contrary: as this paper will show, Nabokov deliberately creates in his fictions situations that make vision fail and that engage his characters in the experience of “sounds unseen.”<sup>11</sup> Blindness, darkness, and environments of restricted or obstructed sight are in fact acousmatic situations which dissociate sounds from their visible sources and foreground the akoumenal.<sup>12</sup> These “auditory turns” not only articulate Nabokov’s keen interest in and awareness of the nature of sounds and sonic experiences. They provide the starting point for his inquiry into the auditory, which, so far from being a neglected sense, proves to be tied to his aesthetic, his ethical, and his metaphysical concerns.

### THE DARKNESS OF SOUND

Nabokov’s first novel to deal with a shift from the visual to the auditory is *Laughter in the Dark*. As a cinema enthusiast and producer in the days of the silent movies, Albinus, the novel’s protagonist, cherishes the theory that sound “will kill the cinema,” and as an “art critic and picture expert,” he is likewise devoted exclusively to the visual, conceiving of “the artist’s vision” as a “happy journey of eye and brush” and “going into ecstasy over the outlines of the purple hills” of southern France.<sup>13</sup> He is attracted to the “deceptive charms of colors” (257), and to the visual charms of his mistress Margot, who, in turn, is fond of visually displaying herself as an artist’s model or aspiring movie actress. Albinus is, at least while still in the possession of his eyesight, a man who is “all eyes” – like the Argus, after whom he has named his cinema, and who, according to mythology, bears the epithet *panoptes* (“all-seeing”) because his body was covered with eyes.

Not only Albinus, but also *Kamera obskura*, the title of the novel’s Russian version and first English translation, is inextricably linked to the tradition that assigns primacy to sight. In the course of its mutation from a scientific instrument into a device of the visual arts, the *camera obscura* became a model for the eye as such,<sup>14</sup> and, being intrinsically linked to perspective and to geometrical optics, the *camera obscura* plays a central role in the Western tradition of

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<sup>10</sup> Schmidt, “Hearing Loss,” 25.

<sup>11</sup> Kane, *Sound Unseen*, passim.

<sup>12</sup> A term proposed by F. J. Smith to avoid the paradoxical notion of “auditory phenomena”; see “Vers une phénoménologie du son,” passim.

<sup>13</sup> Nabokov, *Laughter in the Dark*, 122, 8, 9, 202; further citations in the text refer to this edition.

<sup>14</sup> Shapiro, “Images,” 279, 270.

privileging sight, and has contributed, along with such of its offspring as the observatory, photography, and the cinema, to the shaping of what is generally referred to as visual culture.<sup>15</sup>

Discussions of *Laughter in the Dark* have read the term *camera obscura* as a metaphor for the cinema, in particular since Nabokov has claimed: “I wanted to write the entire book as if it were a film.... The scene of [Albinus’] accident I saw vividly as a film.”<sup>16</sup> Alfred A. Appel, for instance, points out the novel’s numerous film associations and movie-related similes and, elaborating on the “cinema theme,” concludes that “*Laughter in the Dark*’s cast inhabits a cinematic plot equal to their own shortsightedness, banality, or corruption.”<sup>17</sup> As Gerard de Vries and Barton D. Johnson suggest in their study on Nabokov and the visual arts, the *camera obscura* “might also be related to the device used by painters” from the Renaissance onwards as a means to draw the precise contours of images.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, it is not only linked to early twentieth-century visual culture, but also to Albinus as an expert in and collector of Old Masters, most of whom made use of this device.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For a history of the *camera obscura*, see Hammond, *The Camera Obscura*. Prior to becoming an instrument of the visual arts, the *camera obscura* or pinhole camera established itself in the field of science, its forerunners dating back to Aristotle and the Chinese philosopher Mo To of the fifth century BC. Ibu Al-Haytham, an Arab scholar of the tenth century, suggested that during a solar eclipse, the image of the sun could be projected onto the wall of a room by a hole in the opposite wall, and the *camera obscura* became a common device for scientific observations. As Michael John Gorman elaborates, it underwent various refinements, in particular during the sixteenth century: in 1550, the Milanese astrologer and physician Girolamo Cardano added a convex lens; in 1585, the philosopher Giambattista Benedetti furnished it with an oblique plane mirror, and, between these landmark innovations, Giambattista Della Porta describes, in the 1589 edition of his *Magiae naturalis*, a further improvement of the device that would allow the projection of theatrical performances onto a screen (Gorman, “Art, Optics, and History,” 297). More and more, the *camera obscura* was considered analogous to the human eye. Johannes Kepler, in his *Ad Vitellionem paralipomena* (1604), employs the *camera obscura* as a model to explain the visual process, with the pupil functioning like the camera’s hole and the eye’s vitreous body like a lens. The retina corresponds to the screen as the recipient of “a real, inverted image, the picture” (Shapiro “Images,” 279, 270), which Kepler calls *pictura* as opposed to *imago*. The former, as Shapiro elucidates, constitutes “a replica of an object that is projected on to a paper or a screen” and “has a real existence independent of any eye that observes it,” whereas “the *imago* is only a ‘rational entity’ that is perceived by the eye and exists only in the imagination” (ibid., 271). In *Lolita*, when speaking about visual memory, Humbert seems to draw on the distinction that Kepler derived from the *camera obscura*: “There are two kinds of visual memory; one when you skillfully recreate an image in the laboratory of your mind, with your eyes open ...; and the other when you instantly evoke, with shut eyes, on the dark innerside of your eyelids, the objective, absolutely optical replica of a beloved face, a little ghost in natural colors (and this is how I see Lolita)” (*The Annotated Lolita*, 11). The image “recreated” by the mind bears a striking resemblance to the Keplerian *imago*, while the “objective, absolutely optical replica” can be seen as modeled on the *pictura*, whereby Humbert’s modifications of Kepler’s concept – the image is not reversed, and the retina is replaced by the inside of the eyelid – indicate the distorted vision that makes him blind to the child’s vulnerability.

<sup>16</sup> Cited from Appel, *Nabokov’s Dark Cinema*, 258–59.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 261f, 265, 261.

<sup>18</sup> de Vries and Johnson, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Painting*, 30.

<sup>19</sup> According to the – albeit not undisputed – Hockney-Falco thesis (named after its proponents, the painter David Hockney and physicist Charles M. Falco), the accuracy of the Old Masters is owed to their extensive use of such optical aids as convex mirrors and the *camera obscura*. See Hockney and Falco, “Optical Insights into Renaissance Art.”

The *camera obscura* is, however, an ambivalent notion in *Laughter in the Dark*, and its ambiguity undermines and challenges the visuality it epitomizes. As a “dark chamber,” it pertains as well to Albinus’ state after the car accident has deprived him of his eyesight and to the experience of his blindness, to which the novel refers as an “impenetrable wall” (243) or a “solid black wall” (245), thus employing what Jacques Derrida, in his discussion of Rilke’s “Die Blinde” and her “walled-in eyes,” has called “the rhetoric of blindness.”<sup>20</sup> Playing, as Thomas Seifrid observes, with the meaning “prison cell” denoted by the Russian *kamera*,<sup>21</sup> Nabokov’s original title refers metaphorically to Albinus’ blindness as the “darkness” that imprisons him, “making it impossible to force a way through this solid darkness which was like a part of himself” (243). At the same time, the “dark chamber” is more than a metaphor for Albinus’ loss of eyesight, which has been read, above all, in figurative terms as a culmination of his flawed vision.<sup>22</sup> While the metaphorical meanings of Albinus’ blindness are indisputable, the novel at the same time accentuates the impacts of literal blindness, such as the physical consequences of the loss of sight and the experiential implications of being excluded from vision. Waking up in his hospital bed, with his head bandaged – blindfolded, but still unaware of the fact that he is blind – Albinus is confronted with and confounded by the “discrepancy between his senses” (241), since his

ears had been absorbing so many impressions all this time, and his eyes none at all. He did not know what the room, the nurse, or the doctors looked like. And the time? Was it morning? ... Probably the window was open, for he heard the clatter or horse hooves outside; there was also the sound of running water and the clanging note of a pail. Perhaps there was a courtyard with a well and the cool morning shade of plane trees. (241)

The inability to see marks a disruption of the *sensorium*. Dissociated from sight, Albinus is exposed to what Brian Kane in his eponymous study calls “sounds unseen” – sounds that are severed from their source and their cause.<sup>23</sup> What Albinus experiences can thus be described as an acousmatic situation. The term *acousmatic*, introduced by Pierre Schaeffer in his *Traité des objets musicaux*, and elaborated by Michel Chion and others, is defined as “indicating a sound

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<sup>20</sup> Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> Seifrid, “Nabokov’s Poetics of Vision.”

<sup>22</sup> de Vries and Johnson, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Painting*, 34; Appel, *Nabokov’s Dark Cinema*, 266–67.

<sup>23</sup> Kane, *Sound Unseen*, 3.

which one hears without seeing its cause.”<sup>24</sup> Etymologically, *acousmatic* can be traced back to the Pythagorean school, where *akousmatikoi* (“listeners” or “auditors”) referred to a group of Pythagoras’ disciples who, according to legend, attended the philosopher’s lectures behind a veil or curtain.<sup>25</sup> Whether the Pythagorean veil is, as Chion holds, to be taken literally, as a screen shielding the master from his listeners’ eyes so as to concentrate their attention on the meaning of his discourse,<sup>26</sup> on their “Master’s voice” as Mladen Dolar puts it, alluding to the logo of the eponymous record label;<sup>27</sup> or whether it is, as Kane argues, to be taken figuratively as the “veil of allegory”<sup>28</sup> – the term *acousmatic* has established itself to denote sounds that are dissociated from their source and cause. Guillaume Apollinaire for example, in his “Acousmate” poems, speaks of “sounds without a cause.”<sup>29</sup> This does not mean, of course, that the listener is unable to identify the source of the sound: when, for instance, the concert reform movement at the turn of the twentieth century experimented with shielded orchestras,<sup>30</sup> the audience was fully aware of the music’s origin. Albinus, for his part, speculating on the courtyard below his hospital window, attempts “to transform the incoherent sound into corresponding shapes and colours” (241) and to assign the various sounds to their sources, to identify the “clatter of hooves” and the “sound of running water” hitting the bottom of a pail. As Brian Kane contends, “[t]he acousmatic reduction by itself ... still allows for the identification of sources and causes – but it bars access to visual and tactual means to satisfy this goal. Indexical listening is still available as a possible modality. However, the acousmatic reduction disorients and redirects sound to the field of hearing alone.”<sup>31</sup> Discussing Pierre Schaeffer’s acousmatic project of *objets sonores*, Salomé Vögelin draws on Husserl’s phenomenological reduction and speaks of a “reduction to the core of sonic experience” that “brackets the sounds off from their visual contexts to hear them in all their sonicness.”<sup>32</sup> The “dark wall” surrounding Albinus is, strictly speaking, not the darkness of his blindness, but what Vögelin calls the “darkness of sound.”<sup>33</sup>

Acousmatic experiences are not uncommon in Nabokov’s writings. The narrator of *Glory* speaks of the “disembodied noises” Martin hears outside his compartment during a

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<sup>24</sup> Chion, *La voix au cinéma*, 30.

<sup>25</sup> Kane, *Sound Unseen*, 45f.; Chion, *La voix au cinéma*, 31.

<sup>26</sup> Chion, *La voix au cinéma*, 31.

<sup>27</sup> Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 61.

<sup>28</sup> Kane, *Sound Unseen*, 65.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted *ibid.*, 77.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>32</sup> Vögelin, *Listening to Sound and Silence*, 34.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

nocturnal train ride;<sup>34</sup> Fyodor in *The Gift* awakens in the mornings to the noises intruding into his room from the outside; in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov, the wakeful child, listens to the sounds coming from his governess's adjacent room. What all these situations of impaired, obstructed, or precluded vision share is a foregrounding of the akoumenal. This emphasis on the auditory does not mean a counterposing of sight versus hearing, or an invocation of what Jonathan Sterne has called "the audiovisual litany" that privileges hearing on the assumption of its interiority and affinity with the spiritual.<sup>35</sup> Acousmatic situations enable Nabokov to inquire into the peculiarities of the auditory, ever at risk, in this regard, of subsumption under the category of synesthesia – which, by the way, the narrator of *Bend Sinister* expresses by a sonic metaphor when he speaks of the "orchestra of the senses."<sup>36</sup> As Don Ihde contends, "[a] turn to the auditory is ... potentially more than a simple changing of variables. It begins as a deliberate decentering of a dominant tradition in order to discover what may be missing as a result of the traditional double reduction of vision as the main variable and metaphor."<sup>37</sup> The foregrounding of the akoumenal reminds the reader that for Nabokov, the auditory is by no means a "neglected" sense. Quite the contrary: exploring "sounds unseen" permits Nabokov to uncover sound's potential for his aesthetic and metaphysical concerns.

### *SOUNDING SOUND*

In *Laughter in the Dark*, the protagonist is forced to confront the peculiar features of the akoumenal and of aurality that are radically different from those of vision. When the narrator remarks, for instance, that Albinus' "ears had been absorbing so many impressions all this time" (241), he addresses the fact that the ear, unlike the (closable) eye, is ever exposed to impressions. As commonplace as this fact is, it points to the fundamental special implications of sound and hearing. The auditory, as Wolfgang Welsch puts it, "admits" the world, consequently, "penetration, vulnerability and exposure are the characteristics of hearing.... Hearing is a sense of extreme passivity, and we cannot escape from acoustic congestion."<sup>38</sup> Whereas vision is separate from its object,<sup>39</sup> and an abolition of distance makes vision fail, the

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<sup>34</sup> Nabokov, *Glory*, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 15–19.

<sup>36</sup> Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, 64.

<sup>37</sup> Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 14.

<sup>38</sup> Welsch, *Undoing Aesthetics*, 158.

<sup>39</sup> Espinet, *Phänomenologie des Hörens*, 199.

hearing and the heard coincide<sup>40</sup> to the extent that, as David Espinet contends, “the hearing has the heard ... *in the ear*.”<sup>41</sup> Whereas vision imposes an order and “focuses on relationships and differences and derives its meaning from them,”<sup>42</sup> the ear accumulates. It “does not order things but produces its own ephemeral order. Sound can give an indication of left or right, high or low, etc. but this is not the orientation of objects and places but of itself.”<sup>43</sup> *Laughter in the Dark* addresses the ear’s cumulative gathering of hierarchy-defying sound when Albinus, at the railway station in Zurich, “was stunned by all the different sounds, footsteps, voices, wheels, viciously sharp and strong things which all seemed to be rushing at him” (249), or in the garden, when he complains: “There are too many sounds here. Trees, wind, squirrels, and things I cannot name, I don’t know what’s happening around me.... It’s all so noisy” (265). Albinus’ confusion in both cases results from the simultaneity of aural impressions, and his post-accident life, his adjustment to blindness, consists of learning to “sharpen his hearing” (262). Nabokov makes his protagonist undergo an “ear training” that moves him from what Mark S. Muldoon calls “hearing proper” and the “deciphering of sound symbols”<sup>44</sup> to listening: “He was listening – of late he had done nothing else but listen” (276). Listening is, Muldoon contends, not only “more selective in its attunement to auditory qualities,” but also “attempts to capture what is mute and unspoken.”<sup>45</sup> Albinus has become “all ears” and, able “to divine movements from sounds” (262), clairaudient: his ears finally make him discover the affair between Margot and Rex that his eyes have failed to see.

Cincinnatus, the protagonist of *Invitation to a Beheading*, finds himself in a similarly “dark chamber.” The prison cell, the *kamera*, where he awaits his execution, is, as Porter observes, a “literal *camera obscura*,”<sup>46</sup> replacing the pinhole by a “peephole” in the door through which Rodion “peer[s] with a skipper’s stern attention.”<sup>47</sup> The “predatory eye” (122), the metaphor the novel employs for the peephole, is resonant of Oswald Spengler’s association of vision with predation in *Man and Technics*.<sup>48</sup> The modification of the optical device into a

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<sup>40</sup> Vögelin, *Listening to Sound and Silence*, 49, 175; Espinet, *Phänomenologie des Hörens*, 199. For Aristotle, this fact serves as a proof of his “doctrine that the sense and its object are one”; hearing thus becomes the paradigm for all other senses. See Towey, “Aristotle and Alexander on Hearing and Instantaneous Change,” 9.

<sup>41</sup> Espinet, *Phänomenologie des Hörens*, 199.

<sup>42</sup> Vögelin, *Listening to Sound and Silence*, 34.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Muldoon, *Silence Revisited*, 280. Cf. the “indexical listening” or *écouter* in Pierre Schaeffer’s terminology (*Traité des objets musicaux*, 106).

<sup>45</sup> Muldoon, *Silence Revisited*, 281.

<sup>46</sup> Porter, “The Death Masque of Socrates,” 394.

<sup>47</sup> Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, 13; further citations in the text refer to this edition.

<sup>48</sup> Tracing the evolution from herbivores to carnivores, Spengler claims: “The act of fixation by two eyes ... is equivalent to the birth of the world, in the sense that Man possesses a world – that is, as a picture, as a world before the eyes, as a world ... of perspective distance, of space and motions in space.... This way of seeing ...

tool for supervision indicates what Martin Jay calls the twentieth century's "crisis of ocularcentrism," which finds expression, for example, in Foucault's elaborations on the panopticon<sup>49</sup> as well as in the writings of Jacques Ellul, Richard Rorty,<sup>50</sup> and Jean-Luc Nancy, who, in his *Listening*, goes beyond Jay<sup>51</sup> to elaborate the possibilities of the auditory. As Karen Jacobs has shown, in *The Eye*, Nabokov problematizes vision and surveillance,<sup>52</sup> and *Invitation to a Beheading* pertains as well to this "deeply seated distrust of the privileging of sight,"<sup>53</sup> in particular, since Cincinnatus is sentenced to death for resisting state-mandated *transparency*. Critics like Robert Alter and, more recently, Dana Dragunoiu, have outlined the novel's "eye motif";<sup>54</sup> for example, the prison director has "bulging eyes" (15), and Cincinnatus' eyes are emphasized.<sup>55</sup> But the novel also employs the auditory for its thematic concerns. The society that has condemned Cincinnatus to death is a "world" characterized by "mutedness" (91), where individual and oppositional voices are "muted" or silenced, and where *audire* means *obaudire*. The death sentence is, "[i]n accordance with the law ... announced to Cincinnatus C. in a whisper" (11): "The hoary judge put his mouth close to his ear, made the announcement and slowly moved away, as though ungluing himself" (11). The novel's first paragraph foregrounds the auditory by breaking with the traditional association of power with noise, which derives, as Murray D. Schafer argues, from the "Sacred Noise."<sup>56</sup> By whispering the verdict, the judge, in an act reminiscent of Shakespearian "ear poisoning," implants the impending death into Cincinnatus' auditory canal. On the one hand, the whispered death sentence underscores, by resorting to the coincidence of the hearing and the heard, that Cincinnatus is inevitably doomed to die; on the other hand, it defines Cincinnatus as a listener. For in his cell, the prisoner occupies himself not only, as Stephen Blackwell explains,<sup>57</sup> with reading and interpreting signs and clues, but also with listening to the sounds beyond the confining walls. As a visually

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implies in itself the notion of domination. The world-picture is the environment insofar as it is dominated by the eyes.... The world is the prey" (*Man and Technics*, 30, 20, 14). A similar linkage of vision and possessiveness as outlined in Spengler's biosocial speculations is articulated in *The Gift*, when the old woman of the Kirghiz fairy tale solves the tale's riddle by identifying the "tiny bag," with its infinite holding capacity, as "a human eye – it wants to encompass everything in the world" (Nabokov, *The Gift*, 126–27).

<sup>49</sup> Jay, "The Rise of Hermeneutics and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism," 310; Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 410–11.

<sup>50</sup> Jay, "The Rise of Hermeneutics and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism," 309.

<sup>51</sup> See Adrienne Janus's critique of Martin Jay in "Listening," 183.

<sup>52</sup> Jacobs, *The Eye's Mind*, 76.

<sup>53</sup> Jay, "The Rise of Hermeneutics and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism," 308–9.

<sup>54</sup> Alter, *Motives for Fiction*, 66; Dragunoiu, "Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* and the Russian Liberal Tradition," 63.

<sup>55</sup> Dragunoiu, "Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* and the Russian Liberal Tradition," 63f.

<sup>56</sup> Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 51, 76.

<sup>57</sup> Blackwell, "Reading and Rupture in Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*," 40.



restrictive environment, the prison cell turns Cincinnatus automatically into a listener, who, due to his precarious situation, is particularly alert. So, for instance, in the mornings, he is

awakened by the doomlike din of voices mounting in the corridor.... There was the shuffling of many feet, at various levels of audibility; there were voices, also at various depths; one surged up with a question; another, closer, responded.... In the midst of the hubbub the director's bass uttered several words, indistinct but imperative. The most frightening thing was that all this bustle was pierced by a child's voice. (34–35)

The prison corridor constitutes a lo-fi<sup>58</sup> acoustic environment of reverberant sounds. The prison staff's voices are blurred by reverberations, and speech, deprived of its message, is reduced to its acoustic properties. Cincinnatus, the “captive audience,”<sup>59</sup> is able to distinguish layerings of sound, according to the voices' different volumes and pitches, but the “din of voices” (98) permits merely an indexical listening that enables him to recognize the voice of the prison director and to assign one of the voices to a child.

The cause and the source of sound are completely obscured when Cincinnatus is awakened one night by a “muted tapping, scratching” (127). He becomes an ardent listener and, like Albinus, “all ears”: “He listened, his whole head became an organ of hearing, his whole body a tense heart” (127). The novel elaborates on the “phantasmagorical”<sup>60</sup> qualities of sounds unseen – that is, their condition of being “alienated” from their production – and on the “underdetermination” and “uncertainty”<sup>61</sup> that characterizes acousmatic situations. Cincinnatus treats the sounds whose source and cause is unknown to him as autonomous objects, and subjects them to his interpretation. Unaware of the fact that the sounds are part of a cruel game devised by his tormentors, he perceives them as something *beyond* the prison authorities, something resisting them; to him, the sounds are agents of what Emma K. Russel and Bree Carlton have called (in their study of sonic prison protests) a “counter-carceral acoustemology.”<sup>62</sup> With their promise to breach Cincinnatus' carceral confinement, they provide a sonic alternative to his tormentors' blurred voices. He is “especially excited by the concentrated self-confidence of the sounds, the insistent seriousness with which they pursued,

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<sup>58</sup> Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 43.

<sup>59</sup> Rice, “Sounds Inside,” 6.

<sup>60</sup> Kane, *Sound Unseen*, 118.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>62</sup> Russell and Carlton, “Counter-Carceral Acoustemologies,” 13.

in the quiet fortress of the night, perhaps a distant but none the less attainable goal” (128). He perceives them as “modest” (138), “intelligent” (138), and “mysteriously calculating and insistent” (138). Firmly believing that his liberation is imminent, he attributes human qualities to them, such as modesty, sincerity, and tenacity – virtues that are absent from a society whose members are, as Gennadi Barabtarlo puts it, “merely animated mannequins.”<sup>63</sup> The tapping and scratching confer an acoustical agency on Cincinnatus. Responding to the sounds, he engages in a “performative dialogue” with the sounds as his “acoustical partner.”<sup>64</sup> Being all ears and subjecting the sounds to his interpretation, Cincinnatus comes very close to what Salomé Vögelin calls, in analogy to Roland Barthes’s notion of the *écrivain*, an *écoutant*:

The *écoutant* is a transitive listener, who produces the work in his subjective hearing.... As *écoutant*, I am listening, I am a participle, a verb, like the sounds I hear.... The *écoutant* does not come to understand the work as transparent totality but builds it, with the zeal and urgency of an amateur.... He is a phenomenological subject, intent and focused ... his anticipation generates the sonic narration as well as his subjectivity urgently, unconventionally and with conviction.<sup>65</sup>

Likewise, Cincinnatus “builds” on sounds when he “clearly visualize[s] through the tympanum the secret passage” (147). From the sounds he listens to, Cincinnatus imaginatively constructs his escape through the sounds,<sup>66</sup> an escape that only has its validity within the acousmatic spacing of source, cause, and effect. This spacing, however, diminishes relentlessly in proportion to the sounds’ nearing and the imminence of the breakthrough of the wall. Consequently, the aperture in the wall bars Cincinnatus’ escape: the “great crash” (158) with which the wall opens is at the same time a disacousmatization that reveals M’sieur Pierre and Rodrig Ivanovich as the sounds’ source and cause, and their “splendid tunnel” (159) as a passage leading Cincinnatus into another prison cell. The fact that the rescue operation is merely

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<sup>63</sup> Barabtarlo, “Within and Without Cincinnatus’s Cell,” 390.

<sup>64</sup> Russell and Carlton, “Counter-Carceral Acoustemologies,” 10; LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories*, 111.

<sup>65</sup> Vögelin, *Listening to Sound and Silence*, 96.

<sup>66</sup> This corresponds to what Dale Peterson identifies as an “imaginative avenue that promises escape” (“Nabokov’s *Invitation*,” 828); for his part, Stephen H. Blackwell speaks of a “false refuge” (“Reading and Rupture in Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading*,” 40).

a game staged by the authorities underscores that the repressive apparatus exerts its power not only by vision and supervision, but equally by sound.<sup>67</sup>

### *SOUNDING THE OTHERWORLD*

*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* foregrounds the auditory in the narrator's attempt to reconstruct the last years in the life of his brother. The novel makes extensive use of sonic metaphors, as, for instance, when V. claims "certain psychological affinities" with his brother, and when he describes these affinities in sonic terms: "Sebastian and I had some kind of common rhythm."<sup>68</sup> V. conceives of "psychological affinities" in terms of an intersubjective consonance; his metaphor of the "common rhythm" is resonant of another, equally sonic one: the proverbial "being on the same wavelength." Anthropologist Stefan Helmreich observes that notions of wave and wavelength constitute "the meeting of the poetic and the scientific," and, we might add, the proverbial.<sup>69</sup> The physical forces that shape the universe are described in terms of waves, and the fact that physical waves are omnipresent fosters the "idea that waves ... are the basis of the cosmos," and the wave becomes a "fetish for the ontological."<sup>70</sup> Additionally, the activities of the heart, of the brain, and of consciousness are conceptualized in terms of waves – the notion of "mindwaves" emerged in 1869 in the discourse of the Society of Psychic Research. As Helmreich contends, "[w]aves are not merely material processes of energy propagation or of vibration. They are also abstractions.... Waves are manifestations of the release of potentiality as well as the signs of its continued efficacy. They serve ... as vehicles for thinking about the relation between the presents and the futures of potential, realized or otherwise."<sup>71</sup>

In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the potential of waves is closely tied to Nabokov's metaphysical concerns, such as "cosmic synchronization"<sup>72</sup> and the transcendent realms of the Otherworld (*potustoronnost'*) that constituted, according to Vera Nabokov, the "main theme" of his works.<sup>73</sup> The wave idiom, implied in the metaphor of the "common rhythm," becomes the vehicle for what Alexandrov calls V.'s "imaginative sympathy," by which V. "intuits that

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<sup>67</sup> On Nabokov's treatment of the manipulative use of sound by authoritarian regimes, see my "Nabokov's Sonic Geographies."

<sup>68</sup> Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, 34, 32; further citations in the text refer to this edition.

<sup>69</sup> Helmreich, "Waves," 3.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>71</sup> Helmreich, "Potential Energy and the Body Electric," 141.

<sup>72</sup> Nabokov, *Speak Memory*, 173.

<sup>73</sup> Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld*, 4.

space and time can be overcome.”<sup>74</sup> V.’s claim to be in tune with Sebastian, to be attuned to his rhythm or wavelength, anticipates the episode at the end of the novel in which V., sitting in a “dark chamber” in the St. Damier hospital, listens to the breathing of a patient whom he mistakes for Sebastian. This scene, which will culminate in V.’s identification with Sebastian, is an acousmatic situation. The darkness of the nocturnal room and “a screen or something half around his bed” (200) obscure the identity of the sleeper, who, shielded from V.’s sight, becomes what could be called, in analogy to Mladen Dolar’s expression, “a breath and nothing more.” The acousmatic character of this episode not only provides the framework for V.’s mistaking the patient in the adjacent room for his brother; above all, it turns V. into a listener, and it is precisely this listening experience as such that leaves V. in a blissful state: “those few minutes I spent *listening* to what I thought was his breathing changed my life completely as it would have been changed, had Sebastian spoken to me before dying” (202).

The door “standing slightly ajar was the best link imaginable” (201) because it permits V. to listen to the “sounds unseen.” All ears, V. listens carefully from his “dark chamber” to the “faint sound of breathing,” to the “soft sound,” to “gentle breathing,” and to its “rhythm” (200–201). The man’s breathing becomes “hardly distinguishable” from his “own breath, as I sat and listened” (201). V. gets in tune with the rhythm of the disembodied breath he listens to, as he has got in tune with Sebastian’s “rhythm”; the man’s breathing and V.’s breathing become consonant, *unisono*, and, one could add, *unanimous*, for it is more than the inhaling and exhaling of air to which V. listens and to which he attunes himself. *Breath* becomes interchangeable with *soul* – by the traditional association of *pneuma* and *psyché*, and by the cymatic idiom which they share. Since V. conceives of the soul in terms of “undulations” (202) or waves, the sound waves of the breathing are at the same time “soul waves,” and since it is an acousmatically disembodied soul – “a soul and nothing more” – to whose “undulations” he attunes himself, it could be anyone’s, including the real Sebastian’s. The otherworldly implications that the novel attaches to sound evoke a tradition which, from antiquity via the Middle Ages and Renaissance to the nineteenth century, has valorized the auditory as akin to the spiritual.<sup>75</sup> But Nabokov does not revert to the audiovisual litany. It is not the auditory’s interiority, but sound’s physical properties – sound as waves – from which its metaphysical dimension derives. For this reason, it is ultimately irrelevant to V. that the man screened from his sight is not Sebastian. If the

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>75</sup> Sears, “The Iconography of Auditory Perception in the Early Middle Ages,” 29, 31, 34; Gouk, “Some English Theories of Hearing in the Seventeenth Century,” 103; Frangenberg, “Auditus visu prestantior,” 81; Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 57; Schmidt, “Hearing Loss,” 31.

“secret” revealed to him is “that any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations” and that “the hereafter may be the full ability to live in any chosen soul” (202), it is a secret made accessible by the winding paths of a receptive and well-attuned ear.

*Ada*, too, explores the potential of disembodied sound for metaphysical concerns. An acousmatic experience shapes what has been regarded as the novel’s center, the phone call that Van receives at Mont Roux in 1922 from Ada:

Now it so happened that she had never – never, at least, in adult life – spoken to him by the phone; hence the phone had preserved the very essence, the bright vibration, of her vocal cords, the little “leap” in her larynx, the laugh clinging to the contour of the phrase, as if afraid in girlish glee to slip off the quick words it rode. It was the timbre of their past, as if the past had put through that call, a miraculous connection.... That telephone voice, by resurrecting the past and linking it with the present ... formed the centerpiece in his deepest perception of tangible time.<sup>76</sup>

Charles Nicol considers this phone call as both the “climax” of Van’s “Texture of Time” and of “the Van and Ada story,” and as a “pivotal moment in Nabokov’s ability to see the novel as a whole.”<sup>77</sup> But what Nabokov calls the “springboard” for his novel’s “leap into existence”<sup>78</sup> and what his protagonist identifies as the “centerpiece” of his theory of time is, in fact, an acousmatic situation: Van listens to his “*mistress’s* voice,” whose “fingerprint qualities”<sup>79</sup> the telephone renders in high fidelity. The acousmatic reduction foregrounds the voice’s idiosyncrasies, such as pitch, melody, pronounciational features and cadences, that are not only disembodied by the telephone, but also “preserved” (555). The voice on the telephone evokes another literary phone call, situated some years prior to *Ada’s*, but an equally novel experience for its receiver. In *The Guermantes Way*, the third volume of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, the narrator receives a telephone call from his grandmother and admits: “her voice itself I was hearing this afternoon for the first time” and “I noticed in it for the first time the sorrows that had cracked it in the course of a lifetime.”<sup>80</sup> Proust’s narrator emphasizes not only the voice’s fragility, hitherto unnoticed by him, but, above all, the discontinuity between the disembodied

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<sup>76</sup> Nabokov, *Ada, or Ardour*, 555–56; further citations in the text refer to this edition.

<sup>77</sup> Nicol, “Buzzwords and Dorophonemes,” 94, 92.

<sup>78</sup> Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 122.

<sup>79</sup> Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 22.

<sup>80</sup> Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, 418, 419–20.

voice and the bodily presence of his grandmother. Returning to Paris to be reunited with her, he finds a stranger, “an overburdened old woman I did not know.”<sup>81</sup> *Ada* does not elaborate on the discrepancy between a disembodied voice and the body from which it emanates. Van’s listening to Ada’s voice is juxtaposed to and surrounded by two preceding written – and thus visual – messages from Ada: a “cable” (552) informing him of her arrival, and a letter which Van receives prior to the phone call and whose existence and content – the visible traces that time has left on Ada’s body – the narrator reveals to the reader only after Van’s listening to Ada’s voice. *Ada* is not concerned with what Mladen Dolar, in his discussion of Proust, calls “the missing half,”<sup>82</sup> whether in terms of a body or subject. It does not deplore disembodiment, but rather celebrates it, since it is precisely the voice’s disembodiment that validates Van’s theory of time. The passage focuses on the process and the accomplishment of telecommunication, which the novel has addressed earlier, *en passant*, in the shape of Ardis’s various pseudo-technological devices, such as the aquaphone, the dorophone, and the polliphone.<sup>83</sup> *Ada*, in fact, deliberately emphasizes the voice’s disembodiment by referring to it as “that telephone voice” and thus in terms of an abstracted voice, transmitted by a gadget whose components, transmitter and receiver, are themselves abstractions of mouth and ear. What Van listens to is voice technologically transformed and recorded, a voice transmitted via diaphragms, fluctuating electrical currents and coils, a voice whose vibrations are converted into fluctuations in the direct current and reconverted into soundwaves. Ada’s voice is disembodied twice – by the acousmatic nature of the phone call, and by its abstraction as “that telephone voice” – and proves to substantiate Van’s theory of “tangible time” precisely by this double disembodiment. It is telecommunication technology that, by rendering the voice’s idiosyncrasies in high fidelity, “resurrects” the past and provides a “miraculous connection.” “That telephone voice” foregrounds *tele*-communication and expands its potential by having it bridge not only space, but, by making the past audible, also time. Where Proust’s novel dramatizes a gap, *Ada* emphasizes a nexus: the nexus of disembodied sound whose waves, striking the ear’s membrane, make time “tangible.”

### THE VEIL OF SOUND

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 426.

<sup>82</sup> Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 65.

<sup>83</sup> The motif of technology that Brian Boyd (*ADAonline*) identifies in *Ada* is for the most part a motif of telecommunication or transmission of sound.

In *Lolita*, Humbert ends his narrative with a complex sonic experience. His flight after having murdered Quilty comes to a halt on a mountain slope, which reminds him of standing near the edge of a similar precipice, shortly after Lolita's escape. From his elevated position he then becomes "aware of a melodious unity of sounds rising like vapour"<sup>84</sup> from the small mining town in the valley below. He perceives

that vapory vibration of accumulated sounds that never ceased for a moment, as it rose to the lip of granite where I stood.... And soon I realized that all these sounds were of one nature, and that no other sounds but these came from the streets of the transparent town, with the women at home and the men away. Reader! What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that, and so limpid was the air that within this vapor of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic – one could hear now and then, as if released, an almost articulate spurt of vivid laughter, or the crack of a bat or the clatter of a toy wagon, but it was really all too far for the eye to distinguish any movement in the lightly etched streets. I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord. (307–8)

On the evidence especially of Humbert's concluding words here, several critics, among them Brian Boyd and Vladimir Alexandrov,<sup>85</sup> have read this passage as the "moral apotheosis" to which John Ray, the novel's fictional editor, refers in his "Foreword" (6). Alfred A. Appel even speaks of a "signal passage" that marks "H. H.'s progression as an ethical being" (451). Humbert's positioning of the scene within his narrative, however, is misleading: as Leland de la Durantaye argues, the episode should be considered in its "actual chronology,"<sup>86</sup> which places it not at the end of the novel's plot, but after Lolita's escape, when Humbert is still desperately searching for the girl. But reading this scene as Humbert's "moral apotheosis" becomes problematic also in light of how Humbert renders his sonic experience.

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<sup>84</sup> Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 306; further citations in the text refer to this edition.

<sup>85</sup> Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*; 89; Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld*, 51.

<sup>86</sup> de la Durantaye, *Style is Matter*, 89.

What Humbert places at the end of his story is an acousmatic situation that exceeds in complexity those discussed above. Since “it was all really too far for the eye to distinguish any movement in the lightly etched streets,” the sounds rising to his “lofty slope” are severed from their source and cause. In addition, the sounds are disembodied by their “concord,” which makes it impossible to identify particular voices. However, in contrast to Nabokov’s other acousmatic listeners, Humbert does not hear the sounds in, to use Vögelin’s phrase, “all their sonicness.”<sup>87</sup> Instead, he describes a highly biased indexical listening that makes him, a child-lover in more than one sense, perceive the roughhousing of children at play as “melody,” and thus evoke by his choice of words an *Ohrenlust* resonant of that provoked by the “sound of [Lolita’s] bare feet” (182) or the “hot thunder of her whisper” (133). Humbert’s description of his auditory experience also implies references to the acousmatic situation as such, as his use of the term *vapor* for the lo-fi quality of the “melodious unity of sounds.” *Vapor*, however, is an ambiguous metaphor. Denoting the blurred character of the sounds that obscures their sources by excluding the identification of an individual “singer” in the alleged children’s choir, it resembles the Pythagorean veil itself. That it “releases” sporadically an “almost articulate sound” implies that it confines or cloisters the sounds that it blends. “Vapor” thus evokes, along with the attributes “divinely enigmatic” and “demure,” the angelic voices of the so-called *clausura*, an eighteenth-century practice that placed the nuns’ choir behind a grate to shield it from the eyes of the congregation.<sup>88</sup> As Brian Kane notes, this practice was never devoid of erotic speculations,<sup>89</sup> and in *Lolita*, too, the allusion to the angelic choir is tinged with the erotic: *vapor* resounds with *haze*, Lolita’s family name. “Vapor,” then, shrouds Humbert’s preoccupation with and desire for Lolita, and as a verbal shroud, the term refers again to the Pythagorean veil, this time, however, not as the material *sindon*, the fine fabric shielding the master, but in the sense of the “veil of allegory” or “veiled speech.”<sup>90</sup> Humbert, then, is verbally obscuring his desire; his lamenting “the absence of [Lolita’s] voice from that concord” becomes, from this standpoint, equivocal. Is it Lolita’s literal absence that he bemoans (as he

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<sup>87</sup> Vögelin, *Listening to Sound and Silence*, 34.

<sup>88</sup> Kane, *Sound Unseen*, 108, 109.

<sup>89</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, remembering the vespers that he attended on his trip to Venice in 1743, writes in his *Confessions*: “What distressed me were the accursed grilles, which only let the sound through but concealed those angels of beauty – for the singing was worthy of angels – from my sight” (cited from Kane, *Sound Unseen*, 109).

<sup>90</sup> Kane, *Sound Unseen*, 65. In Book V of his *Stromateis*, Clement of Alexandria speaks of the Pythagorean veil in terms of the “veil of allegory” (ibid.). As Brian Kane argues, “the veil not only functions as an allegorical figure, it becomes the figure of allegory. As the figure of figurality – the icon of the hermeneutical power of meaning concealed – the veil of allegory figures the power of language to be simultaneously communicative and opaque, encoded for the initiated, but banal for the multitude” (ibid.).



most probably does), the fact that she is out of his reach? Or are his words to be understood as a “veiled utterance,” referring to his insight that he has deprived Lolita of her childhood and, consequently, to his “moral apotheosis,” which is rendered questionable by the veil and equivocality of “vapor”?

This episode may be read as the “moral apotheosis” not of Humbert, but of the novel. With the acousmatic situation at the end of *Lolita*, Nabokov makes Humbert face a world from which he is excluded. What ultimately shrouds itself in the “vapor” of sound – a shroud he cannot penetrate, but at best duplicate and employ for his own ends – is a coherence that cannot be divided or torn apart. Disembodied twice, by spatial distance and by their choral blending, the children’s voices form a concord that defies any singling out according to sex or age, hence preventing what Eric Naiman has called “genitalization.”<sup>91</sup> With this chorus of disembodied voices, Nabokov restores an intact world of children that Humbert is unable to intrude upon or violate, and whose chorally disembodied voices become a powerful voice of resistance.

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<sup>91</sup> Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, 31.

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