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BLOODIED EYES, DANCING DOLLS,
AND OTHER HOFFMANNIAN MOTIFS
IN NABOKOV'S *KING, QUEEN, KNAVE*

Vladimir Nabokov's second novel *Korol', Dama, Valet* (1928; henceforth *KDV*), which would become the "reworked" English novel *King, Queen, Knave* (1968; henceforth *KQK*),¹ contains numerous Hoffmannian motifs, specifically from the story "The Sandman" ("Der Sandmann," 1816). The main ones are: "bloodied eyes" and optical instruments that, instead of improving the capacity of the human eye to see reality, do the opposite—make people "see" what they *imagine*. In Nabokov's novel we have these motifs transformed into Franz's (the "knave"'s) extreme shortsightedness and complete dependence on his glasses, which are "corrective," yet create delusions. There are also the motifs of automata, and of uncanny characters in our very midst. The "king's" (businessman Dreyer's) fascination with automata, as well as his unwavering devotion to his coldly calculating wife, are akin to Nathanael's enchantment with the doll Olympia. As for uncanny characters, there is Franz's landlord, who resembles the "mouse king" from Hoffmann's "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King," as well as the demonic inventor of automannequins. To my knowledge, this prominent Hoffmannian

¹ Jane Grayson, in her *Nabokov Translated*, classifies the English version as one of the author's "major reworkings." She emphasizes that "however extensive" the revisions are in *King, Queen, Knave*, they "nevertheless [remain] in keeping with the original design" (114). Sharing her view that the English version is the "final original," I largely rely on it for my close reading analysis, referring to the Russian version (in volume 2 of Nabokov's *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda*) only in instances where differences add significant information.

presence in *KDV-KQK* has received only limited attention in Nabokov criticism.² This does not mean that Nabokov's interest in E. T. A. Hoffmann during his Berlin period has gone unnoticed.

The short story "A Nursery Tale" (1975), a translation of "Skazka" (1926), is probably the most frequently discussed Hoffmannian intertext. Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, for example, sees German fairy tales and romantic-fantastic texts as its matrix. She specifically mentions elements that "recall Hoffmann's tales," especially the "ironic, intrusive narrator."³ In relation to *KDV-KQK*, it is the dancing doll-motif from "The Sandman" that is most often mentioned, as it is in V. Polishchuk's commentary to *KDV*.⁴ In a recent article on Berlin's "shop-window-surface culture" of the 1920s, Luke Parker observes that the author of *KDV* intimates that modern display mannequins, fashioned by cutting-edge techniques to look realistically "alive" and accessible, could entice modern viewers to "fall in love with them, as E. T. A. Hoffmann's rapturous young man fell in love with the doll Olympia."⁵ In her article "King, Queen, Sui-mate: Nabokov's *Defense* against Freud's *Uncanny*," Catharine Nepomnyashchy puts Nabokov's third novel *The Defense* (1930) in the context of Sigmund Freud's essay "The Uncanny" ("Das Unheimliche," 1919), which uses the Hoffmann story as its inspiration, but she does not discuss the Hoffmann story itself. On the whole, the topic of "Nabokov and Hoffmann," specifically in regard to *KDV-KQK*, has been, to my knowledge, restricted to fleeting remarks, though it is assumed that during his Berlin period Nabokov took a particular interest in Hoffmann.

One goal of this paper, therefore, is to map the numerous allusions to Hoffmann's story of the Sandman in *KDV-KQK* in some detail. Naturally we are discussing transformed motifs that demonstrate real literature's capacity to avoid, or perhaps even its *inability* to produce, imitations and clichés. Another purpose is to examine how the Sandman motifs in Nabokov's novel are secretly (*heimlich*) targeting Freud's "Das Unheimliche." A discussion of whether *KQK* parodies

² The novel "has never been the most highly rated" (Grayson, *Nabokov Translated*, 24) and hence is less discussed than others by the author. Julian Connolly's discussion of *KQK* (*Nabokov's Early Fiction*) offers an insightful analysis of the themes of "objectification" and artifice in it. Leona Toker's close reading of the novel offers illuminating insights into plots and metaplots, characters and contexts.

³ Sweeney, "Fantasy, Folklore, and Finite Numbers in Nabokov's 'A Nursery Tale,'" 513.

⁴ Polishchuk, "Primechaniia," 701.

⁵ Parker, "The Shop Window Quality of Things," 402. The "Berlin-based artist and photographer Karl Schenker" who devised the dolls, somewhat like *KDV*'s protagonist Dreyer, invited "specialists to produce wax mannequins of extraordinary realism" for *Kaufhaus des Westens* (*ibid.*, 400); this is apparently the prototype for the *Dandy* department store in *KDV-KQK*.

the famous essay is therefore included in my analysis in view of the warning in the foreword to the English version that the “Viennese delegation” has “not been invited” into the novel.⁶

To summarize my goals for this article: I argue that in *KDV* and *KQK* Nabokov enters into a triangular intertextual dialog with Hoffmann’s story “The Sandman” and Freud’s essay “The Uncanny,” to demonstrate that art (Hoffmann’s story) inevitably constitutes a more inspiring stimulus for a new unique work of art than does a theory (here, that of “the uncanny”) that reduces the specific and individual to general laws (in this case, those posited by Freudian psychoanalysis). To put it in the words of Nepomnyashchy (discussing *The Defense*), Nabokov was defending “the ‘artness’ of art” against Freudianism, supporting the “fictional text’s struggle against an encroaching hermeneutics” with its threatening “totalitarianism of meaning.”⁷ The Hoffmannian motifs in Nabokov’s novel also add complexity to the characterization of the “court-cards” (the “knave” especially), who—via these motifs—acquire more depth than they sometime are credited with.⁸ My article further discusses the novel’s mixture of the fantastic and realistic, which makes the criticism that the novel lacks psychological verisimilitude irrelevant in my reading of it. There is no need to balance “plot” and “psychology” for *KDV-KQK*,⁹ since the reality offered in the novel(s) is of the Hoffmannian phantasmagorical type.¹⁰ *KDV-KQK* skillfully incorporates both demonic-fantastic-symbolic and prosaic-trivial-realistic elements, imperceptibly gliding from one to the other in the ambiguous style of Hoffmann, who offers many ontological uncertainties in his

⁶ Nabokov, *King, Queen, Knave*, x; further citations in the text refer to this edition.

⁷ Nepomnyashchy, “King, Queen, Sui-mate,” 8.

⁸ Toker states that the novel’s characters transcend the status of “cardboard figures” implied by the title (*Nabokov*, 57).

⁹ Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov*, 285.

¹⁰ The inventor reveals his demonic essence when asking the “absurd” question whether he really *is* in Germany and not some other country (when visiting Dreyer to offer him his automata). His question appears less absurd when one considers that he travels the globe so frequently that he cannot keep track of which country he currently finds himself in. This “geographical vagueness” recalls Woland’s vagueness about his elusive nationality in Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* (*Master i Margarita*) when he states that he “probably” (*pozhalui*, 25) is German (the novel’s protagonist Dreyer is likewise hard put to guess the inventor’s nationality). The inventor adds that he arrived in Moscow “this very minute” (“siii minutu priekhal v Moskvu”; *Korol’*, *Dama*, *Valet*, 57)—neither Woland nor the inventor relies on traditional means of transport. The inventor’s inquiry about his current whereabouts was added in the English translation (in the Russian original, he only says that he has arrived “this very minute”), making it likely that Nabokov wished to allude to *The Master and Margarita* as a text where, as in his own novel, the demonic imperceptibly enters ordinary reality without people, at least initially, noticing anything strange. Dreyer is not at all surprised about the inventor asking what country he might be in, already being “bewitched” by him and his offer of “almost alive” automata. Bulgakov’s novel was published in 1966 and cannot have escaped Nabokov’s attention.

heterogeneous texts, not least in “The Sandman.” It is true that the “fantastic” is submerged in the realism of settings and everyday patterns of life (*byt*) in Nabokov’s novel(s) by a technique that could be termed “camouflaging atomization,” or the “spraying” of “particles” of some fantastic motif over the novel’s entire texture, often taking the apparent shape of “concrete detail” (as in the case of “glass-sand,” to be discussed below). This submerged existence of the fantastic does not make it less important than the visible surface “reality” of the novel, however, but rather more so.¹¹

Since some readers may be better acquainted with “The Sandman” from Freud’s discussion of the story in “The Uncanny” than from the Hoffmann story itself, I offer a detailed plot summary of the tale, including specifics Freud did not pay attention to. In this section, I include a brief comment on Freud’s interpretation of the story’s events and characters.

HOFFMANN’S “THE SANDMAN” (1816)

As Nathanael, the tale’s protagonist, recalls (in a letter) at the beginning of the story, he and his siblings as children intensely disliked Dr. Coppelius’s visits to their happy home when he would sometimes come to dine. There is, in this childhood period, also a nocturnal visitor whom the youngsters never see and who seems to worsen their father’s moods whenever he appears. When this mysterious visitor arrives in the late evenings, the children are sent to bed, with their mother saying that the Sandman is about to come and that it is time to go to sleep.

Nathanael resolves to find out who the Sandman is and asks his sister’s elderly nanny for information. She tells him that he is an evil man who sprinkles sand into children’s eyes so that these fall out of their sockets covered in blood; he then brings this gory fare to feed his own children, who live in the crescent moon. Nathanael’s mother assures him that pouring sand in children’s eyes is just a metaphor for them getting drowsy, but it is the nanny’s explanation that stays with him.

¹¹ This element of the “Hoffmannian fantastic” confirms Toker’s discussion of the novel’s “metaplot” (*Nabokov*, 51) as one that involves the insurance company *Fatum* fulfilling its “contract” with unknown signatories. It offers “King” Dreyer a guaranteed “life insurance” for all forms of death—including murder.

The boy decides to find out what his father and the secret visitor do so late behind the locked doors of his father's study. Hiding in the room, he sees that the mysterious visitor is none other than the detested Dr. Coppelius, and identifies him with the cruel Sandman. The boy is discovered when he bursts from his hiding-place in terror at the sight of some eyeless homunculi that Dr. Coppelius has been constructing. Seizing the boy, Coppelius threatens to throw "fiery grains"¹² into his eyes to make them fall out, and to use them for his creatures. Upon the pleading of Nathanael's father, Coppelius spares the boy's eyes; he does, however, subject Nathanael's body to a painful "reconstruction," "unscrewing" his hands and feet, tearing them out of their "sockets" (*coppo* means "socket" in Italian, including "eye-socket"), and then reinserting them at will, treating the child like a lifeless doll; finally, however, he returns to the design God had created for the human shape.¹³ Nathanael faints from the horrors—real or imagined—that he has experienced. Does, however, the switching (if it occurred) last long enough to make Nathanael see familiar reality as "twistable," as, for example, shifting to a mirror perspective that apparently reflects reality, but subtly distorts it, making it "uncanny"?

During a later alchemistic experiment in Nathanael's home, an explosion occurs killing his father, whereupon Dr. Coppelius disappears from town. The identification of the Sandman with Dr. Coppelius has created lasting memories of horror in Nathanael's mind, however; temporarily suppressed, they easily reemerge. Not only Nathanael's extremities were put out of joint, but also his mind. His latent "other-vision" of reality will never be "set right again" in spite of his fiancée Clara's attempts to make Nathanael struggle with what she sees as "delusions." Alternatively, from a more romantic-fantastic perspective, Nathanael is the only person in a philistine commonsense world who discerns the terrible doings of irrational evil and demonic blasphemy enacted in the very midst of apparent normality, including his own home.

As a young adult, Nathanael decides to pursue university studies in another town. All is well until he meets the Italian Dr. Coppola who, to his horror, tries to sell him "beautiful eyes" (15/25). His fears are dispelled, however, when Coppola states that he just meant reading-glasses.

¹² Hoffmann, "Der Sandmann"; further citations in the text refer to this edition. All translations from "Der Sandmann" are mine.

¹³ As Drux points out (*E. T. A. Hoffmann*, 16), in ultimately reinserting the limbs as they had been before his changes, and muttering that "the Old One [*der Alte*] knew what he was doing," Coppelius acknowledges God's creative superiority.

Covering a whole table with them, causing the table surface to “gleam and glitter strangely,” he makes the young man see “a thousand eyes” staring at him and “shooting flaming and blood-red glances” at him (ibid.). Still, Nathanael is persuaded to buy a spyglass and, using it one day, he sees the beautiful Olympia through a window sitting motionless at a table. He falls in love with her and, assuming her to be the daughter of the Professor of Engineering Spalanzani, he attends a ball at that man’s home, where his enchantment with her lifeless beauty grows into passion. Even her limited vocabulary, which consists solely of an apparently admiring *ah (ach)*, enchants him. He prepares to ask her hand in marriage but, soon after the ball, witnesses a terrible fight between Spalanzani and Coppola for ownership of Olympia and, to his horror, realizes that she is only a wooden doll (a *Holzpüppchen*). He sees her empty eye-sockets, her eyes lying on the floor drenched in the blood of Spalanzani (who has been wounded by shattered glass). He hears the professor scream at Coppola that he has ruined “his” eyes, meaning the eyes he constructed for Olympia, whereupon Spalanzani flings her bloodied eyes at Nathanael. Reminded of the fiery alchemistic oven he saw in his childhood and Coppelius’s threat to throw sparks of fire in his eyes, and remembering his dancing with the strangely cold Olympia, the traumatized Nathanael screams: “*Ring of fire, turn around, ring of fire.... [P]retty little wooden doll, turn round and round*” (22/25). It seems that Coppelius has continued his quest for lifelike eyes for his homunculi, realizing that it is through the eyes of a human being that the soul is glimpsed, and that his doll should ideally be supplied with “real” eyes so that she would seem to have a soul. Coppola, apparently, was planning to steal Nathanael’s live eyes for Olympia—at least in the young man’s understanding of events.

Brought home in a terrible state, Nathanael seemingly recovers in its cozy atmosphere, reconciled to his clear-thinking fiancée Clara’s dispelling of his fears of Coppelius. Nathanael’s mother and his fiancée Clara both represent common sense, and Nathanael’s love for them is regularly upset by his assumption that they try to mask the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) as “normal” (*cozy-heimlich*).

Shortly before the reconciled couple go to their new home, they climb a tower to admire the view, and Nathanael suddenly sees Dr. Coppelius approaching the tower—at least, sees him when looking through his spyglass. It could, however, be just a “small grey bush” (24/25)—this is what Clara sees. Seized by mad rage at her lack of comprehension, Nathanael tries to strangle her,

returning to his previous vision of her as a shallow rationalist—he, ironically, had called the lively girl a “lifeless damned automaton” (13/25) at one point while admiring Olympia’s “wooden” dancing skills. Alternatively, he is still yearning for his destroyed *Holzpüppchen*, who seemed to understand him completely while sighing out an *ah* of agreement to everything he said.¹⁴ Clara is rescued by her brother, but Nathanael throws himself to his death from the tower.¹⁵ Hoffmann’s story leaves open whether Nathanael had access to deeper insights into an elusive and multilayered reality, or whether, via this character, the author demonstrates the human propensity for seeing what it wants, or fears, to see.¹⁶ This question brings us to Freud’s interpretation of the “The Sandman.”

FREUD’S INTERPRETATION OF THE STORY

Freud does not see Nathanael’s fantasies and insane rages as a romantic mind’s irrational attempts to penetrate “beneath the surface” of explicable reality, but rather as a symptom of phobias. Anxiety “about one’s eyes, the fear of going blind, is a typical phobia which however masks a deeper fear—the dread of being castrated.”¹⁷ Resorting to Greek myth to illustrate his theories, Freud states that Oedipus blinded himself as a “mitigated form of the punishment of castration” for his crimes of killing his father and marrying his mother, Jocasta. Freud grants that losing one’s eyesight offers a “justifiable dread” in and of itself (*ibid.*), but points out that Nathanael’s anxiety is closely linked to his biological father’s death, and that Coppélius always turns up “as a disturber of love” (7/14). In Freud’s view, a seemingly alive doll is much less threatening to a child than the fear of losing one’s eyes, since children rather wish their dolls were alive. (In this statement, Freud is polemicizing with Ernst Jentsch, who saw Olympia as the main source of Nathanael’s *angst*.) He concludes that Nathanael’s fear of losing his eyes, ever since he was threatened with having

¹⁴ Clara could be seen as a victim of Nathanael’s “male chauvinism”—she seems to enrage him whenever she disagrees with him.

¹⁵ Luzhin flings himself from a window after meeting his own “Coppélius,” the sleazy impresario Valentinov. Echoes of Hoffmann are thus still found as late as *The Defense*. See Masing-Delic, “The ‘Overcoat’ of Nabokov’s Luzhin”.

¹⁶ For a survey of the tale’s contradictory reception-history, see Drux, *E. T. A. Hoffmann*, 67–121.

¹⁷ Freud, “The Uncanny,” 6/14; further citations in the text refer to this edition.

“fire-sand” thrown into them, is inextricably linked to Coppelius, alias the Sandman, seen by the boy as “the dreaded father at whose hands castration is expected” (7/14). Presumably Nathanael’s sense of the presence of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) in his very home (*Heim*) began with the nanny’s nursery tale and was exacerbated by the (perhaps imagined) events when the boy was discovered in his hiding-place, climaxing in the father’s death. Apparently forgotten during happy times, these events reemerge at any unguarded moment.

PLOT, CHARACTERS, AND RESONATING HOFFMANNIAN MOTIFS IN KVD–KQK

Franz and Nathanael

The “knave” of the novel, Franz *Bubenkopf* (*Bube* is the German term for knave in a set of cards) is a young provincial who assumes the role of the novel’s title when his uncle, the “king” Kurt Dreyer, employs him as a salesperson in his *Dandy* department store for men’s clothing. The young man, bedazzled by the prospects opening before him in the German metropolis, is soon chosen by “ripe” (9) Martha, Dreyer’s wife, for her lover. Increasingly addicted to the sexual pleasure Franz gives her and demanding it with clockwork regularity, and being, moreover, the sole beneficiary of her husband’s not inconsiderable fortune, she begins to contemplate murdering him with her lover’s help.

Franz “intersects” with Nathanael to a remarkable degree. He is, for example, insistently linked to optics. He is a “bespectacled young man” (9, 12), a “bespectacled corpse” (when asleep in the railway carriage on his way to Berlin, 15); his spectacles get foggy in the rain (20), and accidentally stepping on them results in a “cracked lens” (21) and delivers him up to complete disorientation, his “myopic agonizingly narrowed eyes” (21) rendering him “purblind” (23). The word “(eye)glasses” by itself (26, 50, 105, 113, 126) and combined with various epithets (“broken,” 27; “new,” 30; “tortoise shell,” 110; “blinking,” 102; “worshipful,” “glinting,” 123; “slippery,” “glinting,” 161) recurs with great frequency, also in combination with “lenses” (21, 45, 96). This list places Franz in a Hoffmannian world of deceptive optics, even as his spectacles seemingly help him find his bearings in the real world. Not taking off his glasses even during lovemaking with Martha may, however, be one reason why it takes him so long to discover that she is not a woman but a “toad” (198, 259). As Toker points out, it is only during the one day

without his glasses (having stepped on them in his hotel) that Franz sees the world as a phantasmagorical blend of colors without firm contours, and that, for this one day, he is happy, intoxicated and “in love” with Martha, as opposed to later merely lusting after her and the luxuries she can offer.

Franz is not only wedded to his well-crafted, yet deceptive, glasses, but also has the feeling that objects have eyes which observe him with hostility. Part of this “eye-syndrome” is explicable in terms of his fear of Dreyer. He does terrify Franz—until the latter eventually becomes too “numb” to react to anything.¹⁸ Initially, though, Dreyer frightens him as his powerful boss who could leave him adrift and penniless in the enticing, but dangerous, metropolis. This fear is played out in the scene where Dreyer gives Franz “a fantastic night lesson” (69) on how to be a successful salesperson. Taken to Dreyer’s department store in the middle of the night, he is struck by the eeriness of this locale: it seems to him an “endless labyrinth ... submerged in darkness” where “swinging mirrors” and “angular reflections” create a “spectral abyss” (69). In this Hoffmannian setting (colored by an expressionist aura), Dreyer demonstrates his sales magic, which includes beguiling and “hypnotizing” (à la Dr. Mabuse in the gambling halls of the eponymous film) the customer into unplanned and expensive purchases, having assessed their personality type, tastes, and weaknesses. This “show” of optical effects with “cufflinks sparkl[ing] like eyes” evokes Coppola’s display of eerily glittering glasses that, spread over an entire table, frighten Nathanael into purchasing a spyglass and, in Franz’s case, initiates the series of visions he has of eyes observing him. Dreyer himself casts ominous shadows, one of them for instance “flapp[ing] a black wing on the floor” (72). Or so it seems to the easily frightened Franz, who like Nathanael is an *angstbessesser Knabe* (“panic-stricken boy”), to quote Freud’s essay (5/14).

Daytime fantasies are equally frightening to fearful Franz, who imagines that the cushions in Dreyer’s villa have “bright eyes,” while the “chandelier invariably me[ets] him with sinister refulgence” (105). Nor does he “trust the pictures on the wall” that stare down at him, seemingly “ready to pounce” (123). One of these is a portrait of Martha’s grandfather, “suspected of drowning his first wife in a tarn around 1860.”¹⁹ Their stares are accompanied by the “glittering sideboard”

¹⁸ He also develops a *doppelgänger*, but since the double does not contribute to his anxieties, but rather helps him survive his increasingly uncanny life, this motif is not discussed in this article.

¹⁹ Martha does not immediately hit upon the best way to kill Dreyer—drowning the non-swimmer—even though her own grandfather successfully disposed of a spouse in this way. The murderous grandfather appears only in *KQK*.

which is “all eyes” (36). Even a Christmas tree reflected in a mirror becomes a source of terror as it is “ominously blazing” and “bellowing with all its lights” (146). Keenly aware of his mother’s injunction to “squeeze everything he possibly could” out of Dreyer (27) while pretending to be a devoted nephew, he may possibly experience some stirrings of fearful unease (that do not qualify as bad conscience), especially since this “squeezing” came to include Mrs. Dreyer. Aspiring to illegitimate ownership of the sofa cushions and the brilliantly sinister chandelier, and even his employer’s conjugal bed, Franz feels the hostility of “inanimate objects,” which “hated” him (229), not “wanting” to be owned by him.²⁰

In addition to his guilt-tainted fear of menacing eyes (and ears—he is scared of eavesdroppers as well), Franz is “morbid[ly]” (80) squeamish. One may sympathize with his refusal to eat food already sampled by others, but his squeamishness has reached proportions that make it a debilitating trauma. Interestingly, young Nathanael and his sisters developed a similar trauma about food “tainted” by Dr. Coppelius when he shared meals with the family. He had noticed that the children were revolted by his hands and would refuse to eat food he had touched. He, therefore, made a point of doing so, spoiling the meal for them. In the case of Franz’s childhood, it was his mother who acted like Dr. Coppelius when she forced him to eat a chocolate bunny his sister Emmy had already thoroughly licked and rendered a “slimy brown horror” (91). The disgust was reinforced by Franz’s awareness that his mother loved him much less than Emmy, if at all, and that the privileged sister’s “befouled” treat was considered good enough for him. Franz is in fact pursued by memories of “disgusting” incidents that he cannot keep at bay (for these mnemonic “waxworks,” see pp. 3–4 in *KQK*) and that are reinforced with every new experience of repulsive sights, tastes, and smells. Like Nathanael, Franz has “idiosyncratic” reactions to events and sights that leave others indifferent, or make them laugh—the sight of a “noseless” man in the train frightens Franz, but leaves others indifferent or amused (3).

Franz’s trauma, that is, goes beyond ordinary fastidiousness; it is not just that he abhors the odor of unwashed bodies, or that he cannot forget how a small child picked up a used condom and put it to its lips mistaking it for a pacifier (4). More importantly, his disgust transfers to *people*

²⁰ Franz being hated by inanimate objects clearly alludes to Kavalero’s problematic relationship with things in Iurii Olesha’s novel *Envy* (*Zavist’*, 1927), where the character famously states that “things don’t like [him]” (*Envy*, 7). Nabokov felt challenged by this Soviet novel, according to Dolinin, who speaks of a “secret rivalry” (*tainoe protivoborstvo*) on Nabokov’s part (“Istinnaiia zhizn’ pisatel’ia Sirina,” 17).

who smell, dribble, vomit, or are deformed, as well as animals who do not “behave well” (Dreyer’s dog Tom). Never asking what circumstances may have caused the odors, deformations, or unpleasant physiological symptoms he observes, he also forgets that his own hygiene is “rudimentary” (Toker 50) and that he himself is prone to vomiting. If Toker is right that Franz may join the Nazis in his future beyond the text,²¹ this squeamishness may become a factor in his attraction to Nazi efforts to eliminate “human filth,” as long as it is not he himself who has to do the actual “cleaning up.” Another factor in his potential Nazi future is his willingness to obey commands, a proclivity fostered by Martha, who has made him her very own *Holzpüppchen*. After her death, this habit of subordinating his will to another’s may possibly be taken over by the Führer. The “excited speech” framed by music that the two lovers hear from a radio in a neighbor’s flat after their first ecstatic union in Franz’s room (98) is likely to have been a Nazi propaganda speech—perhaps by Hitler himself, who invariably emphasized the register of shrillness in his “poetics” of excited oratory.²² After Martha’s death, the “bellowing” of the Party that would soon gain power may well have appealed to Franz. Franz does not seem to know what to think, or do, when there is no one to give him forceful orders. Free of his “second mother” Martha (to be discussed below), he may find a “first (‘true’) father” in the Nazi leadership.

The King

The successful businessman Dreyer, the “King,” seems an unlikely fit for Hoffmannian references or intertexts. He always has a hearty guffaw ready for any event—even having his car smashed by an apparently tipping driver who rams his Icarus into a tram, cutting short its reckless flight along Berlin streets (44). He enjoys life to the full, not least sports and sex. He also likes travel and learning new things, for instance, reading Gogol’s *Dead Souls* (*Mertvye dushi*). Nor is he hounded by traumatic memories from the past—if anything, he forgets too easily and seemingly never has any regrets (except toward the end of the novel, where he begins to feel “outmoded” like the clothes from a past season; 72). There is however his eccentric enthusiasm for the inventor’s

²¹ Toker, *Nabokov*, 229.

²² Radio transmissions of Hitler’s and other Nazi leaders’ speeches were broadcast later than 1928, the year of *KDV*’s publication, although several radio stations were already operating. The “excited speech” is not found in the Russian original but was added in the English version; Nabokov may have wished to include a detail from the 1930s. Franz is not immune to the anti-Semitism of the times, calling Dreyer “Dreyerson” (123) on one occasion, apparently “Judaizing” his employer in light of the man’s (stereotypically “Jewish”) wealth.

“automannequins,” and his preference for his conventional and over-organized wife, who values clockwork regularity in *all* spheres of life,²³ over the clear-headed, but charmingly vivacious Erica, a former mistress. In Hoffmannian terms, he prefers the beautifully dressed “doll” Martha who, like Olympia, has little to say (but is nasty when she does say something), to the real and, hence, unpredictable, human being Erica. Like Clara in Hoffmann’s tale, the latter has intelligent insights that annoy Dreyer, because they are pertinent. Strolling happily about town on a beautiful spring day, registering the signs of nature’s renewal with all his senses, life-loving Dreyer unexpectedly encounters Erica, whom he has not seen for seven years. She is accompanied by her little son Vivian. His father, she states, is a “young Englishman” (173). She is delighted to have run into Dreyer, and he too recalls with a measure of amusement the happy two years they spent together when they would attend opera performances (of *La Bohème* especially), sing arias out of tune, declaim poetry, and drink fruit wine in the countryside, acting youthfully foolishly in general and enjoying it. In spite of his charming memories, Dreyer does not for a moment entertain the thought of renewing his relationship with Erica, because to him the past is irrevocably past and, hence, of no interest—he is good at repressing de-automatizing memories. He also believes that he had fully “deciphered” Erica when they parted ways, such that she no longer intrigues him. Unfortunately, his wife, who fascinates him because he believes she harbors some mystery he is destined to unravel, in fact harbors no such thing. His search for her “soul” is futile (154), since, like Olympia, she has none, a knowledge Dreyer is spared, unlike Nathanael. As Aikhenval’d succinctly puts it, her death leaves the husband “weeping” for his loss, and the lover “laughing” at his liberation.²⁴

Dreyer clings to “labels” he has stuck on people, compartmentalizing them while, unfortunately, never “reshuffling” his categories. He is perturbed by the fact that Erica has changed—Martha never does (or so it seems to him)—because this forces him to look for another “label” for her. Lacking the “emotional energy” to adapt to changes in others (214), he prefers predictable people who are emotionally undemanding, in other words, “mannequins,” and, like Nathanael, he prefers imagined mysteries to real-life complexities. His determination to avoid life’s unsettling surprises emerges most clearly in his reaction to Erica’s little son Vivian.

²³ The Dreyer villa seems to be full of clocks, judging by Dreyer’s reaction to the strange silence in it when he enters it alone, having left Martha at the seaside resort—he realizes after a while that all the clocks in the house have stopped.

²⁴ Aikhenval’d, “Retsenziia: Korol’, dama, valet,” 37.

Dreyer is put out by “the *useless* little Vivian” (176; my emphasis). The presence of the boy restlessly moving about on his tricycle and avoiding Dreyer’s friendly pats has an unsettling effect on him, but it does not (consciously) occur to him that Vivian might be his own child. It is very likely however that he is the father, although Erica claims that the boy is half-English (173). His name “Vivian” seemingly confirms her statement, particularly since there is an English ski-instructor in Davos called Vivian Badlook (153), and Erica’s new lover visits Davos, having a tubercular wife in a sanatorium there.²⁵ Dreyer’s paternity might also be ruled out mathematically: the boy is said to be four or five years old, whereas Dreyer and Erica parted ways seven years ago. But then again, Dreyer is no particular expert at estimating children’s ages, and it is his guess of Vivian’s age that the reader gets when the encounter takes place. Vivian could well be seven, which would make Dreyer a good candidate for fatherhood.²⁶ Mr. Vivian Badlook—the narrow-shouldered ski-instructor who photographs Dreyer on his skis just before the latter slips and falls—can be excluded as a “suspect”: he is not little Vivian’s father, but his creator, as well as that of all the other characters in the novel. Nabokov makes this plain, as the instructor’s name forms an easily recognizable anagram of his own. Erica’s choice of an English name for her child may be because Dreyer—sometimes comically—cultivates an English style of behavior. He also assiduously, but largely unsuccessfully, studies English, which he may have done already during his time with Erica. Another reason for her choice could be that she thought Dreyer both “vigorous and *vivacious*,” qualities that had appealed to her, whereas Martha finds them unbearable (178). Perhaps Erica knows English better than Dreyer and, like her creator, is fond of anagrams.

The strongest indication that it is Dreyer who is Vivian’s father is the authorial statement that Dreyer was fascinated watching the Inventor’s²⁷ first doll, “a plump little figure” (192). He observes the doll the way a “sentimental visitor watches a child—*perhaps his own little bastard*—to whose first toddle he is being treated by a proud mother” (193; italics mine). This remark—“tossed in” as an aside but, most likely, conveying the truth about Dreyer, Vivian, and Erica—conveys Dreyer’s preference for a grotesque puppet created by the shady Inventor to his own living

²⁵ Some reshuffled motifs from *La Bohème* seem included in Erica’s account of her life, events of which vaguely recall things that happened to Mimi.

²⁶ Since Erica apparently had a lover at the time of their breakup, the father could theoretically be an unknown English lover we do not meet.

²⁷ To “bewitched” (104) Dreyer, the inventor has by now become the Inventor with a capital “I.”

child and its “proud mother.” He admires the Inventor’s silly doll, but is irritated by the “little bastard” he may have sired. The pursuit of idle games, pointless projects, new sports, mistresses, and the deciphering of “a sphinx without a riddle” mark Dreyer as a “dilettante” in the games of life, pursuing, as he does, a sterile philosophy of non-involvement and fleeting pleasures that makes his life increasingly empty. Perhaps, in his post-textual life, he will at last follow his innermost impulses and do something that is meaningful to him instead of deferring to Martha and her clocks.

Two Fantastic Characters

There are two unmistakably Hoffmannian characters in the novel—Franz’s “wizard-like” (168) landlord Enricht (whose “real” name is Menetek-El-Pharsin; 99) and the “inventor” who dreams of creating lifelike mannequins, ostensibly for parading the fashionable clothes in the show windows of Dreyer’s *Dandy* store.

Enricht

Franz’s landlord Enricht lives together with a wife who—when she is seen at all through a rarely opened door—invariably sits in an armchair looking straight ahead (like Olympia), apparently surveying the world through a window; or reading, facing away from the door. As Franz notices, she never visits the foul-smelling toilet of the apartment—he never bumps into her on his way there, only her husband. She eventually proves to be a broom with its gray mop adorned by “something white” (110).²⁸ Enricht is also prone to put his head between his legs and to contemplate his face framed by his “bleak buttocks” (87) in a *cheval* mirror, that is, a mirror that can be tilted forward. Why he wishes to have a vision of his face in close frontal proximity to his

²⁸ This contraption has been seen as alluding to the old pawnbroker in *Crime and Punishment* (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*), specifically her reappearance in Raskol’nikov’s nightmare, when she keeps laughing at his attempts to kill her (Polishchuk, “Primechaniia,” 704). Other allusions might be to a very different favorite writer of Nabokov’s youth—Conan Doyle. In the story “The Adventure of the Empty House,” Sherlock Holmes puts up a dummy of himself at the window of his apartment to make the criminal Lord Moran believe he is at home, while he is actually hiding right next to the criminal. The motif of the dummy fooling Holmes’s enemies reoccurs in several Conan Doyle stories. Enricht uses his dummy to deceive his renter Franz and Mrs. Dreyer into believing there is a Mrs. Enricht who decides matters in the household. “Mrs. Enricht” is, of course, also a parody of the doll Olympia (Polishchuk, “Primechaniia,” 704); like her, she is destroyed—in this case by enraged Franz, who “avenges” himself for having been duped.

backside remains open to conjecture. Perhaps he agrees with Mephistopheles (from *Faust II*) who states that “up or down, it’s all the same”; or has some other idiosyncratically interpreted alchemistic-hermetic notions about equating “up” with “down” (“as above so below,” as the occult tradition puts it). Perhaps he is just “lewd[ly]” (60) focused on his “wrinkled and hoary rear” (87). He may be pondering how to recreate himself as a nonhuman creature, already being something like the mouse king of Hoffmann’s tale “The Nutcracker and the Mouse King” (1816). A gnomish old man with “a shaggy gray head” (221), always dressed in “a mouse-gray dressing-gown” (120), he seems ready to metamorphose into some new shape.²⁹ In any case, he is convinced that he “at any moment could turn into ... a mouse” (228), or anything else for that matter. The name he claims as his true one, Menetek-El-Pharsin, is clearly derived from the magic handwriting on the wall in Belshazzar’s palace, *Mene, mene, tekel upharsin*, conveying a warning to this blasphemous and dissolute tyrant about his imminent destruction. Enricht seems to see himself as an observer of *mores* keeping an inconspicuous, but vigilant, eye on the “goings-on” in his apartment. Frowning upon Franz’s affair conducted on his premises, but allowing it to continue (even though “Mrs. Enricht” does not “approve”), the old man may be conjecturing what turn the affair may ultimately take—somewhat like Puck in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* watching the strange antics of humans. Of course Enricht is much less attractive than the Shakespearian elf, since in addition to being a mouse king, he seems to be a “kobold.” In *KQK*, Goldemar, the king of kobolds, appears—in the guise of a “well-known playwright” and script-writer (224). Enricht could be part of Goldemar’s “court,” tasked with “reporting” on events taking place in his apartment, thus being one of the author’s numerous spies.³⁰ Villeneuve has argued for Goldemar being a reference to the elusive author of *KQK* himself,³¹ so the kobold Enricht may well qualify for “helper” of sorts.

If so, it is surprising that Franz chooses Enricht for his landlord, since “kobolds had haunted his childhood” (179)—one could even, in a Freudian vein, speak of a compulsion on Franz’s part to revisit a childhood trauma. Hoffmann’s Nathanael as a child was likewise fascinated by

²⁹ Coppelius, too, is always dressed in gray—although in his case, it may only seem so, because his alchemistic experiments leave an abundance of ashes on his clothes.

³⁰ Other “spies” are, for example, the pranksters from Wilhelm Busch’s *Max und Moritz*, who survived their untimely demise in Busch’s “comic strip” tale and now, as Moritz and Max (in that order), spy on the elusive inventor of the automannequins.

³¹ Villeneuve, “Liubitch, Flotow, and Grimm in *King, Queen, Knave*,” 38.

kobolds—subterranean creatures who at times choose human dwellings for their abode—in addition to the Sandman and other fairytale figures (2/25).

The Inventor

The other Hoffmannian figure in *KQK* is the inventor, to Dreyer the “Inventor” (with a capital “I”), the creator of automannequins ostensibly to be used in the shop-windows of the *Dandy* department store, but perhaps designed for more ambitious purposes. He is a nameless man of undefinable nationality and provenance (see note 10) whose mannequins, he promises, will feature lifelike “skin” (called *voskin* from the Russian for “wax,” *vosk*) and agile movements enabled by an “electric impellent” and “contractive transmission” (89).³² But like Dr. Coppelius, he has ambitions that transcend the construction of mere dolls. Polishchuk’s commentary to *KDV* links the inventor to the demonic sphere, pointing to the ancient mythologeme of the devil’s keenness to create living creatures as “good” as God’s³³ and his invariable failure to produce anything more than dolls, puppets, mannequins, and automata. The devil and his minions are incapable of rivaling *the* Creator, as Dreyer’s mysterious employee seems to acknowledge during a test-run of his dolls. Stating that he realizes his female mannequin displays features too masculine to be truly alluring, he excuses himself by saying that he “ran into some trouble, a *rib* [emphasis mine] had failed. After all [he] need[ed] a bit more time than God did.... But [he was] sure [Dreyer] [would] love the way her hips work[ed]” (261). As with Dr. Coppelius-Coppola in Hoffmann’s “The Sandman,” it is the Inventor’s ardent wish that his mannequins should seem—or even become—fully alive, or, at the very least, create a “Nathanael-effect,” that is, cause someone to take them for real people. Like Dr. Coppelius, he too has to grudgingly admit that God has done the best job so far with the shape of human beings.

The Inventor is anxious about having competition in his daunting task of creating lifelike automata. This is revealed when he and Dreyer visit an exhibition of famous criminals in the Berlin Police Museum. He had heard that the exhibit included an “artificial woman” (206) that had been

³² In *Tomorrow’s Eve* (*L’Eve future*, 1886), Villier de l’Isle-Adam provides the alluring android Hadaly with completely lifelike and even warm skin (Olympia’s hands are cold) created for her by the American inventor Thomas Edison; not surprisingly, the source of her completely natural movements is electricity. See Gendolla, *Die lebenden Maschinen* for a discussion of this automaton.

³³ Polishchuk, “Primechaniia,” 701.

the companion of a child murderer who had butchered it.³⁴ He soon leaves, reassured that the phenomenal automaton he has read about, and feared might be better than his own products, is below his standards. The dummy can “urinate” water, but on the whole is “merely a vulgar doll,” in his estimation (207). Very likely, the inventor has, during his long career, had many an occasion to compare his automata with other, famous ones, including Jacques de Vaucanson’s (1709–82) life-size mechanical duck, which could quack, swim, eat, and produce (fake) poop. In comparison with this accomplished duck, the “urinating woman” does seem quite primitive.³⁵

However reassured he may feel after his visit to the museum, the inventor’s attempts to surpass the divine creation will prove a failure in this instance also, as they invariably have before. As he—again—realizes, he will not be able to create a soul, the “divine aspect of the human being”³⁶ that alone is life-giving. His automannequins will at best serve as just that, namely, as very lifelike mannequins displaying clothes in American department stores’ display windows. The American Mr. Ritter offers to buy the entire set of mannequins, becoming the “knight” (*Ritter*) who unknowingly saves Dreyer’s life by his purchase offer, which makes Mrs. Dreyer postpone the planned drowning of her husband.

Depressed by his failures, the inventor, a “practically nameless man” (108), strikes the reader as a “poor devil,” prone to melancholy and self-pity. We learn that he feels “lonely and homesick” (107) in his room in the hotel Montevideo where Franz had lodged before him and ruined his glasses by stepping on them.³⁷ The dust from these crushed glasses seems to have ruined Franz’s already-flawed eyes beyond restoration during his stay in that room. Studying Franz’s unremarkable, yet not quite ordinary, face, the narrator particularly notices his eyes: “those eyes, those eyes, poorly disguised by glasses, restless eyes, tragic eyes, ruthless and helpless, of an

³⁴ Butchering, cutting, and slicing and the tools thereof are recurring motifs in Franz’s angst-filled imagination. His sister Emily is engaged to a butcher who tackles his meat at dinner with frightening expertise. Franz himself aspires to have “beautiful knives” in his and Martha’s future home, and he is quite specific on this score: “meat cleavers and cheese cutters, and a roast pork slicer” (134).

³⁵ *KQK* is full of references to famous automata, both real and fake. Thus a “Turk” in the newspaper captures Franz’s attention (138), but this is not the famous chess-playing automaton dressed in Turkish garb that was eventually revealed to be controlled by a chess-expert dwarf hidden beneath the mechanism. The Turk Franz reads about is no automaton, but a very vital old man who is still able to impregnate his numerous wives. Franz’s odd interest in this Turk, however, may still be associated with the chess-playing Turk who was “really” a little person, since Franz believes that the clever monkeys he sees in a variety show cannot possibly be monkeys, but must be “dwarf[s] in disguise” (118). In *KDV*, the chess-playing “Mechanical Turk” is alluded to more than in *KQK*.

³⁶ Drux, *E. T. A. Hoffmann*, 15.

³⁷ Woland, in a tone of self-pity, speaks of being “always alone” on his endless travels.

impure greenish shade with *inflamed blood* vessels around the iris” (79; emphasis mine). The “glass-sand” of Franz’s glasses, now embedded in “the cracks of the linoleum by the washstand” of this “cursed” room (107), recalls the stuff the Sandman uses to cause children’s eyes to fall all bloody from their sockets (in the version of Nathanael’s nanny). This “sand,” apparently, inaugurates and, eventually, accomplishes the ruin of Franz’s moral vision. After his departure, the minute glass splinters still lodged in the floor seem to have the function of reminding the inventor now occupying Franz’s room in the hotel *Montevideo* that he too has a mandate of acting on behalf of the Coppelius-Coppola-Sandman “conglomerate” in regard to Dreyer, making sure that he maintain his smug self-delusions. Interestingly, “not even ... Enricht” (108) knew about this strange coincidence of Franz and the inventor staying in the same evil room of the same hotel. The adverb “even” indicates that he, the kobold / mouse king, and the demonic, if hapless, inventor, are not operating in quite the same space of the fantastic. Enricht knows much, but not *everything*, being merely the author’s “spy” (as “kobold”).³⁸ The inventor too is but a “tool” in the author’s arsenal of plot and character elements, functioning as involuntary rescuer when thwarting the murder of Dreyer (by having created the potentially profitable mannequins that dissuade Martha from going through with her murderous plan). Martha’s unexpected death renders him superfluous, however, and he disappears from the novel text as suddenly as he entered it, having fulfilled this task, now summoned perhaps to other urgent tasks in other parts of the globe. The glass-sand, meanwhile, seems destined to stay lodged in the hotel’s linoleum, creating a demonic space for future visits from the realms of the Hoffmannian-Nabokovian Demonic.

Martha

Martha, the “queen,” is the moving agent of the plot, as befits a chess-queen (Martha is both card- and chess-queen); she has the power to “knock other figures off the board,” as a character in *The Defense* says of the chess-queen.³⁹ Ironically, however, Martha self-destroys more than she

³⁸ Connolly sees Enricht and the inventor as “diegetic agents of the extradiegetic author ... who exert a hidden influence on the destinies of the main protagonists” (*Nabokov’s Early Fiction*, 73–74).

³⁹ In *The Defense*, little Luzhin’s sexy aunt (who wrecks his father’s marriage) initiates the boy into the basic movements of chess, “teaching” him that the queen, as the most mobile of the chess figures, is also the most dangerous. See my “Luzhin’s Overcoat.”

destroys, as she pursues her against-the-rules strategy of “upgrading” the knave to the position of king.

Martha is a good-looking and elegant woman whose face is serenely Madonna-like and whose modulated voice, to her husband’s mind, has “a kind of early Florentine” quality, at least when he hears it over the telephone (122). Her name “Martha” intimates that, like her biblical namesake, she is more concerned with practical than spiritual matters. The Martha of *KQK* is indeed a person with a pragmatic mindset that combines “bank and bed” (114) and who has come to love her husband’s money and the comfortable villa bought with it while abhorring everything else about him, above all his unpredictability, which is hostile to the world of automata. As already stated, she is a “ripe” woman, fourteen years older than her young lover. She is the one who initiates the affair by coming to Franz’s room (aware of his lusting for her) and she is the one hatching one (unrealistic) plan after another for the murder of her husband. Her passion for the youth who could almost be her son seems to compensate her for a past miscarriage which she views as a “mortal wound” (178), inflicted on her by her hated spouse. This “wound,” and Franz’s youthful sexual ineptness, make her conflate the roles of lover and mother—a powerful psychological brew. While seeing Franz as a “tender“ (112), “frail” (113), and “naked” little boy (167), as her “baby” (249) in fact, she is also sexually satisfied with him as never before. If she is a Jocasta figure, she is one utterly satisfied by her “son’s” performance. Franz in his turn is delighted to have exchanged an ugly and mean mother for a beautiful stepmother to whom he is not a secondary and unwelcome appendix, but the unrivaled favorite.

Martha and Franz

Given the sexual relation of a maternal older woman to her “son-lover,” Martha becomes Franz’s “educator.” She initiates him in sexual practices previously unknown to him (cf. 134), and she also instructs him in good manners and social graces, prepping him as her future husband once Dreyer has been eliminated. A key part of her plan to turn her lover into a man of the world, the killer of her husband, and her child-puppet is teaching him to *dance*. During his protracted training program of being danced into obedience, Martha makes Franz into the *Holzpüppchen* of Hoffmann’s tale. It is probably not by chance that Martha has “a soft doll on [her] night table” (158)—a symbolic pointer to her quest for her once lost, and now found, baby who doubles as pliable lover. Unlike

Olympia, she is not at the mercy of various demonic puppeteers but, rather, controls the males of her environment—at least, until she contracts a fatal pneumonia. Buying Franz a fancy smoking suit, teaching him the steps, rhythms, pace, and poise of fashionable dancing, she “enslave[s] him totally” (150), making him into a quite passable dancer and her completely obedient automaton. Should he not dance to her tune immediately, her “diamond-like gaze” quickly reduces him to a whimpering reminiscent of how “a child’s balloon ... collapses with a pitiful squeak” (133). The young man cannot escape her “piercing” glance, the most forceful one in Franz’s gallery of threateningly staring eyes (146).

In noting this cluster of unwanted child + sexually frustrated woman who has lost a child, we may be approaching the dangers Nabokov admonishes against in his foreword (to the English version) when addressing the “resolute” Freudians among his readers. Saying that he has set “a number of cruel traps” (x) for this cohort, he warns readers to proceed at their own risk. 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.”

Franz’s Mothers

Franz’s relations with his biological mother are briefly, but succinctly, discussed in the novel. The reader learns that, although Franz never loved his mother very deeply, she still was “his first unhappy love,” or a “rough draft of a first love” (94). Abusive and exceptionally ugly (at least in Franz’s perception), she inspired considerable revulsion in her son, but her rejection of him in favor of his sister nevertheless wounded him. Still, it was a rejection that his “second love” easily remedied. Meeting the elegant Martha who becomes addicted to his sexual performance, Franz could be seen as “transferring” Oedipal desire from an unappetizing (widowed) mother who rejected him to a desirable mother who desires him in return. Martha enters Franz’s room to seduce him precisely as he is writing a dutifully filial letter to his *actual* mother and is completely at a loss as to what to write her about. A “new mother” stepping in to take the old one’s place is all he could ever have dreamt of. He has, in Freudian terms, found the ultimate “home” that men yearn for when seeking sexual union, male love being a “longing for home” (*Heimweh*), as Freud, quoting folk wisdom, puts it in “The Uncanny” (12/14). To complete Freud’s model, there is a

hated father-figure in this triangle (which was missing in the first love story), namely Dreyer. Dreyer, who treats Franz like a provincial boy, making him the butt of his friendly but condescending and sometimes humiliating jokes, would seem to be the given rival and hated father-figure for “Oedipus-Franz,” the lover of an exceptionally satisfied Jocasta. In short, conceivably we are here dealing with something like a (secondary) Oedipal triangle where elimination of the feared “castrator” offers the only way out.

This theory is contradicted, however, by the fact that Franz very soon loses any desire to kill Dreyer, but is “drilled” by Martha to commit an act of murder he is physiologically revolted by and psychologically terrified to perform. Nor does Dreyer ever feel threatened by Franz, being completely uninterested in him as a person and, hence, blind to the affair taking place under his very nose. He is convinced that his protégé has a young girlfriend, not realizing during a comical quid pro quo scene that the woman behind the locked door of Franz’s apartment is his own wife. As Erica pointed out to Dreyer, he allots set roles to people around him and for reasons of mental convenience never changes their *emploi*. Franz’s is the male *ingénue*. Nabokov seems to see “automatization” of the human soul as a greater danger than compulsive libidinal drives—the latter, in fact, are a major source of ennui; to quote Aleksandr Blok, these drives lead straight to the “hell of bottomless boredom” (*bezdonnoi skuki ad*).⁴⁰

Not surprisingly then, we see Franz’s love for his second mother cooling, having discovered that the return “home” is no longer *heimisch*, but has become *unheimlich* (Freud 12/14). To make matters worse, Martha develops a physical resemblance to his first mother. She—a status-conscious woman—surprisingly, is planning to visit Mrs. Bubenkopf, once she herself has become the second Mrs. Bubenkopf. Metamorphosing from society lady to petty-bourgeois *hausfrau*, from Mrs. Dreyer to Mrs. Bubenkopf, she is apparently finding her true identity. Once elegantly well-formed, Martha is becoming “bottom-heavy” and although Franz’s knees still can cope with her weight, they do buckle. Sexual fatigue is also beginning to set in, at least with Franz—Martha’s appetites are undiminished. Firing himself up to “perform,” Franz gets to it with the thought of “Well, to work, old soldier” (166).⁴¹ Shortly before her death, Martha strikes Franz as “aged beyond belief” (243). Although still doing all that “was expected from him” (201), obedient Franz

⁴⁰ Blok, *O, net! Ia ne khochu, chtob pali my s toboi*, 3:55.

⁴¹ Ironically, one of Franz’s earliest childhood books was *My Soldier Boy* (94).

lives in a terrifying world of two monstrous mothers, himself becoming the trapped victim of both familiar and frightening, “uncanny,” patterns. Rather than a “homecoming,” Franz’s liaison with Martha becomes a “second flight” from a second “unhappy love.” In short, Freud’s notion that fear of losing one’s eyesight indicates a fear of castration does not seem to apply to Franz, who at times may even have welcomed the latter prospect as a sort of “decommissioning.” Both his “mothers,” rather than Dreyer, pose a threat of castration, at least as the source of a “castration of feeling.”

At one point in the narrative, Franz is attracted to a bare-armed young girl cuddling a kitten seen through the window of a house he is considering renting a room in—but this is well before his settling in Enricht’s dingy establishment and Martha’s transformation into a toad. Love for a pretty young girl is a feeling Franz is no longer capable of as the novel ends. To refer once more (see note 20) to Olesha’s *Envy*: Franz has forfeited his poetic “Valia,” or, in this case, a pretty “Gretchen,” and has to make do with the two repulsive “Anichkas” (see part two, chapter ten in *Envy*) of his life—his “toads.” No wonder that the Nabokovs resting at the same seaside resort as the trio of Dreyer, Martha, and Franz view the young man with “pity and contempt” (259). On the other hand, even though the love triangle of *KQK* does deviate from classical Oedipal patterns, a Hoffmannian streak of the “Uncanny,” as defined by Freud, does seem to shape Franz’s life.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Raising once more the question of whether Nabokov did not “protest too much” in his constant attack on Freudian psychoanalysis, it could be argued, as A. Elm does, that the writer felt compelled to assert “his own identity by contrasting himself as sharply as possible with apparently similar individuals,” in this case Freud.⁴² As the above analysis of *KDV-KQK*, hopefully, has shown, Nabokov was not afraid of creating apparent “similarities” with Freudian works. The issue of whether it is the *soul* or the *scrotum* that decides individual moral choices *eo ipso* leads to distinctions that superficial similarities, purposefully introduced for parodic purposes, cannot reconcile. Nabokov did see Freudian texts as material for parodying Freud, for mocking his claims to revolutionary insights into the human psyche that are familiar to most people (who does not

⁴² Elm, *Uncovering Lives*, 182.

know that the slightly changed familiar is more “uncanny” than any sheer “horrors”?), and his reduction of complex human experience to certain physiological reflexes. Freud’s essay on the “uncanny” was hardly an “eye-opener” to Nabokov, but “The Sandman” offered an *embarras de richesses* in the form of “kobolds,” “automata,” and eyes bloodied by sparks of fire, and much more useful material for his German novel.

In addition to making his German novel more German by steeping it in the phantasmagorical atmosphere of an archetypal writer of German romanticism, especially its Gothic wing of *Schauerromantik*, revived in contemporary cultural trends, Nabokov may also have been interested in the Hoffmannism of the Soviet “Serapions” (in addition to Olesha’s *Envy*), and keen to juxtapose theirs to his. According to his own statements in the novel’s foreword, he was at the time still hoping for a return to a “remorseful” Russia (vii), and therefore perhaps asking himself whether some common ground could not be found in both their and his “Hoffmannian” rejection of “the theory of reflection.” This theory could not adequately convey reality as recently experienced: the horrors of the First World War and the postwar milieu of further-gathering nightmares.⁴³ Both Nabokov and the Soviet Serapions did write within the context of alien cultures (even if, in the Serapions’ case, it was an alien—Soviet—culture of Russian making), cultures that Nabokov apparently still believed might dissipate in his homeland, whereas German reality displayed ever more ominous signs of a reality ever less “real.” Or, to put speculation aside, Nabokov was interested in Hoffmann’s poetics, which he found conducive to his creating a novel of postwar Weimar-German fantastic reality and its potential to develop into nightmarish scenarios.

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⁴³ See Greber, “The Metafictional Turns in ‘Russian Hoffmanism,’” 5.

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