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THE MAP ON THE BELLY,
OR THE ANIMAL SIDE OF HISTORY
IN NABOKOV'S WORK

A detail — that of a dog laying down on its back as its master approaches, “showing its pink underbelly, covered with gray maplike spots” (Nabokov 2008, 21) — is at the root of my interest for the way that Nabokov encourages us to think about history and geography by adopting the point of view of animals. Of course, I will put the dog back into the context of the short 1923 narrative (“Звуки” / “Sounds”) to which she belongs, but before that I will begin by setting the background of Nabokov’s bestiary. It is indeed a question of shedding light on the relationship to time and space of a writer who took a great interest in life and was concerned with every form of violence brought to bear on living things.

Nabokov’s body of work belongs to “the animal side” of the literary sphere as it is portrayed by Jean-Christophe Bailly in his essay of the same title, where he develops the hypothesis of “a fault line running through literature”:

on one side there would be the clan of those who dominate, those who will never let animals cross the threshold except in agreed-upon forms that keep them at a distance no matter what; and on the other side, there would be those who are incapable of regulating that distance, those who are troubled by the slightest gap or the slightest glimmer, and for whom the question of the division between humans and animals is not only not settled once and for all but arises at every moment, on every occasion, as soon as an animal comes into view. It would be a little like a mountain with two sides: one without animals, the other

where animals are present—the second being the only one, as I see it, that is illuminated by a sun.

(Bailly 2011, 38-39)

The end of the quotation might seem paradoxical if one recalls that, for Jean-Christophe Bailly, the animal side is emblemized by Franz Kafka's work, which is far from sunny. But the dark side of the story is exactly what I would like to try to articulate: the gray spots on maps, and the pale fire of art inside of which "an animal comes into view."

Artifice is no less significant: within Nabokov's body of work, *Pale Fire* (a critical fiction whose title is borrowed from Shakespeare) demonstrates the mirror games that allow the artist, if not to turn himself into the sun, at least to steal some of its radiance.

Artifice is no less violent: its emblem is a bird, "slain / By the false azure in the windowpane" (Nabokov 1987, 29). But art in which "an animal comes into view" connects earthly representation to questions about humankind, especially during periods of crisis that threaten its integrity. In Nabokov's work, the humankind is confronted with a "hell of mirrors" (Nabokov 1966, 9), as it is put in the foreword to *The Eye*. Among these mirrors, I will focus on the animal mirror.

I am not claiming to exhaustively account for the Nabokovian bestiary, even if I will draw examples from the entirety of his works, ranging from the earliest Russian stories to the American novels. My intention is only to sketch a few key features.

Working from the hypothesis expressed by Jean-Christophe Bailly with regard to Kafka's works—in which he says the animal is not "a sort of allegorical tutelage [but] seems to be resurfacing from some obscure depths, as it were" (Bailly 2011, 39)—I would like to begin by showing how animal suffering bears the traces of the broken line of history and raises the question of an ethics of form: what can art do when confronted with violence?

I will then attempt to show that Nabokov the naturalist raises the question of political violence (of exile, of authoritarian regimes) in terms of ecological catastrophe, which is demonstrated by "the beasts' silent equanimity" (Bailly 2011, 36).

To conclude, I will explore one specific motif that will bring me back to the detail of the map on the belly: "the lady with the little dog," a motif that draws together the two-sided horizon

of nature and culture (and happens to be the title of a story by Anton Chekhov), a motif that helps us to understand how the animal, namely the common dog, gestures toward an original violence.

Animal suffering and the broken line of history

“The history of man is the history of pain” (Nabokov 1988, 141). These are among the last words spoken by the eponymous character of the novel *Pnin* before news of his expulsion from the American campus of Waindell. These remarks are emblematic of the political animality that Nabokov condemns by way of reference to animal suffering throughout his body of work. This novel will thus act as a crucible for the present analysis.

We know that the character Pnin is a Russian exile in danger of being radically misunderstood in a way that challenges the space of fiction itself, demonstrated by the choice of an unreliable narrator. Among the methods that the writer uses to wrest the poor Pnin from the pernicious cocoon of voices that surround him, intertextuality offers a particularly effective method of doubling: literary references make the narrative voice more playful and provide a certain surface appearance for the character whose misadventures attain a depth that refuses submission to relentless mockery. Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, featured on the syllabus for Nabokov’s course on European literature, thus appears implicitly in one extremely poignant scene during which Pnin breaks down in tears (he has just learned of his expulsion from the university) and shows his toothless mouth (left alone, he removes his dentures). The famed hidalgo from La Mancha also appears with his mouth open, his faithful squire Sancho bent over him and noticing that his master left his teeth behind in his previous adventure; he then gives him a nickname that comes to superimpose itself on Pnin: “*Caballero de la Triste Figura*” (Cervantes 2005, 275) [“the Knight of the sad face”]. Nabokov did not like what he referred to as the cruelty of Cervantes’s book and justified his point of view by taking the side of animals.

Nabokov has often been criticized for understanding nothing about this work from another era and another culture. He nevertheless turns *Don Quixote* into the crucible of a very serious investigation concerning the purpose of fiction that is faced with the violence of history, an investigation that *Pnin* extends. After having fled two totalitarian regimes, and now in the midst of the Cold War (both *Pnin* and the course on *Don Quixote* are from the 1950s), Nabokov finds

the systematic exertion of violence on the protagonist to be unacceptable for any worthy artistic work: we know that Don Quixote is beat to a pulp each of his adventures. This violence is also exerted on the animal world whose suffering the Cornell professor places on equal footing with that of man. An example will help us to recall: Cervantes mentions a dog in the preface written for the second volume of *Don Quixote*, in which the Spanish writer warns the author of an apocryphal continuation, and threatens him, should he repeat his offense, with the same terrible punishments that are inflicted upon animals:

I feel that there is something about the ethics of our book that casts a livid laboratory light on the proud flesh of some of its purpler passages. We are going to speak of cruelty. The author seems to plan it thus: Come with me, ungentle reader, who enjoys seeing a live dog inflated and kicked around like a soccer football; reader, who likes, of a Sunday morning, on his way to or from the church, to poke his stick or direct his spittle at a poor rogue in the stocks; come, ungentle reader, with me and consider into what ingenious and cruel hands I shall place my ridiculously vulnerable hero.

(Nabokov 1983, 51-52)

Nabokov had already put this “livid laboratory light” in the opening of his Russian novel *Camera obscura (Laughter in the Dark)*, whose murky horizon, emblematic of the trauma of a first exile in Europe, is introduced by a reference to vivisection inflicted on guinea pigs. The metaphor used to critique Cervantes’s novel proceeds from a dramatization of art that already controls the 1933 novel’s entire narrative apparatus. There, one finds an artist who accepts to sketch the guinea pig at the request of a scientist who is sensitive and concerned with drawing attention toward the sad fate of animals: the illustrator of comics succeeds in making the public fond of the animal, which he has made into a hero, but in the main story it is he who will turn out to be the torturer. Animal suffering thus acts as a trial for art faced with the violence of history: the nasty twists and turns of life that has been confronted with exile and barbarism are the driving force behind a condemnation of cruelty in both *Camera obscura* and in *Pnin*, a novel that offers an updating reading (*lecture actualisante*) of *Don Quixote*,¹ rather than an anachronistic one, since

¹ See Yves Citton, 2007. *Lire, interpréter, actualiser. Pourquoi les études littéraires?* Amsterdam Eds.

this work comes from a time when our relation to cruelty was admittedly quite different, but for whomever reads it today, it still examines the use of culture in the face of barbarism all the same.

It is striking to remark that the experiments on animals described in the 1930s actually became experiments on humans who were treated like animals in the 1950s. As we know, *Pnin* contains one of the most harrowing reminders of Nazi death camps and the extermination of Jews during World War II: Mira, the first love of the tragic character, died at Buchenwald. Pnin tries hard to forget her, because, if one were quite sincere with oneself, no consciousness could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible:

One had to forget – because one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart, into the gentle heart one had heard beating under one's lips in the dusk of the past.

(Nabokov 1988, 112-13)

In *Camera obscura*, the two characters mentioned above make a similarly unbearable connection between the extreme gentleness of life and the barbarism exerted upon it:

Разговор коснулся опытов над живыми зверьми. Физиолог, человек впечатлительный, еще не привыкший к лабораторным кошмарам, выразил мысль, что наука не только допускает изощренную жестокость к тем самым животным, которые в иное время возбуждают в человеке умиление своей пухлостью, теплотой, ужимками, но еще входит как бы в азарт – распинаят	As it happened, the conversation led them to discuss experiments carried out on living animals. The scientist, who was very impressionable and still unaccustomed to the laboratory's nightmares, promised that science not only tolerated a sophisticated cruelty toward these little animals—whom we felt tenderness for at other times, so soft to the touch, plump and comical—but that it also seemed to have developed a taste for this
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<p>живьем и кромсает куда больше особей, чем в действительности ей необходимо. (Nabokov 1933)</p>	<p>carnage: it tears all living things to shreds far more often than it really needs to. (Nabokov 1999a, 949) [Translated from the French]</p>
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To denounce the concentration camps, Nabokov more systematically turns toward cattle cars and slaughterhouses than to laboratories, but in the 1933 novel animal suffering is already used to think about human animality — in other words, to tell the story of men according to the relationship established with “these other living creatures that are here as we are, and differently, on the earth” (Bailly 2011, 11).

Nabokov uses this relationship — understood “as a gigantic cluster of behaviors and histories” (Bailly 2011, 12), ranging from the most dreadful to the gentlest — to shed light on humanity. Pnin thus finds himself in a tangle of harshness and gentleness. His creator confirms this by affording him “some poetical vengeance” (Nabokov 1988, 158), after having associated him with the figure of the dog, faithful guardian of his vulnerability and his memory. The paths of the man and the dog cross for the first time by mistake, when Pnin, seeking a new home, is seen ringing the wrong doorbell beside the neighbor’s old Scotty, “in much the same candid attitude as he” (Nabokov 1988, 28). Later, “an obese dog” (Nabokov 1988, 58), found sleeping on the carpet of Pnin’s office at the university, stands for the invasive nature of his Austrian master who, in the book, pertains to the frightening motif of Germany as conqueror. Even later, at the end of the party where the character learns of his dismissal, just before the narrator shows him to us toothless and in tears, we see Pnin feeding “a mangy little white dog, with pink patches on his back [...] There was no reason a human’s misfortune should interfere with a canine’s pleasure” (Nabokov 1988, 144). At the end of the book, Pnin escapes with this dog: we catch sight of him for the last time “in a small pale blue sedan with the white head of a dog looking out” (Nabokov 1988, 159). The same dog will return in the novel *Pale Fire*, in which the character reappears, placed inside of a university library along the path of the story’s killer, who steps “over a fat little white dog without awakening it” (Nabokov 1987, 221). We can deduce from this last detail that Pnin took care of his companion who became the guardian of his memory. Moreover, we can point out that the narrator, a blurry and unpleasant character, for his part, is linked to a sort of *trompe l’oeil* dog, “the long-

eared and dejected Sobakevich” (Nabokov 1988,159), who seems to have come directly from Gogol’s novel *Dead Souls* (one of whose main characters bears this dog name – “собака” in Russian), with his tragicomic mask: Sobakevich is “a brown cocker with a tear-stained face” (Nabokov 1988, 158).

The animal is a dominant other who thus serves to chart “hope and terror” (Nabokov 1964, 155), just as Adam Krug attempts to do in the dystopian novel *Bend Sinister*. His presence creates a confusion that allows the writer to slip “in[to] the gaps of history, in[to] the *terrains vagues* of time” (Nabokov 1964, 32) that movements and deportations of populations produce.

Many more examples of animal suffering could be cited. I already mentioned the cedar waxwing, killed by the transparency of the window, and the guinea pigs who were victims of vivisection; we could add the sad fate of the young Dragon in the short story of the same name, the vision of the swan caught in the ice that accompanies Nabokov’s memory of Mademoiselle Miauton and emblemizes exile, or the memory of a Dostoyevskian scene of the killing of a little mare that one finds in *Приглашение на казнь / Invitation to a Beheading*. We can also mention the photographs placed in Sebastian Knight’s bedroom, which are emblematic of a somewhat recurrent montage technique that consists in the juxtaposition of frivolity and violence: “One was an enlarged snapshot of a Chinese stripped to the waist, in the act of being vigorously beheaded, the other was a banal photographic study of a curly child playing with a pup” (Nabokov 1959, 41). The same images that serve to express all kinds of brokenness of being return to his memory at the moment of his death:

it is now the slow assault of horrible uncouth visions drawing upon us and hemming us in: the story of a tortured child; an exile’s account of life in the cruel country whence he fled; a meek lunatic with a black eye; a farmer kicking his dog – lustily, wickedly.

(Nabokov 1959, 177)

As Pierre Pachet suggests in his *Essays on consciousness and history (Essais sur la conscience et l’histoire)*: “Recourse to description of the animal world, to animal sensibility and situations, one might say, attempts to summarize a situation in which man sees his individuality simultaneously exacerbated and refuted” (Pachet 2002, 166). We cannot help but think about the

critique of a certain conception of history in Nabokov's novel *The Eye* (speaking of which, Pierre Pachet's collection of essays is entitled *Aux aguets [On the look-out]*):

Some mean-spirited little man [...] hires a punctilious Philistine to act as Clio's clerk, and begins a wholesale trade in epochs and masses; and then woe to the private individuum, with his two poor u's, hallooing hopelessly amid the dense growth of economic causes.

(Nabokov 1966, 35)

This is followed by a qualified attack of Marx and the endorsement of what, since Carlo Ginzburg, we might call micro-history. The Nabokovian narrator insists: "a toothache will cost a battle, a drizzle cancel an insurrection" (Nabokov 1966, 35). This attention to detail (in the illustration of individual lives, of which *Speak, Memory* offers a well-known example) is made clear even by Nabokov the translator, who associates certain generalizations with the great violence exacted upon the creative individual. We can cite an example of animal violence that is revealed, not without humor, in a Russian translation of Shakespeare, made for a readership that "did not care a fig for botany":

So nobody minded what happened to Goneril's lapdogs when the line
Tray, Blanche and Sweetheart, see, they bark at me
was grimly metamorphosed into
A pack of hounds is barking at my heels.

All local color, all tangible and irreplaceable details were swallowed

by those hounds.

(Nabokov 1981, 317)

I will not go any further into the comparison with micro-history, even if the paradigm of the trace, analyzed by the Italian historian, is enlightening with regard to many aspects of Nabokov's aesthetics of detail.² I would now like to show that the dense forest in which Nabokov

² See Carlo Ginzburg, 2013. *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*. Translated by John and Anne C. Tedeschi. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

seeks to re-situate historical actors is clearly not that of “economic data,” but rather that of the animal world, whose omnipresent traces grant a unique possibility for investigative work. One recalls that in John Shade’s poem “Pale Fire,” Sherlock Holmes is identified with signs of animal life:

[...] Whose spurred feet have crossed
From left to right the blank page of the road?
Reading from left to right in winter’s code:
A dot, an arrow pointing back; repeat:
Dot, arrow pointing back... A pheasant’s feet!
Torquated beauty, sublimated grouse,
Founding your China right behind my house.

(Nabokov 1987, 29)

Ecological catastrophe: History through (devastated) places

Monica Manolescu brought to light the “figure of the naturalist and the explorer” in Nabokov’s body of work: “The author’s alter ego; the explorer clouds the demiurge’s radiant and invincible image in order to bestow him with a vulnerable, and ultimately touching, humanity” (Manolescu 2010, 355). This figure is essential to understanding the catastrophes that the violence of history produces: landscapes laid to waste by wars, bodies deprived of their natural habitat.

Will Norman, for his part, analyzed the threatening presence of history (Norman, 2021). The link with the pastoral that he studies in the “Swiss” novels (*Ada* and *Pale Fire*, in particular) clearly highlights attachment to a lost earth, threatened by political rage, even if one might be tempted to add that Nabokov the naturalist liked to remind us that there was plenty of drama in past Arcadias, where flocks were sent to graze on *muguet* or Lily of the valley, “a beautiful but poisonous plant, that, although used by poets to adorn pastoral landscapes, is, in fact, lethal to lambs” (Nabokov 1990, 270). The naturalist explorer’s encounter with the violence of history gives birth, in his work, to a form of ecological consciousness.

“The Wood-Sprite” (“Нежить”), his first short story to recount exile, conjures a devastated earth, a bloody geography. The spirit of the Russian forests relates, “only dead men come floating by, floating in batches, enormous numbers of them, and the river’s moisture is like blood, thick, warm, sticky” (Nabokov 2008, 5), and then goes on to confide in a writer who is seeking refuge in Berlin: “we are all gone, gone, driven into exile by a crazed surveyor” (Nabokov 2008, 5). The “crazed surveyor” is a figure who makes poor use of the earth (“земля” in Russian), a term that can be heard in the original: “И все мы ушли, изгнанные безумным землемером” (Nabokov, 1921).

In “Easter Rain,” the first version of what would become “Mademoiselle O,” another story of exile, we find a sentence that is emblematic of Nabokov’s way of grabbing hold of the devastating effects of time through the mirror of nature: “The sky was cavernous and troubled – the moon vague, the clouds like ruins” (Nabokov 2008, 646-47). This ecological consciousness is developed in his final Russian novel, *The Gift* (*Дар*), which takes an overtly didactic form:

Give me your hand, dear reader, and let’s go into the forest together. Look: first – at these glades with patches of thistle, nettle or willow herb, among which you will find all kinds of junk: sometimes even a ragged mattress with rusty, broken springs; don’t disdain it! Here is a dark thicket of small firs where I once discovered a pit which had been carefully dug out before its death by a creature that lay therein, a young, slender-muzzled dog of wolf ancestry, folded into a wonderfully graceful curve, paws to paws. And now come bare hillocks with no undergrowth [...] and the wire skeleton of a discarded lampshade is also here, lying on the ground.

(Nabokov 1973, 301-302)

The Berlin forest is a strange collection of real and imaginary lands (there one finds a dog that is almost a wolf), a composite space in which nature and culture blend, as do life and death, the beauty of life and the corruption of living environments.

The Gift is a work of mourning in which Nabokov pays homage to Russian literature and, as a writer, bids it farewell. His character goes through the same experience of loss, often looking back on his lost territory, rich with details, and when the memories fade, he has a recurring feeling

that the landscapes are tumbling down or disappearing. He sees, “a farewell configuration of trees, standing like people come to see someone off” (Nabokov 1973, 78). One must of course tie these kinds of scenes together with the lack of botanical knowledge attributed to the radical Tchernychevsky who is particularly ignorant when it comes to the trees that surround him. We can also think about the notorious example provided by the short story, “A Guide to Berlin,” which places the red star of a reviled regime at the bottom of the ocean, “among the ruins of Atlantis” (Nabokov 2008, 158). All attention paid to nature—to fauna, to flora, and to life in general—acts as an implicit, and fierce, critique of a political power that generally does not care about the planet.

Admittedly, ecological sensibility is not always linked to the devastation of natural spaces; it is supported by a taste for open spaces and the cosmos, by the poetry of far-off places. In “Natasha,” one of the earliest Russian short stories, a pathologically lying character speaks of the countries that he has never been to (Congo, India); he reveals that this is because he likes “the music of geographical names” (Nabokov 2008, 661). Like many other characters, he brings together naming and the power of reconfiguration.

Some of Nabokov’s taste for geography belongs to childhood, to school. In *Mary* (*Машенька*), exiles in Berlin refer to lost Russia in this way: “She’s been rubbed out, just as if someone had wiped a funny face off a blackboard by smearing a wet sponge across it” (Nabokov 1989, 17). In the short story “Sounds,” the dog whose belly brings to mind a map is connected with a fading romance, set in a school. The tutor in “Perfection” holds a degree in geography, “but his special knowledge could not be put to any use,” the narrator explains, though he still describes this knowledge in highly poetic terms — “dead riches, a highborn pauper’s magnificent manor” (Nabokov 2008, 338) — and takes the time to allude to the beauty of antique maps, as though they were draped over the character’s shoulders. Nabokov attempts to give us a taste for unique geographies: “Digne in southern France, Ragusa in Dalmatia, Sarepta on the Volga, Abisko in Lapland” are, for instance, “famous sites dear to butterfly collectors” (Nabokov 2008, 253) that act as a setting for the short story “The Aurelian.” Other more serious explorers are gifted with an extreme sensitivity to space, though more to its cosmic dimension than to its geographic one. *The Eye* opens with a monologue that, in this way, bears the traces of a loneliness whose excessive proportions are exacerbated by exile: “I would imagine somebody who goes mad because he begins to perceive clearly the motion of the terrestrial sphere” (Nabokov 1965, 17). Global

geopolitical apprehension is just as frightening in his final story, “Lance,” which shows a planet “girdled with latitudes, stayed with meridians, and marked, perhaps, with the fat, black, diabolically curving arrows of global wars” (Nabokov 2008, 639).

The canine makes it possible to assess the terrors of “infinite spaces.”³ He appears under the pen of the famous French thinker, the aptly named Delalande, an “elegant atheist” who associates “the search of God” with “the longing of any hound for a master” (Nabokov 1973, 283). He appears again in narratives that, rather approximately, portray transcendence. In this way, “Wingstroke” introduces an angel character that is initially confused with a dog. A hotel guest complains of his neighbor who receives a visit from the angel: she “fusses with her dog” (Nabokov 2008, 35), he thinks, because he believes to have detected “a joyous barking sound” (Nabokov 2008, 38). “The Thunderstorm” depicts an old prophet who has fallen down in a courtyard; a dog witnesses the scene: “The courtyard was empty, except for the old, shaggy dog with its graying muzzle that had thrust its head out of the kennel and was looking up, like a person, with frightened hazel eyes” (Nabokov 2008, 88).

This infinity has a political counterpart: the terror practiced by the rising ideology of Nazism, which takes the form of the tyranny deployed by the group in “Cloud, Castle, Lake.” Schramm, tormented by the tourists with whom he is traveling, believes he has found protection in a highly poetic place where he wants to stay, where he is welcomed by “a dog still quite young [...] its jaws laughing” (Nabokov 2008, 435), but he cannot be allowed to give himself over to the landscape, and the narrative ends with the revelation that he has “not the strength to belong to mankind any longer” (Nabokov 2008, 437).

In response to infinite expanses (the cosmos, violent contemporary masses), one finds a sort of voiceless animal presence—just like this dog, again, who, “dashe[s] out of a gateway, in perfect silence – storing up voice, as it were” in order to welcome the young visitor in “A Bad Day” (Nabokov 2008, 269). The animal is one of the ingredients required for preparing “a kind of secret remedy against future tyrants” (Nabokov 2008, 460) that the writer of “Tyrants Destroyed” dreams of feeding to his readers.

³ One finds this reference to Blaise Pascal (“Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m’effraie,” *Pensées*, 206. Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1976, 110) in *Bend Sinister*: “Those mirrors of infinite spaces *qui m’effrayent, Blaise*, as they did you” (Nabokov 1964, 61).

It is not, however, a question of closing one's eyes, nor of plugging one's ears in order to flee from the real world, but of changing scale in order to make the pressure bearable. These changes are sometimes highly visible. For example, in the exodus narrative, "That in Aleppo Once..." the narrator sees a family on the side of the road, trying to bury a dead relative, but the ground is too hard:

But the little boy was still scratching and scraping and tugging until he tumbled a flat stone and forgot the object of his solemn exertions as he crouched on his haunches, his thin, eloquent neck showing all its vertebrae to the headsman, and watched with surprise and delight thousands of minute brown ants seething, zigzagging, dispersing, heading for places of safety in the Gard, and the Aude, and the Drôme, and the Var, and the Basses-Pyrénées.

(Nabokov 2008, 562)

We find an even more dizzying zoom out in *Pale Fire*, when the king flees through the secret passage:

The pool of opalescent ditch water had grown in length; along its edge walked a sick bat like a cripple with a broken umbrella. A remembered spread of colored sand bore the thirty-year-old patterned imprint of Oleg's shoe, as immortal as the tracks of an Egyptian child's tame gazelle made thirty centuries ago on blue Nilotic bricks drying in the sun.

(Nabokov, 108)

As is the case for the aurochs and the everlasting pigments found at the very end of *Lolita*, this sequence reminds us that "animals are positioned at the threshold of the symbolic [...] they point to an origin or an originary state of designation" (Bailly 2011, 9). The title of Nabokov's final, unfinished novel, *The Original of Laura*, sheds light on the interest that the uprooted author might have had for man's relation to the animal: it is an "absolutely originary relation" (Bailly 2011, 9). This is the final point that I would like to speak about, through the recurring motif of the lady with the little dog.

Ladies with little dogs: Constructing the space-time of an original violence

The association of the dog to a lady comes from Nabokov’s childhood, since his mother always had her own dogs. *Speak Memory* recalls her brown dachshunds, one of whom was the direct descendant of dogs belonging to Anton Chekhov:

This final dachshund followed us into exile, and as late as 1930, in a suburb of Prague (where my widowed mother spent her last years, on a small pension provided by the Czech government), he could be still seen going for reluctant walks with his mistress, waddling far behind in a huff, tremendously old and furious with his long Czech muzzle of wire – an émigré dog in a patched and ill-fitting coat.

(Nabokov 1999b, 28)

This is also a literary memory, itself linked to Chekhov, who penned *The Lady with the Little Dog* (*Дама с собачкой*, 1899), the story of a romantic affair without any clear future. The borrowing of this motif is highlighted in Nabokov’s short story “Spring in Fialta,” which offers a rewriting of Chekhov’s story. In Nabokov’s version, the dog is no longer a character, but a tool for comparison: the lady’s “yellow scarf” is seen “on the move like those dogs that recognize you before their owners do” (Nabokov 2008, 415).

This motif, which condenses the most precious memories and the most painful experiences (especially exile in Prague), is present from one end of Nabokov’s body of work to the other. Starting with the first Russian novel, *Mary* (*Машенька*), the dog acts as a signal of break-ups:

Лидия Николаевна, сидя очень прямо в кресле, читала, когда он вошел. Ее такса мягко сползла с постели и забила в маленькой истерике преданности у ног Ганина.	Sitting bolt upright in an armchair, Lydia Nikolaevna was reading when he entered. Her dachshund slithered off the bed and began thrashing about in a little fit of hysterical devotion at Ganin’s feet.
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<p>Лидия Николаевна, поняв, что он уже теперь непременно уедет, опечалилась.</p> <p>(Nabokov 1926)</p>	<p>Lydia Nikolaevna saddened as she realized that this time he really was about to leave.</p> <p>(Nabokov 1989, 87)</p>
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“That in Aleppo Once...,” a dark story of exodus, awakens the figure of the dog by linking it to the infidelity staged by Shakespeare in *Othello* (the story’s title borrows the Moor’s final words, spoken just before his suicide) and offers a contemptible version of the motif: the lady’s dog is hanged by the jealous lover.

The dog is one Nabokov’s hallmarks, not as esthete as the butterfly, nearer to the original violence exacted upon lost childhood. We find it in photos of “*petite[s] nymphe[s] accroupie[s]*” (Nabokov 1991, 261). Having just arrived at The Enchanted Hunters motel, “Lolita sank down on her haunches to caress a pale-faced, blue freckled, black-eared cocker spaniel swooning on the floral carpet under her hand” (Nabokov 1991, 117). In Kim Beauharnais’s reviled photo album, Van notices one picture that shows Ada as she “spilled her hair over her bare knees as she flexed them and flipped Dack with her flowers to check his nervous barks” (Nabokov 1990, 398). In both novels, the dog is an emblem of life that functions like a footnote, signaling the little girl beneath the mythical creature’s mask and the play-acting of the girls’ admirers. Moreover, both Humbert Humbert and Van Veen “secretly disliked dogs” (Nabokov 1990, 61), as Nabokov notes about the latter; the same is confirmed for the former by The Enchanted Hunters’ stationery heading: “No dogs” (Nabokov 1991, 261).

A brief mention of the motif in the novel *Ada* is enough to convince us that pets tirelessly serve to ask the same ethical and political question: by which thread is life hanging? The dog appears — together with flowers (which prepare the motif of Lucette-Ophélie’s suicide) — at the same time as the eponymous little girl: “a dark-haired girl of eleven or twelve, preceded by a fluid dackel” (Nabokov 1990, 37). One could say that the dog’s function is to reveal the underside of the story: a story of life, when the dog displays the raw reality of the menstrual cycle by stealing Blanche’s sanitary napkin; the story of men, when its presence becomes a structuring element, as is the case in chapter 14 of part one. This chapter, ostensibly about an ordinary tea in the garden,

takes an unexpected turn when the conversation topic shifts toward Jews (in response to a question that Lucette asked), during which Shakespeare (*The Merchant of Venice*) and the anti-Semite T.S. Eliot are tossed into the mix. If one adds to this that Ada speaks in German to the dog known as “German Dackel” (Nabokov 1990, 199), and that Lucette sees the image of the dog at the moment of her death — “she saw a girl with long black hair quickly bend in passing to clap her hands over a dackel in a half-torn wreath” (Nabokov 1990, 494) — we understand that the motif of the lady with the little dog condenses the space and time of all violence, both personal and collective.

This visceral dimension of history and geography (turned upside down, as we know, in the Amerussia where *Ada* is set) is already brought to light by the short story “Sounds” (“Звуки”), which contains the detail that acted as both the opening and the guiding thread of the present analysis.

A genuine matrix of techniques that will be refined in the major novels, “Sounds” invites us to listen carefully to a story of fading romance, subtly inserted into the outlook of a fading world. The narrator clearly formulates this entanglement:

<p>Я понял [...] что не ты одна, а вся земля - моя любовница. Душа моя как бы выпустила бесчисленные, чуткие щупальца, и я жил во всем, одновременно ощущая, как где-то за окном грохочет Ниагара и как - вот - в аллее шуршат и хлопают длинные золотые капли.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Nabokov 1921)</p>	<p>I realized [...] that <i>it was not you alone who were my lover but the entire earth</i>. It was as if my soul had extended countless sensitive feelers, and I lived within everything, perceiving simultaneously Niagara Falls thundering far beyond the ocean and the long golden drops rustling and pattering in the lane.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Nabokov 2008, 15-16; emphasis added)</p>
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Time is the object of a similar condensation. The man’s break-up, when he informs the lady of his desire to put an end to their affair, in this sense, contains every other break within it (the sinking of the Titanic, the outbreak of the First World War): “An instant passed. During that

instant, much happened in the world: somewhere a giant steamship went to the bottom, a war was declared” (Nabokov 2008, 23).

The characters turn themselves into surveyors, giving birth to what one might call a geography of paths. Thus, when the couple, not yet separated, visits the village schoolmaster, they take muddy trails that immediately seem to be reproduced on the walls: “I glanced in passing at an azure map, and thought, That’s how all of Russia is—sunlight and hollows” (Nabokov 2008, 17). This montage technique, emphasized by the power to disperse details, also carefully maintains History on the narrative’s sidelines:

<p>На подоконнике в паутиновом пушку желтел мертвый шмель. - Где это Сараево? - вдруг спросила ты, шурша газетным листом, который лениво взяла со стула. (Nabokov 1921)</p>	<p>The down of a spiderweb on the windowsill contained a yellow, dead bumblebee. “Where is Sarajevo?” you asked suddenly rustling a newspaper page that you had listlessly picked up from a chair. (Nabokov 2008, 18)</p>
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It is only upon returning from the school, when the woman is going to be sent away by the weary lover, that map on the belly is finally introduced:

Фокс, старая, толстая сучка, бежал
по тропинке вдогонку за своей госпожой.
Ты обожала собак. Свистнула, присела на
корточки. Собачка подползла, юля и
приглад<ив> уши. Под твоей протянутой
рукой - перевалилась на спину, показывая
розовое брюшко в старых географических
пятнах.
(Nabokov 1921)

A fox terrier, a plump old bitch, was
trotting along the path after her owner. You
adored dogs. The little animal crawled up to us
on its belly, wriggling, its ears laid back. It
rolled over under your proffered hand, showing
its pink underbelly, covered with gray maplike
spots.
(Nabokov 2008, 21)

The entire story thus appears as a rewriting of history, which changes medium and scale, and gives birth to singular world maps of life.

Conclusion

One might be tempted to say that Nabokov's work puts a dog in every seaport as a response to the violence of history. This is what the short story, whose title is precisely "The Seaport," suggests. Its main character is an exile, coming from Constantinople, on his way to the south of France. We understand that he has found asylum as soon as he enters a little restaurant on the seaport, where a young lady is "fondling the dog's curled-over ear with one hand":

Extending its fire-pink tongue, panting joyously and rapidly, the dog looked through the sunny chink of the door, most likely debating whether or not it was worthwhile to go lie some more on the hot threshold. And the dog seemed to be thinking in Russian.

(Nabokov 2008, 63).

Nabokov's relation to space is one of creation, in the in-between of languages, not a relation of conquest (of cartographic gridding): "Genius is an African who dreams up snow" (Nabokov 1973, 178).

Given that the violence of history is most often associated with animal suffering, we might ultimately wonder why the laboratory guinea pigs disappeared from *Camera obscura* upon its translation into English. The final sighting of the belly, which symbolically serves as the medium for *geography* in "Sounds" is that of a "comical belly" (Nabokov 2008, 24). Humor is not incompatible with the point of view of animals, which have not disappeared when *Camera obscura* is transformed into *Laughter in the Dark*—their suggestive power may have even intensified, if we believe the narrator of "Ultima Thule": "laughter is some chance little ape of truth astray in our world" (Nabokov 2008, 503).

Translated by Jackson B. Smith

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