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NABOKOV,
A WRITER OF SIMMELIAN MODERNITY?

During the second half of the 19th century, following the model of Paris, major European capital cities undergo industrialization and urbanization on a massive scale that makes it possible for them to rise to the rank of modern cities. The same is not true for Berlin, whose development comes later. Following uncertain beginnings, it became a capital city in the aftermath of the 1870-1871 Franco-Prussian War, blossoming as a result of very rapid transformations, including the creation of new means of transport (the S-Bahn/commuter rail [1882], a streetcar [1881], a subway [1902]), the arrival of street lights and the growth of both commercial hubs (the department stores Wertheim [1896] and KaDeWe-Kaufhaus des Westens [1907]), and places of entertainment (cafés, music halls, variety shows). This two-fold economic and cultural evolution progressively leads Berlin toward accessing the status of *Geldstadt* (“money city”) and *Weltstadt* (“metropolis”)¹ as a result of its unprecedented dynamism, which it attains despite the negative consequences of industrialization, including unemployment, poverty, prostitution, and crime.²

Because of the ambivalent feelings that it provokes—between fear and fascination—the German capital not only inspires representatives in literary and artistic fields, but also in the humanities and social sciences, as is the case for the German philosopher of culture and

¹ These two terms are often synonymous, since the notion of a metropolis entails development of the monetary economy.

² For more information on the history of the city of Berlin, see Cyril Buffet’s book *Berlin* (Paris: Fayard, 1993).

sociologist Georg Simmel (1858-1918) who is considered to be the founder of formal and urban sociology. This *Privatdozent* (untenured faculty) at the University of Berlin³ knows the city especially well, spending nearly his entire life there, residing in the heart of the capital's business district where he regularly entertains guests. Even though he is opposed to classical dialectical systems, Simmel nevertheless develops a notion of modernity, based upon the definition offered by the French poet Charles Baudelaire who, in his collection of essays *The Painter of Modern Life*, published in 1863, considers modernity to be “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable” (Baudelaire 1995, 13). Feeling a strong interest for notions related to vitalism, Simmel also draws his ideas from the French sculptor Auguste Rodin's work; he even devotes an essay to Rodin in order to highlight the fragmentary character of existence that is specific to modernity. These two main sources lead the sociologist to offer his own definition of modernity in his book *Philosophische Kultur* (*Philosophical Culture*), published in 1912:

For the essence of the modern as such is psychologism, the experiencing [Erleben] and interpretation of the world in terms of the reactions of our inner life, and indeed as an inner world, the dissolution of fixed contents in the fluid element of the soul, from which all that is substantive is filtered and whose forms are merely forms of movement.

(Frisby 1992, 66)⁴

Here, Simmel highlights the ambivalence of modernity—synonymous, on the one hand, with objectification, with depersonalization, with alienation, and on the other hand, with individual fulfillment, with the other, a modernity that he associates with a precise place: the big city.

Although at present it is impossible to categorically affirm that Vladimir Nabokov read Simmel's work, there is nevertheless a link between the two men, highlighted, for example, by

³ It is not until 1914, four years before his death, that Simmel is granted a paid professorship at the University of Strasbourg.

⁴ Denn das Wesen der Moderne überhaupt ist Psychologismus, das Erleben und Deuten der Welt gemäß den Reaktionen unsres Inneren und eigentlich als einer Innenwelt, die Auflösung der festen Inhalte in das flüssige Element der Seele, aus der alle Substanz herausgeläutert ist, und deren Formen nur Formen von Bewegungen sind (Simmel 1996, 346).

Gavriel Shapiro in his book, *The Sublime Artist's Studio: Nabokov and Painting* (2009), where he writes:

Nabokov depicts life in Berlin, the capital of the other, foreign, vanquished and vanished empire, with the keen eye of an emotionally detached outsider. In this regard, Nabokov follows the dictum of Georg Simmel concerning “the currents of life” in the Metropolis: “It is not our task either to accuse or to pardon, but only to understand.” To be sure, Simmel exerted considerable influence on German Expressionists in their portrayal of the big city. In many ways, however, Nabokov appears closer to him than were his painter-compatriots. Nabokov’s portrayal of the city, vividly descriptive and with careful attention to detail, is largely nonjudgmental. It is precisely Nabokov’s position of a stranger which enables him to manifest such dispassionate objectivity in his portrayal of life in the Metropolis.

(Shapiro 2009, 186)

In addition to this comment on the objectivity of the gaze cast upon the big city, in a footnote Shapiro also establishes a correlation with one of Simmel’s essay, *Exkurs über den Fremden (The Stranger)*. There, Shapiro is interested in the aspect of the *flâneur*, present in both Simmel’s and Nabokov’s works. On another note, in his article “The Shop Window Quality of Things: 1920s Weimar surface Culture in Nabokov’s *Korol’, dama, valet*,” published in 2018, Luke Parker touches upon Simmel’s conception of “the shop window quality of things” (Simmel 1896, 35), as well as the significance of shop windows and mannequins.

As far as we are concerned, having already dealt at length with the motif of shop windows in our work *L’œuvre de Vladimir Nabokov au regard de la culture et de l’art allemands. Survivances de l’expressionisme [The Work of Vladimir Nabokov in View of German Culture and Art: Survivals of Expressionism]* (2016), we will pay particular attention to the notion of modernity as it was described by Simmel and the way in which it appears in Nabokov’s work as a possible intertext used by the writer. In order to do so, we will focus on Germans living in the big city, which Nabokov has a tendency to caricature in many of his writings,

including his second Russian novel *Король, дама, валеет* (*King, Queen, Knave*),⁵ wanting to appear “unsimilar [...] to the impassioned and boring ethnopsychics which depress one so often in modern novels (Nabokov 1968, viii). This book stages characters of German nationality in the space of the Berlin metropolis.⁶ A large part of the action is even set in the very heart of urban modernity, that is, in a department store, known by the name of *Dandy*. This store, with its blue and cream colors, might recall the department store *Wertheim*, located on the Leipzigerstraße, even though several researchers, including Brian Boyd, point out that the first three letters of the Russian title *Korol', dama, valet*, match the abbreviation of the department store *Kaufhaus des Westens* (*KaDeWe*) (Zimmer 2001, 66).

To better grasp the convergence of Nabokov's novel and Simmelian thought on modernity, it is essential to come back to what Simmel viewed as the constitutive characteristics of a big city, contained in his famous essay *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben* (*The Metropolis and Mental Life*), published in 1903. To begin with, “the psychological foundation, upon which the metropolitan individuality is erected, is the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli” (Simmel 1971, 325).⁷ Here, Simmel insists upon fluctuations that are particular to the big city, which present all kinds of images at each instant that can be considered as a kind of aggression against the individual. Because of the speed of the movement that the individual constantly confronts, she cannot manage to take in all of these new sensations, or even protect herself from them, simply because there are too many of them.

This helplessness before “the domination of the metropolis” (Simmel 1971, 326)⁸ leads to the birth of a pathology specific to city life: neurasthenia. Nevertheless, according to Simmel, “the metropolitan type”⁹ can completely “adjust itself to the shifts and contradictions in events”¹⁰

⁵ Modernity is, however, not present in this work alone: it could indeed be studied alongside other works, such as *Mašen'ka* (*Mary*), *Dar* (*The Gift*) and *Putevoditel' po Berlinu* (*A Guide to Berlin*).

⁶ For more information regarding the place of the big city, and more specifically Berlin, in Nabokov's work, cf. *L'œuvre de Vladimir Nabokov au regard de la culture et de l'art allemands. Survivances de l'expressionnisme* of Alexia Gassin (Bruxelles : P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2016).

⁷ “Die psychologische Grundlage, auf der der Typus großstädtischer Individualitäten sich erhebt, ist die Steigerung des Nervenlebens, die aus dem raschen und ununterbrochenen Wechsel äußerer und innerer Eindrücke hervorgeht” (Simmel 2016, 319).

⁸ “Die Vergewaltigungen der Großstadt” (Simmel 2016, 320).

⁹ “Der Typus des Großstädtlers” (Simmel 2016, 320).

¹⁰ Er bedarf, um sich mit dem Wechsel und Gegensatz der Erscheinungen abzufinden (Simmel 2016, 320).

[by] creat[ing] a protective organ for itself against the profound disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it” (Simmel 1971, 325-326).¹¹

To do so, the city-dweller must take on three distinctive traits, which are generally perceived as flaws: the “intellectualistic quality,” the “blasé attitude,” and “reserve” (Simmel 1971, 326, 329, 331).¹² First, *the intellectualistic quality* leads one to adopt the behavior of a “purely intellectualistic person” (Simmel 1971, 362),¹³ treating men and things in a purely objective fashion (Simmel 2016, 321-22) and developing a calculating mind. This evolution is all the more feasible given that the big city is “the seat of money economy because the many-sidedness and concentration of commercial activity have given the medium of exchange an importance” (Simmel 1971, 326).¹⁴ Moreover, “intellectual relationships deal with persons as with numbers, that is, as with elements which, in themselves, are indifferent, but which are of interest only insofar as they offer something objectively perceivable” (Simmel 1971, 326).¹⁵ In this sense, it is not surprising that the watch, which quantifies time, also organizes and sets the tempo of life in the big city. Second, *the blasé attitude* consists in “an indifference toward the distinctions between things” (Simmel 1971, 329).¹⁶ Everything then loses its flavor and its color, and the city-dweller is no longer surprised by anything. Last, *reserve* is defined by a great coldness, a marked indifference with regard to other people, qualities that most often turn into “a slight aversion, a mutual strangeness and repulsion which, in a close contact which has arisen any way whatever, can break out into hatred and conflict” (Simmel 1971, 331).¹⁷

Finally, “the development of modern culture is characterized by the predominance of what one can call the objective spirit over the subjective” (Simmel 1971, 337).¹⁸ The metropolis’s functioning brings about a hypertrophy of objective culture, linked to objects, and a

¹¹ So schafft der Typus der Großstädters [...] sich ein Schutzorgan gegen die Entwurzelung, mit der die Strömungen und Diskrepanzen seines äußeren Milieus ihn bedrohen (Simmel 2016, 320).

¹² Verstandesmäßigkeit, Blasiertheit, Reserviertheit (Simmel 2016 320, 323, 325).

¹³ Der rein verstandesmäßige Mensch (Simmel 2016, 321).

¹⁴ Die Sitze der Geldwirtschaft [...], weil die Mannigfaltigkeit und Zusammendrängung des wirtschaftlichen Austausches dem Tauschmittel eine Wichtigkeit verschafft (Simmel 2016, 320).

¹⁵ [...], während die verstandesmäßigen mit den Menschen wie mit Zahlen rechnen, wie mit an sich gleichgültigen Elementen, die nur nach ihrer objektiv abwägbaren Leistung ein Interesse haben (Simmel 2016, 321).

¹⁶ Die Abstumpfung gegen die Unterschiede der Dinge (Simmel 2016, 324).

¹⁷ Eine leise Aversion, eine gegenseitige Fremdheit und Abstoßung, die in dem Augenblick einer irgendwie veranlaßten nahen Berührung sogleich in Haß und Kampf ausschlagen würde (Simmel 2016, 325).

¹⁸ Die Entwicklung der modernen Kultur charakterisiert sich durch das Übergewicht dessen, was man den objektiven Geist nennen kann, über den subjektiven (Simmel 2016, 330).

hypertrophy of subjective culture, implicating the individual's personality. This antagonism slowly leads to a virtual reification of the city-dweller. In order to escape this alienation, the type of inhabitant in big cities nevertheless has a solution at his disposal, namely the development of two forms of individualism: "individual independence and the elaboration of personal peculiarities" (Simmel 1971, 338).¹⁹ These forms of individualism

lead [...] to the strangest eccentricities, to specifically metropolitan extravagances of self-distanciation, of caprice, of fastidiousness, the meaning of which is [...] to be found [...] in its being a form of "being different" – of making oneself noticeable.

(Simmel 1971, 336)²⁰

This way of being allows one to cultivate not only one's originality—both physical (fashion) and psychological (personality and particular tastes)—but also, and most importantly, to cultivate one's freedom.

The entirety of these characteristics is opposed to those of the small provincial town, which Simmel refers to using the term *community*, defined as "a relatively small circle almost entirely closed against neighboring foreign or otherwise antagonistic groups but which has however within itself such a narrow cohesion that the individual member has only a very slight area for the development of his own qualities and for free activity for which he himself is responsible" (Simmel 1971, 332).²¹

Having defined the notion of modernity that is particular to the metropole, and even more specifically to Berlin, we can now observe the way in which it appears in Nabokov's novel, which one might consider to be the rewriting of this urban sociology that, as we recall, was founded by Simmel.

¹⁹ Die individuelle Unabhängigkeit und die Ausbildung persönlicher Sonderart (Simmel 2016, 332).

²⁰ Was dann schließlich [...] zu den spezifisch großstädtischen Extravaganzen des Apartseins, der Kaprice, des Pretiosentums, deren Sinn [...] in seiner Form des Andersseins, des Sich-Heraushebens und dadurch Bemerklichwerdens liegt (Simmel 2016, 330).

²¹ Ein relativ kleiner Kreis, mit starkem Abschluß gegen benachbarte, fremde, oder irgendwie antagonistische Kreise, dafür aber mit einem um so engeren Zusammenschluss in sich selbst, der dem einzelnen Mitglied nur einen geringen Spielraum für die Entfaltung eigenartiger Qualitäten und freier, für sich selbst verantwortlicher Bewegungen gestattet (Simmel 2016, 326).

Contrary to what we might think, Martha, on account of her materialism and her calculating mind,²² is in no way a reflection of Simmel's type of big city inhabitant insofar as she symbolizes the failure of this modernity, an idea that we will return to later. On the contrary, the character that embodies the modern city-dweller par excellence is Kurt Dreyer who knows exactly how to resist the all-powerful forces of the big city, represented by Martha's repeated attempts at murder, while maintaining the three traits cited above: the intellectualistic quality, the blasé attitude, and reserve. In this way, Dreyer does not allow himself to be overcome in any way at all by the vitalism that is particular to the metropolis along with its constant changes, as we can note in the following passage:

[the] observant [...] interest [of Dreyer] in any object, animated or not, whose distinctive features he had immediately grasped, or thought he has grasped, gloated over and filed away, would wane with its every subsequent reappearance. The bright perception became the habitual abstraction. Natures like his spend enough energy in tackling with all the weapons and vessels of the mind the enforced impressions of existence to be grateful for the neutral film of familiarity that soon forms between the newness and its consumer. It was too boring to think that the object might change of its own accord and assume unforeseen characteristics.

(Nabokov 1968, 106)

In order to do so, Dreyer attributes precise and rigid roles to the people around him. Franz therefore embodies “a timid provincial nephew with a banal mind and limited ambitions” while Martha “remain[s] the same distant, thrifty, frigid wife whose beauty would occasionally come alive” (Nabokov 1968, 106). One even finds this blasé attitude outlined later on in the text by an outside character, Erika, Dreyer's former mistress who declares: “You seat a person on a little shelf and think she'll keep sitting like that forever” (Nabokov 1968, 175). At the same time, Dreyer demonstrates a complete disinterest for what his wife is able to do during the day and for

²² These characteristics, among others, are illustrated by the young woman's words: “You see, sweetheart, one cannot deposit dreams at the bank. They aren't dependable securities, and the dividends they bring are nothing” (Nabokov 1968, 135).

their home's interior decoration, which she designed. Likewise, he knows nothing about either the place where his nephew lives, nor does he know anything about this nephew's personal life. Dreyer's aloofness makes it possible for the narrator to mock him, since Dreyer is aware neither of Martha and Franz's hypocrisy with regard to him, nor of the murder plot of which he is the object.

The development of the city-dweller's intellectual, blasé and reserved traits is all the more possible given that Dreyer, as the owner of the department store *The Dandy*, finds himself in the heart of the monetary economy, not only because of his profession, but also because the resources that he has at his disposal. It should be noted here that the blasé individual is often associated with the dandy (Bonicco 2009, 59), which designates a character possessing a highly original style of dress and a certain arrogance, suggesting that the choice of the store's name can be directly linked to thought on modernity.²³

Furthermore, Dreyer's intellectualism is expressed in his exceptional punctuality (Nabokov 1968, 81), which must not be considered as a mere commonplace that Nabokov uses against Germans, but as one of the constitutive traits of European metropolitan modernity at the beginning of the 20th century.

The character's professional activity also makes it possible for him to contribute to a hypertrophy of objective culture as it relates to subjective culture, and all the more so since Dreyer maintains ties with an inventor who specializes in the design of automated mannequins, which are intended to replace living beings and, more specifically, to replace Dreyer, Martha and Franz who, for a time, become the victims of this objectification of culture. Moreover, it is clear that nobody is able to reify Dreyer, and they are even less able to make him die, which is what his wife is hoping for. Martha's husband gives off a near-supernatural life force:

She would feel again that Dreyer was perishing, that each frantic stroke wounded him more deeply, and finally, that he collapsed in terrible pain, howling, discharging his intestinal fluids, and dissolving in the unbearable splendor of her joy.

²³ The link between the dandy and modernity also appears in Baudelaire who considers that "the word 'dandy' implies a quintessence of character and a subtle understanding of the entire moral mechanism of this world" (Baudelaire 1995, 9).

Yet, as if nothing had happened, he would revive, walk noisily through all the rooms and, cheerful and hungry, sit opposite her at meals, folding a slice of ham, spearing it with an energetic fork, and making a circular motion with his mustache as he chewed.

(Nabokov 1968, 200)

Dreyer thus seems to embody the very concept of vitalism, a philosophy born in the 18th century and founded on “immediate self-experience, intuition, will, instinct, feelings, creativity and dynamism” (Vandenberghe 2009, 34)²⁴, which Simmel drew inspiration from in a large part of his work. The maintenance of an energetic existence is shown to be all the more possible since Dreyer presents himself as an extravagant man: “bizarre and unpredictable[, he] sang off-key silly arias and made her silly presents” (Nabokov 1968, 65). In addition, he cultivates his individualism by reading novels in English and dreaming of exotic travels: “He reflected that it would be nice some day to be promenading like this beneath the glazed arches of a remote station somewhere on the way in Andalusia, Bagdad or Nizhni Novgorod. Actually one could set off any time; the globe was enormous and round, and he had enough spare cash to circle it completely half-a-dozen times” (Nabokov 1968, 15).

All of this indeed seems to show us that Dreyer, the epitome of a true city-dweller, withstands both the Berlin metropolis’s aura and, most importantly, the destructive madness of his wife, Martha, which is not the case for Franz. The young man from the country belongs to *community*, as opposed to *society*, which is symbolized by the German capital. It is therefore not surprising that Franz, upon his arrival at the Berlin train station, is gripped by the city’s frantic rhythm: “Together with the hurrying crowd he walked down the tremendously long platform, surrendered his ticket to its taker with an impatient hand, and continued past innumerable posters, counters, flower shops, people burdened with unnecessary bags, to an archway” (Nabokov 1968, 19). The fact of being carried away by an unknown and uncontrollable tempo is, moreover, apparent in the novel’s first sentence, which describes a clock, since schedules are an integral part of big city life: “The huge black clock hand is still at rest but is on the point of making its once-a-minute gesture; that resilient jolt will set a whole world in motion. The clock

²⁴ L’expérience immédiate de soi, l’intuition, la volonté, l’instinct, les sentiments, la créativité et le dynamisme.

face will slowly turn away, full of despair, contempt, and boredom” (Nabokov 1968, 1). The passage of time also symbolizes the passage from one world into another, that is, from the small town to the big city. Nevertheless, in the beginning, Franz seems happy to be assailed by these many fleeting impressions:²⁵

Once in the street he was engulfed in streaming radiance. Outlines did not exist, colors had no substance. Like a woman’s wispy dress that has slipped off its hanger, the city shimmered and fell in fantastic folds, not held up by anything, a discarnate iridescence limply suspended in the azure autumnal air. Beyond the nacrine desert of the square, across with a car sped now and then with a new metropolitan trumpeting, great pink edifices loomed, and suddenly a sunbeam, a gleam of glass, would stab him painfully in the pupil.

(Nabokov 1968, 23)

This positive welcoming of multiple sensations, however, turns out to be short lived, likely because Franz discovers the city through the eyes of a nearsighted person who has broken his glasses, which tones down his initial perceptions. The metropolis’s aggression is thus not absolute, just like Martha’s own aggression, first discovered in a ray of sunshine and then rediscovered in an almost blind blur.

These pieces of information foreshadow Franz’s failure at becoming a city-dweller. His lack of success can be explained by the impossibility, for him, of breaking away from the community even though his will to leave it behind is demonstrated from the first pages. For example, he decides to move from a third-class train car to second class in order to escape the dirtiness that he systematically associates with the country (Nabokov 1968, 3-4). He therefore seems to confuse modern society with class consciousness. Once he is in Berlin, Franz will never succeed in entering into the everyday life of the big city, with Nabokov seeming to refuse to give him the keys to the metropolis and the possibility of letting himself get dragged into the tumultuous life of the big city. This is the case when he finds himself compelled to leave his

²⁵ The sense of sight is particularly important for Simmel in his sociology of the senses. It is followed by hearing.

room every morning before obtaining the job as a salesperson promised by Dreyer: “Thus perforce he explored the city, or rather what seemed to him its most metropolitan section. The obligatory nature of those excursions envenomed the novelty” (Nabokov, 1968, 57). He is not the *flâneur* that one defines as a contemplative walker; he is a disoriented wanderer who does not know how to spend his days. All of Franz’s dreams therefore remain solely in the state of dreams, since the young man can never manage to turn them into reality on account of his lack of a calculating mind: “He employed this method of calculating happiness quite guilelessly, the way a greedy child imagines a country with chocolate-cream mud and ice-cream snow” (Nabokov 1968, 138).

Franz’s provincial clumsiness is also apparent in his clothing, which Dreyer notices in the train car where, without knowing it, he sees his nephew for the first time:

He noted the so-called “lizard” pattern of the young fellow’s green-and-garnet tie which obviously had cost ninety-five pfennigs, the stiff collar, and also the cuffs and front of his shirt – a shirt incidentally which only existed in an abstract form since all its visible parts, judging by a treacherous gloss, were pieces of starched armor of rather low quality but greatly esteemed by a frugal provincial who attaches them to an invisible undergarment made at home of unbleached cloth.

(Nabokov 1968, 8-9).

Throughout this description, which goes on for several lines, Dreyer pays particular attention to the outdatedness of Franz’s suit, which in no way corresponds to the new codes of their era and even less to the young man’s unexceptional will to set himself apart from the rest of society by transforming himself into an actual dandy.

Indeed, as Simmel highlights in his essays *Zur Psychologie der Mode (On the Psychology on Fashion)* and *Philosophie der Mode (Philosophy of Fashion)*, respectively published in 1895 and 1905, fashion plays an essential role in modernity since it distinguishes precursors from followers, which is the case for Franz at the beginning of the novel. His difficulties, in this respect, even appear in Martha’s comments at the moment when Franz imagines himself one day looking like Dreyer: “‘In ten years,’ she said with a laugh, ‘in ten years, my dear, men’s fashions

will have changed substantially” (Nabokov 1968, 136). Furthermore, Franz will end up sporting his tuxedo at an inappropriate moment, which his mistress points out yet again. The fact that Franz is a bad follower is all the more remarkable since he works as a salesperson in a department store that is supposed to showcase all of the latest trends. As he himself admits, “that big-city Sunday walk had not been easy to copy” (Nabokov 1968, 119).

For want of being able to leave the community, Franz encloses himself within it, even if this community is not in the country, but in the German capital. The analogy between the old and the new community can be read, for example, in the following words: “He was displeased that there were so many vacant lots, so many little parks and lawny squares, so many pines and birches, houses under construction, vegetable gardens. It all reminded him too much of his backwoods home” (Nabokov 1968, 46). Even though he is aware of this likeness, Franz nevertheless accepts to enter into the microcosm of his new family, comprised of Dreyer and Martha, who look after him, even while he continues to maintain ties with his mother and sister to whom he regularly writes despite the fact that he has nothing to tell them and that he would like to break off any relationship he has with them. All of this leads him to become one of these objects of big-city objective culture that Martha sculpts at will: “warm, healthy young wax that one can manipulate and mold till its shape suits your pleasure” (Nabokov 1968, 31). The young woman goes so far as to impose her own schedule upon him: “At half past ten Franz stirred. He had been told to get up at exactly half past seven. It was exactly half past seven. [...] Franz had slept nine hours” (Nabokov 1968, 238). However, this transformation into a “jolly doll” or a “dead doll” (Nabokov 1968, 153) does not protect him from neurasthenia, even though it is particular to the big city, insofar as Franz does not manage to develop a specific individuality that might allow him to immunize himself against the surrounding world (Nabokov 1968, 201-2). The community is destructive, and Franz seems to know that since he sees Martha’s death as a liberation.

This female character can indeed be considered as the very opposite of modernity even though she looks down on the provincial town—she refuses to go with Dreyer to see Franz’s family—from which she herself comes, as she is originally from Hamburg.

In this way, even if Martha gives herself up to a few of the city’s pleasures, such as variety shows, she nevertheless most often remains enclosed in her home, which she decorated in

an entirely impersonal fashion (Nabokov 1968, 35-6), still convinced that she is following what is in vogue, emphasizing her qualities as an imitator, the opposite of a specific individuality. She also spends a great deal of time in Franz's bedroom, which she adorns with objects that, in her opinion, are indispensable. Most often, she also rejects society events, symbolized by large dinner parties attended by her husband's acquaintances, and she therefore refuses to engage in the kinds of interactions that Simmel depicts as distinguishing features of modernity.

Moreover, even though, from the first pages of the novel, Martha displays a calculating mind, she appears to be a woman who does not especially like complicated things that one must think about at length, thus highlighting her limitations when it comes to thought and intelligence: "Life should proceed according to plan, straight and strict, without freakish twists and wiggles" (Nabokov 1968, 10). Consequently, it is not surprising that the young woman does not succeed in developing a "good" murder plot, nor does she succeed in carrying out her plan for drowning Dreyer,²⁶ even more so since she seems to be affected by another pathology that is particular to the metropolis and the monetary economy, namely poverty, described in several of Simmel's essays wherein he demarcates five chronic diseases tied to money: greed, prodigality, cynicism, the blasé attitude, and poverty. According to the sociologist and philosopher of culture, "no one is socially poor until he has been assisted" (Simmel 1971, 150).²⁷ As the French sociologist Serge Paugam notes:

to be assisted, in this sense, is to receive everything from others without being able, at least in the short term, to enter into a relationship of complementarity or of reciprocity with regard to them. The poor person, a recipient of aide that is especially intended for him, must accept to live, be it only temporarily, with the negative image that society attributes to him, and that he ends up interiorizing, of no longer being useful, of being one of what we sometimes name the "undesirables."

(Paugam 2005, 66)²⁸

²⁶ Martha also calculates everything when it comes to her first emotions with Franz, but nothing goes as planned (cf. chapter 4).

²⁷ "[...] ist er im sozialen Sinne arm, wenn er unterstützt wird" (Simmel 1992, 551).

²⁸ "être assisté, en ce sens, c'est recevoir tout des autres sans pouvoir s'inscrire, du moins dans le court terme, dans une relation de complémentarité et de réciprocité vis-à-vis d'eux. Le pauvre, récipiendaire de secours qui lui sont

In this way, while Martha seemed to be the embodiment of the greedy character—she does not want to make useless purchases in the dining car—and postures as a free and emancipated woman, she proves to be dependent upon her rich husband who allows her to escape poverty, a state that she dreads above all else. This idea is present throughout the novel, including in the distressed image that arises in the sordid café to which Franz brought her: “darned stockings, two modest dresses, a broken comb, one room with a bloated mirror, her hands coarse from washing and cooking” (Nabokov 1968, 112). This image shows itself to be very far from her materialist dreams, like when she imagines living with Franz in a beautiful villa (Nabokov 1968, 134-5). These different representations correspond entirely to her idea of a happy marriage: “An unhappy marriage was when the husband was poor, or had landed in prison for some shady business, or kept squandering his earnings on kept women” (Nabokov 1968, 65). It is therefore Martha’s monetary syndrome that ultimately kills her insofar as she postpones her husband’s murder in order to make more money before permanently losing the financial support of her benefactor. Her greediness even leads to her own reification and to the malfunction of her mechanism at the very moment that she is trying to objectify, albeit in vain, the two men who surround her: Dreyer does not die, and Franz frees himself from her by leaving her without medical care.

In view of these various observations, we can say that Nabokov, in this novel, offers a rewriting of the sociological, philosophical, and psychological modernity introduced by Simmel in the early 20th century, considered to be one of the major theoreticians of modernity. He redirects some of the characteristic elements of the metropolis, which become typical traits of his characters, making it possible for Dreyer and Franz to escape the trap set by Martha as she tries to take advantage of these two men, unsuccessfully, insofar as she herself is the victim of this modernity.

In addition to his parody of modernity, Nabokov also seems to show that opening out toward the world is necessary. Effectively, if the individual does not free himself from the

spécialement destinés, doit accepter de vivre, ne fût-ce que temporairement, avec l’image négative que lui renvoie la société, et qu’il finit par intérioriser, de n’être plus utile, de faire partie de ce que l’on nomme parfois les ‘indésirables’.”

community, he is doomed to lose. Since our investigation into the presence of the concept of Simmelian modernity in Nabokov's work is still in its early stages, it would therefore be appropriate to expand our study to include other novels that depict Russian emigrants, such as Ganin in *Mary*, in order more attentively observe the factors that are linked to the *flâneur* and to the question of the foreigner, considered by Simmel to be the city-dweller par excellence, and thus to see how the fulfillment of a given personality is conjured in these works.

Translated by Jackson B. Smith

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