

Trevor Jackson

DYING IS APPOSITE:
POSSIBILITIES OF SELF-DISCOVERY AND
PATTERNS OF COMPLETENESS
IN *THE ORIGINAL OF LAURA*

To say nothing of the irony that accompanies the claim, *The Original of Laura* contains a thematic pattern that strives for completeness. This is not meant in the sense that the ultimate goal of finishing a story – winding through the typically conceived triad of components, traversing its structure from beginning, through the middle, to reach the conclusion and closing point – is dictated by the act of beginning it. Nor does it carry the same meaning as when Nabokov himself said that he had “no purpose at all when composing [...] stuff except to compose it,” creating and arranging a work and then having it off of his mind.¹ Rather, Nabokov not only employs his characters to complete his design, bending them to his will, but also entreats his audience to participate in it and see it to its conclusion as well. Characters are used and discarded when they have finished their purpose, and the audience must participate in order to allow the design to come to fruition. This is not only true because an author needs a reader, but because the machinations of Nabokov’s pattern and plot in *Laura* endeavor to

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 115.

reach out of the text itself as he offers the two central characters the opportunity to escape from his fictional construct.

Much attention has been drawn to Nabokov's highly detailed and delicately planned works. Michael Wood has pointed out that even the very lightest of Nabokov's novels "conceals mountains of weighty preparation; the slightest glance or joke often depends on hours of pedantry, summoned, worked through, and abolished" as if "art were itself a morality, a form of cathedral sculpture demanding all the more care because it may well be seen only by God."² The heavy investment of time, effort, and mental toil into a work of art certifies that there is not only value in its composition and production, but that there is also a certain reverence that accompanies the process of intense labor, showering rewards on both artist and audience. The rich exchange between author and reader, between creation and discovery, accounts for what Nabokov often called the pure pleasure of art. Instructing his students to hone in on these subtle details, one of Professor Nabokov's objectives was to have his students cultivate the good reader in themselves so as not to skip over the pleasure of finding something concealed by the artist and miss experiencing it in its rapturous niceties. In nature too, the same concept is at work. Writing of mimicry in certain creatures, Nabokov finds that their elegant disguises have been "carried to a point of mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and luxury far in excess of a predator's power of appreciation" and concludes that both art and nature are a "form of magic," both a "game of intricate enchantment and deception."³ Like the unknowing predator who passes over a potential catch, the inattentive reader may fail to perceive the artist's ingenuity. The artist certainly has not spontaneously forged and then forgotten his cunning inventions. The only other one that is certain to recognize the intricate design, as Wood says, is God, and that is only if He cares to look. Nabokov often reported that the world of art is under the power of the artist alone. In his lectures on Dostoevsky, he remarks that when an artist begins a work he establishes for himself a problem to solve and selects his elements in such a way that they can logically develop in a self-contained world that only needs to remain consistent with its own rules. He goes on to say that

² Michael Wood. *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 1-2.

³ Vladimir Nabokov. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revised* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 125.

...when dealing with a work of art we must always bear in mind that art is a divine game. These two elements – the elements of the divine and that of the game – are equally important. It is divine because this is the element in which man comes nearest to God through becoming a true creator in his own right. And it is a game, because it remains art only as long as we are allowed to remember that, after all, it is all make-believe, that the people on the stage, for instance, are not actually murdered, in other words, only as long as our feelings of horror or of disgust do not obscure our realization that we are, as readers or as spectators, participating in an elaborate and enchanting game...⁴

The artist, as Nabokov insisted, reigns as the supreme ruler of his art. And it is neither for characters – whose complete subservience to the author Nabokov has made clear – nor readers to fancifully impose their own ideas on the design of a novel.⁵ Yet the existence of the author-god indicates two things: first, with his whole body of work as a testament to his art, that Nabokov the puppet master, the magician, the god of his creative world, knew what he was doing, which implies that, second, and more importantly, there is a design at work in his novels, a design that is calculated and controlled for a specific purpose. Even in its incompleteness, the presence of a design, constructed through profound labor apparent in the textual intricacy, is evident in *The Original of Laura*.

Before expounding on that, though, what of the game? To take one example of the playfulness that assists in reminding the reader that he is reading a work of fiction, that he is known to be a reader, and that his reading is not meant to reflect reality, let us turn to the opening of *Invitation to a Beheading*. In the second paragraph of the novel, after the death sentence is announced to Cincinnatus C. and he is returned to his cell where he wishes to be left alone, the narrator switches tone and directs his words blatantly at the reader:

⁴ Vladimir Nabokov. *Lectures on Russian Literature* (London: Harcourt Inc., 1981), 105-106.

⁵ Dale E. Peterson, "Nabokov's *Invitation*: Literature as Execution," *PMLA* 96 (October 1981): 824-285.

So we are nearing the end. The right-hand, still untasted part of the novel, which, during our delectable reading, we would lightly feel, mechanically testing whether there were still plenty left (and our fingers were always gladdened by the placid, faithful thickness) has suddenly, for no reason at all, become quite meager: a few minutes of quick reading...⁶

Thus the work reveals itself to be a fiction, referring to itself within itself. The novel has taken an extra step beyond merely being a fantastic world with its own logic developed by the author: it has become a world that, in addition to the reader knowing it is a fiction, knows that it itself is a fiction as well. And what if the reader is caught? What if his hands are ruffling through what remains of the book just as it says he is, or if he begins to as if instructed, or goaded, even forced? The comical transgression where the separation of author and audience is abolished, the so-called “fourth wall” torn down, is enough to strike the unaccustomed reader as a violation of the standard assumptions of fiction. The breaching of the fiction is both a reminder and a warning – a reminder that it is a fiction, and a warning that readers should keep their eyes open because there is more to come.

Elements of metafictional game-playing and self-reference are rife throughout Nabokov’s work. In some instances this phenomenon even extends into his life (at least as far as his printed and performed persona is concerned). It has been said that Nabokov, since his first novel, has derived characters as well as influences from himself.⁷ That some of the same elements at work in his fiction have been put to work in his life points again to a confident, calculated career. The game always seems to be in play. To take just one more example, Nabokov seems to have put some of these devices to work in his life through the careful control of his interviews and presentation of his lectures. One Cornell student who had taken several of his classes recalls an incident from fall 1952 in Russian 317. Near the conclusion of the course, Nabokov announced to the class that all the literary trends they had studied “converged and culminated” in a contemporary author called Sirin. The student describes her subsequent discovery thus:

⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*. Trans. Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 12.

⁷ Dean Flower, “Nabokov’s Personae,” *The Hudson Review* 38 (Spring 1985): 153.

When the class was over – he never explained who Sirin was – we raced from Goldwin Smith Hall across the quadrangle to the library to check the card catalog. And behold: Sirin – in whom all trends converged and culminated – was Vladimir Nabokov. It was the pen name he had used before coming to America. He never told us so, whether from modesty or derision, and even at that point we had not dared to ask.⁸

This game, this play of concealment and revelation, easily has its comic dimensions whether or not one regards Nabokov as an arrogant author or a mastermind with a sense of humor. When asked in a 1971 radio interview for the *Swiss Broadcast* if he makes a point of playing games and confusing readers, Nabokov facetiously answered that such a thing would be a bore and even goes to the trouble to render the remark an exclamation.⁹ In the Cornell example, Nabokov brought some of the stylistic hallmarks so prevalent in his fiction beyond the confines of his texts and into reality. This concept takes on particular importance in *Laura* – especially for Philip Wild – as the audience is not only participating by being singled out; rather, by having the burden of discovery placed on them, the audience is actively involved in the characters' attempts to escape their captivity.

Nabokov exerts complete control over his work in order to present a precisely crafted plan in his novels. In doing so he often engages in self-aware game-playing that assists in exposing the subtlety of that plan by reminding readers that they are responsible for unfolding it. I make these points not to elucidate an already well-supported mountain of scholarship, but rather to remark that these elements are still fully at play in what has been criticized in many of the initial reviews as an undeveloped example of an aging author's fading skill, and called a publishing scheme better left alone or submitted to the flames. It is in fact a wholly conceived, intricately planned novel with definite design and direction.

The narrative of *Laura* revolves around death. Death is a finishing point. It is also the means to completion. Through the use – the abuse, as some see it – of his characters,

⁸ Elizabeth Welt Trahan, "Laughter From the Dark: A Memory of Vladimir Nabokov," *The Antioch Review* 43 (Spring 1985): 181.

⁹ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 184.

Nabokov has fashioned, in *Laura*, a thematic winding toward completion by employing death to bring about the end of his novel and the potential escape of select characters from the fiction. Only the two central characters are offered the opportunity to realize their situation. Flora is provided with the starkest clues that she seems destined to miss, while Wild actively seeks an escape that he very well may achieve. The others are merely tools working toward Nabokov's end, neither offered the possibility of awareness nor given the vitality of the main two. They are killed off when Nabokov is finished with them – when they have completed his purpose and are needed no longer to assist in reaching his end. Through repeating arrangements of death, Flora and Wild are brought together to diverge in their approach to escape. Indeed, it is futile to make any predictions on the unwritten events that were planned to occur in *Laura* without inevitably tapering off into the realm of fanciful speculation. What text there is, however, presents clear themes and continuing similarities that point to a partially constructed, though very alive, design.

The many deaths throughout the novel form a functional pattern that precludes the possibility of coincidence and reminds the reader through metafictional clues that he is engaged in a make-believe world in which he, too, has a role to play. Thomas Pynchon has said that when any measure of seriousness is brought up for discussion in fiction, it is the discussion of an attitude toward death. It is a matter of how those facing it directly and those to which it is a distant thought cope with death.¹⁰ As *Laura*'s subtitle indicates, however, Nabokov sought to remove some of this seriousness in favor of fascination and amusement. The deaths he uses, obscure or trivial, are always functional. It is the particular act of moving toward a unique death and a potential escape that is developed in *Laura*.

The death surrounding Flora is used to isolate her and establish a repetitive pattern that will fold over into Wild's past. Her probable father, Adam Lind, commits a suicide that is poorly preserved through the fancy placement of a camera in a corner. He shoots himself after discovering "that the boy he loved had strangled another, unattainable, boy whom he loved even more."¹¹ Adam Lind has quickly been removed

¹⁰ Thomas Pynchon, *Slow Learner: Early Stories* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1984), 5.

¹¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Original of Laura* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 47-49.

from the novel and, while his role is minimal, his position as being the first detailed death (Flora's grandfather dies very quietly) establishes the pattern that will connect much later with Wild's short, parenthetical reference to Aurora Lee's death, who was "axed and chopped up at seventeen by an idiot lover" (205).

Sometime later, Flora's mother enters into a relationship with the Englishman Hubert H. Hubert. Along with his conjurer's charms and occupation as a questionable vintner, he also brings a conscious desire to reconstitute some semblance of his past family. Here the first resemblances emerge that link Mr. Hubert with Wild. Though the pair does not constitute a precise match, their shared features force them to be positioned side by side for comparative inspection.

As far as Flora's feelings are concerned, an atmosphere of revulsion quickly begins to surround Mr. Hubert as his presence in the household is described. Alone together, Flora seems unable to avoid his presence. It is constantly "enveloping her, so to speak, in some sticky invisible substance and coming closer and closer no matter what way she turned." The next sentence describes one example of this anxiety. She would not "dare to let her arms hang aimlessly lest her knuckles came into contact with some horrible part of that kindly but smelly and 'pushing' old male" (57). The atmosphere is one of spatial suffocation, so much so that movement is restricted through the apprehension of obscene contact. The threat of sexual molestation continues several times through the remaining scene as Flora's tensions mount and culminate in a frightened kick to Mr. Hubert's groin. In the course of an illness that has bedridden Flora, Mr. Hubert sits by to comfort her. He tells her stories and the two play a partial game of chess while her mother leaves the house to purchase aspirin. The physically grotesque features of Mr. Hubert and his imposition on Flora's comfort are evoked again as

A fourfold smell – tobacco, sweat, rum and bad teeth – emanated from poor old harmless Mr Hubert, it was all very pathetic. His fat porous nose with red nostrils full of hair nearly touched her bare throat as he helped to prop the pillows behind her shoulders... (67).

Surely, the scene presents a discomfoting and reviling experience from the vantage point of a small girl alone with such a menacing man.

That Mr. Hubert is physically revolting and labeled as pathetic to Flora is of particular importance when the attributes of her future husband are taken into consideration. Utterly obese, Wild possesses an unattractive exterior and is prone to pronouncing a litany of self-deprecating things about himself in his manuscript – things that assist readers in viewing him with feelings of intense pity. From the brief description of their only way of meaningless lovemaking, where Flora must sit in the “fauteuil of his flesh with her back to him” (197), to his untimely bowels and his tiny feet, Wild is undeniably a physically difficult person to behold, far withdrawn from his attractive wife. Even Mr. Hubert’s vague attractiveness and charms are attested to, while Wild has no physically redeeming qualities to speak of. Both, however, possess definitely repelling features in Flora’s view.

Aside from perhaps being a reprised molester from another Nabokov novel, Mr. Hubert’s pathetic aspects are far more pronounced than his physical features. Further, these aspects underline his resemblances with Wild even more pertinently than nauseating appearances. Mr. Hubert had previously had a wife and daughter whose resemblances he seeks to reconstitute with Flora and her mother. This is not expressed in a subtle way, but quite overtly when he makes it clear to Flora’s mother:

He was a dear man, and his life lay in ruins all around him. He wanted [her] to marry him, saying she was the image of the young actress who had been his wife, and indeed to judge by the photographs she, Madame Lanskaya, did resemble [sic] poor Daisy’s mother (73-75).

In addition to continuing the photographic motif that runs through the novel, the passage exposes Mr. Hubert’s willingness to unreservedly admit sentiments that might fluster a marital prospect and lead Flora’s mother to believing herself only a replacement of the lost original. It is an act of desperation evocative of resentment or pity. In any case, Mr. Hubert remains in the house until his death.

The resemblance Mr. Hubert draws between his daughter Daisy and Flora is even more acute. His gift of a chess set for Flora during her sickness is an attempt on his part to fit her into a space previously occupied by his daughter. They both “knew the moves” the reader is assured, and most every aspect of Flora’s appearance seems to make her a perfect replacement for Mr. Hubert’s lost child:

He told her stories about his sad life, he told her about his daughter who was just like her, same age – twelve –, same eyelashes – darker than the dark blue of the iris, same hair, blondish or rather palomino, and so silky–
... (59).

Immediately after this we are told that Daisy was killed taking a shortcut home from school on her bike. A backing automobile smashed her, and soon after her mother simply died of a broken heart. As he relates this story to young Flora, Mr. Hubert “acknowled[ges] all the offences of life” and curiously attempts to “adjust his thick outsole to a pattern of the carpet” (61), fitting into the authorial design. It is as though Mr. Hubert is trying to fold the images of Flora and her mother over those of Daisy and his dead wife, replacing his past with his present.

This notion is again in attendance as Wild describes the resemblances between Flora and Aurora Lee, a love he had “pursued with hopeless desire at high-school balls”:

Your [Aurora’s] painted pout and cold gaze were, come to think of it, very much like the official lips and eyes of Flora, my wayward wife, and your flimsy frock of black silk might have come from her recent wardrobe
(201).

Both descriptions of past persons resembling Flora take into account mutual aspects: age, eyelashes, eyes, and hair with Mr. Hubert; gaze and eyes, lips, and clothing with Wild. More compelling than the specific details of the parallels each man draws, however, is the general notion these parallel passages indicate: both men are imposing figures from their present on their past in an attempt to reconstitute losses caused by death.

Mr. Hubert and Wild, then, share similar characteristics. Both display a willingness to express their pathetic distinctiveness, and they reside in nearly identical situations, both viewing Flora as a semblance of the past to be regained. So, too, do these men's unexciting, rather sudden deaths reflect one another. Mr. Hubert suffers a stroke in an elevator and Wild has a heart attack.

The deaths of characters continually mirror one another. Just as Daisy's mother seems to die for no reason other than grief, Flora's mother suddenly collapses on the lawn during Flora's college graduation ceremony, a death commemorated (like her husband's) by a photograph (103). As Flora bends to search vainly for her mother's pulse, Wild stands in the background of this photograph admiring Flora's features rather than sympathizing with her plight.

Every death in *Laura* is devoid of emotion or pathos and is presented with a matter-of-fact nonchalance that prevents any concern for the deceased on the reader's part. Little Daisy's demise is perhaps the most tragic in tone and the only one that might arouse sentiment. But even her innocent end at the hands of a backing motorist is downplayed and distracted from by the uncomfortable atmosphere surrounding its telling. Mr. Hubert's existence is even called incidental, and none of the characters are nearly as central or as developed as Flora and Wild.

Most characters are scarcely present at all before being subject to elimination. The inclusion of these temporary characters is unessential to the main action of the novel, which seems to be divided between Wild's mental experiments and Flora's affairs. Why include these characters at all? They do not forward the principal story, nor are they present long enough to develop any discernable dimensions. They do, however, affect the aesthetics of the structure. These short-lived characters serve a twofold purpose. First, they form the mirroring pattern that connects the two central characters. In doing so, the authorial hand imposes death as it completes its design. Once Mr. Hubert has served his purpose, in laying down the repetitive pattern of deaths, he is killed. The completion of his use to the author mirrors the circumstance of his death, as he has just finished a business dinner and is ascending in a hotel elevator at the moment of his termination. Once Flora is done with college, and very close to meeting Wild, her mother is

terminated as well, signifying the end of her use in Nabokov's design. Wild succumbs when his heart allegedly fails him just as his manuscript is completed.

Secondly, the multitude of patterned deaths isolates the primary characters from any meaningful connections and pushes them to the forefront of the focus. From here, their deaths can be anticipated as well. A connection via similar backgrounds has been created to bring Flora and Wild together, both no longer with any family (Wild had a sister who died before reaching puberty) and both with similar individuals haunting their pasts (Mr. Hubert and Aurora Lee). Their centrality is also shared in the unique prospect of freedom that is offered to them by the author. For the audience, the mounting similarities represent a reminder of fiction under the control of deliberate patterning.

Nabokov also extends potential awareness to his disconnected couple. Despite the similar circumstances that brought them together, Flora and Wild are opposite characters. While Wild is an intensely internal character, preferring intellectual pursuits to physical ones, Flora is preoccupied with the external world and not in the least concerned with matters of the mind. This differentiation is reflected in how they recognize (or fail to) the author's offer of awareness.

If her predecessors serve as any indication, Flora seems destined to be unsuccessful, if not a downright failure. Her grandfather was a landscape painter whose works were met with indifference when he migrated to America. Her father had slightly more luck as a photographer. Her mother was a second-rate ballerina whose diminishing age and looks "reduced [her] to giving dancing lessons at a not quite first-rate school in Paris" (51-53). Flora, like her mother, is also a cheater – both amorously and academically, taking multiple lovers while in wedlock and passing college examinations by penning information on her arms. Her marriage to a successful though unsightly man is another indication that she is unable to do things on her own or that she prefers an easy, simple road to a challenging one. Despite the many clues and signs Nabokov extends to her, Flora is unable to achieve self-awareness.

The most overt hint given to Flora begins on an index card headed "Last §" on the left and "Z" on the right, a double indication that the episode is near the end of the novel. In this scene, Winny Carr comes across Flora sitting on a bench at a train station with a recently purchased copy of *My Laura* in her lap that she never bothers to open. When

Winnie notices the book and says that she hopes Flora will enjoy the story of her life, Flora brushes off the remark, saying that she “doubted if she could force herself to start reading it.” Winnie persists in her attempt at persuasion but ultimately fails:

Oh you must! said Winnie, it is, of course, fictionalized and all that but you’ll come face to face with yourself at every other corner. And there’s your wonderful death. Let me show you your wonderful death. Damn, here’s my train. Are we going together?[""]

“I’m not going anywhere. I’m expecting somebody. Nothing very exciting. Please, let me have my book.”

“Oh, but I simply must find that passage for you. It’s not quite at the end. You’ll scream with laughter. It’s the craziest death in the world.[""]

“You’ll miss your train” said Flora. (225-227)

Even when the key to her self-discovery as a fiction is in her lap and its contents broadcast directly to her, when her opportunity to realize her situation and take measures to escape is at its most deliberate apex, Flora flatly rejects the prospect out of apathy or vanity. In one section of Wild’s manuscript it is said that the blurb of *My Laura* calls the book a “roman à clef, with a clef lost forever” (221). Aside from the jolt of sexual humor in this dust-jacket description, *My Laura* is the “novel with a key” able to unlock Flora from the fictional confines of *The Original of Laura*. But she will not open it. Indeed, she is averse even to opening her mind, and is content and confined within her own view of the world. We are told that, “of art, of love, of the difference between dreaming and waking she knew nothing but would have darted at you like a flatheaded blue serpent if you questioned her” (85-87). And elsewhere in the novel we are told that her “contempt for everyone but herself advertised with a flush of warmth its constant presence” on her face (17). She is self-involved, self-enclosed, but unable to become self-aware. Her refusal to read the book of her life is a rejection of the possibilities Nabokov has offered her.

If the scene at the train station is indeed to be placed at the end of *Laura*, and as far as we know by this point Flora has not died – except within the novel she refuses to acknowledge – then it can be inferred that through her avoidance of becoming acquainted with her life and death (her refusal to read about it in *My Laura*) she fails to fit the patterned design and is kept confined through her persisting position in the fiction. She stands outside of completion by remaining alive at the end of the novel.

There are other ignored or unrealized indications of Flora's failings peppered throughout the novel. While they may not be obvious to her, they are within reach of the reader. Winny's remark, for one, that Flora will come face to face with herself at every other corner is echoed in the repetitions that Flora associates or is associated with. Cora, Aurora, and Laura, all rhyming with and resembling Flora, form a mural of self-reference that is either inaccessible to her or beyond her willingness to recognize. Cora the housemaid is likened to Flora when Wild mentions that they both are "somewhere in bed with their boyfriends," typifying their promiscuity (163). Wild finds an appealing semblance of Aurora Lee, the murdered romantic infatuation of his youth, in Flora. And Laura, to whom Flora is the original to which the novel's title refers, is the elusive rendition that sometimes melts into Flora to confuse both of their identities.

An air of vagueness and uncertainty surrounds *My Laura*. This lack of clarity associates itself with Flora and continues to reflect her inability to detect the metafictional clues strewn about her. In the first chapter of the novel we hear that Flora's "exquisite bone structure immediately slipped into a novel – became in fact the secret structure of that novel" and that she is to be identified by an "unwritten, half-written, rewritten difficult book" that is apparently "on a very high shelf, in a very bad light" (15-23). Flora's identity is often deferred and said to be in another location, distant and unattainable. "Everything about her," we are told, "is bound to remain blurry, even her name which seems to have been made expressly to have another one modeled upon it by a fantastically lucky artist" (85). Her indistinctiveness becomes more and more obvious to the reader as each episode paints her as a vulgar materialist, a philistine, as Nabokov might say, reducing her to a nearly one-dimensional character. In the scene at the train station, Winny even remarks that Flora's life is "fictionalized within the novel." And when it is expressed in these terms, we come to wonder which novel is being referred to:

The Original of Laura, which the reader holds in his hands and which certainly validates the claim, or *My Laura*, the novel within the novel that the reader holds in his hands which also certainly validates the claim? We go on to wonder if they are the same novel. Suffice it to say, the confusion *My Laura* evokes is also passed on to Flora and her role in Nabokov's novel. Through her disinterested refusal to read the book, to watch the signs, and to confront her death, Flora fails to recognize her ability to escape and is continually condemned in the prison of the fiction by remaining alive.

Wild, on the other hand, succeeds in escaping the fiction by a reversal of the creative process. His death is the single unique one in the book. Unlike the executions imposed upon other characters by the author, Wild's is an interior reversal, an act of will perpetrated by himself from within the confines of the fiction. This is not to say that Wild has begun to dictate his own circumstances, an idea that Nabokov would readily dismiss, but rather the manner in which his death is conducted serves as an expression of the metafiction itself and conforms to the pattern of completeness running throughout the novel. Unlike the demise of the others, Wild's death is a deliberate act, built up by increasingly intense experimentation.

It is within Wild's "mysterious" manuscript, a "mad neurologist's testament" as his wife puts it, that "had cost him, and would still cost him, years of toil" (1-3), that his secret mental experiment is described. As those years go by, his experiments begin to engulf more and more of his body, targeting greater portions of himself for erasure. It is described by Wild as

A process of self-obliteration conducted by an effort of the will. Pleasure, bordering on almost unendurable exstasy [sic], comes from feeling the will working at a new task: an act of destruction which develops paradoxically an element of creativeness in the totally new application of totally free will. Learning to use the vigor of the body for the purpose of its own deletion[,] standing vitality on its head. (213)

In his manuscript, Wild explains the progression of his experiments and the methods he uses to conduct them. Aside from being an account of this, the manuscript is also a

guidebook or instructional volume for those interested in pursuing similar endeavors. In his trances, he begins by erasing his feet, working his way up to his procreative portions and eventually his torso. Many areas targeted for erasure are also subject to Wild's self-debasing scrutiny. He takes great pains to describe the annoyances and inconveniences that his obese body has caused him his whole life, and goes significantly out of his way to recall and record the various episodes, as he puts it, in the "anthology of humiliation to which, since my marriage, I have been a constant contributor" (219). In any case, his method involves slipping off into a trance and mentally erasing portions of his body. He conducts these practices, deleting himself at least up to the midsection, before restoring his erased portions and coming out of the trance. Soon it occurs to him that he might achieve a different outcome if he removes himself from the trance without restoring certain portions of his body. He first attempts this with his toes, whereupon he finds that he is unable to walk, falling flat on his face with delight. The skin on his toes, he excitedly reports, has shriveled and can be peeled away (157-167). There is no reason to suspect that he stops with his toes. That his mental activities are capable of influencing his physical appearance implies that his entire body can be similarly affected in this manner.

And indeed it is curious that soon after Wild has submitted the final chapter of his manuscript in longhand to his typist he suffers a fatal heart attack. Like John Shade's poem, Wild's manuscript is hijacked by some "other fellow" to be published in a more permanent place than Wild had planned (187). There is enough contextual evidence to infer, at least reasonably, that Wild completed his experiment; that he succeeded in erasing himself rather than suffering a heart attack. While his body may remain, his consciousness has achieved freedom. In his manuscript he writes that an experimenter should remember that the "divine delight in destroying, say[,] one's breastbone should not be indulged in. Enjoy the destruction but do not linger over your own ruins lest you develop an incurable illness, or die before you are ready to die" (181). In his years of experimentation and humiliation, Wild has reached the point where he is prepared for death and thus freedom from his suffering. The great pleasure he derives from his mental effacement coupled with his growing self-assurance that he is working in the right direction promises that his destruction is the eventual, logical end he seeks.

In order to begin his experiment Wild must first slip into a trance where it is necessary to produce a mental image of himself on the back of his closed eyelids before he can begin to dismember it (131-133). In doing so, he engages in an act of creation that parallels his own. The concept at work, another mirroring device, can be represented as a hierarchical staircase. At the very top stands God, if this means only the highly patterned wonders Nabokov recognized and appreciated in nature. Next comes the artist, Nabokov, who will impress similar aspects into his work – aspects whose preparation requires magnificent effort because, as Wood says, God may be the only one to notice their depth. Finally comes the work of art, the “divine game.” In order to erase a fictional creation, creation first needs to take place. Wild must formulate a projection of himself on his private blackboard in order to dismantle it, deepening the metaphorical staircase an additional step so that it runs from Nabokov the creator to Wild, to Wild’s self-projected “i” with its dot of a head, line of a body and torso, and serif of two disliked legs that can then effectively be erased only after its formation. Wild is doing to himself what Nabokov is doing to him, both “standing vitality on its head.” Engaging in this process by doing precisely the opposite of what is required of an author to create a character, Wild has undone himself. He has disappeared from the fiction. Like the mass in his recurring nightmare, he has been rubbed out and is no longer present in the fiction, no longer imprisoned.

Escaping from the cycle of life is not only creative fiction. Notes on Nabokov’s index cards indicate that he was looking into the Buddhist concept of nirvana while writing this novel. Running the span of two cards, Nabokov records such definitive phrases as “absorption into the supreme spirit,” “absorption into the divine essence,” “release from the cycle of incarnations,” and “extinction of the self,” all of which, he writes, “postulates a supreme god” (215-17). Moving from being inside to being outside, or at least to “not being,” is what Wild accomplishes within the parameters of the fiction. An escape from life, from suffering, is the ultimate goal in Buddhism. It is a goal shared by Wild and accomplished in his experiments. All of Nabokov’s phrases about nirvana express the nature of Wild’s plans. The supreme god is Nabokov, playing the “divine game” with his imagined world – divine because all action of the story emanates from his

own whim and will; a game because the audience is participating in an elaborately staged exhibition.

Wild, then, is no longer doomed to Nabokov's arbitrary plans because his part in them has been realized and he has been released. But this liberation requires an audience to have completed the following process; to read through, recognize, and allow the pattern to unfold by traversing its terrain and arriving at its end. By following the process of its presentation, it is the reader who enables the novel's purpose to be accomplished. Each time one reads through the novel, Wild achieves his escape, and only by following his experimentation to the end, along with his suffering and humiliation, his physically dreadful appearance and self-defacing attitude about it, his cruel wife and his depressing loneliness – only by completing the novel – is Wild dissolved and released from the tormenting world that once bound him in the fiction.

Flora, as far as we know, stays behind, perpetually imprisoned in each repeated reading. The others whose lives are terminated in the novel are autocratically used to establish and complete Nabokov's design. Only Wild is selected to undergo the process of transcendence that is the culminating point of the novel. As he positions and executes (in every sense of the word) the agents in the fictional world of *Laura*, Nabokov has woven a scheme intricate enough that the brilliance of both structural craft and artistic beauty flash up from the page.

It is unfortunate and tantalizing that the final chapter of Wild's manuscript occupies only a few lines that end mid-sentence on a single index card. This one is labeled as the beginning of the last chapter of the novel. Here we might have expected to find a synthesis of Wild's discoveries, his warnings or entreaties to others, or a statement of his future intentions. Or perhaps there would be nothing of the sort. Equally tantalizing and unfortunate is that Nabokov's final novel remains, as it will always remain, unfinished. As a natural consequence, readers will only be able to make limited conclusions about what does exist on 138 index cards. The unlocked, unknowable, unwritten facets of the novel will remain in obscurity. *The Original of Laura*, like *My Laura* contained within it, spattered and hidden, is a kind of maddening masterpiece; complex, daunting and intricate, profusely woven around a remarkable design and, unfortunately, incomplete.

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