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“THE MYSTERIES OF MIMICRY”  
AND NATURE AS SUPREME ART:  
NABOKOV’S INTANGIBLE NATURE

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*NATURE AS SUPREME ART*

“**T**he mysteries of mimicry had a special attraction to me” (Nabokov 2000, 98), Nabokov writes in *Speak, Memory*. Subsequently, it is almost commonplace that in both his fiction and non-fiction the writer conceives of insect mimicry as irreconcilable with Darwin’s theory of natural selection. Remembering the words of his father, the lepidopterist Konstantin Godunov-Cherdyntsev, Fyodor in *The Gift* states that

the incredible artistic wit of mimetic disguise... was not explainable by the struggle for existence (the rough haste of evolution’s unskilled forces), was too refined for the mere deceiving of accidental predators, feathered, scaled and otherwise (not very fastidious, but then not too fond of butterflies), and seemed to have been invented by some waggish artist precisely for the intelligent eyes of man. (1988, 105)

The elaborations on mimicry in Nabokov’s œuvre, however, imply more than a critique of Darwinian gradualism, for they involve an inquiry into nature in general. When he states that mimicry is characterized by an “artistic perfection usually associated with man-made things” (Nabokov 2000, 98), when he praises its “subtlety, exuberance and luxury” (2000, 98), and when his fictional lepidopterist muses on its “fantastic refinement” (2000a, 219), he equally refutes the concept of nature as economic or rational, as, for example, that of Aristotle

who claims in *On the Heavens* that “Nature is no wanton or random creator”<sup>1</sup> and that “Nature does nothing that is superfluous and pointless,”<sup>2</sup> since “God and Nature create nothing that has not its use.”<sup>3</sup>

In particular “Father’s Butterflies,” a text originally intended as the second addendum to *The Gift*, challenges an economic nature by emphasizing that mimicry displays “the ‘aimlessness’ of accomplishment” and, with it, “the ‘aimlessness’ of pure art” (Nabokov 2000a, 223) which is certainly incompatible with “the famous ‘struggle for survival’,” since “strugglers have no time for art” (Nabokov 2000a, 223). However, mimicry’s “aimlessness” points beyond itself and proves at the same time that nature isn’t always governed by utility and that nature now and then exceeds the necessary. The same “non-utilitarian” (Nabokov 2000, 98) aspects and the same exuberant refinement which Nabokov sees in the wing-patterns of butterflies, the Stoic Chrysippos discovered in the peacock’s tail with its multitude of colors; musing on its splendor, Chrysippos concluded that nature created it only for the sake of her own pleasure (Hadot 2004, 262; Deichgräber 1954, 79)

It has been noted by several critics that for Nabokov mimicry establishes a link between nature and art, between the natural and the artificial. As Zoran Kuzmanovich contends, the capacity for mimicry reveals nature as an “arch cheat” (2002, 35); Stephen H. Blackwell considers mimicry as “the natural equivalent of human artistic practice” (2010, 87). Nature and artifice become interchangeable terms: “Nabokov’s non-fictional writings show that he completely redefines the terms *nature* and *artifice* into synonyms of each other,” Vladimir Alexandrov states (Alexandrov 1991, 17). Thus, for Nabokov, “Japanese butterflies, those splendid tailed creatures with splashes and ripples of colour on their delicately veined wings, always seem to have fluttered off Japanese fans or screens,” and “art and nature mingle together – in such a wonderful way that it is difficult to say for instance whether sunsets made Claude Lorrain, or Claude Lorrain made sunsets” (Nabokov 2000b, 108). The interchangeability and inseparability of nature and art does not only prove to be a “key to Nabokov’s art” (Alexandrov 1991, 18), it is above all a key to his notion of nature.

In mimicry, nature manifests itself as creative force, or *natura genatrix*; at the same time it exceeds the meaning of *phusis*, which denotes, as Pierre Hadot underlines in *Le Voile d’Isis*, “the action expressed by the verb *phuestai*: giving birth, growing, sprouting” (2004, 40). Mimicry reveals nature’s artistic abilities, its capacity to “invent” “fascinating and incredible

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<sup>1</sup> Qtd. in: [ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/heavens](http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/heavens), II, xi.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle 1902, II, vi, 744a 35.

<sup>3</sup> See [ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/heavens](http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/heavens), I, 4. For a discussion of Aristotle’s concept of nature see Pierre Hadot. 2004. *Le voile d’Isis*. Paris: Gallimard, p. 49 ff.

intricacies” (Nabokov 2000d, 399). With his insistence on artistic nature Nabokov is, as Dieter E. Zimmer contends, “very close to postulating a creator whose intention was to amuse men by the subtlety of mimicry... The creator would be a master-artist who has not only created his work of art which is nature but also the audience to enjoy it which is the discerning human spirit” (2001, 49). However, for Nabokov this master-artist is not a supernatural power, but nature herself. Mimicry’s “artistic perfection” (Nabokov 2000, 98) is achieved by an artistic *natura parens*, “Mother Nature ... with her brush” (Nabokov 2000e, 329), who – endowed with the “incredible artistic wit” of a “waggish artist” (Nabokov 1988, 122) that finds “immense delight” (Nabokov 2000a, 226) in amusing herself and others – is resonant of Pliny the Elder’s playful and rollicking nature that takes pleasure in its own playful variations or *natura varie ludens* (Deichgräber 1954, 69).

The understanding of nature as master-artist deserves a more detailed examination, since it unfolds far-reaching implications for both the relationship between nature and art, and for the relationship between nature’s art and human art. The assumption that nature is artistic and a master-artist indicates, above all, an inversion of the traditional relation according to which nature precedes art. One of the few pre-Christian instances of a breaking with the Greek tradition that nature is anterior to art is the Stoic Zeno of Citium whose understanding of nature is elucidated by Cicero in his *De natura deorum*:

Zeno defines nature as a “creative fire [*ignem artificiosum*] which goes its own way, as an artist does, to bring its work to birth”. In his opinion the essence of all art is creation. Our artists construct their works by the skill of their hands. Nature does the same but in a fashion far more subtle. Nature is a creative fire and the teacher of all the other arts. She is herself a creative artist. In each of her creations she follows her own path and her own principles. Nevertheless, nature in the universe as a whole, which holds and encompasses everything in its embrace, is not an artist only but a master-artist, from whose plan and providence springs all the harvest of the times and seasons. (Cicero 1972, 145-146)

Like the human artist, nature creates, but her creations excel any human art. The conception of nature as *ignem artificiosum* or *pur tekhnikon* and as master-artist entails, as Jean-Louis Chrétien writes in his comment on this passage, that nature is “defined by art itself”: “le plus intime de la nature est en même temps le comble de l’art” (Chrétien 1997, 97). Consequently, nature ceases to be anterior to art but becomes “artificial by essence” (Chrétien 1997, 96). Nature is thus conceived of as originary art, and this affects first of all any notion of *mimesis* in terms of a copy from nature. The *locus classicus* where one might expect such

‘faithful copies’ from nature, are the depiction of natural forms in scientific books,<sup>4</sup> but if nature is already an originary art, any conventional notion of *mimesis* is deprived of its basis. This becomes evident in the elaborations on the intricacies of depicting a *Plusia rosanovi*, or owllet moth, in “Father’s Butterflies”:

How lovely it is, by the way, how one’s eye is caressed by, the dark-cherry forewing, traversed by a mauve-pink stripe and adorned at its center by the golden emblem of its genus, in this instance a tapering, bowed half-moon – and if its hard to render the flowery velvet of the background, what is one to say of the “emblem,” which, on the actual moth, resembles a dab of gilt redolent of turpentine, and must therefore be copied (and recopied!) in such a way that the painter’s work transmits, besides all the rest, a resemblance to the work of a painter. (Nabokov 2000a, 211)

Praising the skills of the painters illustrating lepidopteral atlases, the narrator contends that the illustrator’s challenge consists in rendering the “emblem” or the genus of a moth, since this emblem “resembles a dab of gilt redolent of turpentine” (Nabokov 2000a, 211). Therefore, the illustrator’s task is not to copy from nature, or what Paul Klee has called *natura naturata*; instead, he has to render what is already artistic. His task is not only to achieve a resemblance to the actual insect, but “a resemblance to the work of a painter” (Nabokov 2000a, 211). Here Nabokov approximates with his understanding of nature as master-artist twentieth-century revisions of *mimesis*, like Paul Klee’s according to which the artist imitates *natura naturans*, poetic nature, or, as Picasso formulates it: “It is not a matter of imitating nature, but to work as she does” (quoted in Hadot 2004, 289).

If the concept of nature as master-artist affects *mimesis*, it also affects – by extension – the relationship between human art and that of the master-artist. The notion of nature as supreme artist or master-artist also means, as Jean-Louis Chrétien emphasizes in his comment on Zeno’s *ignem artificiosum*, that it is nature from which all human arts derive and against which all human arts have to be measured (1997, 98). Nabokov is well aware of this when he claims – now employing metaphors of the Judeo-Christian tradition – that a “creative writer must study carefully the works of his rivals, including the Almighty” (Nabokov 1990, 32), and that “art is a divine game [...] because this is the element in which man comes nearest to God through becoming a true creator in his own right” (Nabokov 1981, 106). Nabokov’s

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<sup>4</sup> As Hugh Raffles (2011) shows in his *Insectopedia*, scientific insect illustrations, from Maria Sybilla Merian to Cornelia Hesse-Honegger, defy any simplistic concept of *mimesis*.

understanding of the artist as God's rival is as little Romantic<sup>5</sup> as his views on nature. That the *homo poeticus* emulates God and that art is a "divine game" implies above all that God is an artist and his creation is a divine art. Nabokov thus evokes an *ars divina*, a notion conceiving of God's creation explicitly in terms of art, which originates from St. Augustine, persists throughout the Middle Ages in the writings of Eriugena and Nicolai de Cusa, and reaches its climax with Marsilio Ficino's Renaissance Neo-Platonism.<sup>6</sup> In *The Book of Eighty-Three Questions*, Augustine speaks of "the supreme art of the almighty God" (Augustine 1972, § 78); Eriugena, in the same tradition, calls in his *Periphyseon* God "the Artificer of all things" (III, 635 D); in *De venatione sapientiae*, Nicolai de Cusa refers to the world in terms of a work of art: *mundi artificium* (IV, 10). Marsilio Ficino who elaborates on the notion of an *ars divina* throughout his *Platonic Theology* considers God as "the artificer of nature" [*deum naturae artificem*] (XIII, iii, 1). God as supreme artist – or, as in Eriugena's writings, God as supreme artist and *artifex* – has come to replace Zeno's *pur tekhnikon* as master-artist, and the human artist has to be seen in relation to the divine artist: human art imitates *ars divina*. Augustine, for example, sees human art as an extension of divine art, in a way that the latter is "effective in the artist's hand, so that he is able to create something beautiful and well-shaped" (Augustine 1972, § 78). Ficino, however, reformulates this *imitatio* of divine art in terms of emulation. In Book XIII of his *Platonic Theology* he praises the achievements of the human arts. Citing Zeuxis' grapes, and Apollos' mare and dog as examples of what could be called in Nabokov a "mingling" of art and nature, he writes: "and what is marvelous is that human arts make on their own whatever nature itself makes: it is as if we were not her slaves but her rivals [*quasi non servi simus naturae, sed aemuli*]" (Ficino 2001, 169). "So man [...] is a kind of god [*est quidam deus*]" (*ibid.*), Ficino concludes in Book IV, for "just as this soul emulates God's work through its various arts, so too, like God, it accomplishes all things [*ita instar dei efficit omnia*]" (2001, 249). Ficino seems to almost anticipate Nabokov's statement that the artist emulates God and thus becomes "a true creator in his own right" (Nabokov 1981, 106).

Nabokov addresses his notion of the godlike artist – "godlike" in his emulation of the supreme artist – in his poem "Tolstoy," published in 1928, in which he conceives of the writing of literature as a cosmogenesis in which the writer functions as the creator of a universe:

I mean the nights on which Tolstoy composed;

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<sup>5</sup> Alexandrov, p. 18

<sup>6</sup> See Jean-Louis Chrétien. *Corps à corps. À l'écoute de l'œuvre d'art*. Paris: Minuit, 1997, p. 97 ff.

I mean the miracle, the hurricane,  
of images flying across the inky  
expanse of the sky in that hour of creation,  
that hour of incarnation... For the people  
born on those night were real... That's how the Lord  
transmits to his elected his primeval,  
his beatific license to create  
his worlds, and instantly to breathe into  
the new-made flesh of a one-and-only spirit. (2013, 57-58)

It is this notion of the artist as godlike which has gained critical attention and which has been interpreted either as postmodern, aligning Nabokov with writers like Borges and John Barth (Merivale 1967, 294), or as a Romantic (Alexandrov 1991, 18). Moreover, on the basis of Romanticism's being indebted to Neoplatonic thought one could indeed be tempted to conclude from Nabokov's affinities to Ficino that his views on art and the artist are "essentially Romantic" (Blackwell 2010, 66). However, Romanticism has not only considered nature as artistic; following a concept that originated in the seventeenth century with thinkers like Paracelsus and Della Porta (Hadot 2004, 268), Romanticism has seen nature also as a hieroglyphic language to be deciphered. Novalis, in his *Disciple at Sais*, speaks of natural phenomena in terms of a "magic writing" (quoted in Hadot 2004, 270-71); and Schelling, in his *Philosophie der Kunst*, as a "mysterious writing" (Schelling 1985, 696). Franz von Baader calls nature a "mysterious hieroglyphic" (quoted in Hadot 2004, 271), and writers of the American Renaissance, like Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, and Emerson, likewise frequently employ the metaphor of the hieroglyphic.<sup>7</sup> Goethe, although standing only partly in the Romantic tradition, speaks in a poem entitled "Metamorphose der Pflanzen" of the hieroglyphics of the Goddess<sup>8</sup> that have to be deciphered in the metamorphoses of plants (Goethe 1827, 283). Nabokov, in contrast, does not conceive of nature as a hieroglyphic language to be deciphered. In "If Mimicry Minded" he writes, for instance, that the "pattern of the Blues (undersides) may be considered as *cryptic* inasmuch as it resembles the flowerhead on which the butterfly sleeps, with the scintillae imitating dewdrops in the dangerous light of the morning" (Nabokov 2000c, 311). Mimicry is "cryptic," but only for the insect's potential predator. Whereas his readers and characters, as in "The Vane Sisters,"

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<sup>7</sup> For the metaphor of the hieroglyphic in American Romanticism, see John T. Irving, *American Hieroglyphics. The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.

<sup>8</sup> "Aber entzifferst du hier der Göttin heilige Lettern."

constantly feel entangled in or suspect obscure patterns, or “signs and symbols” as in Nabokov’s eponymous story, Nabokov himself doesn’t share the idea of a world cryptically encoded (Alexander 2002, 191). Nor does his contemplation on the divine artist amount in a Romantic self-authorization – it is significant that in “Tolstoy” the human artist is bestowed upon a “beatific license to create” (Nabokov 2013, 58) by the supreme artist. Commenting upon the notion of divine art in Augustinus, Eriugena, and Ficino, Jean-Louis Chrétien emphasizes that the divinization of the artist doesn’t imply man’s attempt to assume God’s place (Chrétien 1997, 109). As E. N. Tigerstedt, in his study “The Poet as Creator,” underlines, “[t]o St. Augustine, man, especially fallen man” (Tigerstedt 1968, 467) can never be equated with “God as creator” (1968, 467). Therefore, the tradition of *ars divina* is grounded in a thinking that is distinguished by “a radical and profound humility” (Chrétien 1997, 109). Subsequently, it will be shown in the following that this holds as well for Nabokov; his reflections on nature as art, on nature as supreme art, and on the *homo poeticus* emulating a supreme artist go hand in hand with an aestheticization of nature. An entomological atlas, as in “Father’s Butterflies,” invites the beholder into the “picture gallery of the genius of Russian nature” (Nabokov 2000a, 206) like the catalogue of an art exhibition. On the copy of *Butterflies and Moths of the Russian Empire* the narrator states: “[t]he preciousness of that dark-blue book, furiously, carefully withdrawn from its case, consisted for me in the revelation of beauty and the poetry of perception that it presaged” (2000a, 206). If nature is art, supreme art, then nature is aesthetic – a “revelation of beauty” (2000a, 206) – and discloses itself in an aesthetic experiencing which denies any self-authorization.

#### *AESTHETIC NATURE, INTANGIBLE NATURE*

Nabokov, in *Speak, Memory*, frequently describes natural phenomena in terms of wonder and astonishment. “Shock of wonder” (2000, 168) is the expression Nabokov employs, as, for instance, when

[w]ithout any wind blowing, the sheer weight of a raindrop, shining in parasitic luxury on a cordate leaf, causing its tip to dip, and what looked like a globule of quicksilver performed a sudden glissando down the center vein, and then, having shed its bright load, the relieved leaf unbent. Tip, leaf, dip, relief – the instant it all took to happen seemed to me not so much a fraction of time as a fissure in it, a missed heartbeat, which was refined at once by a patter of rhyme. I say ‘patter’ intentionally, for when a gust of wind did come, the trees would briskly start to drip all together in as crude an imitation of the

recent downpour as the stanza I was already muttering resembled the shock of wonder I had experienced when for a moment heart and leaf had been one. (Nabokov 2000, 168)

It is the sudden awareness of the heart-shaped leaf with a raindrop gliding to its tip that produces the “shock of wonder”; the “stanzas” are “Downward a leaf inclines its tip / and drops from its tip a pearl” (Nabokov 2013, 67) of “The Rain Has Flown” (“Dozhd’ proletel”), written in 1917.

Yet suddenness linked to nature is not restricted to individual experiences like the one cited above, to which Nabokov refers in terms of the “birth” (2000, 168) of his first poem; the sudden and the unexpected come to define playful nature itself. This aspect of *natura varia ludens* becomes in “Father’s Butterflies” the center of the speculations of Konstantin Godunov-Cherdyntsev who serves, as Blackwell underlines, for Nabokov “to advance certain ant-Darwinist ideas” (Blackwell 2003, 250). Musing on “nature’s first attempts at stabilizing something” (2000a, 225) in the “immeasurably distant times when ‘the specimen reigned supreme’” (2000a, 225), his son, through whom Konstantin’s insights are refracted, elaborates: “A crawling root, the extremity of a tropical creeper vivified by the wind, turned into a snake solely because nature, noticing movement, wished to reproduce it, as a child amused by the flight of a forest leaf picks it up and tosses it back up. [...] At times nature found it amusing, or artistically valid, to retain, near a selected species, an elegant corollary, generally quite unrelated, but simply picked up from the ground simultaneously back in the times when a dragonfly might simultaneously be a butterfly. Or else it pained nature to disjoin two of its initial creations, which, despite the abyss of differences separating them, nonetheless modulated between one another” (2000a, 225, 226-27). Artistic and playful, nature is resonant of the “leisurely idleness” or “curiosity-infused idleness” that, as Blackwell contends, “becomes part of Nabokov’s alternative model for the evolutionary progress” (Blackwell 2003, 250). However, an artistic and playful nature is also an unpredictable nature:<sup>9</sup> Nature’s delight in her own creations, nature’s whimsical capriciousness, and her fondness of experimentation also entail that her doings cannot be foreseen and her works cannot be anticipated. Nature’s unpredictability is the point in which Nabokov’s philosophical speculations on the “witty Mother... with her brush” and his scientific speculations on insect mimicry converge. Victoria N. Alexander, in her article “Nabokov, Teleology, Mimicry,” demonstrates that Nabokov’s refutation of Darwinism in regard to mimicry is by no means “conservative” (2002, 206), but rather “innovative” (2002, 206), since Nabokov did not

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<sup>9</sup> For this point, see Hadot, p. 262 - 63: “Toujours prête à jouer, la Nature paraît imprévisible. Parfois, elle tâtonne, elle s’amuse à faire des essais : voulant faire le lys, elle invente d’abord le liseron.”

“object Darwinism properly understood” (2002, 206),<sup>10</sup> but simply had something more radical to add” (2002, 206). In her examination of Nabokov’s writings on Lepidoptera, Alexander contends that “[t]he question Nabokov posed about ‘mimicry’ was: How do resemblances arise? Gradually, by natural selection? Or somewhat suddenly, by chance?” (2002, 192). According to Alexander, Nabokov supplements Darwinism by a “theory of spontaneous pattern formation” (2002, 195). Patterns form not necessarily gradually, but as well accidentally by “random mutations in the genotype” (2002, 200), which may, however, prove to be advantageous for the mimic’s survival.<sup>11</sup> Alexander concludes: “When Nabokov writes that he ‘discovered in nature the non-utilitarian delights that [he] sought in art,’ he is referring to beauty created spontaneously” (2002, 207). Governed by chance or accident, coming into existence “spontaneously,” pattern formation is marked by the unpredictable.

Whether it is seen as the playful creation of an unpredictable *natura varie ludens*, or whether it is considered as a spontaneous and incidental aberration, as the theory of spontaneous pattern formation implies, the structure underlying mimicry is therefore that of an event. As Henri Maldiney points out, an event has to be understood as “event” and “advent” or “arrival”: as *événement-avènement* articulating in the unpredictability of its “there” its “becoming present” or presencing (Maldiney 1985, *passim*).<sup>12</sup> An event inaugurates its presence; consequently, its “there” evades any apriority as implied, for instance, in Heidegger’s notion of project (*Entwurf*) with its being-possible presupposed by

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<sup>10</sup> Johnson and Coats underline as well that it is “important to realize that Nabokov fully accepted the concept of evolution *per se*.” See Kurt Johnson and Steve Coats. *Nabokov’s Blues. The Scientific Odyssey of a Literary Genius*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999, p. 28. Peter Forbes, on the other hand, attests Nabokov a lack of interest in deep biology. He claims that “[i]n Nabokov’s writing, the burnished details are at the service of an orchestrated work of art, with character, drama and plot, but in biology he seems to be totally uninterested in the big picture: the genetics and the evolutionary history concerned him not at all.” Peter Forbes. *Dazzled and Deceived: Mimicry and Camouflage*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011, p. 132

<sup>11</sup> For this point, see as well Victoria N. Alexander and Stanley Salthe. “Monstrous Fate: The Problem of Authorship and Evolution by Natural Selection,” where the authors point out the “[r]adically new forms, often non-utilitarian, can either appear suddenly, maintaining themselves and existing as if for their own sake for some time until they either find a use or become a liability and disappear.” ([www.toralexander.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/monstrousfate2010](http://www.toralexander.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/monstrousfate2010), p. 9)

<sup>12</sup> The “there” of an event (*événement-avènement*) cannot be subsumed under a now-point within a chronological axis: its inchoative aspect or “implied” time defines it as a chronogenetic – and therefore originary – present and thus the present of presence. Maldiney’s notion of an originary present is based on Gustave Guillaume’s distinction between the explicit and the implicit time of the verb. Explicit time corresponds to the verb’s tense: it makes the verb participate in the chronological sequence and is divisible like historical time. Implicit time signifies the verb’s aspect; inherent to the verb’s semantics, it does not belong to the order of chronology and is indivisible. Implicit time, however, requires explicit time in order to realise itself. (Maldiney 1973, 160 ff.) Time-generating, the present of presence is, as Maldiney underlines, a negation of time (Maldiney 1976, 292) and inverts as “fondateur du temps” (Maldiney 1992, 65) the relation of present and time. “Par là,” Maldiney writes, “la relation du présent et du temps s’inverse. Le temps n’est plus au fondement du présent, mais le présent est au fondement du temps” (1973, 160). The originary present is an ek-static present transcending the limits of a “now”. It is discontinuous in respect to vectorial or chronological time by inaugurating its presence. Its inchoative present defines the event as “advent” or “arrival” and thus as the “never-having-arrived”: “un événement-avènement toujours en arrivance et jamais arrivé”(Maldiney 1992, 306)

the structure of care (Heidegger 2008, 235f.).<sup>13</sup> The event eludes any projected possibility: By inaugurating its “there” the event is its own possibility and thus auto-possibilisation, transcending any presupposed possibilities by being *transpossible* (Maldiney 1992, 316). In its “surplus” (Zimmer 2002, 49) which, by exceeding the necessities of the Darwinian struggle for survival, is the mark of nature’s playfulness and unpredictability, the wing-pattern of the mimic articulates the transpossible event of its coming into existence. Mimicry with its “aimlessness” (Nabokov 2000a, 223) and its “non-utilitarian” (Nabokov 2000, 125) aspects, does not simply testify to nature’s creativity in terms of a capability to accomplish a perfect work or a finished *ergon*, but to nature’s creativity as *energeia*.

That nature is unpredictable, and that its works bear the mark of the transpossible event of their creation, also implies that nature is aesthetic. The unpredictable eludes any intentional perception; it reveals itself in aesthetic experience. The butterfly – depicted in an entomological atlas or as a living specimen – is therefore a “revelation of beauty” (Nabokov 2000a, 206). “Revelation” and intentional perception are incompatible. Revelation means an encounter and is as such of the order of aesthetic experience (*aisthesis*) or, in Erwin Straus’ terminology, “sensing.” “Sensing” denotes according to Straus the “bodily state” of an “immediate, non-conceptual co-experiencing” (“Die Formen des Räumlichen” 153), a sensory experiencing (*sinnliches Erleben*), which is a “prelogical way of communication” or “sensory communication” (Straus 1978, 377) the antonym of any conceptual cognition. Conceptual cognition or perception belongs to what Straus calls the “gnostic moment” which focuses on the “what” of the given, its thematic content. The “Gnostic” is operative, for instance in the Romantic concept of nature as hieroglyphic text; any deciphering concentrates on the “what.” Experiencing, in contrast, is of the order of the “pathic moment” which is predominated by the “how” of the being-given, which eludes any objectifying or thematic definition.<sup>14</sup> “The being-present of sensing”, Straus writes, “[...] is the experiencing of a togetherness unfolding itself toward the subject and the object. In the act of sensing, the person sensing experiences himself and the world, himself in the world, himself together with the world” (1978, 372). Crucial in sensory experiencing is the togetherness characterizing the relation between the

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<sup>13</sup> “Presence” or being there, Maldiney writes, “toutefois ne signifie pas être-là mais être le là. Le là de tout qui a lieu, de ce qui se produit, le là qu’apporte et emporte avec soi l’apparaître” (1992, 199). It is the “there” itself, which produces or projects its being-there, whereas Heidegger’s *Dasein* in its “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*) is determined by the “one” (*Man*), which is – according to Heidegger – the “who of being-there” (*das Wer des Daseins*) (Heidegger 2008, 312).

<sup>14</sup> Edmund Husserl speaks of the “inactual” (1971, 73), Aron Gurwitsch of the “irrelevant” (1975, 238). The pathic, although non-thematic in being not related to the thematic content of perception, is crucial: as Gurwitsch points out, it endows any perception with reality; without the margin of the “irrelevant” anything perceived would remain an unreal detail (Gurwitsch 341; Maldiney 1973, 238). The margin of the irrelevant forms the background of the world from which any thematic determination starts.

sensing and the object or the sensing and the world, and Nabokov addresses this togetherness when he speaks of a “sense of oneness with sun and stone” (Nabokov 2000, 109). Togetherness characterizes experiencing as located not within the sensing or the “subject” but as being situated between the sensing and the sensed. For this reason the togetherness correlating subject and object neither permits the primacy of a self-consciousness – and, consequently, no Romantic self-authorization – nor that of a world-consciousness (Straus 1978, 372-373). Togetherness is to be understood, as Straus insists, as a togetherness not in the sense of the additional, but in the sense of a mutuality and reciprocity (1978, 373). The sensory communication of experiencing is thus neither identical with an originary communication of subject and object in the Kantian sense, which is based on the *a priori* of a transcendental subject, though not to be considered as a constituting perception in Husserl’s sense. The togetherness of experiencing means co-originary and co-nativity: experiencing is, as Mikel Dufrenne insists, a *co-(n)naissance* (Dufrenne 1987, 148), the simultaneous, reciprocal and mutual constitution of the sensing and the sensed, the self and the world – a simultaneous being-born and mutual and reciprocal giving-birth to one another. The narrator of “Father’s Butterflies” therefore employs the term *conspiracy*: The contemplation of nature is “a conspiracy between nature and the one who alone can understand her” (2000a, 219). “Conspiracy” is not to be taken in its current sense of “plotting” or “scheming,” but in the sense of Latin *conspiratio* which denotes “harmony,” “unity,” “mutual consent,” and “consensus” – notions that are also reflected in the metaphorical meaning of the verb *conspiro*: “to agree,” “to be consentaneous,” and to “act together.” A “conspiracy” with nature implies mutuality and reciprocity, togetherness and co-presence. It is “conspiracy” in this sense that makes nature an “accomplice” (2000a, 223) to man and, vice versa, man an “accomplice” to nature. Without “conspiracy,” without being encountered, nature “would be useless (lost upon the world) like a small volume of Shakespeare lying open in the dust of a boundless desert” (2000a, 219).

Aesthetic experience as *co-(n)naissance* or “conspiracy” simultaneously joins the sensing and the sensed and keeps them apart. Like the dialogue which Merleau-Ponty defines as “une operation commune dont aucun des nous est le créateur” (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 407), aesthetic experience opens an interspace that – to use Bernhard Waldenfels’ formulation – “defies any appropriation” (Waldenfels 1991, 7). Nabokov seems to be well aware of this when, speaking of the beauty of butterflies, he makes his narrator state that “one’s eye is caressed by” (2000a, 211) it. “Caressed” is more than a metaphor to denote the insect’s pleasantness to the eye of the beholder. “Caressed” participates of the sphere of the tactile

which Nabokov frequently evokes in his elaborations on lepidoptera. He employs adjectives like “silky” (2008, 253), as in “The Aurelian,” “powdery” (Nabokov 2000f, 82) as in “Butterflies,” and “delicate” (2000, 107); the moths in his eponymous poem “Nochnye babochki,” he refers to as “my tender ones” (2000g, 107). His writings abound with words that denote lepidoptera in terms of what is soft to touch, like “silky”; what is to be touched with care, such as “delicate,” “tender,” vitreous” (2008, 253); and what escapes any firm grip, such as “powdery.” Caress is touch, and as such it implies the spatiality specific to aesthetic experiencing.

Commenting upon “touch,” a central notion in William Carlos Williams’ poetics, Joseph N. Riddel contends that touch is “more than merely sensation. Touch is being in touch. It is a closing of a distance, a bringing into place” (Riddel 1974, 32). Riddel’s characterization of touch as “a closing of a distance” highlights the fundamental feature of the tactile which Jean-Louis Chrétien has called “the illusion of an immediacy” (Chrétien 1992, 147), for touch is not the abolition of a distance or the closing of the gap between the touching and the touched. Just the opposite: Touching doesn’t mean that two surfaces meet; but an approaching and being approached (Chrétien 1992, 107-8); touching opens an intermediary space. Touch is the most basic form of the sensory in which the experience of oneself and the world as co-originary becomes evident. Touching is primarily never to be understood as reflexive, but always as transitive (Chrétien 1992, 125): “touch,” *tact*, always means *con-tact*. Touching is simultaneously being touched and touching one another, but touching and being touched never coincide, as Merleau-Ponty insists: “Toucher et se toucher: se toucher = touchant-touché. Ils ne coincident pas dans le corps, ils ne coincident non plus dans l’esprit. Il faut autre chose que la jonction se fasse” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 307). Touching and being touched are joined in the sensory which – by both joining and separating the sensing and the sensed – excludes any coincidence of the two. Touch thus reveals the insurmountable in-between of any sensing. Due to its paradigmatic character, Aristotle accords touch the primacy among the senses – in contrast to Kant who, in his *Anthropologie*, calls it “the most crudest of all senses” (Kant 1917, 155) and therefore inferior to vision.<sup>15</sup> In *De Anima*, Aristotle evokes an intermediary body of a medium that is situated between the touching and the touched: an in-between that can never be surmounted, but falls at best into oblivion, since it escapes touch itself (Aristotle, 1959, 423 A 30-31, 423 B 4-9). Touch is therefore “a revelation of the intangible” (Maldiney 1992, 209), and so is a caress.

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<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of this issue, see Jean-Louis Chrétien. *L’appel et la réponse*. Paris: Minuit, 1992, p. 125

Nabokov's statement that "the eye is caressed" makes the spatiality of aesthetic experiencing explicit which is, according to Straus, "the far". "The phenomenal world of the far," Straus writes, "cannot be derived from the objective world. The far is an originary phenomenon [*Urphänomen*]. The far is not experienced, but experiencing unfolds in the far ... there is no sensory experiencing without the far" (Straus 1978, 405). The far is not to be understood in the sense of the objectively measurable, such as "length" or "distance," nor as the opposite of "near." The far as the spatial dimension of sensing means proximity as well as distance. The caress is therefore, as Straus formulates it, an "infinite movement of approach" (1978, 408): "infinite" because it incessantly unfolds the dimension of the far and thus makes the intangible of touch explicit. The "revelation of beauty" (Nabokov 2000a, 206) by which "one's eye is caressed" (Nabokov 2000a, 211) is a revelation of the far and the intangible. In this regard, mimicry keeps its "mysteries" (Nabokov 2000, 98) and nature its essential secret. The theory of spontaneous pattern formation may have proved to be a solution to the riddles of mimicry's origin; however, the unpredictability of its coming to existence – the transpossible event of its creation – identifies it at the same time as secretive. Unfolding itself in a proximity that is simultaneously distance, and shrouded in the intangibility of the aesthetic, mimicry maintains nature's essential inaccessibility, in accordance with Heraclitus' famous aphorism: "nature likes to conceal herself," *phusis kruptesthai philei* (Diels 1903, B123).

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