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THE SHATTERED MIRROR:  
A STUDY OF NABOKOV'S DESTRUCTIVE METHOD IN *DESPAIR*

Sergej Davydov

From the early 1930s the technique of encapsulating one text within another becomes prevalent in Vladimir Nabokov's fiction, and the interplay between the inner and the outer text develops into one of the author's most intriguing games. Written in 1932, Nabokov's novel *Despair* can be seen as an alluring variant of the *matreshka*-text.<sup>1</sup> (*Matreshka* is a rather plump wood-carved Russian doll that contains a number of other dolls, each a smaller, isomorphic replica of the original.) The novel *Despair* contains an unfinished tale authored by the hero, Hermann, as well as his diary, found in the final chapter. Hermann's tale about the doubles constitutes the inner text of the novel, whereas Nabokov's novel can be seen as the outer text. However, the relationship between the inner and the outer text becomes obscured by the fact that Hermann's manuscript and Nabokov's novel are identical texts. The authorship of the latter is clear only through an examination of the genre titles given to the respective texts. Thus Hermann calls his work either a "tale" or a "story," while Nabokov's text is defined as a "novel."<sup>2</sup> This subtle though significant difference points to the existence of two strata of text—one belonging to the hero and one belonging to the author—even though the author per se does not take part directly in the novel. The first part of this essay deals with Hermann's tale; the second part is an attempt to bring out the filigreed line of Nabokov's hand in Hermann's manuscript to establish the clearly polemical nature of the relationship between the author, his hero, and their respective texts.

Hermann's Tale of the Doubles

*Despair* is a novel about doubles and about doubleness in general. The

novel's plot is simple: the chocolate merchant, Hermann, happens to discern his double in the tramp Felix. This discovery, or more properly, revelation, leads Hermann to the idea of the "perfect crime," and he devises a rather sophisticated plan for the murder of his double. The ingenious plan consists of a simple substitution of victim for murderer. Hermann, having given himself a new identity, will continue to live on the insurance money received as a result of his own death. This brilliantly conceived plan is, however, destroyed by a fundamental flaw: the striking similarity of the doubles, so obvious to Hermann, passes unnoticed by anyone else, and the police all too quickly ascertain the victim's true identity. After the world has condemned his crime, Hermann seeks recognition as an artist. In justification of his "crime of genius" he undertakes to write a detective tale about it—creating in this way an artistic variant of the crime, the murder's literary double.

From the very beginning Hermann views his carefully planned murder as a distinctive type of artistic endeavor, as art itself. He compares "the breaker of the law which makes such a fuss about a little spilled blood, with a poet or a stage performer" (13). Indeed, repeatedly comparing murder to art, Hermann reminds us more of a poet than of a murderer. Goethe himself once declared that there was no crime of which he felt himself incapable. Thomas De Quincey, in his famous triptych entitled "On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts," calls the murderer an artist, and his crime his *oeuvre*: "As the inventor of murder, and the father of art, Cain must have been a man of first-rate genius. All the Cains were men of genius."<sup>3</sup> Although a novice in the genre of Cain, Hermann plans the perfect murder, "perfect" in the artistic sense:

If the deed is planned and performed correctly then the force of creative art is such, that were the criminal to give himself up the very next morning, none would believe him, the invention of art containing far more intrinsic truth than life's reality (132).

De Quincey mentions also the technical difficulties connected with the flawless execution of such a work of art:

no artist can ever be sure of carrying through his own fine preconception. Awkward disturbances will arise; people will not submit to have their throats cut quietly; they will run, they will kick, they will bite; and, whilst the portrait-painter often has to complain of too much torpor in his subject, the artist in our line is generally embarrassed by too much animation.<sup>4</sup>

By tricking Felix into cooperation in his own murder, Hermann successfully surmounts the difficulties mentioned by De Quincey. Moreover, in killing Felix, the artist forces his model into complete immobility—a quality absolutely necessary for the completion of Hermann's next opus,

his tale: "what is death, if not a face at peace—its artistic perfection? Life only marred my double" (25). Consistent with the principle of murder as art, Hermann bases his work on a dead model. Consequently, the world he creates is the tale's stagnant, inert cosmos.

In the murder itself, as well as in the later recounting of it, Hermann is guided by the same principle of mirror symmetry. For Hermann, the outside world hardly exists. His gaze is directed inward, toward his self-created inner world, a world that, like Narcissus' solipsistic cosmos, does not partake of the world around it. Hermann sees this world through eyes whose corneas have been coated from inside with amalgam. For the narcissistic writer the mirror becomes the highest aesthetic idol, and a mirror likeness becomes the guarantee of artistic success. The consequent mirror symmetry of the doubles (Felix is left-handed) dictates the structure of the story.

My accomplishment resembles a game of patience, arranged beforehand; first I put down the open cards in such a manner as to make its success a dead certainty; then I gathered them up in the opposite order and gave the prepared pack to others with the perfect assurance it would come out (132).

According to Hermann's scheme, his tale should consist of ten chapters, with a happy ending followed by a traditional epilogue (188-90). Analogous to the pre-arranged game of solitaire, Hermann forces the composition of his tale about doubles to reflect its own theme. The story is composed of two parts that, naturally, reflect each other. On the axis running between Chapters 5 and 6, as on the amalgam surface of a mirror, the coordinates of the symmetrically distributed motifs are brought together. A number of motifs in Chapter 2 (the yellow post, the theft of the car, the shaving brush alias the pine cone, and so forth) are mirror reflections of their doubles from Chapter 9. Chapters 2 and 9 fall on either side of this axis with mirror-like precision:

1 (2) 3 4 5 | 6 7 8 (9) 10 [11] 5

The yellow post on Ardalion's plot of land described in Chapters 2 and 9, to which the tale and its events frequently return, serves as a landmark for the text's symmetric topography.

Hermann's obsession with mirrors also dictates the narrative tenses in the story. In Hermann's "double time-perspective" the future and the past reflect and contaminate each other. In Chapter 2, for example, the narrator smuggles into his description of the summer landscape (June) snow that belongs to the future scene of the murder (March), described only in Chapter 9. "Thus the future shimmers through the past" (47), explains Hermann. This bidirectionality of time becomes more pro-

nounced upon a second reading, when the reader, this time along with Hermann, is seized by the same double perspective, the same déjà vu, and places all the motifs in their proper time sequence.

The three meetings of the doubles are also symmetrically timed:

1st		2nd		3rd
(May 9th)	June July Aug. Sept.	(Oct. 1st)	Nov. Dec. Jan. Feb.	(March 9th)

The time coordinates of the first and last meetings meet halfway on October's mirror surface, and autumn becomes the crystal prism of the story's calendar. It is not by chance that the following picture of absolute mirror symmetry pertains to the same time of year:

A few days before the first of October I happened to walk with my wife through the Tiergarten; there on a foot bridge we stopped, with our elbows upon the railing. . . . When a slow leaf fell, there would flutter up to meet it, out of the water's shadowy depths, its unavoidable double. Their meeting was soundless. The leaf came twirling down, and twirling up there would rise towards it, eagerly, its exact, beautiful, lethal reflection. I could not tear my gaze away from those inevitable meetings. "Come on," said Lydia and sighed. "Autumn, autumn," she said after a while, "Autumn. Yes, it is autumn." . . . I lagged behind and pierced fallen leaves with my *cane* (72). [My emphasis]

In this scene Hermann gives away the formula, exposing to the reader the very essence of his tale's prismatic composition.<sup>6</sup> Not unlike the autumn leaves, the pages of Hermann's tale meet their own reflected images. (In Russian the word "list" is a homonym, signifying both "leaf" and "sheet.") Their soundless and unavoidable meeting takes place on the mirror surface that divides Chapters 5 and 6.

Hermann, pulling the strings of his tale, reminds us of the "crimson spider amid a black web" found on the cover of a "rotten detective novel" that he gives Lydia to read.

She dipped into it and found it terribly thrilling—felt that she simply could not help taking a peep at the end, but as that would spoil everything, she shut her eyes tight and tore the book in two down its back and hid the second, concluding, portion; then, later, she forgot the place and was a long, long time searching the house for the criminal she herself had concealed repeating the while in a small voice: "It was so exciting, so terribly exciting; I know I shall die if I don't find out—" (33-34).

The "detective novel, torn in two down its back" echoes in many ways Hermann's own story, which can be read as a peculiar detective tale with a purely literary denouement. The question, ultimately, is not "Who is the murderer?" but rather "Where is the hidden mistake?" that will ruin both the opus and the author.

Van Dine, the classical analyst of the mystery genre, wrote:

The truth must at all times be in the printed word, so that if the reader should go back over the book he would find that the solution had been there all the time if he had had sufficient shrewdness to grasp it.<sup>7</sup>

On re-reading his manuscript Hermann involuntarily becomes the detective in his own story and discovers the hidden clue. The "S-T-I-C-K" forgotten in the car and bearing the initials of the victim is the fatal object that causes Hermann's despair and gives the title to his tale. At least ten times in the course of the story the reader is reminded of this awkward stick, and ten times Hermann fails to take notice of it. This is then the concluding portion of Hermann's peculiar detective and, alas, defective tale in which one hero was to impersonate the author, the murderer, the victim, and, finally, the detective and the reader of his own mystery.

This is the second time in Nabokov's work that a stick has turned out to be the cause of the failure of an artist and his *oeuvre*. In the story "Lips to Lips" it is the precious cane that torments the unfortunate writer Ilya Borisovich; in *Despair*, the cane's country cousin, a stick, brings about the fall of the hero. The irony of the situation is that Hermann's tale, designed to prove his genius as a murderer, is instead proof of his failure. The mnemonic device, the "stick," serves not only as the symbol of Hermann's fall, but also as the instrument with which Nabokov chastises the hero for his crime.

#### Nabokov's Novel about the Doubles

*Quem Jupiter vult perdere  
dementat prius*

Latin proverb

Up to this point we have chiefly been concerned with Hermann and his tale; we should not forget, however, that *Despair* is also the title of Nabokov's novel. It remains for us to answer the question "How can the works of two authors exist under the same title, indeed, be the same text?"

Between the covers of *Despair* resides yet another writer. Hermann alludes to him repeatedly, has chosen him to be his first reader, and prepares to send him the manuscript of his tale.

There . . . I have mentioned you, my first reader, you, the well-known author of psychological novels. I have read them and found them very artificial, though not badly constructed. What will you feel, reader-writer, when you tackle my tale? Delight? Envy? Or even . . . who knows? . . . you may use my termless removal to give out my stuff for your own . . . for the fruit of your own crafty . . . yes, I grant you that . . . crafty and experienced imagination; leaving me out in the cold (90-91).

This Russian émigré novelist "whose books can not possibly appear in the U.S.S.R." (168), is, of course, Sirin (Nabokov's Russian pen name). This enigmatic belletrist, whom Hermann quite unceremoniously addresses in the second person familiar, never appears in the novel as a character. Nevertheless, he takes part in the novel as a spectre, a ghostly apparition at the service of the author, Nabokov. Sirin, whom Nabokov calls "one of my characters in 'real' life,"<sup>8</sup> is not so much concerned with psychological matters, but rather deals shrewdly in questions of art. (I use the name Sirin whenever I refer to the "auctor ex machina" who, unseen though detectible, meddles in the events of the novel. In contrast to this literary persona [Sirin], the name Nabokov is reserved for Nabokov, the person.) Sirin's invisible pen more than once intrudes on the development of Hermann's tale, and his filigreed handwriting is easily discernible on the pages of his manuscript.

So it goes on and on, Ex writing to Why and Why to Ex, page after page. Sometimes an outsider, a Zed, intrudes and adds his own little contribution to the correspondence, but he does so with the sole aim of making clear to the reader (not looking at him the while except for an occasional squint) some event, which, for reasons of plausibility and the like, neither Ex nor Why could very well have explained (70).

Although Hermann tries to downplay the significance of the unknown "Zed," he occasionally notices that his "pen has mixed steps and wantonly danced away" (98). Sirin, who is the literary saboteur and spoiler, spreads through the novel a fine net of traps, tricks, and other devices, all designed to ensnare the hero and destroy his smug illusions. One of the more refined harassing devices built into the novel is the peculiar variant of the myth of Narcissus and Nemesis:

After the first encounter of the doubles Felix offers Hermann his hand. Hermann grasps it because it provides him "with the curious sensation of Narcissus fooling Nemesis" (23). After the murder Hermann looks at Felix's face and it seems to him "as if [he] were looking at [his] own image in a stagnant pool" (182). But Nemesis is not to be fooled for long. Sirin, like a mythical deity, assumes the form of an errant breeze to spitefully distort the image seen in the pool. Hermann takes note of this wind-blown intrusion:

thus a breeze dims the bliss of Narcissus; thus, in the painter's absence, there comes his pupil and by the superfluous flush of unbidden tints disfigures the portrait painted by the master (25).

A draft from the same source also penetrates Hermann's nightmare:

I saw running . . . a cart rut brimming with rainwater, and in that wind-wrinkled puddle the trembling travesty of my face; which, as I noticed with a shock, was eyeless (61).

In Chapter 3 "a puff of smoke" coming from Hermann's cigarette is "folded by ghostly fingers" before melting away in midair (65). The same wind follows Hermann also in Chapter 5. Here, however, the quick-witted Hermann evades the pursuing gusts:

I walked for a pretty long time down the side street which led me away from the statue, and at every other step I stopped, trying to light my cigarette, but the wind kept filching my light until I took shelter under a porch, thus blasting the blast—what a pun (79).

But Hermann is not long fated to be the victor. Toward the end of the book, the wind again rises. In the novel's penultimate chapter Hermann notes that "a strong wind from Spain worried the chick fluff of the mimosas" (191). The wind soon increases in force, and the hero notices from his window how "the wind roughly upturned the several petticoats of olive trees which it tumbled" (192). The wind forces Hermann to stay indoors: "It frightened me, that thunder in my head, that incessant crashing, blinding March wind, that murderous mounting draft" (192). On the sixth day of Hermann's stay in the hotel, Sirin (not unlike Prospero) conjures up a tempest:

the wind became so violent that the hotel could be likened to a ship at sea in a tempest: windowpanes boomed, walls creaked; and the heavy evergreen foliage fell back with a receding rustle and then lurching forward, stormed the house. I attempted to go out into the garden, but at once was doubled up, retained my hat by a miracle and went up to my room (193).

As Hermann's manuscript increases in size, so does the wind in force. The six days are the six days of creation in which Hermann brings his own world into being in his tale. The "chick fluff of the mimosas," "the several petticoats of the olive trees," "the heavy evergreen foliage" are all realizations of the metaphoric juxtaposition of "tree leaves" and "leaves of a manuscript," to which Nabokov returns also in other works.<sup>9</sup> It is Hermann's manuscript, the very pages of the tale, that the frivolous author-imp has chosen to destroy, assuming for the purpose the form of whimsical wind. (To paraphrase Blok's poem "The Artist," here not a "whirlwind from the seas sings in the leaves," but rather the "heavenly Sirins.")<sup>10</sup>

In Chapter 11 Hermann, not yet having finished the last, tenth chapter of his tale, ventures into the hotel's garden and feels "a heavenly, soft stillness."

At first I did not even realize what was the matter, but I shook myself and suddenly understood, the *hurricane* [my italics] wind which had been raging lately was stilled.

The air was divine, there drifted about the silky floss of willows; even the greenery of indeciduous leafage tried to look renovated; and the half-bared, athletic torsos of the cork oaks glistened a rich red (207).



It would be, however, a mistake to consider this "heavenly stillness" the creator's well-deserved reward after the six days of labor during which he delivers his tale. It is much more likely that this is the eye of the hurricane, a breathing space before the shattering denouement. Hermann gathers from the floor the scattered pages of his manuscript and, full of anticipation (ignoring several unsuccessful attempts to light his extinguished cigarette),<sup>11</sup> prepares to read them for the first time. But soon "the delicious foretaste [changes] to something like pain—to a horrible apprehension, as if an evil imp were promising to disclose to [him] more and more blunders and nothing but blunders" (211). Hermann reads up to the fateful scene in which his inability to handle the importunate "S-T-I-C-K" finally results in the destruction of all his cherished illusions.

It is Sirin who, rustling his wings (in Russian his pen name designates a mythological bird), ruffled the pool's surface and dimmed Narcissus' bliss; now he filches Hermann's light and shrieks into his ear "that the rabble which refused [Hermann] recognition" was right. It is Sirin who torments Hermann, caning him with the disreputable wand, and eventually drives him to despair and madness.

In the novel *The Gift*, the accredited hero-writer Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev states that "any genuinely new trend [in art] is a knight's move, a change of shadows, a shift that displaces the mirror."<sup>12</sup> Having confronted the hero with his error, Sirin forces Hermann to ruin his tale's symmetrical ten-chapter scheme by adding an extra chapter. In the eleventh chapter Hermann's tale "degenerates into a diary, the lowest form of literature" (218) or, more precisely, into a "diary of a madman." With a sleight of hand the auctor ex machina has shifted the axis of symmetry of the hero's tale, the mirror Hermann had placed between Chapters 5 and 6 upon whose surface the two parts of the tale were supposed to meet. The "shattered mirror" is for Hermann "the weirdest of omens" (34). After this blow to his tale, the mirror-worshipper's passion turns into hatred: "There is, thank God, no mirror in the room, no more than there is the God I am thanking" (220). The shift of the mirror finally returns the power, which was temporarily usurped by the literary pretender, Hermann, to the legitimate author. It is through this device that the successful author-spoiler once and for all secures his copyrights.

For Nabokov the only real number is one. No likenesses exist, only analogies. Just as Hermann creates Felix in his own image, so does Nabokov create Hermann. Just as Felix pockets Hermann's silver pencil (24), Hermann misappropriates Nabokov's pen, his manuscript. *Despair* is a novel about the concept of similarity, about doubles. But the reader knows that "it is the vulgar who note resemblance," and think that "all Chinamen are alike" (51). If the likeness between Hermann and Felix (save the "lilac tie") is not really there, then it follows that there should

likewise be no real resemblance between Hermann and Nabokov (save a tinge of lilac from the name "Sirin" on Hermann's tie).<sup>13</sup> They are linked by the act of creation, but this is a mere analogy.

In a fit of "cacographic debauchery," deeming himself a god,<sup>14</sup> Hermann creates a man, his double, forgetting in his demiurgic hubris that he himself is a creature. It is here, in the opposition of the demiurgic and divine principles, that we find the crucial difference between Hermann and Nabokov and their respective works. To his own indignation, Hermann has to confess his inferior position as a character in someone else's novel, but he does not allow himself to be reconciled to it. He wages a desperate battle for authorship with his creator. As Field suggests, it is correct to interpret the "theological joke" in Chapter 6 in light of the clash between the author and the hero.<sup>15</sup> Hermann openly rebels against his absurd position as a puppet in an alien work:

The nonexistence of God is simple to prove. Impossible to concede, for example, that a serious Jah, all wise and almighty, could employ his time in such inane fashion as playing with manikins . . . God does not exist, as neither does our hereafter (111-12).

On first reading, this monologue of Hermann's bears little relation to the rest of the tale; nonetheless, this mock-Karamazovian sally against the creator is the key to a proper understanding of the novel.<sup>16</sup> From this clash of two rivaling artists the author emerges victorious, and Hermann's failure, while not without flair, remains failure. Having destroyed his character's symmetrical tale, the author uses it as the basis for his own novel, presenting the hero's fall as his own victory. In this sense, *Despair* is a novel about the primacy of the author's consciousness.

In his 1937 article, Khodasevich wrote about *Despair*:

It shows the suffering of an original, self-disciplined artist. His downfall is brought about by one error, one misstep, which, once admitted into the text, gobbles up the fruits of his creative labors. . . . Hermann is driven to despair because he alone is responsible for his downfall, because he is only talented but not a genius.<sup>17</sup>

Nabokov has no patience with a writer's weaknesses, be it a hero in fiction or a real author. He recognizes only genius and gives short shrift to unfortunate talents. For Nabokov only genuine art is capable of stepping over the bounds within which mortal man is confined and of rendering itself immortal. One can only agree with Rosenfield, who defines Hermann's leading motive as "a modern perversion of the primitive's longing for immortality."<sup>18</sup> Nabokov informs his hero in no uncertain terms that the path of immortality through art is closed to him. The Nabokovian syllogism "Other men die, but I am not another; therefore I'll not die"<sup>19</sup> does not apply in Hermann's case. Both Hermann's sacrifice (Felix) as well

as his sacred text (the tale) will be rejected by the gods.

There is no doubt that a cruel, mythical punishment hangs over Hermann, reminding us once more of the punishment Nemesis visited upon Narcissus. Through her the Olympians chastised humans for their hubris, vanity, and unnatural acts. Likewise Nabokov, in his Olympian indignation, punishes his narcissistic hero for his prideful act. *Despair* is, in the last analysis, a novel by Nabokov in which the character behaves with loathsome arrogance and caddishness. Pride is the worst sin of all; it is according to this principle that Dante placed Satan (who "against his Maker dared his brows to raise") in the lowest circle of hell. For this reason, Hermann's inevitable death on the scaffold (cf. 66, 119, 213, 219, 220), while the end of his suffering in this world, is only the beginning of his suffering in the next. We shall see what variety of hereafter the incensed author has prepared for his blasphemous hero, who rejected both God and the possibility of an afterlife.

Nabokov gives his hero and reader the answer to the novel's final question in the form of riddles. The first is found in a cryptogram, whose answer lies in the irrational handwriting by which Sirin toys with Hermann, in the manner of Alice manipulating the pen of the puzzled White King. Hermann writes a letter to Felix while "the consumptive pen in [his] hand [goes] on spitting words: can't stop, can't stop, cans, pots, stop, he'll to hell" (127-28). Hermann will end in hell, reads the author's message. The second hint at Hermann's future whereabouts is found in his "nasty dream" in Chapter 3. It is presented in the form of a literary charade:

For several years I was haunted by a very singular and very nasty dream: I dreamed I was standing in the middle of a long passage with a door at the bottom, and passionately wanting, but not daring to go and open it, and then deciding at last to go, which I accordingly did; but at once awoke with a groan, for what I saw there was unimaginably terrible; to wit, a perfectly empty, newly whitewashed room. That was all, but it was so terrible that I never could hold out (56).

This room, calling to mind Raskol'nikov's "eternal solitude on a hand's breadth of ground" or Svidrigailov's eternity in "one little room,"<sup>20</sup> is the hell Sirin has constructed for his spawn of Satan and scion of Cain. In the English version of the novel Nabokov installs a chair into the otherwise bare, whitewashed room (a possible allusion to an electric chair?), thus creating a somewhat diluted variant of the characteristically Russian hells of Raskol'nikov and Svidrigailov.<sup>21</sup>

Sirin also torments Hermann in the next dream, which is induced by Hermann's impious puns: "What is this jest in majesty? This ass in passion? How God and Devil combine to form a live dog?" (56). The last pun is an anagram borrowed from Joyce,<sup>22</sup> and Sirin seems to have a befitting Joycean answer to Hermann's last question. The following oneiric re-

tribution is a grotesque realization of Hermann's irreverent God-dog anagram in which the "evil god" shows Hermann his mirror-inverted face:

I dreamed a loathsome dream, a triple ephialtes. First there was a small dog; but not simply a small dog; a small mock dog, very small, with the minute black eyes of a beetle's larva; it was white through and through, and coldish. Flesh? No, not flesh, but rather grease or jelly, or else perhaps, the fat of a white worm, with, moreover, a kind of carved corrugated surface reminding one of a Russian paschal lamb of butter—disgusting mimicry. A cold-blooded being, which Nature had twisted into the likeness of a small dog with a tail and legs, all as it should be. It kept getting into my way, I could not avoid it; and when it touched me, I felt something like an electric shock. I woke up. On the sheet of the bed next to mine there lay curled up, like a swooned white larva, that very same dreadful little pseudo dog . . . I groaned with disgust and opened my eyes. All around shadows floated; the bed next to mine was empty except for the broad burdock leaves which, owing to the damp, grow out of bedsteads. One could see, on those leaves, telltale stains of a slimy nature; I peered closer; there, glued to a fat stem it sat, small, tallowish-white, with its little black button eyes . . . but then, at last, I woke up for good (106-07).

It is tempting to see in this last nightmare of Hermann's the ultimate variant of his future, postmortem habitation. The dream is, moreover, reminiscent of an ancient Aztec funeral rite:

The departed was to take a little dog with him; . . . they killed it and cremated it with the corpse. The departed swam on this small animal when he passed the river of the underworld, and . . . arrived with it before the god, to whom he presented his papers and gifts. Whereupon he was admitted, together with his faithful companion, to the "Ninth Abyss."<sup>23</sup>

We are also told that "only the bright reddish dogs can pass the shore of the dead," whereas the white and black ones "cannot swim the river." Hermann, obviously, has the wrong dog, and it is only correct that whenever he wakes up in the grave, he finds his "little white pseudo dog," the "poor dogsbody's body" (Joyce), in a more advanced state of decay.

We will not reproach Hermann who concludes that "God does not exist, as neither does our hereafter" (112) for returning to his creator a ticket to such an eternity. It is, however, amusing to note that in the foreword to the English edition of *Despair*, published some thirty years after the novel first appeared, the unforgiving author returns to remind the hero of his otherworldly abode:

Hermann and Humbert are alike only in the sense that two dragons painted by the same artist at different periods of his life resemble each other. Both are neurotic scoundrels, yet there is a green lane in Paradise where Humbert is permitted to wander at dusk once a year; but Hell shall never parole Hermann.

In destroying Hermann's criminal opus, and in punishing its writer for his turpid deed, Nabokov acts like an old-world moralist. However un-

Nabokovian this may sound, Nabokov seems to agree:

In fact I believe that one day a reappraiser will come and declare that, far from having been a frivolous firebird, I was a rigid moralist kicking sin, cuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel—and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent, and pride.<sup>24</sup>

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1. The majority of Nabokov's fictions belongs to the matreshka-type text.
2. Vladimir Nabokov, *Despair* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1970). For "tale" and "story" see pp. 13, 91, 167, 218; for "novel" see pp. 90, 167 as well as the title page of the book. All consequent citations are to this edition and are given in the text parenthetically.
3. Thomas De Quincey, *The Collected Writings*, vol. 13, ed. D. Mason (New York, 1968, reprint), p. 17.
4. De Quincey, p. 39. In his triptych De Quincey devotes particular attention to the famous murderer Williams, whom he calls "the most aristocratic and fastidious of artists." De Quincey describes in detail Williams's two murders, which stunned England in December 1811, and which might stun the literary critic willing to accept certain analogies between the murderers Williams and Hermann. As in the case of Williams (the mallet with initials), so in the case of Hermann (Felix's stick bearing initials)—both criminals are exposed by very similar objects. In both cases the newspapers do not mention anything about the existence of the incriminatory object, and thus give the criminal the chance to commit another crime. In Williams's case the second crime was the murder of the Williamsons; in Hermann's, it is his work of art, the tale. Both Williams and Hermann commit their second criminal act as proof that the first such act is a work of genius. The near duplication of the names of victim and murderer (Williams and Williamsons) is echoed in the supposed likeness between the doubles (Hermann and Felix). We should not, however, enumerate the similarities because, as is written in *Despair*, "it is the vulgar who note resemblance" (51), and in De Quincey's words, "This vulgar *gout de comparaison* . . . will be our ruin; each work has its own separate characteristics—each in and for itself is incomparable" (58). Rather than accuse Hermann of plagiarism, let us conclude the following: Hermann's tale can be seen as the full realization of De Quincey's concept of "murder considered as one of the fine arts," with the difference that Hermann, actually equating murder and art, turns De Quincey's simile into a metaphor, and the murderer into an artist proper, a writer.
5. The final chapter was not foreseen by Hermann. It was, rather, written after he had discovered, on re-reading his tale, the fatal error. Therefore, it belongs not to Hermann's tale, but to Nabokov's novel. Chapter 11 will be discussed in the second part of this essay.
6. Nabokov returns to the prismatic image in *Speak, Memory*: "Now and then, shed by a blossoming tree, a petal would come down, down, down, and with the odd feeling of seeing something neither worshipper nor casual spectator ought to see, one would manage to glimpse its reflection which swiftly—more swiftly than the petal fell—rose to meet it; and, for the fraction of a second, one feared that the trick would not work, that the blessed oil would not catch fire, that the reflection might miss and the petal float away alone, but every time the delicate union did take place, with the magic precision of a poet's word meeting halfway his, or a reader's, recollection" (New York: Capricorn Books, 1970), pp. 270-71.
7. W. Wright (Van Dine), *The Great Detective Stories* (New York, 1936), p. 9.
8. Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York, 1973), p. 290.

9. In the poem "Slava" (Fame): "'Your poor books,' he breezily said, 'will finish/by hopelessly fading in exile. Alas./those two thousand leaves of frivolous fiction/will be scattered; but genuine foliage has/a place where to fall: there's the soil, there's Russia./there's a path drenched by maples in violet blood. . .'" *Poems and Problems* (New York, 1970), p. 107, lines 53-58.

10. "S morja li vichr'? Ili siriny rajskie/V list'jach pojut. . ."

11. Sirin's "ghostly fingers" hid Hermann's matchbox, significantly, behind the inkpot (cf. 211).

12. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1970), p. 251.

13. Hermann's "favorite lilac tie" (162, 179), which he ties around Felix's neck, makes the doubles resemble each other as much as the color of that tie does resemble Nabokov's pen name. The puns on the word "siren" (lilac) and "Sirin" play an important role. Hermann, however, fails to decipher them: "The public garden, where invalids were hand-pedaling about, was a storm of heaving lilac bushes. I looked at shop signs; picked out some word concealing a Slav root familiar to me, though overgrown with an unfamiliar meaning" (16).

14. "In his 'genius' [Hermann] is like a god—but a god gone mad," says C. Rosenfield in the article "Despair and the Lust for Immortality," in *Nabokov: The Man and His Work*, ed. L. Dembo (Madison, 1967), p. 74.

15. Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art* (London, 1967), p. 251.

16. Hermann's attack on God reminds us, however, more of Alice, unwilling to reconcile herself to the thought of existing only in the Red King's dream. The monologue's central position in the novel testifies to its importance: although actually written after Chapter 10, Hermann places it in Chapter 6, that is, exactly in the middle not of his ten-chapter tale, but of Nabokov's eleven-chapter novel.

17. V. Khodasevich, "O Sirine" (On Sirin), a review article in *Vozrozhdenie* (Renaissance), Paris, Feb. 13, 1937. Parts of this article were translated in *Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes*, ed. Alfred Appel and Charles Newman (New York, 1970).

18. Rosenfield, p. 73.

19. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, lines 213-214.

20. F. Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, Part Two, Ch. VI; and Part Four, Ch. I: "Eternity is always presented to us as an idea which it is impossible to grasp, something enormous, enormous. But why should it necessarily be enormous? Imagine, instead, that it will be one little room, something like a bath-house in the country, black with soot, with spiders in every corner, and that is the whole of eternity" (trans. Jessie Coulson).

21. The insertion of a chair into this 1965 version of Hermann's dream can have, however, a more bizarre motivation. In this dream the reader can discern Nabokov's mocking allusion to the "earliest dream" of C. G. Jung, which "haunted [Jung] for years." In his dream Jung, "hesitantly and fearfully," descends through a hole in the ground (grave) into a doorway, closed off by a heavy curtain. He pushes it aside and sees before him a "rectangular chamber" with a "golden throne." On it stands a "huge thing of a curious composition, made of skin and naked flesh." On the very top of its faceless head shines a "single eye, gazing motionlessly upward." This dream, Jung believes, represents a descent into "the underground temple" of the afterlife. The monstrously enthroned phallus is identified by him as a "subterranean God" and associated with "Lord Jesus." See *Memories, Dreams, Reflections by C. G. Jung*, recorded and ed. by Aniela Jaffé, trans. R. and C. Winston (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), pp. 11-13. It is not without curiosity that Hermann in this new version of his dream claims to know "whom" [Nabokov's italics] he would find next time in the chair-furnished room. "Stretching up with a hammer and a mouthful of nails," Hermann is, however, unable to crucify this bizarre god whose existence he refutes. He spits out the nails and never opens "that door again" (56-57). The proof that Nabokov intends the grotesque author/phallus juxtaposition can be found also in the translator's peculiar "slip of

pen." The Russian anagram involving the names Nabokov and Sirin: "siren' v nabokoj vase" (lilac in a leaning vase) Nabokov renders in his English version as "phallic tulips in a leaning vase" (42), and adds thus another of his frivolous gibes at the "Viennese witchdoctor" and his disciples.

22. "The voice of all the damned: Htengier Tnetopinmo Dog Drol cht rof. Aiulella! (From on high the voice of Adonai calls.) Dooooooooooooog! The voice of all the blessed: Alleluia, for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth! (From on high the voice of Adonai calls.) Goooooooooooood!" *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), pp. 599-600. See also the passage concerning "the dog of [Stephen's] enemy": "A point, live dog, grew into sight running across the sweep of sand. Lord, is he going to attack me? Respect his liberty. You will not be master of others or their slave. I have my stick" (45).

23. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, 1949), p. 368.

24. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 193.