

# Spectral Psychoanalysis: the Nabokov Effect

Sigi Jöttkandt

**Abstract:** “The truth only progresses from a structure of fiction,” Lacan maintains, yet which “truth” can we say is emerging from the prevailing fictitiousness of reality in this era of the “new Real”? In today’s “post-truth” environment, where everything becomes language games, psychoanalysis returns to the problem of interpretation. In this essay, I suggest some Nabokovian pointers for a spectral reading praxis in the era of climate change and its “worse Real.”

**Key words:** Psychoanalysis, post-truth, post-interpretation, the Real, reading, the letter, discourse, revolution, cinema, memory, materiality, spectrality

“...I definitely felt my family name began with an N and bore an odious resemblance to the surname or pseudonym of a presumably notorious (Notorov? No) Bulgarian, or Babylonian, or, maybe, Betelgeusian writer with whom scatterbrained emigres from some other galaxy constantly confused me.” – Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins*

“The truth only progresses from a structure of fiction,” Lacan maintains, yet which “truth” can we say is emerging from this era of the “new Real”?<sup>1</sup> What this century is increasingly understood by is a ‘fracturing’ in the Symbolic order, its sham, flammable cladding now tragically going up in smoke on the towers of former certainties around the world. From the vantage point of a post- or perhaps ‘spectral’ psychoanalysis, such fissures are becoming legible in what one now calls the “post-truth” public sphere. The signifier’s original basis in deception, its first nature as semblance, arrives as the unconscious truth of the capitalist discourse. And as climate change tips the Earth headlong into a “worse Real,” evacuated of the sureties with which a certain “Nature” by “returning to the same place” once comforted us, it seems timely to revisit this fictional structure that moves truth along. Miller, following the lead of Lacan’s *Seminar XXVII*, has identified this as the “moment to conclude.” “The age of interpretation is behind us.”<sup>2</sup> But following this declaration, the question facing us is how to get one’s bearings in the new praxis Miller calls “post-interpretation,” – particularly if one is, like Jean-Claude Milner,<sup>3</sup> left a little “cold” by the Joycean *sinthome* with which Lacan left off in his late teachings.

1 Lacan, 1971, lesson of 19.5.71; Miller 2014a.

2 Miller 2007, p. 4.

3 Jean-Claude Milner, comment made during the Melbourne School of Continental Philosophy Colloquium, Melbourne, Australia, 3-4 July, 2017.

Before suggesting some possible directions, we can note the phrase the “climate change unconscious” as the articulation of the way the Western world is failing to come to terms “Symbolically” with the ecological catastrophe unfolding “before our lying eyes” – as the Marx brothers once quipped. Anthropogenic climate change still remains effectively barred from public discourse, even to the extent of deleting its references on official sites (although this may be changing as its phenomenal effects are now being dramatically felt around the world). However, psychoanalysis is nothing if not uniquely equipped to attend to the message contained in the unsaid, enabling one to chart a structural path through what is emerging as an exorbitant new shamelessness, emboldened by Trump and his administration, of course, but which really only supplements other, longer-standing histories just a few of which might be mentioned here: the ideological rescinding of many forms of regulation in the years leading up to the 2008 Global Financial Crisis; the “new narcissism” of the social media revolution, whose impacts include a complete redefinition of what it means to be a private citizen; the take-the-money-and-run mentality of the Silicon Valley elites currently building multi-million dollar “survival condos” in remote places, and plotting escapes from the Anthropocene to Mars, together with their gene-edited children; the consolidation of autocratic rule over those left behind, and the deterioration of what now rings quaintly as “human rights” from another era, etc. These and many other features of 21<sup>st</sup> century life seem to reflect another relation to jouissance, one no longer tethered to the castrative cut and its repression that dominated an earlier period of psychoanalysis. A text-book example of Lacan’s adage that what is foreclosed in the Symbolic returns in the Real, we witness today a frenzied hyper-jouissance, one that, infiltrating much of public and private life, suggests a closer reading as unconscious “climate panic.”<sup>4</sup>

On this basis, one might assess such symptomatic formations of 21<sup>st</sup> century psychic life as reflections of what Miller identifies as the “mutation” in today’s Symbolic, one that has overseen broad redefinitions of categories of truth and falsity. Miller comments,

The traditional categories that organize existence have passed over to the rank of mere social constructions that are destined to come apart. It is not only that the semblants are vacillating, they are being recognized as semblants.<sup>5</sup>

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4 In making these observations, I am deeply indebted to recent work by Tom Cohen whose terms “climate change unconscious” and “climate panic” I am using. See for example Cohen, Colebrook, Miller 2016.

5 Miller 2014b, n.p.

In a “post-truth” environment where everything becomes language games, truth abdicates; it disappears back into “misty abysses,”<sup>6</sup> putting new agents in charge of deciding which hallucinatory version of reality prevails. Perfectly justified too, then, is Miller’s admonition that psychoanalysis must take its bearings today not from the structure of neurosis and its hysterical symptom but from psychosis, the elementary phenomenon and the delusion. As the Name-of-the-Father is unmasked as the originary fiction, one might turn to Vladimir Nabokov, the 20th century’s most prodigious figure of literary deception, disguise and dupery. Nabokov, who for too long has been read either as a postmodern destroyer of ontological certainties, or as an all-powerful Auteur winking at us in the direction of Romantic and humanist paradigms, seems finally to have discovered his critical moment. As we find ourselves living under the hard sign of extinction, with the irreversibility of ecological system change now upon us, “Nabokov,” as a signifier for the refusal of linear logics and, especially, of the inevitability of death, appears to us now as if he had been lying in wait in advance for this, having been here the entire time...

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He is sitting on a circular seat, posing (rather unconvincingly) as a dejected old man reading a foreign newspaper<sup>7</sup>. But a more faithful likeness emerges in the sun-blinding splinters that greet our literary train, exploding like a bullet from its tunnel of memory, conduit of his official aesthetic program. We catch him next seeking shelter in the optical illusion of a portrait that, examined more closely, is composed of tiny letters, depicting an entire novel (*Master and Man*) in the contours of Tolstoy’s profile.<sup>8</sup> Now he lies dormant, a latent time bomb in a ticking clock whose numbers flit mechanically sideways like black and white letters, pausing briefly the way “commercial stills did on the old cinema screen.”<sup>9</sup> But startling us from our torpor with the crash of a spilled tea tray at a Cambridge tutor’s feet, an electrifying shock rockets us to our feet in the middle of one of his tales.<sup>10</sup> With his cuffed hand, cunningly shaped from wood, he beckons treacherously in the direction of a slow subdued thumping, easily mistaken for wholesome German “bandstand music” but flowing *en verité* from ancient fabulous forests.<sup>11</sup> The sonorous rustling of their ancient lime leaves drowns out the siren songs of

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6 Nabokov 1996, p. 283.

7 Nabokov 1996a, p. 626.

8 Nabokov 1996a, p. 491.

9 Nabokov 1996a, p. 514.

10 Nabokov 1996a, p. 592.

11 Nabokov 1996a, p. 617.

“Mnemosyne’s monologue.” His favorite gambit of all of course is to assume the name “Vladimir Nabokov,” much as an earlier, similarly “not harmless” Nabokov (the author’s father), adopted “the mimetic disguise of a doctor without changing his name.”<sup>12</sup>

Who or what is this signature that circulates throughout the novels of Vladimir Nabokov as an assortment of letteral signs and symbols? Presenting as a seemingly harmless after-dinner parlour game, an expert’s puzzle, are these the marks of another signifying network that secretly piggybacks on the authorizing, narrating, memorializing textual systems of one of the twentieth century’s greatest literary auteurs? A parasitic cipher for some other representational aim, this ‘alt’ Nabokov silently consumes its host languages from the inside, much like the English that secretly but indelibly imposes its own formal patterns on the unsuspecting young would-be poet’s Russian rhymes. “It would have horrified me at the time,” recounts Nabokov in *Speak Memory*, “to discover what I see so clearly now, the direct influence upon my Russian structures of various contemporaneous (“Georgian”) English verse patterns that were running about my room and all over me like tame mice.”<sup>13</sup>

Can we read Nabokov as an advance guard of “post-interpretation”? As is well known, like Alfred Hitchcock, a certain “Vladimir Nabokov” makes numerous cameo appearances in his novels, whether as a self-parodying character named Van Veen, McNab, or simply “V,” or again in the various anagrammatic games that he plays with the letters of his name across his oeuvre – as Vivian Darkbloom, Blavdak Vinomori, Ivor Black, Badlook, Baron Klim Avidov, Adam von Librikov, and so on. While a long tradition in Nabokov criticism has been to regard these walk-on parts as ironic expressions of Nabokov’s supreme narratorial power and control – the self-citations of an extra-diegetic author figure demonstrating to us his “God-like” status – the sheer textuality of these letteral foldings and re-foldings now strike one as engaging another relation to the I. Like the Joycean *sinthome*, the concertinaed encryptions of Nabokov’s proper name as it zig-zags through his writing suggest an enjoyment that seems in excess of any authorial gag.

If, as I have suggested, Nabokov seems to have anticipated – even projected – the changed relation to speech and writing Miller observes taking place in the era of the “new real,” it is as a ‘cinematic’ take-down of the literary and its desiring tropes by one whose investment in the materiality of language accelerates what analysts are starting to recognize as a significant semiotic shift in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In Nabokov, literature seems continually in league with some unknown principle

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12 Nabokov 1996a, p. 569.

13 Nabokov 1996a, p. 587.

of textual interference, a “bend sinister” in language that curves linear systems. Resisting the pull of narrative resolution, cross-wiring literature’s plot engines, this “Nabokov effect” appears as a calculated assault on all teleological models.

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A post-interpretive reading practice might begin by tracking instances where authorship gives way to another principle of literary production. As if spawned by the ink blots and boggy puddles that besplatter Nabokov’s characters, one would quickly find other textual figures or, perhaps, non-figures clamoring for our distracted attention: a mysterious “left-slanted” handwriting that interleaves a diary entry’s “factual or more or less fictional” reports in *Look at the Harlequins*,<sup>14</sup> exercise books that dissolve into a “chaos of smudges and scriggles,”<sup>15</sup> the unerased try-outs of a writer’s opening paragraphs whose over-written repetitions bleed into the garbled semblance of full sentences in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (“As he a heavy A heavy sleeper, Roger Rogerson, old Rogerson bought old Rogers bought [...]”).<sup>16</sup> In the short story, “The Visit to the Museum,” a cataloging error in the archive triggers an assault on the structures of historical memory. In “Ultima Thule,” a “chance combination” (of letters? words? numbers? We never find out) kills a man. An accidental typo in the poem *Pale Fire* assures John Shade of a “life everlasting based on a misprint”<sup>17</sup>; in *Ada*, a type-setting conceit transforms prose’s grammar into a mine-field of temporal dislocations. In Nabokov, it is invariably a question of a certain over-flow, a technical spillage occurring in the mechanics of writing. This spillage is linked to a cinematic figure summoned from the underworld, what Lacan in Seminar XVIII calls “the function of the shadow” as it wells up from the act of inscription.<sup>18</sup>

If this shadow function at times attaches itself, like a gum-shoe, to the Imaginary register, trying on the masks of Nabokovian characters – John *Shade*, Dolores *Haze*, *Hazel*, Van *Veen* (literally “from or of the bog”) *Sebastian Knight*, Ivor and Iris *Black*, or the serial noir of *Humbert Humbert* – it merely makes use of that register’s spatial dimensions to let us glimpse something else through the body’s “torpid smoke.”<sup>19</sup> In fact, it just as often sheds such ploys to feed directly from the formal marks that spawn it – geometrical shapes such the circle referenced in the Russian

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14 Nabokov 1996c, p. 579.

15 Nabokov 1996c, p. 624.

16 Nabokov 1996a, p. 30.

17 Nabokov 1996b, p. 479.

18 Lacan 1971, lesson of 19.5.71.

19 Nabokov 1996d, p. 396.

“Krug” in *Bend Sinister*. Here, too, one must mention the alphabetical forms caressing Nabokov’s female characters: Nina in “Spring in Fialta,” whose name manifests a side-ways configuration of her signature sprawl: “She was sitting in the corner of a couch, her feet pulled up, her small comfortable body folded in the form of a Z”<sup>20</sup>; or Lolita, whose sequence of blackened bars reflects the “skeleton glow” of the Venetian blinds between whose “intercrossed rays” her unhappy tale unfolds.<sup>21</sup>

As the hypnagogic patterns of readerly identification become exposed, X-ray-like, to language’s technical operations, this is accompanied by a revision of the specular model that configures, mimetically, the mirage of the ego or I as Imaginarily constituted. In Nabokov, the Imaginary register never seems to secure the idea of a “self” but is, rather, the site of infinitely complicated foldings. From Imago to fragilized image, reflection to refraction, dialectic to dehiscence, the mirror’s signature reversal neglects to assemble a totalized image, instead precipitating an “enfilade” of “nightmare mirrors with reflections overflowing in messy pools on the floor.”<sup>22</sup> What the image amounts to in Nabokov is thus a vastly different affair than the “orthopedic” totality of the mirror stage’s drama with its “donned armor of an alienating identity.”<sup>23</sup> While an image is a slippery, shape-shifting object at the best of times, in Nabokov it assumes its properly topological properties: constitutively fragmented, the image pokes holes in representation’s smooth reflective surfaces, as for example in the following passage from Nabokov’s autobiography, *Speak, Memory*. The presumed “original” of the scene we have just witnessed from *Look at the Harlequins!*, Nabokov’s “fake,” reversed mirror of his life-story (its kaleidoscopic patterns of refraction already visited in the shimmering, overlapping rings of biographical “truth” and “fiction” in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*), here Nabokov recalls his early poetic endeavors. Spellbound by rhyme, the young Nabokov overleaps space and time, teleporting from the “cold, musty, little-used room” where, with one arm dangling from the leathern couch, he grazes the “floral figures of the carpet,” to find himself “prostate on the edge of a rickety wharf, and the water lilies I touched were real”:

the undulating plump shadows of alder foliage on the water – apotheosized inkblots, oversized amoebas – were rhythmically palpitating, extending and drawing in dark pseudopods, which, when contracted, would break at their rounded margins into

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20 Nabokov 1996d, p. 418.

21 ris: 1981, p. 18; footnote?? the the extra 2 kgany like. Nabokov 1996b, p. 120.

22 Nabokov 1996d, p. 283; 1996c, p. 570.

23 Lacan 2006, p. 78.

elusive and fluid macules, and these would come together again to reshape the groping terminals.<sup>24</sup>

A liquifying reduction of the semblable, an inky pool which, in spreading, laps at the limits of the lyrical I, bleeds through the phantasmal narcissal scene of identification. It is not the polished mirror of poetic language that more or less faithfully reflects “life” in the Nabokovian poetics. Instead, “life” seems embodied as strange shadowy “pseudopods” – literally, fake feet – that grope and poke at the world from beneath the screen-like surface of the water. In this alternative, ‘cinematic’ account of apperception, representation does not so much reflect as absorb and resorb. Another representational ontology takes over, of language as a sightless, denaturalizing, “original” or first “fake” life masquerading as the negative or obverse of figure but, left to its own devices, reverts back to prefigural blotches.

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In Nabokov, the Symbolic suffers an ignoble fate. In the psychoanalytic schema, knowledge’s S<sub>2</sub> supports the master signifier of the paternal metaphor. But in Nabokov, understanding appears as a dubious transmission that spirals through a network of proxy paternal figures in the form of (maternal) grandfathers, uncles and, in particular, tutors. It seems that knowledge has always been a matter of impersonation, imitation, and invention. Among the early instructors who make their appearances in *Speak, Memory* are an expert ventriloquist, remarkable for his impressions of a figure who famously put words into others’ mouths, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, “mouthing every line most lusciously and changing his voice from flute to bassoon, according to the characters he mimed.”<sup>25</sup> Another is “Lenski,” a “very pure, very decent human being, whose private principles were as strict as his grammar,”<sup>26</sup> but whose garbled literary knowledge – “he casually informed me that Dickens had written *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” – is more than compensated for by his scriptive beauty, having an “unforgettable handwriting, all thorns and bristles.”<sup>27</sup>

This ‘cinematic’ tutor Lenski, dragging a faintly “etherish” smell behind him (from film developing chemicals, one wonders?), makes his chief appearance in *Speak, Memory* as the director of a mortifying series of “instructive readings” that accompany his Educational Magic-Lantern

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24 Nabokov 1996a, p. 550.

25 Nabokov 1996a, p. 504.

26 Nabokov 1996a, p. 506.

27 Nabokov 1996a, p. 504.

Projections put on for the edification of the children.<sup>28</sup> With his penchant for outlandish modern inventions, he thus discloses his credentials as an agent of a certain *techné* and *savoir faire*. These include a “new type of pavement he was responsible for [...] composed of (so far as I can make out that strange gleam through the dimness of time) a weird weave of metallic strips.”<sup>29</sup> However this is no Scheherazadean flying carpet woven by the threads of literary invention. Whatever ‘ground’ the metallic footpath proffers unfolds as a treacherous path of silver webbing, each reticule more hazardous than the rest and, needless to say, “the outcome was a puncture.”<sup>30</sup>

Metaphorical vehicles for imaginative ‘flight’ are similarly self-impeding: an “electroplane” with “voltaic motor,” flew “only in [Lenski’s] dreams and mine.”<sup>31</sup> Another invention to which Lenski claimed what the narrator calls a “natural fatherhood” was designed to accelerate the speed of ordinary horse-power with a “miracle horse food in the form of galette-like flat cakes (he would nibble some himself and offer bites to friends).”<sup>32</sup> What constitutes Lenski’s claim to these inventions, it turns out, is simply “an emotional attitude on his part with no facts in support and no fraud in view.”<sup>33</sup> His would be a non-biological paternity that suspends the “natural” with another right: of self-assembly, auto-production, fabrication and contrivance.

If “knowing” has always been doubled by its innate propensity to swerve in transmittal, dead-ending in ironic self-annulment, the  $S_2$ ’s *duplicity* now spreads even to the master signifier,  $S_1$ . The paternal star in whose light the young Vladimir triumphantly struts at the beginning of *Speak, Memory*, was always already counterfeited. Nabokov senior’s glittering trappings of power – his military outfit with its “smooth golden swell of cuirass burning upon [his] chest and back [which] came out like the sun”<sup>34</sup> – turns out to be a “festive joke,” assumed in jest by the narrator’s father in self-parody. Simultaneously blinding and a double-blind, the master signifier in Nabokov is preprogrammed as a comedic routine.

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28 Nabokov 1996a, pp. 501-2.

29 Nabokov 1996a, p. 505.

30 Nabokov 1996a, p. 505.

31 Nabokov 1996a, p. 505.

32 Nabokov 1996a, p. 505.

33 Nabokov 1996a, p. 505.

34 Nabokov 1996a, p. 371.

“The sight of his handwriting fascinates him; the chaos on the page is to him order, the blots are pictures, the marginal jottings are wings.”<sup>35</sup> The written word in Nabokov is a complex figure – possessing not only textual but irremediably visual dimensions. Entering discourse iconically, it constructs mental images in flight from linear models of meaning. A visual system thus seeps through Nabokov’s textual fabric, manifesting as a cross-sensory switchboard jumping on double meanings, cross-lingual puns and homophonies. In the novel, *Transparent Things*, this trans-scriptivity encounters the object world as an encrypted network through which matter and memory, or memory-as-matter, is transported.

In this work thematizing Nabokov’s material mnemonics, we are introduced to the idea of objects as “transparent things” whose interactions are laid open to dispersion effects unmistakably allied with textual dissemination. In chapter 3, an old desk disgorges a pale lilac pencil which returns a spectral memory of its making. After a brief recount of its immediate provenance as the possession of the carpenter who, ten years ago, mislaid it while failing to fix the old desk, the pencil in the narrator’s hands writes its own way back to its “sweetly” “whittled” shavings which are now scattered, “reduced to atoms of dust.” Objects, it seems, carry a “memory” of their previous histories, rendering the present “transparent” to the past into whose layers they constantly threaten to sink. For the present, as the narrator explains in the novel’s opening passage, is merely “a thin veneer of immediate reality” that is “spread over natural and artificial matter, and whoever wishes to remain in the now, with the now, on the now, should please not break its tension film.”<sup>36</sup>

Yet, despite this translucency, objects nevertheless remain traversed by the inflexible law of time’s unfolding and the inexorability of entropic systems, shared by all living and dead things. All, that is, except the metallic-grey atoms, which, emanating from the pencil-object in silvery trails, have the ability to revolve in all directions – in reverse as well as fast-forwarding into the future. These granules of black lead, *plumbum*, recover their “complicated fate” by writing out the pathways of their dispersion, an act the narrator calls “panic catching its breath” but “one gets used to it fairly soon (there are worse terrors).”<sup>37</sup>

Going back a number of seasons (not as far as Shakespeare’s birth year when pencil lead was discovered), and then picking up the thing’s story again in the ‘now’ direction, we see

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35 Nabokov 1996c, p. 500.

36 Nabokov 1996c, p. 489.

37 Nabokov 1996c, p. 492.

graphite, ground very fine, being mixed with moist clay by young girls and old men. This mass, this pressed caviar, is placed in a metal cylinder which has a blue eye, a sapphire with a hole drilled in it, and through this the caviar is forced. It issues in one continuous appetizing rodlet (watch for our little friend!), which looks as if it retained the shape of an earthworm's digestive tract.<sup>38</sup>

In this, writing's 'primal scene,' graphite, a metamorphic rock predating the Solar System, pierces ocularcentrism's "blue eye," boring through the latter's tunnels of interiority with the 'memory' of an archaic, molten, intercalating arch-conductivity. Coiled within the written word is a materiality that intervenes temporally, overwriting time's arrow with a different interface of space-time. A hexagonal form of matter which the bisecting tropes of solarly definitionally fail to penetrate, this non-transparent *l'achose* ("a-thing") resists chunking by time and space.

Curiously, the figure Nabokov suggests for accessing this material memory is not a word but a number, 313, which should be imagined, as Hugh tells Armande, "as three little figures in profile, a prisoner passing by with one guard in front of him and another behind."<sup>39</sup> Here the 3s in this little sequence "guard" the entry and exit of life and death, marching to time's inexorable forward beat. But the 1 – an "I" formed through another process than identification – slips from their grasp by making a quarter turn in another direction. It briefly faces us, readers now trained in Nabokov's graphematics, before slipping through "some secret outlet" that deposits one outside the "prison of time."<sup>40</sup>

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*Transparent Things* ends in one of Nabokov's trademark conflagrations. As the final pages of the novel combust in a "torrent of rubies,"<sup>41</sup> they reduce to ashes any last lingering hope that the subject of enunciation – a hapless proof-reader called Hugh ("You") Person – can be kept separate from the enunciating subject, a certain "touchy, unpleasant" "Mr. R," a thinly-veiled Nabokov hiding behind a mirrored image of the Cyrillic Я, ("ya" meaning "I," or "I am"). Like the strongly opinionated Nabokov, Mr. R, also an author, demonstrates a streak of "nasty inventiveness," fighting "on his own ground with his own weapons for the right to use

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38 Nabokov 1996c, pp. 492-3.

39 Nabokov 1996c, p. 555.

40 Nabokov 1996a, p. 370.

41 Nabokov 1996c, p. 561.

an unorthodox punctuation corresponding to singular thought."<sup>42</sup> A Möbial structure, the orders of writing and reading slide irreparably into one another: is the manuscript of R's that Hugh has been correcting throughout the novel, it finally dawns on us to ask, the very the book we have been reading as the tragic story of Hugh's unintentional murder of his wife, Armande in his sleep, a re-tracing of the steps of his desiring history in the Chorb-like hope of undoing time,<sup>43</sup> and the repetition of the dream of a fire, which has in the meantime become "reality"?

Rings of blurred colors circled around him, reminding him briefly of a childhood picture in a frightening book about triumphant vegetables whirling faster and faster around a nightshirted boy trying desperately to awake from the iridescent dizziness of dreamlife.<sup>44</sup>

It was by interpreting his patients' dreams that Freud came to the idea of the symptom as an unconscious message that presents itself for interpretation. Yet the father's dream of the burning child famously presented Freud with a conundrum, of a "Real" that breaks through the otherwise ubiquitous dream-structure of the pleasure principle. If Nabokov, similarly, pierces the bar isolating the primary or original text from its secondary or "meta"-level interpretation, with him we also reach the end of a certain analytic praxis, and the collapse of the "narcissism" of the reader as decipherer of the symptom's hidden messages. In Nabokov, interpretation is never "stratified" in relation to the unconscious<sup>45</sup> – but is inscribed in the same register. The text, to rephrase Miller slightly, *is* its own interpretation.

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Nabokov tosses his book into the fire at the close of *Transparent Things*. The dying Hugh's "ultimate vision was the incandescence of a book or a box grown completely transparent and hollow. This is, I believe, *it*: not the crude anguish of physical death but the incomparable pangs of the mysterious mental maneuver needed to pass from one state of being to another."<sup>46</sup> Radiantly aglow, this empty "book or box" sucks into its vacuum the orders of metaphor and metonymy, together with their implied futurity

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42 Nabokov 1996c, p. 504.

43 In the short story, "The Return of Chorb," the titular figure tries to undo the events leading up to his wife's death by repeating them. The quest ends in Chorb's "meaningless smile" and the story ends with the lackey's stunned whisper, "They don't speak" (Nabokov 1996c, pp. 153-4).

44 Nabokov 1996c, p. 562.

45 Miller 2007, p. 4.

46 Nabokov 1996c, p. 562.

as the promise of another meaning, laid over or horizontally deferred until the “last word.” It thereby dismantles every reading it pretends to invite in the name of some Truth that exceeds what “can be settled by a yes or a no.”<sup>47</sup>

As it defies figuration, blinding sight, silencing speech, autosarcophically consuming its own words, this “transparent and hollow” book, or box, unwrites the order of the literary as *metaphorein*. “Tralatitious,” the much-contested title of R’s book, in addition to its standard definition as “metaphor,” also has the meaning of what can be acquired by direct contact: “passed along as from hand to hand, mouth to mouth, or from generation to generation.”<sup>48</sup> What can be passed on “from hand to hand, mouth to mouth”? At this point the figure of reading returns, not as the superadded layers of secondary meaning but as the “tralatitious” work of the letter in the act of integral transmission.

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When a certain power exits, its exhausted routines finally played out, it pivots on the sole aspect of language that “might not be a semblance.” A “frail,” “weak,” “harmless looking” logic,<sup>49</sup> the letter unleashes the only true revolution that psychoanalysis recognizes: a shift in discourse. Lacan comments, “It is a matter of making tangible how the transmission of a letter has a relationship with something essential, fundamental in the organization of discourse, whatever it may be, namely, enjoyment.”<sup>50</sup> How does one initiate such a shift in discourse? Back in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lacan circumspectly offered that while psychoanalysis might accompany one to the point “where the cipher of [one’s] mortal destiny is revealed,” it is not in the analyst’s power “to bring him to the point where the true journey begins.”<sup>51</sup> However in his presentation of the theme of the 2016 Congress of the World Association of Psychoanalysis, Miller indicated a possible pathway through the totalizing semblances wraithing the “new Real.” “The only path that opens up beyond” the delusional structure which has surpassed the hysterical symptom, he claims, “is for the *parlêtre* to make himself the dupe of a real, that is, to assemble a discourse in which the semblants clasp a real.” “To be the dupe of a real – which is what I’m extolling – is the sole lucidity that is open to the speaking being by which he may orient himself.”<sup>52</sup>

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47 Lacan 1971, lesson of 13.1.71.

48 Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tralatitious>

49 Lacan 1971, lesson of 12.5.71.

50 Lacan 1971, lesson of 12.5.71.

51 Lacan 2006, p. 81.

52 Miller 2016, n.p.

Nabokov, whose “transparent and hollow” books seem the pure definition of semblance, nonetheless encrypts an “*immortal* destiny” of a book, or box, in the Real letters of his name. An impossible book-*bok*-box without sides (recall *bok*, the Russian for “side”), Nabokov entraps in this open, turning, continually self-inverting ‘structure’ the sheer excess of the signifier. Jettisoning the logic of inside and outside, rippling mimetic orderings, the book or box without sides reverses temporal logics.

Can one think of the Nabokovian ‘*cinemathomme*,’ then, as the rhetorical “duping” of the Real into doubling itself in the Symbolic? Lacan states,

The psychoanalyst is a rhetor (rhôteur): to continue equivocating I would say that he ‘rhetifies’ (rhêtifie), which implies that he rectifies. The analyst is a rhetor, namely, that ‘rectus’, a Latin word, equivocates with ‘rhêtification’. One tries to say the truth. One tries to say the truth, but that is not easy because there are great obstacles to saying the truth, even if only because one makes mistakes in the choice of words. The Truth has to do with the Real and the Real is doubled, as one might say, by the Symbolic.<sup>53</sup>

The Truth the “Nabokov effect” unleashes straddles both the Symbolic and Real. It electrifies literature’s semantic complex with a continually expanding network of formalization without pauses, borders or ends. Differently than punctuation, which as Miller points out “still belongs to the system of signification,” is “still semantic,” and still “produces a quilting point,”<sup>54</sup> Nabokov’s cinematic post-interpretation reverses the signifier, and turns a now spectralized psychoanalysis to its archaic origins in the “montage” of the partial drives.<sup>55</sup> Castration’s ‘cut’ unfolds as a hole turning on a non-Euclidean graphematics of knots and weaves, light and shade, a toric glove that reduplicates what it interlaces.

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53 Lacan 1970, lesson of 20.5.70.

54 Miller 2007, p. 8.

55 In Seminar 18, Lacan tells an amusing story about the “birth” of the signifier as it materializes from the fragmented body: one’s arm which, trespassing on a neighbour’s enjoyment, gets repeatedly thrown back. Out of the chance patterns derived from the accumulations of this projection a schema arises from which the signifier as semblant materializes. (Lacan 1971, lesson of 13.1.71).

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