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Vladimir Nabokov's *Despair*: The Reader as "April's Fool"

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One must recognize that *Otchaianie*, the 1936 Russian version of Vladimir Nabokov's *Despair*, in some respects, seems more modernist, and even more postmodernist than the American translation and revision of 1965: in this last edition, Nabokov has added many important precisions to present Hermann Karlovich as a complete lunatic and a mad, unreliable narrator, which makes Hermann Karlovich a coherent one at the expense of his polysemic character.

One can even say that, in spite of his well-known contempt for psychoanalysis, Nabokov, maybe influenced by his life in America, where psychoanalysis was fashionable, as in Europe, or maybe in order to deceive his reader in another way, and in particular his American reader, with his unflinching faith in psychoanalysis, has added many details likely to thrill the psychoanalyst, especially on sexual matters: Hermann Karlovich appears not only as a madman, but as a sexual pervert, with his wife Lydia (the dissociation scene, ch. 2, p. 32-34¹) and with his pretended double Felix, as a potential narcissistic dostoïevskian homosexual. But is all this intended to exhaust the meaning of Hermann Karlovich? I do not think so.

In the 1965 version, the American reader is given more information than the Russian about Hermann Karlovich, especially about his erotic frustrations,² as is proved by the adjunction of "the important passage which had been stupidly omitted in more timid times," as Nabokov himself says in the Foreword (p. 10), the dissociation scene, when Hermann Karlovich watches himself, or his self, making love to Lydia. The reader at first believes that mad Hermann's imagined self is the watching one, the one who is standing naked, resting his hand on a chair, or sitting in the parlour, away from the bed, where his original self is making love to Lydia: but in fact, this watching self is the real one, it is the fancied one who is making love to Lydia. As many times as he can, Hermann Karlovich makes the reader believe in the illusion rather than in reality, then he shows us that we have been *fooled* (cf. the first pages of his narrative, when he lies constantly and enjoys confessing it). The mirror Hermann Karlovich uses in this episode to augment the distance and the distancing produces another double and another illusion: Hermann Karlovich appears to be a prisoner of a hall of mirrors and of a general process of dissociation, and so are we, as we are unable to distinguish fiction from reality and what Hermann Karlovich says from the truth, we feel that we may be fooled by this strange narrator at any moment.

Hermann Karlovich fools us so many times that even the murder he commits may not be taken for granted but raises some doubts. Until the end, which takes place on *April's Fool Day*, April 1st, the reader is not quite certain whether there has been any murder at all. Maybe, everything is a produce of the imagination of the completely unreliable Hermann Karlovich. As he proudly puts it at the very beginning of his narrative: "Had I lacked that power [to write], that ability [to express ideas with the utmost grace and vividness], et cetera, not only should I have refrained from describing certain recent events, but there would have been nothing to describe for, gentle reader, nothing at all would have happened!" Words, words, and only words? The whole book could be but the memoirs of a madman, the story of his folly, the diary of a madman — which it becomes, in fact, in the last chapter of the text — a narrative in the reality of which we do not feel compelled to believe, a poet's fabrication, or

¹ We use the following edition: Nabokov, Vladimir, *Despair* (London: Penguin Books, 1981) (1st ed., New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1965).

² Proffer, Car R., "From *Otchaianie* to *Despair*," *Slavic Review*. 28 (1966), 258-267.

a stage performance: the ending, in the last version, when Hermann Karlovich, looks decided to make his escape as a film actor, could be a very nice and acceptable *coup de théâtre* for a reader who would not know he was watching the rehearsal of a film. So that we can imagine a third ending, after the one in the Russian version and the one in the American version, an address of the author to the naïve reader: “I have deceived you, you appear at last to be the April fools Hermann Karlovich intended to make of you since the beginning. *Poisson d’avril!*” *April’s Fools* or *Poisson d’avril!* would have been very good titles. But that would have been a too classical ending, a worn-out trick, and implying that Vladimir Nabokov and his central character would agree on the same purpose, and this is out of question, as we shall see. Nevertheless, this is quite postmodernist: the text is explicitly and carefully cut from any reference to time, space and reality.

Why did not Nabokov write the ending planned in the American version, which would have been in fact a new start for the story? Brian McHale writes that in the sequence between *Lolita* (1955), *Pale Fire* (1962) and *Ada* (1969), Nabokov progressed from Modernism to Postmodernism in his writing.³ It would be surprising if in his 1965 revision of *Otchaianie* he did not leap from Modernism to Postmodernism as he was doing at the same time, from *Lolita* to *Ada*. One must note already that *Despair* is a sort of *double* of *Otchaianie* and has its own specific relation to its 1936 Russian original. Even if Hermann Karlovich appears as a more coherent, a more explained, a more classical character, whom we are fallaciously invited to reduce to the figure rather paradoxical but already quite traditional of the writing madman — and so, *Despair* may even look like a return to a pre-*Otchaianie* tradition — we must never trust Nabokov, for, as Maurice Couturier puts it, Nabokov is *a tyrant* and, like Hermann Karlovich, a professional *deceiver*.

Despair, as I shall try to show, must be considered at least as a modernist, a modernized version of *Otchaianie*, and in some respects, as a postmodernist version of an already modern text, which is shown by the original treatment Nabokov makes of the very traditional theme of doubling.

Otchaianie and *Despair*, of course, are *not* novels on the double, for there are *no* real doubles in Nabokov’s novels. Nabokov as a writer and as a teacher, Nabokov as an artist, is interested exclusively in rendering *differences*, *Despair* is a novel *about* doubling, that is about the shadows of differences, as Shade says in *Pale Fire*: “The resemblances are but the shadows of differences.” So, even if there are not any doubles in *Despair*, the doubling theme hovers over the text as a shadow or a ghost over the reality. It is this ghostly presence that I intend to describe.

What is Postmodernism? I will not spend much time and room trying to give an exhaustive definition of such an evanescent topic. I just want to show that, by doubling in 1965 in English his 1936 Russian text, Nabokov, in fact, contrary to appearances, reinforces the polysemantic meaning of his work. By adding many similes, many explanations to his Russian text, he enriches the meaning of *Otchaianie*: *Despair* is the achieved, cannonic version of *Otchaianie*.

By accentuating the overt and explicit madness of his pervert and unreliable narrator, Hermann Karlovich, Nabokov allows him to look like a would-be double of the author himself, an unfortunate rival of Nabokov. Not that I mean that as a murderous madman, Hermann Karlovich can represent at the same time a postmodernist writer and Nabokov himself, the two of them having, of course, nothing in common with madness and murder. My thesis is that Hermann Karlovich is a potential double to Nabokov, the shadow or the shade of Nabokov, that means he is in fact different from the latter for the precise reason that he offers a seeming resemblance with him, he gropes on the heels of Nabokov as a writer, but he who

³ McHale, Brian, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 1987, p. 214.

strives to show himself as an all-powerful author, is nothing but a fictional character, a literary character in the fiction he thinks he is writing, in fact he is not writing, he is *being written*, and he is the last-produced of a long, long series of literary figures, from the many-handed grip of which he vainly and *desperately* tries to escape: he lusts for immortality,⁴ but he will obtain only the Hell's immortality. *Despair* is a good title, better than the French, *La méprise* (1939), since it is the explicit conclusion of the failed escape of Hermann Karlovich from his status of mere character. Hermann Karlovich pursued by a swarm of stereotypes and stock characters: *Despair* is the howl of the prisoner who has tried to run away, and is caught back and returned to jail.

In no early works of Nabokov, do we find so many and so rich literary allusions, and, as Julian W. Connolly⁵ in his excellent articles and studies on *Despair* has shown it, their function is to turn Hermann Karlovich into a purely literary character, to force him to keep his fictional status inside the narrative of which he thinks he is the author.

So, Hermann Karlovich is a shadow of many literary shadows and the double of many doubles. In his text, he wants us to believe that he is the original, Felix being the double, even if he recognizes that he, Hermann Karlovich, may seem to Felix "a doubtful imitator" (ch. 1, p. 21), which in fact he is. But, according to the elementary dialectics of the relations between the original and the double, as Clément Rosset has explained them in his most remarkable small philosophical essay *Le réel et son double*,⁶ Hermann Karlovich becomes the double of his alleged double, and behaves as if he were the double of his "double," whose presence becomes more and more important in the text, at the expense of Hermann Karlovich, who extenuates himself, vainly trying to prove that he is something more than the shadow of a shade. Felix is no double at all, and he has no double in real or imaginary life, and, the more so, he has *no literary double*, Felix is completely genuine and original. He exists by himself and he craves not for a double, as opposed to Hermann Karlovich, who craves for himself and for everyone in the world for general resemblance (it is the reason why this elegant businessman from Berlin is such an enthusiastic pro-Soviet leftist). It is Hermann Karlovich who is obsessed with having a double, not Felix, who does not care at all. That is why Felix, who is unique and authentic, plays the part of the original, while Hermann Karlovich plays the part of the double, of the *Doppelgänger*, who pursues and finally kills the original, his pretended "double," the unhappy Felix.

Why has Hermann chosen precisely Felix as his would-be double? Because Felix, stretching on the grass, looked like him for he looked like *a corpse*: the resemblance can be at its best only in death, the great equalizer, "Life only marred my double; thus a breeze dims the bliss of Narcissus" (p. 22). As a tramp, Felix is the impending future of Hermann Karlovich, the bankrupt businessman. And Felix is everything Hermann has decided *not* to be: a free, joyous, *happy* — *Felix*, in Latin, means "happy" and "lucky, fortunate" — tramp who loves freedom, gardening, birds (he uses "Swallow" for his signature), fiddling, who dreams of a friend. Felix craves for a friend, Hermann craves for a double, that is all the difference: Hermann will not

⁴ Rosenfield, Claire, "Despair and the Lust for Immortality," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* (Spring 1967), "Vladimir Nabokov", 174-192. Repr. in: *Nabokov. The Man and His Work*, studies edited by L. S. Dembo (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967) pp. 66-84.

⁵ Connolly, Julian W., "The Function of Literary Allusions in Nabokov's *Despair*", *Slavic and East European Journal*. 26, 3 (1982), 302-313.
 Connolly, Julian W., "Dostoevsky and Vladimir Nabokov: The Case of *Despair*," in *Dostoevsky and the Human Condition after a Century*, ed. by Ugrinsky, A., Ozolins, V. (New York, 1986), p. 155-162.
 Connolly, Julian W., *Nabokov's Early Fiction. Patterns of Self and Other*, Cambridge, CUP, 1992 (pp. 143-160: on *Despair*).

⁶ Rosset, Clément, *Le réel et son double. Essai sur l'illusion* (Paris: Gallimard, Folio/Essais, 1993) (1st ed., 1976, 2nd éd, 1984). The some forty pages Clément Rosset writes about doubling are the cleverest thing one can read on the topic.

be the desired friend of Felix, he will be his *Doppelgänger* and his murderer. Felix is but a projection of the mind of Hermann Karlovich, in fact he is the hidden, refused and concealed truth of Hermann Karlovitch, the truth the bankrupt wants at once to suppress and to appropriate in order to save himself from the total ruin which he knows threatens him. By choosing Felix as his double and by killing him after he has disguised Felix as Hermann Karlovich, the latter tries to kill his own hated self, in order to *become* Felix: what interested and moved Hermann Karlovich, behind the seeming and superficial resemblance, was not, in fact, that resemblance, but the *difference* between him and Felix, for he wanted to become different from himself by becoming Felix, in order to be at last *happy*, but the difference of Felix is his inner truth which cannot be shared, for the double does not exist, there cannot be two Felixes, otherwise each would lack what makes Felix real, the fact that he is unique (Plato, *Cratyles*). Hermann Karlovich fails, of course, in his endeavour, for one cannot reject and abandon oneself, one's old skin, like a snake. And one cannot become another man by taking his place and life, a snake cannot become another snake by getting into another snake's skin, as the snakish Hermann Karlovich tries to do.

It is not the original who has killed the double, it is the double who has killed the original in his thirst to exist at last. But, in fact, one can see that Hermann Karlovich the killer starts existing less and less, while Felix, even after his death, becomes more and more present: the furious wind that rages about Pignan and the Pyrénées mountain resort, where Hermann Karlovich tries hard to hide himself from himself, behind the name of Felix, and also behind his own bushy beard which de-faces him completely, is a symbol of that ghostly presence which fills the surroundings of Hermann Karlovich with surrogate Felixes (even the French gendarme is assimilated to Felix by Hermann Karlovich, ch. 11, p. 174).

So, Hermann Karlovich, by becoming the shadow of himself, becomes the shadow of Felix.

The deep tragedy of Hermann Karlovich is that, until the end, he does not give up the hope of becoming a creator, while he is destructive, a mere creature of God-Nabokov, a shadow of shadows of creatures — that is why he allows himself arbitrarily the privilege of giving and taking back the life of creatures in order to prove to himself that *he* is God (God is not allowed to exist, otherwise Hermann Karlovitch would be but a creature, see the anti-God diatribe at the beginning of chapter 6, p. 90-91), and Felix as his “double” is his creature. He wants to be the master and, as the creator, the God of the world which he creates, of our world, of our lives, to reduce everyone to his resemblance, i. e. to his rule, that is to kill everyone, because this all-mastery can only be achieved in that kingdom of general sameness, that land of mirrors which in *Pale Fire* Nabokov has called the new Zembla, the post-revolutionary Zembla, no more *Zemlja-Rossija*, but *Semblerland*. General sameness can be achieved only in death and by death, the true double, the real double is the dead double. A good double is a dead double: Hermann Karlovich is perfectly right, and Nabokov and all of us would but agree with him, for the double is precisely what does *not* and *cannot* exist on earth. Of course, it is not a reason to *make* doubles, i. e. to kill people, here is our difference from mad Hermann...

As has been demonstrated, for example by Ellen Pifer,⁷ Hermann is a double of Hermann from Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades*, of Popristchin from *The Memoirs /or Diary of a Madman* by N. V. Gogol, of Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov (“Rascanikov”) and, of course, of Mr. Golyadkin, of Ivan Turgenev's poem *How fair, how fresh are the roses*, of Oscar Wilde, of Swinburne, of Conan Doyle's Watson (“Watson”), of Maurice Leblanc's Arsène Lupin, etc. etc. etc. *Despair*, as I have already said, is the story of the fight of his protagonist-narrator against his literary doubles, all of them he strives, but with no success, to kill. But by killing his supposed double Felix, he necessarily kills himself, and by killing his literary doubles, he

⁷ Pifer, Ellen, “Wrestling with Doubles in Nabokov's Novels: *Despair*, *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*.” *The Nabokovian*, VI, (Spring 1981), 37-40.

condemns himself to insignificance and madness. He fires at a manikin he has dressed with his own clothes, which he has given his own identity, in the hope to escape from his life, which is not only the life of an unsuccessful petty bourgeois and of an unhappy husband, but, most of all, the life of a superfluous literary double: he is *un double en trop*, *lishnyj dvojniki*, *lishnyj chelovek*, *dvojniki lishnego cheloveka*, the double of *l'homme superflu* of XIXth century Russian literature, that is the most useless of all figures. Hermann Karlovich cannot become Felix, for he cannot be transformed into Felix: he cannot be Felix, for he cannot be happy.

What Hermann Karlovich wants is to triumph over “Dusty” (“Dusky and dusty”: Dostoïevski),⁸ Turguy (Turguenev) and some others, all of them being the fathers of the doubles that trouble him so much and keep him from existing, Hermann Karlovich has to settle accounts with them if he wants to live in his own right. He even tries to lead astray the famous pushkinian verse, *Pora, moj drug, pora...*, addressed by Pushkin to his wife and expressing a longing for “a remote abode of work and pure delight” (Foreword, p. 11). This is sublime verse and sublime thought, far above Hermann’s projects of swindling his life-insurance, and Hermann tries to justify himself by hiding himself under the wing of the greatest Russian poet, the true God of Nabokov. But the dishonest use of Pushkin is precisely what Vladimir Nabokov never forgets, and Pushkin triumphs over Hermann Karlovich, he has *le mot de la fin*, for he has long ago unmasked the miserable endeavours of this wretched grand-son of his Salieri. Pushkin makes Mozart say in a flash of genius:

Genij i zlodejstvo	Genius	and	crime
Dve veshchi nesovmestnye.	Cannot	exist	together.
(Mozart and Salieri, 1830)			

As hard and as skilfully as Hermann Karlovich has tried, he could never be a genius, for there are no genial murderer and, *a fortiori*, no genial artist could compose an apology of crime, for art is creation, and crime mere destruction.

But what keeps him from becoming an author? In fact, it is in his own text, in re-reading it that he discovers his fatal blunder, the mystic stick, the mistake that sums up his failure, Felix’s stick with the identity of its owner which he had forgotten in his car and unmasks Hermann Karlovich as a murderer *raté* and a poor writer who did not notice that he was denouncing himself in his own text as the murderer and as an incapable, hence his “despair” (ch. 11, p. 168-169), nothing is left to him, apart from brooding over “the shattered remains of [his] marvelous thing” and to write “swiftly and boldly on the first page of [his] work: *Despair*; no need to look for a better title” (p. 169).

What he wanted was to be the “implied author” of the narrative, to behave like God and be an absolute despot at least in his text, in his own exclusive production, but even his characters, who should have been his “galley slaves,” escape his domination, for he is himself one of these “galley slaves” of the real implied author, i. e. Vladimir Nabokov himself: the Russian émigré author, to whom Hermann Karlovich intends to send his manuscript, “my first reader, you, the well-known author of psychological novels [...] very artificial though not badly constructed,” and who, as Hermann Karlovich suspects with much reason, “will give out my stuff for [his] own” (Ch. 5, p. 74). Hermann Karlovich is quite right, for this mysterious author to whom Hermann intends to pay the homage of his manuscript is the real author, Vladimir Nabokov in person, who makes his unexpected and brief appearance, like Hitchcock used to do in his films, both proceedings fulfilling the function of the artist’s signature at the corner of the picture. Once for all, Hermann Karlovich is no author, because, as Roland Barthes and others say, the author is dead, absent or gone: the postmodernist author can play but the part, the role of the author in his own fiction, to figure in the fiction as a fictional

⁸ J. W. Connolly 1986 reminds us that it is the crazy Hermann Karlovich who derides and mocks Dostoïevski, in *Despair*, not Nabokov.

character, that of an imaginary author, a host and a ghost, for there is no more room for the author in the text, which is the *rendez-vous* of many already written texts and discourses, especially from the formidable literature on the Double since at least the XVIIIth century, as it is easily recognizable in the text of *Despair*.

This is why *Despair* is, in many respects, a postmodernist text: Nabokov has accentuated and enriched the intertextuality to the point that his protagonist is drowned down in literature and is no more than a literary manikin. And he has put on stage the drama of the author, by showing a character who produces a text of which he strives vainly to appear as the almighty God and *auctor*.

The absence of closure brings the narrative back to the beginning. That is why Vladimir Nabokov has added to the Russian version a second explicit ending, which is a doubling of the finale, as if we, assimilated to the French crowd, were to assist to the filming of the escape of a would-be criminal: in fact, Hermann Karlovich is going to play his own role, the real murderer will really escape, and we, naïve readers and spectators, will, of course, let him go.

It is only a possibility, briefly dreamt of by a fancy character inside an imaginary tale: the book ends on the speech Hermann Karlovich has not even pronounced. But we are left wondering, for the book has no clear ending: will Hermann Karlovich escape successfully? Has he still any chance to be happy, will he be *felix*? Will he be lucky this time? It is left to the reader to imagine which issue he prefers, nothing forbids us to do so, for it is only the realist reader, i. e. the premodernist one, who aspires to a clear-cut closed ending: this sort of reader is persuaded of the reality of the events; since he has started reading the novel, he believes that Felix is a double, or a sort of double, of Hermann Karlovich, exactly like him he thinks that he has failed only because of Felix's stick, and only on the level of the murder's plot, this reader, in whose mind sit together in a row a rational critic, a judge severe and a vigilant literary policeman, wants Hermann Karlovich to be caught, sentenced and eventually executed, so that the ending will be square-cut. But Hermann Karlovich, on this 1st of April, which is also the anniversary of Nabokov's *grand maître*, Gogol, would make us, reasonable, desperately serious and naïve readers, appear to be living fossils of the XIXth century, today's *April fools*.

Nabokov abandons Hermann Karlovich in a very difficult situation, as Pushkin does his Evgenij Onegin, fallen to the feet of Tatiana while the husband makes his entrance. Nabokov even "do[es] not remember what happened to him eventually" (Foreword, p. 11). These careless words of an author who does not bother about the destiny of his main character excludes not the idea that the latter really escaped the doom we expected and desired for him, the guillotine: what has become of him? Hermann Karlovich lives on in the reader's memory up to our days.