SELF-TRANSLATION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF NABOKOV'S AESTHETICS FROM *KAMERA OBSKURA* TO *LAUGHTER IN THE DARK*

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"Accidental dove droppings": that is how Vladimir Nabokov described the changes he made to his early novel *Kamera obskura* when he translated it into English (Appel 265). The Russian novel was first published in 1932 and translated soon after into several languages, including French and Czech. The novel's first English translation by Winifred Roy displeased Nabokov, but, as Brian Boyd observes, he was "unwilling to lose the chance of his first English publication" and so allowed it to go to press in Britain in 1936 (419). Two years later Nabokov managed to secure a publisher for an American edition. This time he translated it himself, giving the book a new title: *Laughter in the Dark* (1938).

Thanks perhaps to Nabokov's own dismissive remarks about his alterations, scholarship on the work tends to treat the Russian and the English versions of the novel together without distinguishing between the two.[1] The subject matter and structure of the book—modeled from the outset on a Hollywood film—does remain largely the same in translation. A wealthy married man and art critic (Bruno Krechmar/Albert Albinus) becomes fascinated with a vulgar young woman (Magda/Margot Peters), who later betrays him with a talented but sadistic cartoonist (Robert Gorn/Axel Rex).[2] Krechmar abandons his family for his young mistress, inadvertently bringing about his daughter's death. His mistress's infidelity, in turn, leads to a car accident that blinds him, and he is ultimately killed while attempting to take his revenge. Although the outlines of the novel do not change, there are several major and minor differences between the original and the translation.

Nabokov was more forthcoming about the scope of his changes in a pub-

1. Jane Grayson's analysis in *Nabokov Translated* is a notable exception. She traces the changes made between the original Russian version, Roy's translation, and Nabokov's own *Laughter in the Dark*. Her findings are discussed below.

2. I will refer to Nabokov's characters by their Russian names except when speaking specifically about Nabokov's English translation.

licity questionnaire he completed for the novel's American publisher: "When translating it, I again had to rewrite it by hand, changing a lot, because I saw it all in another, English, rhythm and colour" (Bobbs-Merrill). Most notably, Nabokov rewrote the opening chapter, gave his characters different names, refashioned the way the protagonist learns of his mistress's affair, and eliminated and introduced several characters. The few commentators who have considered Nabokov's changes have for the most part understood them as the author's attempt to iron out the kinks of the original and to appeal to a new audience. Jane Grayson, who offers the most extensive analysis of the changes made in translation, notes that Nabokov "tightened up every structural feature" of the book to produce the impression of "total authorial control"(43). John Colapinto likewise points to the expulsion of devices deemed "too slow, too flabby." Boyd observes that in translation Nabokov meant not only to better satisfy his own artistic sense but also to please a new audience. Nabokov "stress[ed] the movieland banality of the story, as if to lure an unimaginative producer," Boyd remarks (445). Alfred Appel suggests that Nabokov made his novel less European, purging it of its temporal and geographical specificity to attract a New World audience (265).

But the significance of the novel's transformation in translation goes beyond its streamlined shape and broadened appeal. The changes reflect an evolution in Nabokov's concerns. While both versions of the novel attend to the nature of aesthetic response, and specifically to the way our responses might be falsified or corrupted, *Laughter in the Dark* discloses an aesthetic problem very different from the one Nabokov examined in *Kamera obskura*.

Nabokov's Russian novel ultimately traverses rather well-trodden territory: it highlights the way our desire for gratification can interfere with our aesthetic (and moral) judgment. Nabokov posits that things that merely please the senses are often mistaken for things of real aesthetic worth, and these mistakes can have dire consequences. His readers did not need to be convinced. This ancient concern about deceptive appearances—dating back at least to Plato—had become particularly germane in the early decades of the twentieth century thanks to the growth of mass entertainment. Émigré critics like Vladislav Khodasevich warned against the insipid pleasures of cinema and the impending death of culture signaled by the general acceptance of the cinema as an art form. What was *not* at all obvious was that Nabokov's *Kamera obskura* was in fact a *critique* of such cheap pleasures. In fact, many critics saw it as an endorsement. They accused Nabokov of pandering to the masses by writing a titillating story, complete with a love triangle, a car accident, and the death of an innocent.

In translation—possibly in response to unfavorable critical appraisals—Nabokov introduces a number of changes to the novel's form that help reorient the concerns of the novel away from the well-known problem of a spectator's seduction by deceptive appearances and toward a more insidious and

complex problem: that our own creative drives, far from being inevitably beneficial or benign, can interfere with our aesthetic and ethical judgment. Nabokov continued, of course, to be irritated by philistinism, denouncing it in his critical writing and employing it as fodder for parody in his fiction. But it is the latter aesthetic concern—the harm wrought by one's own creative desire—that would come to preoccupy him more profoundly, particularly in his masterworks *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*.

To demonstrate the transformation of Nabokov's aesthetic concerns, I will read *Kamera obskura* and *Laughter in the Dark* alongside Leo Tolstoi's twin stories *The Devil* (1889/1911)[3] and *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889). Nabokov invites this comparison through multiple allusions to Tolstoi's works. For example, he names a minor character in the novel Dorianna Karenina, and as Krechmar awaits the birth of his daughter he sees in his mind's eye the flickering video footage of Tolstoi's 1910 funeral procession.[4] G.M. Hyde proposes that despite the overt references to Tolstoi's great novel, Nabokov's work is "schematic and abstract by comparison with *Anna Karenina*" and therefore more closely resembles Tolstoi's late short stories (59). Hyde shows that *The Devil* is a productive intertext for the work. The depth of Nabokov's engagement with Tolstoi becomes still more apparent, however, when *Kamera obskura* and *Laughter in the Dark* are read alongside *The Devil* and *The Kreutzer Sonata*, respectively.

Reading Nabokov's Russian and English versions of the novel in tandem with Tolstoi's two stories illuminates a crucial aesthetic insight held in common by two authors—the moralist and the aesthete—who are thought to be radically opposed on matters of art. Tolstoi's two stories diverge in much the same way that Nabokov's Russian novel diverges from his English translation of it. The doubling in each author's work reveals that each of them worried that our blindness to art and to other people may come from two sources, not one. We may be blinded not only by the sensuous demands of our bodies but also by the creative impulse of our minds.

Tolstoi's Twin Tales

Tolstoi's *The Devil* and *The Kreutzer Sonata*, both completed in the fall of 1889, are closely related. Both stories are preceded by the same epigraph from Matthew: "But I say unto you, that every one that looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (*The Kreutzer Sonata* 354; *The Devil* 304). Both stories relate how adultery makes

3. Tolstoi completed *The Devil* in 1889, but it was published only posthumously.

4. Several scholars have noted Nabokov's allusions to Tolstoi in *Kamera obskura/Laughter in the Dark*. See, for example, Alexandrov, Foster, Naiman, and Seifrid. In their discussions of Nabokov's engagement with Tolstoi, these essays tend to focus on a single literary work of Tolstoi's, most often either *Anna Karenina* or *The Devil*.

a happy family life impossible and leads to violence. In *The Devil*, Tolstoi's protagonist, Eugene Irtenev, like Nabokov's Krechmar, pursues an affair with a lower-class woman that eventually destroys his life. Scholars have noted several features of Tolstoi's work that might have inspired Nabokov. Foremost among these is the theme of blindness. Tolstoi's Irtenev is myopic; his poor sight is a correlative to his moral blindness. Nabokov, too, makes literal his protagonist's moral and aesthetic blindness when Krechmar loses his sight in an accident. Nabokov likewise adopts the symbolic color scheme of Tolstoi's story. For example, both authors dress the protagonists' betrayed wives in white and the mistresses in red. And as Alexander Dolinin points out, Nabokov echoes the name of Irtenev's wife Liza Annenskaia, in the name of Krechmar's spouse Anneliza (92).

The Kreutzer Sonata is also an important, though largely unrecognized, intertext for this work of Nabokov's.[5] Tolstoi's story is told by an unnamed frame narrator who, while traveling on a night train, encounters the novella's protagonist, Vasilii Pozdnyshev. Pozdnyshev then takes over the narration and treats his mostly silent listener to his life's story, detailing in particular how he murdered his wife after coming to suspect her of an affair. Nabokov knew *The Kreutzer Sonata* well, having performed the role of Pozdnyshev in a mock trial of Tolstoi's protagonist at a literary evening put on by the Berlin Journalists' Union. In his performance Nabokov highlighted the motifs of blindness and entrapment that would become central to *Kamera obskura*, written only a few years later ("Rech' Pozdnysheva").

Tolstoi's *The Kreutzer Sonata* and Nabokov's novel also resemble one another in that both are ironic iterations of Shakespeare's *Othello*. The plotting, murderous Pozdnyshev perversely identifies himself with Othello, who is deceived into killing his wife (Kopper 176). The unabashedly adulterous Magda compares herself with the faithful Desdemona (KO 155; LD 226). Pozdnyshev and Magda both debase Shakespeare's tragedy. Additionally, Nabokov's novel echoes the erotic attraction between two male rivals that Tolstoi depicts in his work. Pozdnyshev suspects his wife of an affair with the violinist Trukhachevski because he himself feels drawn to the musician. Nabokov brings this latent eroticism between male rivals to the surface by having Gorn parade around naked and teasingly caress the blind (and therefore unsuspecting) Krechmar with a blade of grass.

Beyond these shared motifs, Nabokov makes at least two possible allusions to *The Kreutzer Sonata*. The first occurs only in the Russian version of the novel. When Magda visits Krechmar's apartment, the first thing she notices are the decorative "pistols and swords" (*pistolety i sabli*) on the wall (KO 40). Nabokov replicates the mise-en-scène of Pozdnyshev's study, where "guns

5. To my knowledge, Alexander Dolinin is the only critic to date who so much as mentions *The Kreutzer Sonata* in connection with Nabokov's novel.

and daggers" (*ruzh'ia i kinzhaly*) hang on the wall (KS 421). The home of each protagonist will become the scene of a murder, and the objects that will become the murder weapons—a Damascus dagger for Pozdnyshev and a pistol for Krechmar—are first displayed as adornments there. A second allusion appears in both the Russian and English versions of the novel. Having learned of his mistress' affair, Krechmar decides to kill her as soon as she returns to their hotel room. But when she arrives she immediately begins to take off her shoes and thus thwarts the murder attempt: "Impossible to fire while she was taking off her shoe" ("Nevozmozhno streliat', poka ona snimaet bashmachok.") (KO 155; LD 225). Magda's banal action subverts Krechmar's intention to restore his honor by killing her; it deprives the scene of the dignity he desires. The critical moment passes, and although Krechmar still menaces Magda it is clear he will not kill her. A murder is similarly averted in *The Kreutzer Sonata* thanks to the protagonist's shame at his own unshod feet. Trukhachevskii escapes Pozdnyshev because Pozdnyshev had taken off his boots before his attack: "I wanted to run after him, but remembered that it is ridiculous to run after one's wife's lover in one's socks; and I did not wish to be ridiculous but terrible" (KS 423). Tolstoi's and Nabokov's comic corruptions of Shakespeare's tragedy leave their characters shoeless at moments of high drama.

The proximity of *The Devil* and *The Kreutzer Sonata* in content suggests that these stories are, in a sense, the same story told in two different ways. Tolstoi, as Ilya Kliger has observed, had a penchant for telling "the same story twice: the way it really happened, and the way it is disfigured by conventional expectations" (156). Kliger identifies many such narrative doubles, one told fabulaically "from the forward-looking perspective of the character encountering a situation for the first time" and a second "[tending] toward the narrative pole of syuzhet, with its teleological, that is, retrospective organization and its reliance on prior models and expectations" (157). *The Devil* and *The Kreutzer Sonata* follow this doubling pattern, which might have caught Nabokov's eye, given his own fondness for fictional doubles.

The Devil unfolds chronologically. Irtenev, in spite of his successive attempts to give up his mistress, feels an increasingly uncontrollable sexual desire that compels him to violence. Fabula predominates in the telling. *The Kreutzer Sonata*, by contrast, is told retrospectively through multiple frames. The reader learns of a murder, already committed, from a narrator who hears it from Pozdnyshev. Syuzhet predominates in the telling. The conventions of narration are given primacy over the narrated events, and the multiple mediations might even make us suspect that the whole tale is Pozdnyshev's invention, referring to no actual murder. As John Kopper puts it: "Instead of the story being about something that has happened, it is about the effort to make something from nothing, that is, about fiction making" (171). It is as though Pozdnyshev's chosen narrative genre, the confession, demands the violence—

real or imagined—that he recounts. After all, if there is no crime, what is there to confess? What is there to tell?

How we perceive the motives and transgressions of Tolstoi's protagonists—both adulterers, both murderers—is shaped, in large part, by the way each story is told. To put it a little too simply: *The Devil* appears to be about the desire for sex, *The Kreutzer Sonata* more about the desire for story. Tolstoi turns from the demands of the appetite (Irtenev's) to the demands of a creative mind (Pozdnyshev's). Nabokov makes an analogous shift from fabulaic telling in the Russian novel to a syuzhet-oriented telling in the English, and this shift produces a similar change in the nature of his protagonist's crimes.

Kamera obskura: Blind Intuition

Kamera obskura begins with an aesthetic mistake. We meet Nabokov's protagonist, Krechmar, as he adjudicates a copyright lawsuit brought by the artist Gorn against the second-rate film actress Dorianna Karenina. At issue is a portrait of Karenina holding a stuffed toy based on the image of Gorn's wildly popular cartoon creature, Cheapy. Krechmar, an art connoisseur, is invited to be an expert witness. But his deliberation on the case quickly reveals the irony of his position: Krechmar is a poor judge of value. He cannot grasp the distinction between objects with merely pleasing appearances and those with genuine worth. Krechmar overestimates Cheapy's worth, which is clear to the reader by the name alone. "He evidently loves his animal [Cheapy]" ("On, vidimo, liubit svoego zveria"), Krechmar says of Gorn, failing to perceive the mercenary motives of the cartoonist, who is mostly interested in the financial benefits of the trial's publicity (KO 8). Cheapy is only a source of profit for Gorn, but Krechmar unduly elevates her to something worthy of love. Krechmar's misevaluation of Cheapy foreshadows his more consequential misevaluation of Magda, for whom, mistaking sexual desire for love, he leaves his family. Magda, we learn, was seduced and abandoned at a young age by Gorn, and she is therefore, in a sense, Gorn's second creation.

Krechmar's first, fateful mistake is overestimating Cheapy. But in this error he is hardly alone: Cheapy is beloved by the masses. Krechmar's fall is instigated by nothing more than his acquiescence to commonplace aesthetic attitudes. Similarly, in Tolstoi's *The Devil*, Irtenev's fall starts with nothing more than his acquiescence to commonplace moral attitudes. Irtenev, despite his pangs of conscience, accepts the custom of landowners pursuing affairs with peasant women. Krechmar, despite his credentials as an art expert, accepts cheap entertainment as real art. Krechmar typifies what Nabokov called the philistine/*poshlyak*, who is characterized not so much by his "love for the useful, for the material goods of life" as by the fact that he considers this preference for material indulgence a genuine aesthetic response: "Poshlism is not only the obviously trashy but mainly the falsely im-

portant, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive" (*Lectures on Russian Literature* 313). The confusion of the *poshlyak* has its source precisely in the propensity to "adopt stock ideas and conventional ideals of his or her group and time" (309). Krechmar, as a *poshlyak*, accepts commonly held beliefs without question.

The protagonist's aesthetic confusion, as other scholars have remarked, stems in part from his excessive fascination with surfaces. Gerard de Vries and D. Barton Johnson note that Krechmar cannot see "the meaning of his paintings beyond the beauties of color and line" and therefore cannot be much of an art expert (36). Leona Toker observes that Krechmar, who ignores the inner lives of his wife and mistress, dwells on the surface when it comes to people, as well (111). But Krechmar is blind not only to depth; even the *totality* of a surface eludes him. Throughout the novel he is most attentive to Magda, yet he often fails to grasp the whole of Magda's appearance. He fails to integrate what is on the surface, registering her instead as an assemblage of sensuous qualities. In the cinema where he first meets her, she is merely a "long Luini-esque eye" ("prodolgovatyi luinievskii glaz") (KO 15; LD 22). In his apartment, she is a patch of red moving between rooms. Even at a beach in Solfi where his mistress' body is on full display, Krechmar cannot take in the whole of her at once; he perceives only the separate shapes and colors that make up her appearance. Since Krechmar's discrete sense impressions never cohere, he cannot make any sense of what he sees.

Krechmar's world dissolves into sensuous qualities especially at critical moments that demand discernment. Magda comes to his apartment and he must decide whether or not to let her into his home, and thus into his life. But all Krechmar can do is look "at the chandelier, the furniture upholstered in silk, as though he himself were a stranger. He saw, incidentally, only a sunny haze; everything swam, and whirled" ("On [...] gliadel na liustru, na shelkovuiu mebel', slovno i sam byl chuzhoi zdes',—no videl, vprochem, tol'ko solnechnyi tuman, vse plylo, kruzhilos'") (KO 40).[6] Later, instead of preventing his wife from reading Magda's love letter, Krechmar watches as his surroundings melt into incoherent impressions, "gazing through the trembling haze at the tip of his shoe and tapping it lightly on the swimming pattern of the carpet" ("gliadia skvoz' drozhashchii tuman na nosok svoego bashmaka i legon'ko topaia im po rasplyvchatomu uzoru na kovre") (KO 54). Krechmar's submission to the flow of his sense impressions is perhaps most evident and most pathetic when he stands passively at his daughter's deathbed: "everything trembled and grew turbid before him [...] everything again became muddled" ("vse drozhalo i mutilos' pered nim [...] vse opiat' zatumanilos'") (KO 119). Since his sensuous impressions fail to coalesce

6. In translating the Russian citations below I draw on Nabokov's own translation but restore the language he cut in *Laughter in the Dark*.

into a coherent whole, Krechmar cannot comprehend his responsibility for this family tragedy.

In light of Nabokov's frequent avowal of the "supremacy of the detail over the general," it might seem odd that his protagonist's immersion in sensuous impressions is marked negatively in the text (*Lectures on Literature* 373). But Krechmar's gaze differs from the one valorized by Nabokov. Krechmar *does* attend to detail, but his vision is undiscerning. Nabokov declares that a good reader possesses both "an artist's passion and a scientist's patience," and in the absence of either "will hardly enjoy great literature" (5). He echoes the Kantian thought that sensuous and intellectual operations work in concert, and that aesthetic pleasure is precisely our perception of cooperation between the two. For Kant, cognition, moral action, and aesthetic judgment all depend on the harmonious relation of sense and reason. Nabokov in this novel dramatizes the absence of such harmony between sense and reason, which leads to epistemological, moral, and aesthetic failures. "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind," Kant wrote (193). Krechmar incarnates the second half of Kant's dictum.

Only after losing his physical sight does Krechmar realize that for all his attention to sensuous qualities, he has known little of the world. He ponders whether he had "managed to make full use of the gift of acute vision" ("polno, umel li on do kontsa pol'zovat'sia darom ostrogo zreniia"). He had not, he decides:

Он с ужасом замечал теперь, что, вообразив, скажем, пейзаж, среди которого однажды пожил, он не умеет назвать ни одного растения, кроме дуба и розы, ни одной птицы, кроме вороны и воробья.

With horror he now noted that imagining, let's say a landscape where he once lived, he cannot name a single plant except oaks and roses, nor a single bird save sparrows and crows. (KO 179; LD 257)

Krechmar has the gift of acute vision, but the attunement of his senses is not enough. Since his sensitivity is unaccompanied by intellectual detachment, he slips easily into an egoistic relation to his surroundings.

Krechmar regards everything primarily in terms of how well it will gratify his sensuous needs. Nabokov depicts his sexual appetite as a manifestation of a more general pursuit of sensuous pleasures. Sexual and gastronomic enjoyments are closely connected in *Kamera obskura*, throughout which sex and food serve as near substitutes for one another. When Magda refuses Krechmar sex under the pretext of his illness (damaged vision), he contents himself with listening to her read as he "slowly consume[s] invisible cherries" (KO 181; LD 259). During his brief separation from Magda and reunion with his family, Krechmar absentmindedly peels and eats an orange. The bitter taste of the orange hints at the lack of sexual gratification Krechmar foresees in a return to his wife. And the ethereal Anneliza's taste for snow, acquired during

her pregnancy, reflects an anemic sexuality. Krechmar can only assess whether or not something is subjectively gratifying, and as a result he misconceives the value of things. He mistakes his sensuous pleasure for a sign of real worth.

Entrapping the Reader

Lest readers feel themselves superior to Krechmar, impervious to the demands and dangers of appetite, Nabokov implicates them in his protagonist's error. Here he takes his cue from Tolstoi. In Tolstoi's view, an artist who wishes merely to gratify the sensuous demands of the audience creates works that rely on conventional forms and peppers these works with stimulating effects. In his aesthetic treatise *What is Art?* (1897/8) Tolstoi catalogued the methods of what he considered false art: "(1) borrowing, (2) imitating, (3) striking effects, and (4) diversions" (100). As Eric Naiman points out, Nabokov seems to follow "Tolstoi's blueprint for how to write badly" in *Kamera obskura* (567). But Tolstoi also, and no less self-consciously, exploits these devices in *The Devil*. He uses the methods of false art ostensibly in order to condemn their effects. He provokes the reader's appetite for sensuous diversion to expose our common tendency to mindlessly pursue gratification.

The Devil chronicles Irtenev's struggle between his appetites and his conscience. Through labor, marriage, confession, and escape, Irtenev tries to thwart his desire for his mistress, Stepanida. But his desire is revived every time he encounters her. Each meeting is an occasion for Tolstoi to lavish attention on Stepanida's body; by describing it in sensuous detail he induces his reader to simulate the protagonist's delight in her appearance. When Irtenev first meets Stepanida, the reader, too, is treated to the sight of her standing in a thicket, "barefoot, fresh, firm, and handsome, smiling shyly" (310). Irtenev feels "possessed" ("zavladennyi") by desire, and the reader feels engrossed by Irtenev's desire and the ensuing scene of seduction.

Telling Irtenev's story chronologically allows Tolstoi to exploit the uncertainty of his hero's fate in order to create suspense, which further entices the reader. Since the reader has no foreknowledge of Irtenev's fate, each of Irtenev's "moral efforts" to resist Stepanida appears to be a genuine opportunity to correct his course, to quash the desire that threatens his family life. The question of whether he will save himself or not propels us through the story. Irtenev's triumphs over his appetite are, alas, always short-lived; he is repeatedly re-seduced by Stepanida. And with each new seduction, Irtenev and the reader are granted another sensuous vision of her. Irtenev cannot "take his eyes from her strong body, swayed by her agile strides, from her bare feet, or from her arms and shoulders, and the pleasing folds of her shirt and the handsome skirt tucked high above her white calves" (325). Each failed attempt to resist his desire increases his desperation until at last Irtenev is driven to death (or, in the story's alternate ending, to murder).

The sensual depictions of Stepanida and Tolstoi's use of the tried-and-true formula of escalating the hero's misfortunes titillate and frighten the reader. At the end of the story, however, Tolstoi's narrator intrudes to accuse us: "And indeed if Eugene Irtenev was mentally deranged everyone is in the same case; the most mentally deranged people are certainly those who see in others indications of insanity they do not notice in themselves" (348). Most straightforwardly, the narrator suggests that if the reader is Irtenev's (and Tolstoi's) peer, he too is probably possessed by sexual appetites. But there is another and more damning charge here as well: You, reader, are gripped by the hero's seductions and reversals of fortune without reflecting on what it means to be so gripped—to take voyeuristic pleasure in watching a man's life unravel. Simply by reading and enjoying the story, we all establish our guilt.[7]

Nabokov's *Kamera obskura* similarly uses sensuous detail and an intriguing plot to gratify readers before critiquing that very gratification. But where Tolstoi admonishes his readers directly, Nabokov pursues a slightly subtler course: he continually mocks his readers in order to awaken them to their absorption in the pursuit of easy gratification.

By treating the reader to vivid descriptions of Magda, who styles herself after the Hollywood ingénue, Nabokov has us experience Krechmar's sensuous pleasures just as Tolstoi has us experience Irtenev's. At the beach in Solfi, for example, we watch Magda through Krechmar's eyes:

Кречмар, облокотясь на песок, не отрываясь смотрел на нее, на ее руки и ноги, уже сплошь покрытые гладким солнечным лаком, на румяно-золотое лицо с облупившимся носом и только что накрашенным ртом.

Krechmar, resting his elbow on the sand, could not tear his gaze away from her, from her arms and legs, already completely polished by the sun, her ruddy-gold face with its sunburnt and peeling nose and her freshly painted mouth. (KO 76; LD 112)

Even while executing his plan to murder her, Krechmar is distracted by "the nape of her neck, her suntanned skin [...] the golden brown skin of her slim but firm calf" ("zatylok, zagoreluiu sheiu [...] zolotistuiu kozhu netolstoi, no krepkoi ikry") (KO 155, 158; LD 225, 229).[8] Krechmar is seduced again and again by Magda right up until he loses his sight—the sense gratified by her appearance.

Beyond his sensuous prose, Nabokov appeals to the reader by foregrounding a recognizable plot consisting of ready-made motifs. We follow the twists and turns of Krechmar's story, as we do Irtenev's, but whereas Irtenev's journey is composed of a series of conflicts between desire and moral will, Krech-

7. See Gary Saul Morson for a broader discussion of Tolstoi's "reader-implicating" fiction.

8. Although sensuous descriptions of Magda/Margot are present in the English text as well, they are typically pared down. Just as in previous Russian citations, I rely here on Nabokov's translation but restore the language he cut or altered in the English.

mar's desire is challenged only by external obstacles: his daughter's death, Gorn's reappearance, and a car accident. Nabokov's novel thus deviates from the psychological prose his more sophisticated readers expected from a literary writer, hewing instead to a crowd-pleasing narrative of romantic adventure. Nabokov avails himself of the melodramatic motifs of film, and even deploys cinematic devices, most notably a montage-like narration of Krechmar's car accident. Nabokov crosscuts this scene with descriptive passages—including a long passage depicting Anneliza on her balcony in Berlin—to stall our reading and generate suspense.

Nabokov implicates his reader in Krechmar's unreflective pursuit of gratification most of all, however, by having reader and protagonist respond to an artwork embedded in the novel. At a moment of heightened suspense, when Krechmar is on the verge of discovering his lover's betrayal, Nabokov inserts a transcription of a long, digressive work by Krechmar's acquaintance, the pseudo-Proustian author Ditrikh Zegel'krants. Zegel'krants has witnessed Magda's infidelity, and the reader expects him to reveal it, but instead Zegel'krants reads from his new work, about "a highly impressionable person going to the dentist" ("chelovek s povyshennoi vpechatlitel'nost'iu otpravliaetsia k dantistu") (KO 147). Nabokov describes Krechmar's interest waning as Zegel'krants's hero meditates on his toothache, and the reader cannot help but sympathize with Krechmar's frustration at the absence of action: that action is precisely what the reader wanted, too. When Zegel'krants's hero finally reaches the dentist's office, Krechmar feels relieved that something might finally happen: "here the narrative livened up a bit" ("tut povestvovanie neskol'ko ozhivilos'") (KO 148). The reader also expects some excitement as he begins to recognize the people in the dentist's waiting room—they are the same people whom Zegel'krants's had seen on the train where he had witnessed Magda being amorous with Gorn. The reader and Krechmar are both gratified by the hints of a melodramatic plot, and both soon realize (the reader slightly before Krechmar) that the lovers Zegel'krants describes in the waiting room are Gorn and Magda. For a moment, Krechmar and the reader are gripped—but then Zegel'krants turns back to teeth and the reader gratefully returns to *Nabokov's* novel, en route to Krechmar's confrontation with his lover, leaving Zegel'krants's hero to ponder the inside of his mouth.

By conflating the experience of his protagonist with that of his reader, Nabokov exposes the reader's desire for the sensuous and the intriguing. Given the choice between Zegel'krants's plotless psychological prose and *Kamera obskura*, you would surely choose the latter, Nabokov seems to suggest. Nabokov snares his readers by offering them an artwork that gratifies them, only to unmask and critique their demand for gratification. Irony in *Kamera obskura* serves the same function that moral accusation does in *The Devil*, each trying to compel a more self-conscious readerly response.

But whereas Tolstoi wanted to help readers transcend their appetite for the sensuous and intriguing, the stuff of the Hollywood potboiler, Nabokov was not above such delights. As Iosif Gessen recalled:

Да ведь и для самого Сирина нет как будто большего удовольствия, чем смотреть нарочио нелепую американскую картину. Чем она беззаботно глупей, тем сильней задыхается и буквально сотрясается он от смеха, до того, что иногда вынужден покидать зал.

Sirin himself seemed to enjoy nothing more than deliberately seeking out the most inept American film. The more casually stupid it was the more he would gasp and shake from laughter, to the point where he sometimes had to leave the theater. (105)

In his poem "Kinematograf" (1928) Nabokov confesses to "lov[ing] the spectacles of light" ("liubiu ia svetovye balagany"), and describes cinema's outlandish tricks—eavesdropping devices, captivating car chases—with a mix of irony and admiration (203). Nabokov always acknowledged the potency of the artistic devices Hollywood had mastered and the implacability of the appetites it fulfilled. He neither wanted nor expected readers to transcend such delights altogether, as Tolstoi did. But by making readers respond more self-consciously to them, he hoped that they might enjoy these devices without being entirely in their grip.

Catching it for *Kamera*

Kamera obskura's most sympathetic critic, Khodasevich, appreciated Nabokov's ironic intention of producing a "cheap" novel in order to critique its easy amusements. Most other critics either missed the irony or rejected it as a thin alibi. They accused Nabokov of simply using the stimulating devices of cinema in a cynical bid to reach a broader audience. "Those who read books only to find out 'what happens next' [...] will be quite satisfied with the novel," Georgii Adamovich remarked in one review ("Kto chitaet knigi tol'ko dlia togo, chtoby uznat', chto sluchitsia dal'she [...] budet romanom vpolne udovletvorën") (101). Nikolai Andreev noted that the "carnal quality of description is almost at its expressive limit" in Nabokov's novel ("Plotskost' opisanii pochti predel'na v svoei otchetlivosti.") (102). Petr Balakshin considered "lust and fear, the lowest orders of feeling," to be the foundation of Nabokov's novel ("pokhot' i boiazn', chuvstva nizshego poriadka") (106). He attributed the work's popular success to the fact that it made no demands on the reader and merely fed a base craving for stimulation.

Whether Nabokov's use of Hollywood clichés allows him to critique cinema or indeed makes his own novel "cheap" is still not a settled question. Although most contemporary critics recognize *Kamera obskura*'s irony and acknowledge Nabokov's intention to critique cinema—an indictment "carried out in a very Tolstoyan spirit" as Thomas Seifrid puts it (7)—the novel retains a minor place in Nabokov's body of work. Boyd maintains that "*Camera Obscura* could [...] make an excellent film. But there was a literary cost to pay.

As a novel, *Camera Obscura* is too thin in texture and too hasty in structure to satisfy on the level of Nabokov's other works" (368).

The reviews at the time anticipate Boyd's judgment, and they did not surprise Nabokov. From the start, he had been uneasy about how his novel would be received, writing to his wife Véra: "Ugh, how I'm going to catch it for poor *Camera*. And it will serve me right" (*Letters to Véra* 181). He does not elaborate on his concerns, but it seems likely that he worried his work would be confused with the kind of cheap entertainment he sought to critique. His fears were confirmed when critics like Balakshin thundered: "There are mindless authors for mindless readers. Sirin is one of these" ("Est' bezdumnye pisateli dlia bezdumnogo chteniia. Takov V. Sirin") (105). The criticism seemed to sting; Nabokov was not yet the author whom "the arrows of adverse criticism cannot scratch" (*Strong Opinions* 146). Years later he would declare *Kamera obskura* his poorest novel because he had "'succeeded' all too well" in characterizing his literary personages as "hopeless clichés" (Appel 262). The sting of criticism is likewise evident in the way Nabokov revised his novel when he translated it into English, introducing key narrative elements to resist a "mindless" reading.

Laughter in the Dark: Creative Compulsion

Three crucial changes make the English novel, *Laughter in the Dark*, less susceptible to the charge that Nabokov merely replicates cinematic clichés. Nabokov foregrounds syuzhet rather than fabula, he stresses the artifice of the text, and he endows his protagonist with creative ambitions. These alterations serve to distance the author from the "cheap" devices of the novel while still allowing him to rely on the attractions of a suspenseful and even melodramatic story. Nabokov's changes recall the similarly evasive techniques of *The Kreutzer Sonata*, in which Tolstoi is able to exploit yet disavow the violence and sexual content of his story by employing a frame narrator and depicting Pozdnyshev as its principle author. Tolstoi's author-narrator merely reports a sordid tale conceived by another.

Nabokov gives his English novel a new beginning. He eliminates the Cheapy anecdote and begins instead with a summary of the story about to be told:

> Once upon a time there lived in Berlin, Germany, a man called Albinus. He was rich, respectable, happy; one day he abandoned his wife for the sake of a youthful mistress; he loved; was not loved; and his life ended in disaster.
>
> This is the whole of the story and we might have left it at that had there not been profit and pleasure in the telling; and although there is plenty of space on a gravestone to contain, bound in moss, the abridged versions of a man's life, detail is always welcome. (LD 7)

Nabokov creates a narrative frame absent in the Russian, and underscores it by referring to two physical frames. Before we meet the protagonist—Albinus in the English—we see the story of his life etched on his gravestone

(outer frame) and bound with a ring of moss (inner frame). The novel's new beginning evokes the opening of Tolstoi's *Death of Ivan Ilych*, in which Ivan Ilych's obituary—an "abridged version" of the hero's life—likewise precedes his appearance in the narrative. Nabokov eschews chronological telling, one that hews closely to the fabula, for a more complicated syuzhet, which immediately gives away the story's ending. In doing so, he creates a different kind of pleasurable suspense than he had in telling the story chronologically: what, we wonder, was the disaster? But he also gives himself plausible deniability when it comes to Adamovich's charge that his novel is merely for those who like to see "what happens next." The new narrative frame stresses the constructedness of the text, more explicitly encouraging the reader to not only enjoy but also to contemplate his own reading practice. The greater stylization of the narrative, as Grayson puts it, makes "action, character, and description [...] more vivid, but the involvement of the author—and reader—is lessened" (57). Instead of looking over the protagonist's shoulder and sharing in his perspective, the reader takes on the perspective of the author-narrator who can see the whole arc of the tale.

Nabokov also invites the reader to share the artist's rather than the protagonist's perspective by inserting in the English version of the novel many more embedded artworks, which draw the reader's attention to the artistry of the text. Nabokov claimed that his objective in *Kamera obskura* was not to write a novel that resembled a "screenplay" but to create a "verbal imitation of what was then termed a 'photoplay'" (Appel 258). He wanted to create a stylized *painting* within a narrative work, to "render the seven main colors the way that tinctures in heraldry are rendered by means of lines or dots placed in this or that way" (258). Nabokov's comments indicate his ambition to work against the limitation of his medium, an ambition that appears to have gone unappreciated by most critics. In *Laughter in the Dark* he makes this intention more explicit; he insists that the reader delight not merely in prose and plot but in the author's performance of an artistic feat. Nabokov's descriptions of paintings, which pay particular attention to primary colors, alert the reader to the way Nabokov has color-coded his own narrative: red is the color of deceit, yellow signals violence, blue indicates the presence of something otherworldly. The alert reader is induced to decipher the code, thus engaging with the text deliberately rather than automatically.

But the most significant change in the English novel is the emergence of the protagonist's creative ambition. Krechmar's initial misdeed was a passive acquiescence to conventional aesthetic standards; Albinus' is an active appropriation of another's artistic idea:

> It so happens that one night Albinus had a beautiful idea. True, it was not quite his own, as it had been suggested by a phrase in Conrad (not the famous Pole, but Udo Conrad who wrote *Memoirs of a Forgetful Man* [...]). In any case, he made it his own by liking it, playing with it, letting it grow upon him, and that goes to make lawful property in the free city of the mind. (LD 7–8)

Albinus is a critic by profession, but he wants to pursue his own artistic project. He wants to animate famous paintings, to set the works of the "Old Masters" in motion. In *Kamera obskura*, Krechmar briefly entertains a similar thought: "to make a film entirely in Rembrandt's or Goya's tones" ("sozdat', naprimer, fil'mu iskliuchitel'no v rembrandtovskikh ili goiavskikh tonakh") (KO 13). But there it is Krechmar's own idea and it occurs only in passing, never to be mentioned again. Significantly, in the Russian novel it is Gorn who appropriates an artistic idea: the idea for Cheapy is first proposed by Gorn's acquaintance. The translation gives this act of appropriation to Albinus, and makes it even more theft-like by putting its source in another's actual artwork. Albinus is in fact a thief twice over: He seeks to use for his own creative project not only Conrad's novel but also other artists' paintings. Though we are told that Albinus makes Conrad's idea his "lawful property" by liking it and playing with it, the narrator is close to Albinus' thoughts here, and this justification of artistic appropriation, expressed in the language of law and commerce, strikes us as Albinus' own self-exculpatory reasoning.

The idea to narrativize paintings—to create plot where there is none—enthralls Nabokov's protagonist only in the English novel. Albinus quickly grasps that the animated film he envisions would be a financial loser, so instead of realizing his idea on the screen he proceeds to realize it in life. (His ambition to turn his own life into art echoes that of Herman, Nabokov's protagonist in *Despair* (1934), written in the years between the author's work on *Kamera obskura* and *Laughter in the Dark*.) The plot of Albinus' fatal love affair seems to be generated by his own desire to set things in motion. Nabokov's English text promotes this reading by comparing the tranquility of Albinus' family life to the tranquility of the landscape paintings he wishes to animate. Albinus enjoys "many beautifully soft evenings at home" with his wife gazing from their balcony onto a cityscape that looks as if it were painted: "the blue streets with wires and chimneys drawn in Indian ink across the sunset" (LD 19). Albinus reflects that his family "belonged, as it were, to another period, limpid and tranquil like the backgrounds of the early Italians" (45). And he compares his betrayal of his family to a "madman slash[ing] a picture" (91). Albinus destroys the uneventful reality of family life—this tranquil landscape painting—by hatching for himself an adulterous plot. Nabokov absolves himself of the composition's clichés by fostering a sense of uncertainty about who, exactly, is responsible for Albinus' banal but entertaining plot.

Diminishing the eroticism of the novel, as Grayson observes (51), and stressing instead Albinus' creative desire, Nabokov makes his protagonist closer kin to Tolstoi's Pozdnyshev than to his own Russian prototype Krechmar. The protagonist of *The Kreutzer Sonata* is a consummate raconteur, who, from the moment we meet him, seeks to draw attention to himself and the

story he has to tell. Moreover, like Albinus, Pozdnyshev is an artistic thief. He appropriates the work of other artists, incorporating it into his own narrative.

At the center of Pozdnyshev's tale is a performance by his wife and the violinist Trukhachevski of Beethoven's "Kreutzer" Sonata. The performance initially arrests Pozdnyshev's attention, compelling him for a time to disregard his own obsessions and to recognize other people not as the means to his own ends but as autonomous human beings with their own intentions and inner lives. But soon enough, Pozdnyshev subsumes this aesthetic experience into a creative work of his own. He recasts the musicians' performance as evidence of their affair, and his imagination runs wild:

> I could no longer control my imagination, and with extraordinary vividness which inflamed my jealousy it painted incessantly, one after another, pictures of what had gone on in my absence [...] I gazed at those pictures, and could not tear myself away from them [...]. The more I gazed at those imaginary pictures the stronger grew my belief in their reality. The vividness with which they presented themselves to me seemed to serve as proof that what I imagined was real. (KS 416)

The musical evening becomes fodder for Pozdnyshev's own creative vision. He begins to spin a narrative of adultery, which culminates in a performance of his own that rivals his wife's: in a rather theatrical scene, he murders her with a decorative dagger he pulls off the wall. Pozdnyshev is blinded not only, and not even primarily, by sexual desire, but by the irrepressible drive of his own imagination.

Albinus shares Pozdnyshev's rather than Krechmar's affliction. It is his creative ambition, not his appetite, that instigates his demise. Like Krechmar, he is blind both morally and aesthetically: he cannot distinguish real art from fakes, and his art collection is "sprinkled" with forgeries. But Albinus' blindness stems not from a desire for sensual gratification but from the creative ambition to turn his own life into a narrative worthy of Hollywood film. Even if the changes Nabokov made in translation were inspired initially by the need to shield himself from his critics' complaints, they nonetheless had profound philosophical ramifications. They revealed a second cause of aesthetic and moral blindness.

Nabokov's interest in the possibility of an adverse relationship between our creative drives and our moral commitments is to some extent already evident in *Kamera obskura*. There, after all, Nabokov depicts the talented artist Gorn as a sadist.[9] But Gorn's character shows us only that creativity and cruelty can coexist; perhaps the first causes the second, but we are given no explicit reason to think so. Gorn's cruelty is present from childhood, as, presumably, is his creativity; he is from the outset an artist and a monster both. In *Laughter in the Dark*, by contrast, we see how an ordinary man in the grip of an artis-

9. Julian W. Connolly and David Rampton both take up the relationship between "aesthetic detachment" and ethical action in their analyses of *Kamera obskura*/*Laughter in the Dark*, and both focus on Gorn.

tic impulse may lose sight of the humanity of others. Albinus is no born sadist. His character shows us how creative desire can *inspire* cruelty.

The notion that sensuous appetites inhibit genuine aesthetic perception is nothing new, but the idea that one's own creative desires interfere with one's ability to apprehend art—and the humanity of others—is counterintuitive. Creativity is generally understood as something that enables our aesthetic and moral apprehension rather than detracts from it. But Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark*, like Tolstoi's *The Kreutzer Sonata*, suggests that our own creative drive can have harmful consequences. It can make us unresponsive to art and to other people.

The Bliss of Being a Reader

Their own implacable creativity made Tolstoi and Nabokov particularly sensitive to its potentially blinding effect. As his wife attested, Tolstoi knew that his artmaking obscured the people in his life. He observed that an artist always robs his own life for his art, making "his art splendid and his life poor" ("sochinenie ego prekrasno, a zhizn' durna") (*Moia zhizn'* 163). Nabokov does not share Tolstoi's guilt about creative self-absorption; art, he thought, would be impossible without it. In his lecture on Tolstoi, however, Nabokov acknowledges the struggle between "interest directed within oneself toward one's own inner life of vigorous thought and interest directed outward, toward the external world of people and tangible values" (*Russian Literature* 236). For both authors, creative work entailed a certain sacrifice of one's own receptivity, though they perhaps disagreed on whether this sacrifice was worth making.

The conflict Nabokov recognized between creative ambition and receptivity helps make sense of some of his later pronouncements—for example, that "being a budding author" is not a quality he associates with being a good reader (*Lectures* 3). It also illuminates Nabokov's enigmatic definition of "aesthetic bliss" in his "Afterword to *Lolita*":

> I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and, despite John Ray's assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm." (314)

Richard Rorty assumes that by "aesthetic bliss" Nabokov means creative ecstasy—the ecstasy of the writer—and consequently argues that Nabokov's definition of aesthetic bliss is "implausible": the single-minded fixation and self-directed attention necessary for creative work is at odds with the other-directed attentiveness necessary for curiosity, tenderness, and kindness (158). And Nabokov's rendering of Albinus seems to support Rorty's argument.

But perhaps Nabokov reflects here on a different kind of bliss—a bliss made possible only by the abeyance of creative ambition. After all, Nabo-

kov's preface to this remark suggests that he speaks here as both a writer and a reader. The sentence about aesthetic bliss might very well refer to the pleasure afforded him not by writing but by reading. The artist, whose ecstasy has to do with creation, might remain attentive primarily to himself and to the impressions relevant to his creative work, and Rorty might be right that doing otherwise would foil him: "Nabokov knew quite well that ecstasy and tenderness not only are separable but tend to preclude each other—that most non-obsessed poets are, like Shade, second rate" (159). The *reader's* aesthetic delight, however, is not opposed to the kind of detachment from one's own interests that goes hand in hand with tenderness and kindness. In fact, as a reader, one's aesthetic pleasure depends precisely on the ability to attend to something other than oneself. The writer might derive all sorts of satisfaction from his work, but perhaps "aesthetic bliss," as Nabokov characterizes it here, belongs solely to the good reader. It is a gift granted by the artist, who liberates his readers from their obsessions while remaining trapped by his own.

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Тезисы

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Авторский перевод и трансформация эстетики Набокова от «Камеры обскуры» к «Смеху в темноте»

В статье утверждается, что в своем переводе романа «Камера обскура» (1932) на английский язык под новым названием «Смех в темноте» (1938), Владимир Набоков значительно трансформировал эстетическую идею оригинала. Обе версии романа рассматривают природу эстетического отклика, в частности, то, как наша ответная реакция может быть сфальсифицирована или искажена. Но в русской версии романа Набоков идет довольно проторенным путём, показывая, как наше стремление к поощрению мешает эстетическому восприятию и суждению. В «Смехе в темноте» он освещает другое, более неожиданное и, в некотором смысле, более завуалированное препятствие для ожидаемого эстетического восприятия, а именно, наш собственный творческий стимул. Чтобы

продемонстрировать трансформацию эстетической идеи Набокова в результате авторского перевода, я рассматриваю русскую и английскую версии его романа параллельно с повестями Льва Толстого «Дьявол» и «Крейцерова соната», которые являются важными интертекстами для «Камеры обскуры» и «Смеха в темноте». Толстой и Набоков разделяют идею о том, что наши собственные творческие побуждения, далекие от того, чтобы быть всегда благотворными или даже благонаправленными, могут стать препятствием для наших моральных и эстетических реакций.