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# PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS AN OLD MAN

Nabokov's Evolving Body Paradigm

The basic contention behind this essay is that body matters, particularly when one sets about reading Nabokov, and that research on this author has in general devoted too little attention to this, perhaps because reading and studying are traditionally conceived primarily as matters of the mind, and not of the body, or much less so, since the body often appears as a fall from verbal language, its reality either defeating language, or lacking the articulateness one associates with words. My essay is part of an ongoing inquiry into the possibility and usefulness of envisaging a semiotization of the body, along with, or leading to, a somatization of story, in the wake of the theories propounded by Peter Brooks in *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*. My inquiry is underpinned by a cluster of questions, among which: how does Nabokov handle bodies? What meanings emerge from his bodies? How do they signify? What narratives do they nourish? In what ways may the body furnish a creative matrix for the fiction-maker? How do readers' bodies affect their reading experience of Nabokov? Is there any such thing as an "aesthetics of narrative embodiment" (Brooks 1993, 25) able to mine new hermeneutic ways towards Nabokov's fictional world? In order to approach these questions, I shall first present certain specific bodily motifs in Nabokov's pronouncements on writing and reading, before discussing examples from his fiction and, ultimately, giving extra thought to the last, incomplete 'leg' in his corpus, *The Original of Laura*.

One of the signal places from his childhood that Nabokov chooses to revisit in his autobiography is his father's library, a seminal site of literary lust and leisure. In chapter nine of *Speak, Memory*, it is this one room that he remembers dashing to after school; only the bait is not a good book, but a good duel, between his "big, robust" father and a "wonderful rubbery Frenchman, Monsieur Loustalot", his "agile" boxing and fencing instructor. "The place", as he recalls it, "combined pleasantly the scholarly and the athletic, the leather of books and the leather of boxing gloves" (Nabokov 1969a, 141). After his father's death, Nabokov retained a strong appetite for boxing, which he expresses in his 1925 piece, "Igra" ("Play"). Its concluding sentences provide an

eloquent celebration of the special elation a boxing match may elicit in its audience: “a feeling of dauntless, flaring strength, vitality, manliness, inspired by the play in boxing. And this playful feeling is, perhaps, more valuable and purer than many so-called ‘elevated pleasures’” (Nabokov 2000, 754).<sup>1</sup>

It is this very vigour and pugnacity that our writer allegedly aimed to summon in his reader: “a good reader is bound to make fierce efforts when wrestling with a difficult author, but those efforts can be most rewarding after the bright dust has settled”. (Nabokov 1990, 183). What immediately strikes one here is the agonistic, or even andromachic connotation Nabokov invests in his relationship with the reader by playing upon the literal and more figurative meanings of “wrestling”. Moreover, the consonance in [f] – “fierce efforts”, “difficult”, “efforts” – brings home the intense physicality of the sparring partners’ engagement. This calls to mind an oft-quoted image from “Good Readers and Good Writers” which also yokes together intellectual ability and physical prowess: that of the reader climbing up a steep slope and meeting the author at its top. In a less known evocation, Nabokov privately explains to one of his publishers the challenge involved in finding a competent translator, that is, a man (for it can only be a man) “who has enough Russian to understand my writings and at the same time can turn his English inside out and slice, chop, twist, volley, smash, kill, drive, half-volley, lob and place perfectly every word” (Nabokov 1990, 42). This string of verbs is recognizably culled from the cant of tennis, a sport out of which Nabokov was able to make a partial living during his Berlin years. One can sense in these lines the vivid pleasure he derives from the sport’s lexical palette, as when in his 1925 piece he enumerates the various moves that constitute the art of boxing – “lunges, sidesteps, bobbing, [...] hooks, jabs, uppercuts”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nina Berberova once witnessed Nabokov's enthusiasm for this sport, without quite partaking in the manly elevation, when she visited him in 1940. He was recovering from the flu, but his weakened state did not prevent him from playing with his six year-old son Dmitri: "Nabokov took a huge boxing glove and gave it to the boy, telling him to show me his art, and Mitya, having put on the glove, began with all his child's strength to beat Nabokov about the face. I saw this was painful to Nabokov but he smiled and endured it. This was training, his and the boy's. With a feeling of relief I left the room when this was over." (Berberova 1996, 368-69; 1970, 231).

<sup>2</sup> Translation made using the revisions to Karshan and Tolstoy's translation, as proposed by Tim Harte (2009/11, 147). The lexical palette of tennis was also helpful to Nabokov when drawing up a typology of his Swiss governess's slaps: "*Plus tard vint aussi ce qu'elle appelait, selon le degré de force, tape, soufflet ou camouflet; ce dernier, exécuté à toute volée, ressemblait à ce que les joueurs de tennis appellent un revers smash, et atteignait généralement l'oreille* (Nabokov 1936, 156). In Thirlwell's translation: "Later there also came what she called, according to the degree of force used, a tap, slap or blow; this last, executed at high speed, resembled what tennis players call a backhand smash, and generally reached the ear (Thirlwell 2009, 10).

My belief is that the attention our writer devotes to these sports' language is not mere lexical delight, or metaphorical play. In fact, physical skill epitomizes the role Nabokov very often assigns both the reader and himself, that of the performer. Reading, just as writing, is for Nabokov a performance. One of the most prominent examples of this particular paradigm can be found in Mascodagama, Van Veen's acrobatic alter ego, whose name conjures up the Portuguese explorer's wildly perilous exploration of unknown territories, but also, as Brian Boyd has suggested, a music instrument, the "viola da gamba", which in Italian, means the viol of the leg, or leg viol, so that "Mascodagama" could mean "leg mask";<sup>3</sup> and indeed, Mascodagama's main feat is "maniambulation" or "brachiambulation" (Nabokov 1969b, 185;82), the ability to make his hands and arms walk and thus act, or masquerade, as legs. The description of the pleasures afforded by this spectacular ability is quite unambiguous in its comparison with Nabokov's own art:

The essence of the satisfaction belonged rather to the same order as the one he later derived from self-imposed, extravagantly difficult, seemingly absurd tasks when V. V.<sup>4</sup> sought to express something which *until* expressed had only a twilight being. [...] It was the standing of a metaphor on its head [...]: a triumph, in a sense, over the ardis of time. Thus the rapture young Mascodagama derived from overcoming gravity was akin to that of artistic revelation in the sense utterly and naturally unknown to the innocents of critical appraisal, the social-scene commentators, the moralists, the idea-mongers and so forth. Van on the stage was performing organically what his figures of speech were to perform later in life – acrobatic wonders that had never been expected from them and which frightened children. (Nabokov 1969b, 184-85)

The true magic of Van's performance lies in its ability to simultaneously achieve an organic, aesthetic and metaphysical bid to transcend the ordinary laws of nature, language and time. Moreover, as Eric Naiman observes, "Van's vaudeville performances in *Ada* [...] are a hyperbolic model not just for authorial creativity but for adequate interpretive performance of the Nabokovian text" (Naiman 2010, 127). By resorting to the term "adequate", Naiman reminds us that establishing a model is a highly normative act; and indeed, the surest sign that Van's performance stands as a model is its erection *a contrario*, in opposition to Nabokov's counter-models, that is, all those attitudes to art

<sup>3</sup> This gloss is part of Boyd's "Adaonline" annotations: <http://www.ada.auckland.ac.nz/>. Accessed May 2014.

<sup>4</sup> It is of course not for nothing that Van Veen shares his initials with his creator, Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov.

– the social-scene commentators etc. – that he glibly dismisses. Only then can the protagonist's body, in its wondrous beauty, strength and suppleness, serve as a paradigm for his author's ideal of writerly and readerly performance.

What are the leading features of this body's paradigmatic performativity? Let us take a quick look at other Nabokovian characters who are endowed with a meaningful mastery of the body. Take Pnin, the otherwise oft-derided Professor in exile, who is literally "transfigured" when playing croquet: "From his habitual, slow, ponderous, rather rigid self, he changed into a terrifically mobile, scampering, mute, sly-visaged hunchback" (Nabokov 1957, 130). As the allusion to Shakespeare's archetypal villain implies, Pnin's dramatic transmogrification is not restricted to physical qualities, it also shows in his strategic know-how, verging on the devious and even on "brutal indifference" (*Ibid.*, 131), traits that seem utterly out of character and are more in keeping with his author's own conception of chess-problem art, as expressed in *Speak, Memory*: "Deceit, to the point of diabolism, and originality, verging upon the grotesque, were my notions of strategy (Nabokov 1969a, 222). A similar artistic metamorphosis thanks to physical prowess occurs to Hugh Person, who has devised an inimitable tennis shot, the "Person Stroke", having "an element of art-for-art's sake about it" (Nabokov 1972, 57) since it never enables him to win a match – a quality he shares with Lolita's tennis game, described as "an absolutely perfect imitation of absolutely top-notch tennis – without any utilitarian results" (Nabokov 1993, 231). Here, Nabokov's anti-Darwinian view of evolution merges with his aesthetic creed, as when he celebrates mimicry in *Speak, Memory*: "I discovered in nature the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art" (Nabokov 1969a, 98). Besides, he underlines the aesthetic significance of the nymphet's tennis game in his afterword to *Lolita*, where he ranks it among the "nerves of the novel [...], the subliminal co-ordinates by means of which the book is plotted" (Nabokov 1993, 360). In this remarkable passage, the nymphet becomes a protean artist, part-musician, part-poetess, as well as a jeweller and a wildcat-tamer or cowgirl, as is underscored by the myriad metaphors evoking her magical skills.<sup>5</sup> Among these, most noteworthy is the "cosmos" (Nabokov 1993, 232) which she is able to create by the mere act of serving – the mark of a true artist in the Nabokovian sense.

Most importantly for my argument, Lolita's tennis game foregrounds another virtue of physical performance, one that is not so much characterized by muscular power than by alluring sensuousness. Unlike Pnin's gift for croquet, Lolita's art is sterile and does not allow her to win against her opponent, however it does win her spectator's heart. Humbert's ecstasy is palpable in the "pulsating" bench he sits on while contemplating his nymphet, a hypallage which constitutes an objective correlative for his sensual

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<sup>5</sup> I study the poetic rhetoric of this passage at greater length in my book on *Lolita* (Delage-Toriel 2009, 97-102).

response to the girl's seductions;<sup>6</sup> but it is especially manifest in his style, which displays that merging of "the precision of poetry and the excitement of pure science" (Nabokov 1990, 10) which characterizes art in Nabokov's eyes. In the same way that a racket in Lolita's hands becomes "an instrument of precision" and her game a mathematical entity, with a "geometry" and a "trajectory" of its own, Humbert's pen traces and adheres to its object with the painstaking passion of a scientist having discovered a wondrous butterfly. Let us consider, for instance, this one segment: "my very loins still tingle with those *pistol reports repeated by crisp echoes and Electra's cries*" (Nabokov 1993, 232). The semantic load of the sentence is already freighted by the presence of "loins", the term that ends the novel's memorable opening sentence and which only recurs two other times in the novel, as well as "tingle", a notion frequently employed in Nabokov's *ars poetica*, as I shall further evidence below. Just as Lolita's back and forehead drives are "mirror images of one another", Humbert's prose is an exact reflection not only of his own sensation but also of the poetry of this game, which he scans through a regular pattern of plosives (now and then combined with an [r] or an [s]) that echo to perfection the sound of the ball's impact. Thus bench, loins, racket and indeed the whole texture of Humbert's description pulsate in unison; this is a poetics that turns the text itself into a fully aroused and arousing body. Once semiotized, the nymphet's body allows the text to become a somatic entity with which our own bodies may resonate, like chambers of echoing desires.

Like Pygmalion, and thanks to Nabokov, Humbert creates a female body that not only kindles erotic desire but also fuels the creative desire to know and to make. Brooks reads the story of Pygmalion and Galatea as proof that "in essence all desire is ultimately desire for a body" (Brooks 1993, 24). In my view, the desire that innervates the story of Humbert and Lolita, and this tennis scene in particular, is a perfect illustration of Brooks' contention that "the desiring subject is always also the creator of the narrative, whose desire for the body is part of a semiotic project to make the body signify" (Brooks 1993, 25). Moreover, this creative desire forms a powerful nexus between writers and readers, so that the desirable body becomes part of an "epistemophilic" project: epistemophilic in the sense that stories work because they provoke and meet readers' curiosity, their desire to know. And as Freud's theories of the birth of the epistemophilic urge in the child's curiosity about sexuality have exposed, there is an inextricable link between erotic desire and the desire to know.

Nabokov's diatribes against Freud notwithstanding, there is no denying that Nabokov's construction of the reader-writer relationship is based on a paradigm that is

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<sup>6</sup> I loosely borrow this coinage from T.S. Eliot, who in his essay, "Hamlet and His Problems" writes that "the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion." (Eliot 1960, 100).

both agonistic and erotic. The latter trait is manifest when he urges his students to “caress” or “fondle” the details of a book (Nabokov 1980, 1). Particularly eloquent is the sensuously mimetic way in which Nabokov is remembered to have expressed this: “‘caress the details’, Nabokov would utter, rolling the r, his voice the rough caress of a cat’s tongue, ‘the divine details!’” (Wetzsteon 1970, 245). Another phrase that comes to mind is the “tingle in the spine” which, in his words, “really tells you what the author felt and wished you to feel”. (Nabokov 1990, 41). In his essay entitled “Good Readers and Good Writers”, this tingle is flanked by the epithet “telltale”, (Nabokov 1980, 6) as if to remind one that the reader’s physical thrill is intimately bound to narrative thrust, and, to answer John Ray Jr., that senses not only make sense but also make stories. The term appears again at the beginning of his lecture on Dickens’ *Bleak House*:

All we have to do when reading *Bleak House* is to relax and let our spines take over. Although we read with our minds, the seat of artistic delight is between the shoulder blades. That little shiver behind is quite certainly the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained when evolving pure art and pure science. Let us worship the spine and its tingle. (Nabokov 1980, 64)

The erotic quality of Nabokov’s pleasure in reading Dickens comes to the fore when he compares his relative discomfort with Austen to the ease with which he is now ready to “embrace Dickens”. He claims that whereas he “had to find an approach to Jane Austen”, with Dickens, “there is no problem of approach [...] no courtship, no dillydallying. We just surrender ourselves to Dickens’s voice” (*Ibid.*, 63). In other words, the problem with Austen is that one must spend too much time in foreplay, whereas to enjoy Dickens, one may simply yield to the seductiveness of his appeal.

So far we have found that the body offers two paradigms to qualify the dynamics of writing and reading: that of the athlete and that of the mistress or lover. In both cases, the author is always figured as having the upper hand for he is the one who sets the rules, daunts us with his devilish devices, and entices us with his dainty *doigté*. Although the body of his works is of unequal strength, there is a remarkable coherence in its overall design and effect, owing to the author’s careful supervision of its publication. What, then, is one to make of its last leg, *The Original of Laura*, which he neither completed nor wished to publish in its present state? Do these paradigms still hold? To state the obvious, one of the most interesting aspects of this posthumous publication is the fact that for the first time, the wider audience is made privy to the genesis of Nabokov’s work: readers are invited into the heart of the writer’s studio, thanks to the facsimiles of one hundred and thirty four mostly penciled index cards making up his final opus in progress. A new degree of proximity with the author’s actual body is granted by one’s coming face to face with his handwriting, neat and firm at the

beginning, growing sketchier and fainter as the draft becomes more rough, but also perhaps as the author's physical and even mental abilities were declining. What these scribbles and smudges and deletions trace is the portrait of the artist as an aging man, whose fumbings and gropings are fully exposed.

Both *Pale Fire* and *Ada* had staged, in their metafictional workings and through the example of their aging artist protagonists, the fate of a work when faced with its creator's diminishing powers, but except for its last line, John Shade's poem is complete when he dies, and by some kind of Cartesian trick, his "misshapen body" (Nabokov 1991, 8) and "the bags under his lusterless eyes" seem somewhat redeemed by his genius, Kinbote considering them as mere "waste products to be eliminated from his intrinsic self by the same forces of perfection which purified and chiselled his verse". (*Ibid.*, 23) Van, for his part, most certainly dies half-way through revising his manuscript. If Nabokov does refer more graphically to the burdensome failings of his body, there again, these are treated on a somewhat whimsical mode, as if they offered a new and intriguing encounter with himself: "he looked forward with juvenile zest to the delightful effect of a spoonful of sodium bicarbonate dissolved in water that was sure to release three or four belches as big as the speech balloons in the 'funnies' of his boyhood" (Nabokov 1969b, 570). Both instances display a distancing from the grossly material humiliations imposed by old age, a manner of maintaining some – intellectual at least – measure of control over the body. *The Original of Laura*, and especially those sections dealing with Philip Wild and the Medical Intermezzo, seems to present us with the opposite aim since it offers close-up views of the body stripped bare of all intellectually compensatory make-up. We are spared neither the crude reification of Wild's "enormous stomach" into a "trunkful of bowels" nor young Flora's unflattering view of "poor old harmless Mr Hubert"'s "fat porous nose with red nostrils full of hair", nor even Dr. Aupert's clinical report of his patient's "globular shadow of an adenoma [that] eclipsed the greater part of the whitish bladder" (Nabokov 2009, 99; 67;175).

If the aging body no longer seems to act as a pleasantly compelling model in the conventional sense, I do believe that it continues to play a significant role in our compulsion to read. Of course I would be hard put to appraise in any depth the quality of this fragmentary work's narrative drive as a whole, but the recurrent, even obsessive concern with the body certainly elicits one of the main dynamics in the novel's present state. Here is an example from the "Medical Intermezzo" section: "the delight of getting under an ingrown toenail with sharp scissors and snipping off the offending corner and the added ecstasy of finding beneath it an amber abscess whose blood flows [,] carrying away the ignoble pain" (*Ibid.*, 183). Here, gruesome though the picture may be, the discovery of the abscess fulfills that very epistemophilic urge I discussed above; its hyperbolic reward, "delight" and "ecstasy", is comparable to that which is sought in a desired, eroticized body. Within this rhetoric of excess, the evocation's very gruesomeness becomes part and parcel of an aesthetics of the grotesque or, to use a

more recent notion, a trash aesthetics. Throughout a large part of this novel, Nabokov's epistemophilic project is carried out by the relentless ardour with which bodily self-destruction is plotted, and it is worth noting, as I have done elsewhere, that ecstasy is associated with self-mutilation, or even "auto-dissolution", no less than five times.<sup>7</sup>

As Joshua Witty has shown, Wild's bodily depletion has an incremental value in that it paradoxically strengthens his sense of himself; comparing Wild's condition to that of R in *Transparent Things*, who declares, "The more I shrivel the bigger I grow", Witty explains that these characters' "mental identities [...] only become more energetic as their bodies are destroyed" (Wittig 2010, 96-97). He also points to another salient way in which the body may constitute a narrative motor, namely, the detailed depiction of Flora, which was presumably meant to open the novel and thus plays a key role in setting the plot astir and provoking, then sustaining, the reader's desire for the story. He notes that "with the body of Flora shown in such vividness before us, our relationship with her seems to approach one of physical contact – even though we are of course only touching the fibers of page" (*Ibid.*, 91). This of course is reminiscent of the tactile delights, that tell-tale tingle, which Nabokov's style characteristically elicits when portraying other young girls – in *Speak, Memory, Mary, Lolita, Ada* and *Look at the Harlequins!*. Yet in *The Original of Laura*, the female body is not merely an object for representation. From the very first chapter, Flora's body actually provides the form, the compositional matrix for the novel *My Laura*: "Her exquisite bone structure immediately slipped into a novel – became in fact the secret structure of that novel, besides supporting a number of poems" (Nabokov 2009, 15). And since *The Original of Laura* is rife not only with anatomical and sexual features, but also with elements of *mise en abyme* and mirror images, one might surmise that this comment ranges further than *My Laura*, to include *The Original of Laura* as a whole. Actually, Nabokov confirms the overarching metafictional dimension of the body's inscription within the novel only three cards later, with two rather dense and rambling sentences:

Only by identifying her with an unwritten, half-written, rewritten difficult book could one hope to render at last what contemporary descriptions of intercourse so seldom convey, because newborn and thus generalized, in the sense of primitive organisms of art as opposed to the personal achievement of great English poets dealing with an evening in the country, a bit of sky in a river, the nostalgia of remote sounds – things utterly beyond the reach of Homer or Horace. Readers are directed to that book – on a very high shelf, in a very bad light – but already existing, as magic exists, and death, and as shall exist, from now on, the mouth she made automatically

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<sup>7</sup> See my article, "Nabokov's Last Smile," in which I also note that self-mutilation or self-destruction is "described in far more lyrical and hyperbolic fashion than any of the sex episodes in the novel" (111).



while using that towel to wipe her thighs after the promised withdrawal. (*Ibid.*, 21-23)

These sentences are a fitting illustration of how to effect an ellipsis by means of digression. The ellipsis concerns sexual intercourse, the traces of which are literally “wiped” off the body of the text by digressive considerations on the evolution of literature. Their main quality, then, is a certain elusiveness springing from the very nature of their discourse: the impersonal pronoun “one” does not allow a specific identification of the speaker, but it is likely to represent the narrator, who is also Flora’s lover (although it remains unclear whether he has in mind his own sexual experience or whether this scene is drifting towards another level of fiction, that of his novel *My Laura*). The sentence coils on itself in möbius-like fashion, and the reader is easily lost by the narrator’s meandering logic, that seems to telescope contemporary and ancient art while pointing to a virtual book in the making, the existence of which is conditioned by the arresting presence of the female body, made to signify, metonymically, through its mouth – the part of the body where eros and logos converge. The text thus acts as a veil, pointing to an orifice, a gaping hole, while simultaneously covering it up with graphite. Indeed, Nabokov has thoroughly crossed out with his pencil the three lines of text coming right after the indeterminate pronoun “what”: that which was initially supposed to follow is therefore left in limbo. The tantalizing incompleteness implied by the conditional “could” and the three epithets “unwritten, half-written, rewritten” might be perceived as a token of the aging Nabokov’s resignation in front of his own fate, as Maurice Couturier suggests when writing that “all that is left here is the dregs of a desire left hanging” (Couturier 2010, 132).<sup>8</sup> My feeling, however, is that Nabokov is still fully in control here. Whether or not his endeavour is successful is of course matter for debate, but in any case the rambling circumvolutions of the passage appear to me as a deliberate enactment of the very point he means to make. A point that is in fact very similar to that which he presents in the Mascodagama passage from *Ada*. Striking rhetorical resemblances may indeed be noticed: both focus metatextually on the difficulty of genuine creation, which seeks to flesh out, magically, the airy stuff of one’s imagination – or, as this passage puts it, “to express something which *until* expressed had only a twilight being”. And such difficulty, the province of the happy few, is, he insists, utterly unknown to, or beyond the reach of, a certain category of artists, who are hemmed in by the shortcomings of their time. The semiotization of Flora’s body, which becomes a vehicle for Nabokov’s aesthetic creed, entails a somatization of the story, which not only affects the nature of the text, but also the way in which it is read.

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<sup>8</sup>“Il ne reste là que les scories d’un désir en souffrance” (my translation).

The passage's acrobatic incompleteness can indeed be perceived as a mere ploy, the better to hold the desiring reader within the text's grip by holding at bay what Brooks terms "the death of desiring, the silence of the text". The narrative's reticence and indirection in depicting this physical scene effectively "has to do with the dynamic temporality of desire in narrative, the way in which narrative desire simultaneously seeks and puts off the erotic denouement that signifies both its fulfillment and its end" (Brooks 1993, 15). Thus, by indicating, in a conditional mode, a sexual moment that, in Michael Wood's words, "can't fully exist until it has become history and memory" (Wood 2013, 60), by denying the reader the right to indulge, in the present of reading, in voyeuristic sexual participation, Nabokov cunningly pursues his exploitation of the epistemophilic drive. Missing a projected, hypothetical textual body that is already part of literary history, the reader has no choice but to continue his quest for further knowledge, for an end that will never be.

To put an end that *will* be to this essay, let us turn to a piece by Paul Ricoeur, also part of a very fragmentary and posthumously published work, in which the philosopher tries to define what dying may mean when one is not yet dead:

It is the time of retirement, in the existential sense of *retirement*, the time of *disappearing*.

This is the time I'm in. I still participate in the torments and joys of creation, like a twilight end of season; but I feel in my flesh and my mind the scission between the time of the work and the time of life; I am moving away from the immortal time of the work and I withdraw into the mortal time of life: this moving away is a kind of dispossession, a laying bare of mortal time in the sadness of having-to-die, or perhaps of the time of the end and of the poverty of the spirit. (Ricoeur 2009, 60)<sup>9</sup>

Ricoeur speaks here of his own sensations and feelings on the eve of his life and it's possible that Nabokov shared some of this experience, notably that "scission between the time of the work and the time of life" he may have felt when he proved unable to physically transpose onto paper the novel that was already complete in his mind. My hunch is that he didn't fully accept, as Ricoeur seems to have done, the sadness of this "dispossession" and the apparently inevitable poverty of the spirit. In his final contest

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<sup>9</sup> "C'est le temps de la retraite, au sens existentiel de *retraite*, le temps du *disparaître*. C'est le temps dans lequel je suis; je participe encore aux tourments et aux joies de la création, comme dans une arrièr-saison crépusculaire; je ressens dans ma chair et dans mon esprit la scission entre le temps de l'oeuvre et celui de la vie; je m'éloigne du temps immortel de l'oeuvre, et je me replie sur le temps mortel de la vie: cet éloignement est un dépouillement, une mise à nu du temps mortel dans la tristesse de l'avoir à mourir ou peut-être le temps de la fin et la pauvreté d'esprit" (Ricoeur 2007, 96-97).

against time, Nabokov promises no withdrawal from his work; on the contrary, the physical ailments proper to his ebbing mortal life largely contaminate this last and maybe immortal work, which, unsurprisingly, is so much concerned with dying. By figuring the body as a potent signifier able to create desire, both writerly and readerly, Nabokov thus allows himself to retire and disappear not “into the finished book”, (Nabokov 1969b, 587) as Van had wished, but into the unfinished book.

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