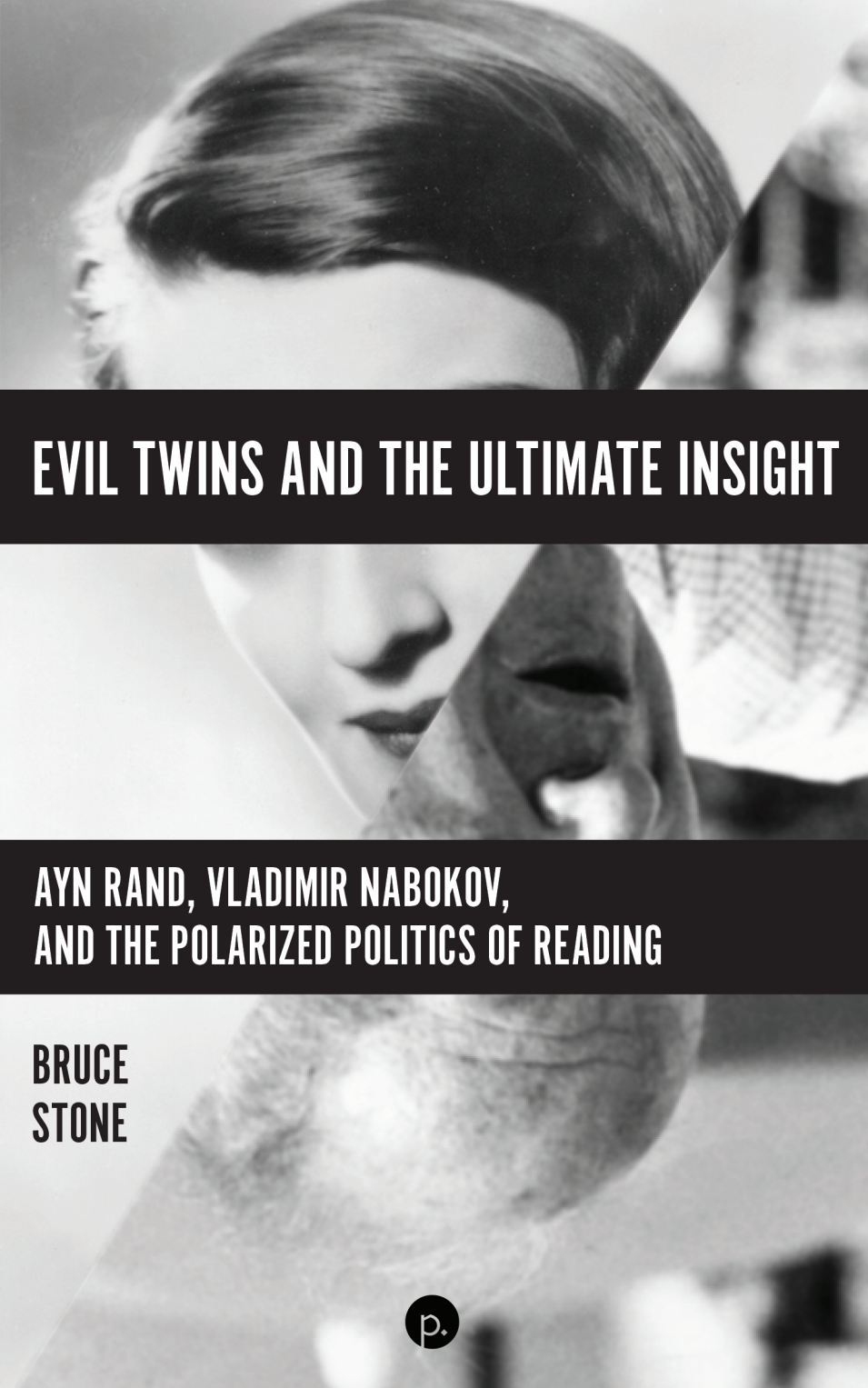

EVIL TWINS AND THE ULTIMATE INSIGHT

AYN RAND, VLADIMIR NABOKOV, AND THE POLARIZED POLITICS OF READING

BRUCE STONE

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Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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Introductions

Reality Check

Literature is inherently political, the theorists tell us, with novels, stories, poems, plays all mired in local power struggles and lousy with opinions about the so-called social order. But in the twenty-first-century American home, the factual presence of bookshelves itself feels ideologically loaded, like a stump speech sounded in the idiom of furniture, some tongue-and-groove pledge of allegiance. To read at all these days, much less in print, is to take a civic stand. Then again, property ownership of any kind, from the home down to its unlettered furnishings, is no less politically entangled, but at this level of generality, in which novels get conflated with nightstands, we risk misunderstanding both our belongings and the precarious terms of our belonging. What follows, the shapely ink strewn across these pages, is not your standard diatribe on the politics of literary taste; it's more like a grudging intervention in the partisan blood feud that mobilizes and paralyzes the American electorate.

Four recent books, all from academic presses, draw us in, obliging us to ask whether literature exacerbates our ideological division, or whether it might close the gap, heal the wound, and lead us toward consensus. But to approach the question, as our English professors pose it, is to stumble into a hall of mir-

rors, a gallery of eerie, eerily interlocking evil-twin relationships, the most prominent of which pits Vladimir Nabokov, the trickster-genius of the Western canon, against Ayn Rand, the novelist laureate of libertarian conservatism. And this pairing overlies and echoes an earlier instance of authorial doppelgänging, a real battle of the beards, between Fyodor Dostoevsky and Nikolai Chernyshevski, the latter of whom wrote one bad book that sparked, reportedly, the Bolshevik Revolution.[1] Analogous instances of analogous relations crop up in the margins of our inquiry, but let's reiterate the obvious upshot and plant a flag in the palimpsest's top-most layer: these bookish conflicts reverberate with the present implacable enmity between Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, those identicals and opposites of the political spectrum.

The real-world twinship at issue here is itself prefigured in the pertinent literature, the midcentury novels of Nabokov and Rand, where the former's madcap *double* routine is just the surreal terminal case of the latter's textbook character gradation. Consider the equivocal bond between suave Sebastian Knight and his clumsy half brother, V., in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (Nabokov's first English-language novel), or James Taggart's wimpy *James Taggart* versus *Hank Rearden's* indomitable Hank Rearden in *Atlas Shrugged* (Rand's characters being stilted projections of ideas, personas couched in italics).

That space where antonyms rhyme.

As we'll see.

So swept up herein is a vast cyclonic debris field, from the Russian Silver Age to your Covid-darkened front doorstep, this litany of sorrows familiar and foreign, factual and fictive, real and imagined: partisan politics, tyrannicide, Amazon sales rankings, the 2008 economic collapse, and the inversion table of the 2016/2020 elections. The twin spoilers Jo Jorgensen and Jill Stein factor in, as do Gene Bell-Villada's father, Nietzsche, Slavoj Žižek's succulent lisp, and a souvenir coffee mug depicting Putin

1 The 1863 novel *What Is to Be Done?,* or *What to Do?* in Nabokov's laconic translation.

(shirtless) astride a ruddy bear. Of course, there's bound to be lung cancer, mock executions, Red Terror, Bad Writing, powder burns, one murderer maimed when his victim bites down hard on his hand. Somewhere in the tangle, Rasputin's satanic visage, Mitch McConnell's Palpatine pallor and billowing wattle, dreams of perpetual motion, Cheryl Brooks's suicide, Flesch–Kincaid readability scores, and the jewel-encrusted bodies of young-adult children being led to slaughter down basement stairs. Shout-outs also to the good folks at *goodreads,* those demented Soviet propaganda posters with the leader's granite visage against a garish vermilion backdrop, scholars chirping lustily from crenelated walls, and an imaginary township in central Wisconsin where Paul Ryan (Republican, Wisconsin, 1999–2019) forever stumps for Donald J. Trump.

Me, just me, deracinated, this tissue of words.

And you, reader, sister, brother, double.

And let's not forget the mounded white wedding-cake tiers of the Orthodox cathedral, the gilded dome of its bell tower, from which vantage a Bolshevik machine gun sights the imprisoned tsar's bedroom window. When allowed outside, the tsar enjoys the anomalous swing set on the prison house's grounds. Because the upswing permits gawkers a view of the tsar's legs cresting the palisade that encloses the compound, the jailers erect a second, taller palisade around the first. A kindness. The house is called, by Bolsheviks, the House of Special Purpose. One midsummer night, the tsar, his wife, and their children — four daughters, plus the hemophiliac tsarevich, who had survived to this doom by the prayers of Rasputin — are lured into a semibasement for execution, along with the four retainers (one doctor, one cook, one "lady-in-waiting," and, for symmetry, one "footman") who had followed the royal family into imprisonment. The entourage arrays itself as if posing for a group portrait, per the commandant's compositional genius (he'd been a photographer before the war). Befitting the lie they've been told by their captors, the condemned all wear traveling clothes. The tsarina and ailing tsarevitch take chairs.

The eleven executioners — a mixed corps of Balts and Hungarians rounds out the local talent — form a ragged line. Some, in fact, are not entirely sober, and even when the commandant discloses the death sentence, there is little air of martial legality in the proceedings. What happens next is more like an ambush, improvised, rash, when the soldiers produce weapons and everyone empties their clips, loosing a hundred-odd bullets at the prisoners. (Some figures are estimates.) The tsar, his wife, and at least two of the four retainers die in this first barrage. But the children, like their mother, have jewels sewn into the lining of their clothes, fairy-tale Kevlar, and these deflect the executioners' anyway wayward bullets, though there's no help for the noise or the smoke in the enclosed space, plus the frenzied yapping of the royal spaniel, Joy, who will survive the massacre to retire on a British pension. No one can see shit for a while. The room's door is reopened, for ventilation. Then, emerging from the fog, the jewel-armored bodies of the tsar's progeny, crouching, huddled, still alive, against the back basement wall. Maria, the heavy one, has taken a bullet to the thigh. The executioners holster firearms and draw blades — hoping belatedly to shroud the murders in secrecy, to maintain plausible deniability — but still manage to inflict only nonlethal damage on the bodies, so the least squeamish expeditiously target faces and heads, blades as good as bullets now. The hemophiliac boy, not quite fourteen, gets two behind the ear.

And still the death squad has to resort to rifle butts to erase the last signs of life (the groans, the stirring limbs) so that the bodies can be *prepared,* that is, *further disfigured* for disposal.

At least one of the female victims will be posthumously fingered.

After a time, someone outside shuts off the engine of a driverless Fiat truck, quelling the diesel rumble intended to mask the noise of gunfire (that ruse a total failure).

True story. Sentries had been watching the whole while from the two unboarded-up windows, and they — plus one of the executioners and the put-upon guard who mopped up the blood — provided eyewitness testimony for the local inquest.

The account in *The Atlantic,* from 1928, differs in a few respects, trivial and nontrivial, from the account on Wikipedia. Both are available online. According to *The Atlantic,* the spaniel was named Jimmy and belonged to Anastasia, the youngest daughter, not the tsarevitch Alexei, as Wikipedia has it; she had carried the dog in her arms as they descended into the basement, where it died along with its owner. The tsar had carried Alexei likewise in his arms as the family crossed the compound to the site designated for the murder, so you can understand how these things might have grown confused.

Also according to *The Atlantic,* the machine gunner aiming at the tsar's bedroom window roosted not in a cathedral bell tower, but merely on a neighboring rooftop. For me personally, more ghastly truth resides in Wikipedia's cathedral staging.

And *The Atlantic*'s version says nothing of the tsar on the swing set, only that the guards inscribed the seats with lewd graffiti to menace the tsarevnas, but it contains, uniquely, this sentence: "As it is the last time we shall look upon their faces before the fiery acid eats away all traces of a human countenance, let us note them carefully as they pass into the shambles."

Dual narratives, each adjacent to the truth.

Each a cautionary tale (*there but for the democratic process go we*), and a chiding (*how benign our troubles by comparison*).

Only the ravaged bodies to tell the difference, in the basement, between tyrants and tyrannized.

Truth, a ceaseless sorry haggling over terms.

Take Two

Maybe now, when each election cycle seems doomed to end in an acrimonious dead heat — a virtual draw, mutually infuriating — we might agree at least on this: that, of all the epic cultural conflicts currently raging (race, class, gender, region), the partisan divide looms largest and cuts deepest because it, in fact, subtends all the others. A Democrat has more in common and a stronger sense of kinship with someone else on the Left than with *anyone* on the Right, and vice versa. Fellow feel-

ing fractures along party lines. Our national politics has long since devolved into something like the cola wars, a climate of hysterical brand loyalty dug in so deep that it's the ideological equivalent of trench warfare, maybe beyond remedy or rapprochement. No one really minds that the parties themselves swapped platforms at some indeterminate point in the twentieth century (recall the party of Lincoln), exchanging identities or trading polarities in a ghostly kind of dance — opposing partisan fogs passing through each other, as it were, like so much noncommingling wind-borne swamp gas, changing hosts. And little thought is given to the eerie sameness in the vitriol, each party's hatred for the other side betraying the same premises and couched in identical terms. Elephants and Donkeys alike decry lying, corruption, hypocrisy, incompetence, and incitements of violent activism, except, of course, among their own. Each accuses the other of playing politics at the expense of truth and substance, as if the circus animal factions are working from the same limited script.

Is anyone surprised that Republican campaign chants of "Lock her up" eventuated in literal jail time for actual Republicans? That, in successive elections, just about everyone pinned last hopes, or worst fears, to "rogue electors" who might disrupt the vote ratification process? Or consider the historical crossfade from November 9, 2016 (nationwide "Not my president" protests) to January 6, 2021 (a homicidal tour group storming the Capitol).

Hardly credible that the country could be divided so evenly, with such statistical precision that national elections turn on margins roughly the size of the population in Kenosha, Wisconsin, a state itself divided cleanly down the middle, like the Rumpelstiltskin of lore who tears himself in two.

That Elephants and Donkeys sustain a totally mutual bone-deep hatred is itself a sign of their underlying similarity if not sameness. It's as if we're living out, through our national politics, one of those literary evil-twin stories, such as Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson" or, more familiarly, "The Thing and I"

from the "Treehouse of Horror VII" episode of the *The Simpsons* (Bart's conjoined twin, Hugo, separated at birth by paper cutter). And as it happens, literature has something to say about the conflict. In fact, it might hint at a possible, however improbable, resolution.

Lessons in Literary History

In 2000, D. Barton Johnson, then a scholar at University of California, Santa Barbara, contributed a fresh chapter to the library of eerie world-historical coincidences, rich enough to rival the current evil-twin political narrative for sheer unlikelihood and Bizarro-world fascination. He outlined the parallel destinies of Vladimir Nabokov (b. 1899) and Ayn Rand (b. 1905, as Alissa Rosenbaum), who both witnessed firsthand the death throes of tsarism (or the birth pangs of communism) in Russia, both emigrated to the United States to become English-language writers, both denounced collectivism in dystopian fictions, both advocated a radical individualism, and both reached the bestseller list in 1958, when Nabokov's *Lolita* (a work of antisocial artistry) secured a spot alongside *Atlas Shrugged* (Rand's apoplectic capitalist manifesto). Maybe the most startling aspect of the coincidence is that Rand was a childhood friend of Nabokov's sister Olga. She sometimes visited the Nabokov house in Petersburg. This was in 1917, in that interval between capital-R Revolutions, the February (when the tsar abdicated) and the October (when the Bolsheviks cracked skulls and ousted Petersburg families like the Nabokovs and Rosenbaums from their residences).[2] The girls, age twelve and fourteen, talked politics, reportedly. If it weren't true, no one would believe it.

What makes the two writers' kinship especially uncanny is that even their profound differences shake out in a pattern of diametrical inversion as if they were at once identical twins and polar opposites. Nabokov, the exacting empiricist, student of

2 D. Barton Johnson, "Strange Bedfellows: Ayn Rand and Vladimir Nabokov," *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 2, no. 1 (2000): 47–67.

the phenomenal, spent six prime years at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, sketching, by hand, the scale patterns on the wings of butterflies; Rand, the abstractionist, prophet of the noumenal, flayed the world upon her razor of moral absolutes. Nabokov, who wrapped "objective reality" in scare quotes (not despite but because of his scientific expertise); Rand, who propounded Objectivism, the belief that Reality is directly and unambiguously accessible to rational minds. Nabokov, the artist and master parodist, innovator of literary forms that take unreliable narration to a whole other dimension; and Rand, the scriptwriter who, for all her radical ambitions, preferred to compose in the missionary position, contriving clunky prescriptivist melodramas for mass consumption.[3] Nabokov, the incorrigible joker, who once wrote that "laughter is some chance little ape of truth astray in our world"[4] and staged at least one not-very-nice literary hoax (see the short story "Vasiliy Shishkov"); versus Rand, whose life's work is, to my ear, utterly humorless.[5]

Nabokov, more revered than read, I think; Rand, maybe more widely read than revered.

Fans of neither writer are likely to find the comparison flattering.

Johnson also notes how Rand and Nabokov triangulate strangely around a literary figure from their shared cultural background: the nineteenth-century writer, philosopher, rabble-rouser, and muse to budding tyrants Nikolai Chernyshevski[6] (who has his own doppelgänger problem with Dostoevsky, and whom we'll refer to by his monogram, NC, for convenience).

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3 Ibid.

4 Vladimir Nabokov, "Ultima Thule," in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 503.

5 In an essay on the purported humor in Rand's first, and arguably best, novel, *We the Living,* Robert Mayhew, a philosopher at Seton Hall, shares Rand's ponderous definition of the term — "the denial of metaphysical importance to that which you laugh at" — and a number of mirthless examples; see Mayhew, "Kira Argounova Laughed: Humor and Joy in *We the Living,*" in *Essays on Ayn Rand's "We the Living,"* 2nd edn., ed. Robert Mayhew (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 351–62.

6 Johnson, "Strange Bedfellows," 52–56.

Nabokov wrote an eccentric and to some minds heretical biography of NC, conceived as a stand-alone chapter in his 1938 novel *The Gift* (history as fiction).

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Nabokov's biography of NC is, typically, a virtuoso performance, and pretty obviously a work of genius. How you feel about the result might depend on your attitude toward virtuosity and genius. For the record, Nabokov attributes the biography's exhaustive research and writing to his novel's protagonist (who bears another big Russian name — Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev — and whom we'll also refer to monogrammatically as FGC), but the distance between the author's and character's literary styles is, in this case, virtually nil. In the first half of his *Life of Chernyshevski,* FGC adopts an associative hopscotch method, tracking motifs or "themes" (such as "nearsightedness" or "tears")[7] across the chronology of NC's life in a way that effectively collapses time. In the chronicle's second half, things settle down a bit, the narrative gaining traction as NC's agitprop campaign ramps up and precipitates his arrest for sedition and rabble-rousing — the authorities have to frame him for crimes that he had in fact committed — but still the biography dilates on peripheral concerns. The quirks of lesser-known revolutionaries clamor for attention: Nikolai Dobrolyubov's farcical sex life and anticlimactic funeral, among the attendants the "doddering mother of one of the gravediggers"[8]; Dmitri Pisarev's mental illness, "distinguished by a kind of perverted aestheticism," and the awful letters he wrote to his own mother, which data all but eclipse his role as NC's prison mate and real-time explicator of *What to Do?*[9] Some fine-grained observa-

7 Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 214, 221.
8 Ibid., 263.
9 Ibid., 278.

tions on Russian prosody also hijack the political narrative. Nikolay Nekrasov was NC's favorite poet, sometime friend, and the publisher who mishandled NC's manuscript (*What to Do?* tumbles unnoticed out of a moving carriage, threatening to alter the course of history until a Samaritan recovers the lost manuscript and returns it for a reward worthy of Judas: 50 silver rubles), but the biography lavishes equal attention on his iambic pentameter's musical caesuras.[10] At one point, FGC pranks readers by substituting a passage from Pushkin for a passage from NC's obscure, late-career work "Evenings at the Princess Starobelski's."[11] And framing the whole chapter is an inverted sonnet, the sestet supplying an epigraph, the octet getting the last word, which gives the text the looping circularity of a Möbius strip. All of this makes for a kaleidoscopic portrait of NC, diffusing the ideological relevance of the biography. It must be said that the prose is consistently breathtaking. FGC springs NC's mock execution upon readers with a special temerity: he fussily relates NC's noncapital criminal sentence — "to be exiled for fourteen years of penal servitude and then to live in Siberia forever"[12] — which is affirmed by both the Senate and State Council, but the tsar "reduced the term of penal servitude by half." Then, FGC deadpans the heinous non sequitur: "On May 4, 1864, the [fussy noncapital] sentence was announced to Chernyshevski, and on the 19th, at 8 o'clock in the morning, on Mytninski Square, he was executed."[13]

NC was subjected to mock execution, a special cruelty of the tsar's penal system, just as his rival Dostoevsky had been, and FGC's rendition of the event manages to be at once jovial and ghastly (Nabokov's wonted manner):

10 Ibid., 252.
11 Ibid., 258.
12 Ibid., 280.
13 Ibid.

> It was drizzling, umbrellas undulated, the square was beslushed, and everything was wet; gendarmes' uniforms, the darkened wood of the scaffold, the smooth, black pillar with chains, glossy from the rain. Suddenly the prison carriage appeared. From it emerged, with extraordinary celerity, as if they had rolled out, Chernyshevski in an overcoat and two peasant-like executioners; all three walked with swift steps along a line of soldiers to the scaffold.[14]

From the crowd come cries of "Close the umbrellas!" — the situational equivalent of "Down in front!" FGC's rendition captures all the mundanity and absurdist detail in the morbid spectacle:

> While an official read the sentence, Chernyshevski, who already knew it, sulkily looked around him; he fingered his beard, adjusted his spectacles and spat several times. When the reader stumbled and barely got out "soshulistic ideas" Chernyshevski smiled and then, recognizing someone in the crowd, nodded, coughed, shifted his stance: from beneath the overcoat his black trousers concertinaed over his rubbers. People standing near could see on his chest an oblong plaque with an inscription in white: STATE CRIMIN (the last syllable had not gone in).[15]

The narrative continues in this vein: soldiers rough up NC, some workmen chime in with verbal abuse. NC is shackled to the pole, where he must remain for fifteen minutes. Sympathizers in the "better-off part of the crowd" begin hurling flowers, roses, and lilacs, which outpouring policemen hasten to suppress.[16] Then the episode concludes with FGC reverting to the initial death sentence/life sentence confusion: "Mean-

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 281.

> while Chernyshevski was hastily released from his chains and his dead body borne away. No — a slip of the pen; alas, he was alive, he was even cheerful! Students ran beside the carriage with cries of 'Farewell, Chernyshevski! *Au revoir!*'"[17]
>
> For all the dire world-historical content, all the suffering and deaths (accomplished and incipient) in the narrative material, FGC's biography sustains a cheerful tone, a spirit of irrepressible play, uncowed by the disaster. The waggish energy, the unerring eye for sweetly banal, sentiment-extinguishing detail, the dazzling cat's-cradle architecture, the resolute inversion of figure and ground in the historical narrative: this is a determined reorienting of the reader's perspective, a serious epistemological gambit, embodied in a literary text. FGC's biography iridesces in a way that survives translation into English (Nabokov's revision of Michael Scammell's work) and hasn't faded over time (*The Gift* dates to 1937/38 in Russian, 1963 in English, the same year Kennedy was shot, also the centennial of NC's *What to Do?*).

Meanwhile, as Johnson explains, this is the same Nikolai Chernyshevski from whose communist example Rand drew lavishly to concoct her Objectivist propaganda novels (fiction as history).[18]

If anyone tells you they love Ayn Rand, you might remind them that her real name was Alissa Rosenbaum and that she borrowed her literary playbook from the library of Socialist Realism.

Inexorably, Johnson's catalogue of connections turns toward the pop domain, as if anticipating the dawn of Wikipedia: both writers were "ardent" Scrabble players, neither learned to drive a car, both entered the immortal lexicon of rock music. The Canadian prog-rock trio Rush borrowed freely from Rand for their albums *Fly by Night* (one song is titled "Anthem") and *2112* (also

17 Ibid.

18 Johnson, "Strange Bedfellows," 52–53.

inspired by, or plagiarized from, Rand's dystopian *Anthem*).[19] The Police nod to Nabokov in the lyrics for "Don't Stand So Close to Me," his Russian surname made to rhyme with "shake and cough."[20] That sort of thing.

In the light of Johnson's article, the two writers' respective attitudes toward coincidence itself seem pertinent. Nabokov positively gloried in it: "the chance that mimics choice,"[21] as he once called it, became an artistic signature or watermark in his fiction. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,* the title character, a novelist who takes after his creator, adopts a compositional method predicated on coincidence, described as "a glorious gamble on causalities, […] the probing of the aetiological secret of aleatory occurences."[22] Another of Nabokov's fictional avatars — the poet John Shade, in *Pale Fire* — has his intimations of immortality upended by a trivial misunderstanding (a newspaper misprint), but he consequently rediscovers a mystic significance in "topsy-turvical coincidence," which hints at life's "plexed artistry," "some kind of correlated pattern in the game,"[23] like a garbled transmission from that elusive hereafter. Nabokov made of coincidence an art and a metaphysics.

Rand demurs, on both counts, in *The Art of Fiction:* "Coincidence is always bad in writing, and it is disastrous in plot writing[… .] A plot presents free will and man's achievement of, or at least struggle for, his purpose — and coincidence is irrelevant

19 Rand's influence lingers well into the band's long career: the 1984 "Freewill," from the *Permanent Waves* album, has a chorus that echoes Rand: "You can choose a ready guide / In some celestial voice / If you choose not to decide / You still have made a choice / You can choose from phantom fears / And kindness that can kill / I will choose a path as clear / I will choose free will." The tacit atheism and lethal kindness bear Rand's fingerprints.

20 Johnson, "Strange Bedfellows," 59, 62.

21 Vladimir Nabokov, "The Vane Sisters," in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage, 1997, 2008), 626.

22 Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: New Directions, 1941, 2008), 96.

23 Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 63.

to anyone's choice or purpose." Her conclusion: "It can happen in life, but it is meaningless."[24] Line starts here for rebuttals.[25]

24 Ayn Rand, *The Art of Fiction* (New York: Plume, 2000), 23.

25 Any "meaning" divorced from what "can happen" would appear to be an arbitrary imposition, an assertion of will at odds with reality, not a universal truth. The phenomenon of coincidence constitutes a threat to Rand's "meaning."

RAND

Russian Meddling

The twinship phenomenon might be a mere curiosity, a quirk of fate and fortune, were the two writers' legacies less politically fraught and consequential. Both get blamed for a lot of damage in the world. Nabokov is sometimes charged, from the right flank, with condoning or committing or making light of pedophilia (a recent scholarly book promises guidance on *Teaching Nabokov's "Lolita" in the #MeToo Era*[1]). And this charge itself is but a local instance of a broader, left-flank grievance: he's sometimes mistaken, with cause, for one of those Dead White Patriarchs responsible for the subjugation of women, the silencing of pan-ethnic voices, and the prevalence of homophobia. (If this were true, if his work were to advocate, implicitly or explicitly, any of these platforms, it would be too boring to read; though if you happen to have thin skin or like preachy fiction, Nabokov will probably offend you.) Still, it took a mind like Rand's to detect something more pervasively sinister in Nabokov's aesthetic. She shared her verdict with an interviewer: "He is a brilliant stylist, he writes beautifully, but his subjects, his sense of

1 Eléna Rakhimova-Sommers, ed., *Teaching Nabokov's "Lolita" in the #MeToo Era* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021).

life, his view of man, are so evil that no amount of artistic skill can justify them."[2]

Given Rand's overtly political aspirations (she, the self-styled ideologue and agitator), as opposed to Nabokov's ivory-tower aestheticism, the problem of influence applies more to her than to him, and deservedly she takes the worst of the opprobrium. In a 2018 think-piece for *Aeon* magazine, Skye Cleary, a lecturer at Columbia University, claims that "Rand's rhetoric continues to enthral millions of readers," spreading an ethic of "victim-blam[ing]" (vis-à-vis her love-as-rape scenes), in addition to her brand of myopic self-interest and malignant capitalism.[3] Bill McKibben, writing for *The New Yorker* in 2018, counts Rand's influence among the "myriad intellectual, psychological, and political sources for our inaction" on climate change: "Long after Rand's death, in 1982, the libertarian gospel of [*Atlas Shrugged*] continues to sway our politics: Government is bad. Solidarity is a trap. Taxes are theft. The Koch brothers, whose enormous fortune derives in large part from the mining and refining of oil and gas, have peddled a similar message."[4] And in *Mean Girl: Ayn Rand and the Culture of Greed* (2019), Lisa Duggan, a professor of social and cultural analysis at New York University, reflects on the rise of Trump, the vitriol that shapes public policy, and observes, "Ayn Rand is the writer whose dour visage presides over the spirit of our time."[5]

Rand, the embodiment of all that's wrong with the Right; Nabokov, a doubtful poster child of the Left, target of misdirected ire.

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2 Rand, quoted in D. Barton Johnson, "Strange Bedfellows: Ayn Rand and Vladimir Nabokov," *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 2, no. 1 (2000): 58.

3 Skye Cleary, "Philosophy Shrugged: Ignoring Ayn Rand Won't Make Her Go Away," *Aeon,* June 22, 2018, https://aeon.co/ideas/philosophy-shrugged-ignoring-ayn-rand-wont-make-her-go-away.

4 Bill McKibben, "How Extreme Weather Is Shrinking the Planet," *The New Yorker,* November 26, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/11/26/how-extreme-weather-is-shrinking-the-planet.

5 Lisa Duggan, "How Ayn Rand Became the Spirit of Our Time," *Literary Hub,* May 31, 2019, https://lithub.com/how-ayn-rand-became-the-spirit-of-our-time/.

Is it odd, or inevitable, then, that both writers are also lauded in identical terms? Both, maybe counterintuitively, are considered wellsprings of *happiness*.

Lila Azam Zanganeh's *The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness* (2011) is a peculiar literary memoir, attesting to the wondrous, spirit-quickening effects of Nabokov's fiction. In *Redeeming Words and the Promise of Happiness: A Critical Theory Approach to Wallace Stevens and Vladimir Nabokov* (2012), David Kleinberg-Levin, emeritus professor in philosophy at Northwestern University, intimates a utopian potential in the sensuous materiality of Nabokov's prose. And declarations of supreme happiness do abound in Nabokov's fiction. The protagonist of Nabokov's *The Gift,* sensitized to the quotidian beauty and playful tenderness in the world, "gifts with which the summer morning rewards [him]," considers writing "a practical handbook: *How to Be Happy.*"[6]

THUMBNAIL SIDEBAR

Possibly the most straightforward avowal of human happiness arrives in Nabokov's story "Beneficence" (1924) about a heartsick (or love-deranged) sculptor in the throes of an agonizing breakup. He arranges to meet his girl one last time at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate on a chilly, overcast day (windswept plaza, clouds spitting shards of rain), but she stands him up, and instead he witnesses a random act of kindness pass between a gatehouse soldier and a woman selling postcards (he gives her a cup of hot coffee with milk), which precipitates the following declaration:

> Here I became aware of the world's tenderness, the profound beneficence of all that surrounded me, the blissful bond between me and all of creation, and I realized that the joy I had sought in you [the girl] was not only

6 Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 328.

> secreted within you, but breathed around me everywhere, in the speeding street sounds, in the hem of a comically lifted skirt, in the metallic yet tender drone of the wind, in the autumn clouds bloated with rain. I realized that the world does not represent a struggle at all, or a predaceous sequence of chance events, but shimmering bliss, beneficent trepidation, a gift bestowed on us and unappreciated.[7]
>
> Written in that period between wars, from Nabokov's penurious exile in Berlin, the story's upbeat conclusion seems like a small, anomalous miracle in the annals of literary modernism.

Rand's work too is praised in similar terms.[8] After her final novel was torched by reviewers, one disciple wrote in her defense: "*Atlas Shrugged* is a celebration of life and happiness. Justice is unrelenting. Creative individuals and undeviating purpose and

7 Vladimir Nabokov, "Beneficence," in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 77.

8 Coincidentally, the same praise has been accorded to the hoary Russian Nikolai Chernyshevski. In his biography, Nabokov reports that NC received a letter from a sympathizer during his exile, reading, "Your works are filled with peace and love. You didn't want this" (*The Gift,* 292), the "this" referring to the assassination of Tsar Alexander II.

The same praise has also been lavished upon none other than Friedrich Nietzsche. One scholar defines his philosophical project in this way: "The 'superman' is […] the supreme advocate of life-affirmation through acceptance of the totality of life"; R.J. Hollingdale, quoted in Michael Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche: Problems and Perspectives* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 134.

Here's Nietzsche himself, describing his intrepid philosophical hero, in "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-moral Sense": "The intuitive man, standing in the midst of a culture, in addition to warding off harm, reaps from his intuitions a continuously streaming clarification, cheerfulness, redemption"; see Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-moral Sense (1873)," in *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language,* eds. and trans. Sander L. Gilman, Carole Blair, and David J. Parent (New York: Oxford, 1989), 256.

rationality achieve joy and fulfillment."[9] Robert Mayhew, a philosophy professor and dedicated Rand scholar, likewise attests to the "benevolent universe premise" that inheres in Rand's major works.[10] And *Atlas Shrugged* itself labors to define, or litigate, happiness: "Happiness is a state of non-contradictory joy — a joy without penalty or guilt, a joy that does not clash with any of your values and does not work for your own destruction, not the joy of escaping from your mind, but of using your mind's fullest power, not the joy of faking reality, but of achieving values that are real, not the joy of a drunkard, but of a producer," as one of her mouthpiece characters puts it.[11] Rand is more like a Levitican bookkeeper, an actuary of happiness.

The extreme bipolarity in these literary testimonials reminds me of channel-flipping between MSNBC and FoxNews.

That the tempest of our politics indeed roils in the teapot of our books is evident from Rand's outsize influence among conservative powerbrokers. Each election year, we're subjected to the creepy public ritual in which Right-minded politicians acknowledge Rand as a formative influence and guiding light. Let's trot out now for perusal the usual suspects: Paul Ryan (Republican, Wisconsin), retired Speaker of the House, author of the infamous Path to Prosperity Budget, who distributed *Atlas Shrugged* to new staffers. Republican senator Ron Johnson, also from the fair state of Wisconsin, likened himself to a Randian hero in a 2013 interview. Earlier still, Alan Greenspan, Federal Reserve chairman under Reagan and Clinton, was a voluntary longtime member of Rand's inner circle. More recently, Rex Tillerson pledged groveling allegiance en route to his brief stint as Secretary of State; Jo Jorgensen, the Libertarian Party

9 Alan Greenspan, quoted in Gene H. Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov, Ayn Rand, and the Libertarian Mind: What the Russian-American Odd Pair Can Tell Us about Some Values, Myths and Manias Widely Held Most Dear* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 31.

10 Robert Mayhew, "Kira Argounova Laughed: Humor and Joy in *We the Living*," in *Essays on Ayn Rand's "We the Living,"* 2nd edn., ed. Robert Mayhew (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2012), 351.

11 Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Signet, 1996), 935.

candidate who tipped the electoral scales in at least three 2020 swing states, plugs *Atlas Shrugged* on her Twitter feed; and even the proudly alt-literate Trump claims to have relished Rand's *The Fountainhead.* Everyone kisses the ring. It's as if Rand is the only writer authorized for endorsement by the Republican National Committee; she makes reading itself, that suspiciously lefty activity, okay. But maybe the old guard affords an overly optimistic view of Rand's long-term viability as a conservative touchstone. Maybe, once this generation of Republicans is in the grave, the next wave will follow the same bankrupt ideals — the United States as "utopia of greed" — but minus the literary pretense, freed finally of all debt to Rand and the awful bother of reading fiction.

THUMBNAIL SIDEBAR: Some Data

The example of our conservative elderly statespersons notwithstanding, I have my doubts that either Rand or Nabokov commands an audience large enough to qualify as a cultural driver. In my experience, few undergraduates recognize either writer's name: a 2019 essay in *The New Republic* profiles several young Randians, who claim to feel lonely and alienated on their college campuses. Likewise, with the number of English majors shrinking, and the discipline embarked on a social justice campaign, Nabokov's clout in the academy must be waning. Then again, publishers still have sufficient confidence in Nabokov's brand to bankroll new titles culled from his marginalia: the early play *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn* (2012) and the recent collection of interviews and essays *Think, Write, Speak* (2019), both from Knopf. There are signs, too, that Rand's literary shelf life hasn't yet expired. The film version of *Atlas Shrugged,* an epic trilogy, didn't wrap until 2014 (you can cue it up on Amazon right now), and there was a Rand renaissance in 2007/2008, when book sales soared as panicked Elephants braced themselves for the twinned apocalypse (the economic meltdown and the Obama presidency).

At the time, *Forbes* estimated (as part of a marketing blitz) that copies of Rand's novel reached a million high school students, which is maybe not a negligible number.[12] So Rand's work might haunt us yet for a good long while.

On April 13, 2019, the two writers' magna opera sat nearly side by side on Amazon's Sales Rankings: the inexpensive paperback editions of *Atlas Shrugged* and *Lolita* occupied slots #5988 and #5264, respectively, among all book sales ever recorded on Amazon. These numbers fluctuate crazily and are, to me, virtually meaningless. On June 18, *Atlas* ranked 3409 among all book sales, while *Lolita* rose to 3084; earlier, in May, *Atlas* scored more than a thousand points ahead of *Lolita*. Within the category of Classic Literature, they stood at the more robust #385 and #219, respectively, with Nabokov still edging out Rand. But Rand's book (1957), though it dates to nearly the same year as Nabokov's (1955, in France, 1958 in the United States), was also ranked in the category of Contemporary Literature, where it occupied slot #182.

Even if the numbers were stable and reliable, these sales rankings would still defy interpretation. Not all book sales flow through Amazon's locks and levees. Bulk purchases from the Ayn Rand Institute, in Santa Ana, California — a nonprofit(!) funded by private boosters — might artificially inflate Rand's numbers. There's more competition among editions for Nabokov's book (Library of America, Everyman's, Appel's *Annotated Lolita*). Mandatory purchases by students (middle/high school for Rand, college for Nabokov) probably cancel each other out. Ditto for library loan data. And finally, even if *Atlas* sits at #182 on the Contemporary Literature list, it might make only the smallest mark on the culture. How many books are sold annually? How many of those are actually read? And of that number, how many go on to be enshrined in readers' minds as *verbum dei?* And how do

12 Mark E. Babej and Tim Pollak, "Atlas Shrugs Again," *Forbes,* September 28, 2007, https://www.forbes.com/2007/09/27/unsolicited-advice-aynrand-oped_meb_0928unsolicited.html.

> we measure the cumulative cultural effect of any of this? It's hazy as all sociology.
>
> Put it this way, how many people do you know who are actively reading, much less proselytizing for, either writer?

Skye Cleary is anything but sanguine about Rand's motive power, her hold over the conservative imagination. She recommends, in fact, a state of perpetual vigilance, a continued effort to take Rand's influence seriously, and to refute her work with equal seriousness (literary criticism as political activism). But at this point, it would be difficult to add much to the literature that repudiates Rand. Claudia Roth Pierpont's profile in *The New Yorker,* "Twilight of the Goddess" (1995), is perceptive and authoritative and stylish besides: "A reader can hardly get through more than a page or two without sniffing the burning fuel of subverted emotion, or seeing political outrage as a mere component of her recoil from the broader offenses of mankind (especially womankind) upon her senses: dirt, sweat, fat, sagging breasts, softness, confusion, ill-fitting clothes, ugliness, all endangering the heroic ideal."[13] Actually, it seems impossible to improve upon the denunciation issued by Whittaker Chambers in *National Review* upon the publication of *Atlas Shrugged* in 1957. Everyone cites this quote: "Out of a lifetime of reading, I can recall no other book in which a tone of overriding arrogance was so implacably sustained. Its shrillness is without reprieve. Its dogmatism is without appeal[….] From almost any page of *Atlas Shrugged,* a voice can be heard, from painful necessity, commanding: 'To a gas chamber — go!'"[14]

Chambers was himself an equivocal figure, ideologically bipolar: once a card-carrying communist and an actual spy for

13 Claudia Roth Pierpont, "Twilight of the Goddess," *The New Yorker,* July 2, 1995, 79.

14 Whittaker Chambers, "Big Sister Is Watching You," *National Review,* January 5, 2005, https://www.nationalreview.com/2005/01/big-sister-watching-you-whittaker-chambers/.

the Soviet Union, later reformed and embraced as a standard-bearer of Christian conservatism.[15]

Rand's followers would likely shrug off Chambers's attacks as some kind of hangover from all the commie Kool-Aid he'd once ingested. His short review, of necessity, runs roughshod over the fine print of Rand's epic, but his takeaway is impeccable. He sketches the novel's "preposterous" plot, its contest pitting the "harried ranks of free enterprise," mostly titans of industry, Rand's creator class, against a mass of grabby, do-gooding "looters," whose ranks include politicians, teachers, social workers, liberal-minded writers, and members of workers' unions. The main event of the novel is a strike, staged, ironically, by the creator class; they remove to a secret redoubt in the Rocky Mountains, where they establish their "utopia of greed" and wait for the national infrastructure to collapse in their absence, as it must, at which point they can resume their abandoned enterprises to pilot the chastened country toward prosperity (or alternatively, to scavenge the carcass for viable profit vectors). For Rand, this is literally a battle between Good and Evil, and Chambers helpfully deflates all the overblown capitalization inherent in Rand's vision: "Both sides [in the battle] are caricatures."[16]

On the Good side is Dagny Taggart, the brains behind Taggart Transcontinental Railroad, but second chair to her big brother, Jim, who abets the government's efforts to nationalize all business sectors. When she's not overseeing the railroad's fortunes, Dagny has subdom sexual relationships with the novel's triad of heroes: Hank Rearden, an innovative steel magnate, hamstrung by misplaced conscience and government regulation; Francisco D'Anconia, a playboy copper magnate, seemingly bent on squandering his wealth and reputation, but really plotting to renew the world; and finally John Galt, a one-time automotive

15 Chambers's transformation (or redemption, as some would have it) is not all that different from Rand's own self-rebranding, when she dropped her heritage and language as a Russian Jew and reinvented herself from scraps of Aristotle, bits of Nietzsche, gadgets out of H.G. Wells, and a literary style cribbed from dime-store noir and blockbuster cinema.

16 Chambers, "Big Sister."

engineer who has disappeared himself to establish that Rocky Mountain utopia for all right-minded men and women. (The commune produces its own crops, but Rand never condescends to mention the infrastructural niceties of plumbing and sanitation.) At a pivotal moment, Galt comes out of hiding to deliver an oxygen-depleting radio address (first-rate bloviation), laying out an Objectivist manifesto, blasting the opposition and rallying the faithful.

Senator Ted Cruz (Republican, Texas) read aloud from Galt's CO_2-rich bloviating speech in a 2013 filibuster. He urged his hearers in the Senate chamber to go out and buy copies of the book, because "we are living in the days of Ayn Rand."

That Rand's book is pure fantasy, a romance novel for vulture capitalists, is captured adequately, too, by the populist rabble on *goodreads* — at least on the first few pages displaying the "most-liked" reviews. (The newest reviews tell a different story, with five-star ratings dominating the results; more than two hundred new ratings were logged in the first week of May 2019 alone.) The raters also note the bipolar disorder of Rand's moral vision and the ludicrous idealization of her heroes, all the capitalist overlords estranged from their corporeality, as if the body were an accessory of the will, the resulting characters more humanoid than human. (Rand's purported effort to dissolve the mind/body split was all talk, in name only, pure theory, never reaching the page: her mind erases the body.)

Any writer seeking to weigh in on Rand's literary worth and political legacy is doomed to redundancy. The twinship phenomenon, her vexed relationship with Nabokov, affords a clever workaround, a way to reframe the conversation and revisit some otherwise exhausted arguments. And it dangles before the mind's eye a tantalizing prospect. Because so much of the Right's platform coalesces in Rand, and so many of the Left's ideals (art, science, literacy) circulate in Nabokov, we persuade ourselves that our books can adjudicate, by proxy, our political disputes, that they can prove, empirically, cleanly, once and for all, where the truth lies.

Tell us which of the twins is the evil one.

Evil Twin Quadrille

Since D. Barton Johnson's evenhanded, take-no-sides, grind-no-axes 2000 article in *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies,* four scholarly books have emerged that all touch upon the Rand/Nabokov nexus. The Chernyshevski business is sometimes muted, sometimes dominant. Each of these books is fatally flawed, but together, in the horizonal negative space of their evident flaws, as it were, they do manage to establish, beyond a reasonable doubt, the evil twin's identity, which will come as no surprise. These recent books and their numerous intersecting problems conspire to reveal what's irrefutably wrong with Rand, what's equivocally right with Nabokov, and how literary taste factors into our contemporary partisan standoff. Most surprising, perhaps, is that we can derive a reasonably objective conclusion at all about these books, their problems, and the politically charged wrongs and rights of Rand and her nemesis Nabokov.

To say that literature has political relevance has always been an insult to literature.

Gene Bell-Villada's *On Nabokov, Ayn Rand and the Libertarian Mind* (2013) addresses the two authors' twinship most directly. The book began life as a response article to Johnson's essay, and seems in some ways a point-by-point elaboration of Johnson's ideas. But for Bell-Villada, the writers are more similar than different: although he exempts *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* from

his censure, he tars Nabokov and Rand with the same brush and would see both identically feathered. The book is a strange, everything-but-the-kitchen-sink concoction. In a sequence of chapters with punchy taxonomic titles ("On What They Each Stood For," "On Politics and Society," "On Their Russian Side," "On Their Nasty Side"), the book rehashes the two writers' parallel biographies, dabbles ineptly in literary criticism, and veers regularly into memoir as Bell-Villada reflects on his own multicultural roots and literary development, which he measures against Nabokov's and Rand's. (He claims to have endured a Randian father, and to have envied Nabokov's privileged childhood.) Toward the end, Bell-Villada abandons the twinship phenomenon in order to reflect more broadly on libertarianism; he traces the movement's fitful evolution (brace for a bio of Friedrich von Hayek) and flits across multifarious topics: Reagan's America and Thatcher's England, gun control, entitlement programs, Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, and disaster funding after Hurricane Agnes (1972), among other dated cultural flashpoints with ample contemporary resonance. Tacked on, besides, are two appendices: Louis Begley's rejected introduction to Nabokov's autobiography (Bell-Villada purposes to rescue the essay from oblivion), and a series of short satirical articles, by Bell-Villada himself, chronicling his misadventures with libertarians. The book aims to establish the badness of Rand, the Randness of Nabokov, the folly of libertarians, and the resilience and prescience of Gene Bell-Villada. Although I find it easy to sympathize with the author's lefty politics, the book falters on every front — as biography, as criticism, as memoir, and as rescue mission. It is, in sum, a remarkably bad book, with flop sweat moistening its sentences, but the book's very badness will, later, prove doubly instructive.

THUMBNAIL SIDEBAR

The story of Louis Begley's stillborn introduction to Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* has an archeological charm in its own

right. It also exposes the soft, pale flank in Bell-Villada's defenses. The appendix devoted to Begley's misfortunes bears the title "A Suppressed Essay," though *refused* or *declined* might be more accurate terms, and in a short preface, Bell-Villada euphemistically recounts the circumstances of the manuscript's rejection: Nabokov's son and executor, Dmitri, took umbrage at "Begley's polite criticisms of Nabokov's indifference to politics," and when he "demanded changes that Begley thought inappropriate," the essay was "scratched."[1] Bell-Villada had to contact Begley for a copy of the page proofs, which he then manually "word-processed" for publication.[2]

Begley's introductory essay does show signs of life when he chases down Proustian allusions across the autobiography's chapters or excavates resonant contradictions in Nabokov's self-image. Still, it comes as no surprise to learn that the introduction was stricken and scrapped, and Nabokov's staunch aversion to politics has little to do with it. Throughout the essay, Begley bears hostile witness to Nabokov's achievement, and he indulges in a lot of Freudian prying. He piles on the innuendo surrounding Nabokov's gay uncle, Ruka, who left his nephew a fortune, and his gay brother, Sergei, whom Nabokov callously but not maliciously outed. For good measure, Begley — extrapolating from a minor, apparently innocent scene in the text — hints at actual adultery on the part of Nabokov's mother. Begley suggests, too, that Nabokov has repressed conflict concerning his idealized dad — a larger-than-life figure, a lawyer and Renaissance man who had a professional hand in the signing of Tsar Nicholas II's abdication papers, and who was killed when he foiled (by bodily intervention) an assassination attempt at a political event in 1922 Berlin (true story). And — the probable deal-breaker,

1 Gene H. Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov, Ayn Rand and the Libertarian Mind: What the Russian-American Odd Pair Can Tell Us about Some Values, Myths and Manias Widely Held Most Dear* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 220.

2 Ibid., xii.

from son and executor Dmitri's perspective — Begley alleges that Nabokov's marriage was loveless, finding "not a trace of sexual attraction, never mind passion, or the desire to pierce the mystery of the other […] in Nabokov's relation of Véra."[3] Begley attributes this problem — sharing snapshots of the adolescent Nabokov's crushes — to a taste for young proletarian girls (Begley calls it, indulging the multilingual preciousness he begrudges in Nabokov, *gout de la canaille*).[4]

Among the introduction's minor offenses, Begley presumes to read Nabokov's blunt disavowals of linear time as either a "fib" or a "queer result of Nabokov's intellectual as well as artistic mastery."[5] And Begley's first paragraph is so overwrought, puffed up, and beside itself with obligatory praise as to suggest harmful contamination from Nabokov's singular style: "Fortunate indeed is the reader of *Speak, Memory* for whom this is the initiatory voyage to the least oblique and most loving of Nabokov's recreations of his North Russian childhood and early youth[….] Written in pellucid prose, its structure ostensibly symmetrical like the façade of a gleaming Palladian villa, Nabokov's autobiography is a work of labyrinthine intricacy."[6] Soon after, Begley adds stylistic insult to personal injury: "The horrors and bestiality of the first half of this century are held up for view with a mixture of a humanist's compassion and the disdain of an aristocrat who does not dislike to strike, when it suits him, the pose of a consummate dandy."[7] Elsewhere, Begley adds "irrepressible pedant" to Nabokov's rap sheet.[8]

Given the quality and tenor of Begley's performance, Dmitri Nabokov seems to have shown excessive courtesy in extending the opportunity to revise (incredulous laugh-

3 Louis Begley, "Introduction [To Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*]," in Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov,* 235.
4 Ibid., 236.
5 Ibid., 224.
6 Ibid., 221.
7 Ibid., 221–22.
8 Ibid., 224.

> ter might have been a more appropriate response). Begley is free, obviously, to indulge his antipathy for Nabokov, however misguided it might be, but it seems both tasteless and self-sabotaging, even preposterous, to air such antagonisms in the introduction to Nabokov's autobiography. In portraying Begley as a victim of editorial foul play, Bell-Villada, like the proverbial engineer, hoists himself with his own petard.

For Bell-Villada, what unites Nabokov and Rand, overriding the duo's obvious and profound differences, is a shared libertarian hard-headedness and a particular style of nastiness. Both were "intellectual absolutists," "extremists who brooked no disagreement, no compromise, no nuance, no vision or position outside their own. And they granted no concession, however minimal, to points of view differing even slightly from those they represented."[9] Where Rand was a give-no-quarter proponent of rational selfishness, Nabokov, in Bell-Villada's view, was just as dogmatic, an equally militant champion of aestheticism. (Even writing it now, the charge against Nabokov still seems knuckleheaded and nonsensical.) Much of Rand's core philosophy descends from Nietzsche, whose harshest pronouncements Rand took literally,[10] but Bell-Villada also discerns the ances-

9 Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov,* 63.

10 Bell-Villada aptly cites some of the chestnuts from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* that Rand swallowed whole:

On selfishness: "Egoism pertains to the essence of the noble soul [….] The noble soul accepts this fact of its egoism without any question-mark, also without feeling any severity, constraint, caprice in it, but rather as something that may be grounded in the primal law of things: — if it sought a name for it, 'it is justice itself.'"

On sentiment: "The feelings of devotion, self-sacrifice for one's neighbor, the entire morality of self-renunciation must be taken mercilessly to task and brought to court."

On society: "Society should not exist for the sake of society but only as foundation and scaffolding upon which a select species of being is able to raise itself to its higher task and in general to a higher *existence*."

Bell-Villada also duly emphasizes how Rand and her disciples acquired from Nietzsche their self-righteous contempt for all "that *which ought to*

tral influence in Nabokov's fiction: he argues that both writers indulge master–slave delusions in their character portraits, elevating their beautiful, Caucasian protagonists above the grotesque riff-raff and rabble. He notes too how both writers took a dim view of their literary competition, how both took knives to sacred cows: Rand rejecting idealist philosophers such as Plato and Kant, Nabokov mocking Freud and quarreling with Darwin over natural selection. (Bell-Villada portrays both writers as belonging to a class of libertarian "deniers.") And neither spoke out loudly enough, for Bell-Villada's taste, against nazism, McCarthyism, or the Vietnam War.[11]

Bell-Villada's case against Nabokov is paper-thin, but he is on surer ground when denouncing Rand, who made herself an easy target: anyone who claims to have discovered a Truth free of all contradiction (a section title in *Atlas Shrugged* is, in fact, "Non-Contradiction") is practically begging naysayers to prove her wrong. Bell-Villada scores a few easy points when he sketches Rand's "immigrant story." To counter her pretensions to perfect self-reliance, her lambasting of altruism ("No one helped me," she claims, in a note appended to the Signet *Atlas Shrugged*),[12] Bell-Villada offers a slanted rendition of her biography, craftily underscoring the numerous instances in which she depended

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perish" (Nietzsche, quoted in Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov,* 66–67, italics in the original).

11 In "Rereading Barthes and Nabokov," an essay discussed below in "Truth, Lies, Education, Politics," Zadie Smith mentions how Nabokov "liked to torture his left-leaning friends with paeans to capitalism generally and the Vietnam War specifically"; see Smith, "Rereading Barthes and Nabokov," in *Changing My Mind* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 47. I don't know Smith's source for this assertion, but an interview quote, from the Halloween 1971 issue of *The New York Times,* seems to capture the essence and temperature of Nabokov's public position: "All I know is that I would not like S. Vietnam to turn into Sovietnam, and that blunders do not win wars"; see Nabokov, quoted in Alan Levy, "Understanding Vladimir Nabokov," *The New York Times,* October 31, 1971, https://www.nytimes.com/1971/10/31/archives/understanding-vladimir-nabokov-a-red-autumn-leaf-is-a-red-autumn.html.

12 Ayn Rand, "About the Author," in *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Signet, 1996), 1070.

on the kindness of kin and strangers. He mentions (oddly) that she paid no tuition for her education in the Soviet Union, then relates how she received free housing from an American uncle who "sponsor[ed] [her] for a six-month stay."[13] She enjoyed free movie tickets courtesy of her cousin (who owned a theater), pocketed emergency loans from other assorted relatives, and benefited from rent assistance as a young woman. A chance encounter with a magnanimous Cecil B. DeMille led to her foot-in-the-door apprenticeship in Hollywood. That sort of thing.[14]

Bell-Villada also deserves credit for wading through so much material that he finds distasteful. He chokes down 2,000-plus pages of Rand alone, and four of Nabokov's Russian-language novels, all disagreeable (to him). In the early chapter "On the Big Books They Wrote," by way of orientation, he offers evaluative plot summaries of the two writers' signature works, short-

13 Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov,* 43.

14 Actually, in his radio address, Galt makes a fine distinction between acceptable aid-giving and unacceptable sacrifice. He begins, "If you exchange a penny for a dollar, it is not a sacrifice; if you exchange a dollar for a penny, it is." In what follows, Galt/Rand applies the same preposterous calculus to imaginary ethical dilemmas:

> If you achieve a career you wanted, after years of struggle, it is *not* a sacrifice; if you then renounce it for the sake of a rival, it *is* [who does this?]. If you own a bottle of milk and give it to your starving child, it is *not* a sacrifice; if you give it to your neighbor's child and let your own die, it *is*." [There's more:] "If you give money to help a friend, it is *not* a sacrifice; if you give it to a worthless stranger, it is [how would you know a stranger's worth?]. If you give your friend a sum you can afford, it is *not* a sacrifice; if you give him money at the cost of your own discomfort, it is only a partial virtue, according to this sort of moral standard. (Rand, *Atlas Shrugged,* 941)

It's possible that Rand's own case falls under this loophole, but it still seems crazy for her to insist so loudly and violently on what is ultimately a small distinction. And Galt's argument might do more to justify, say, a graduated wealth tax than to prohibit it; altruistic acts infringe on the do-gooder's well-being only in exceptional cases (i.e., fatal acts of heroism). But Rand goes bananas over the egregious exceptions, blind to the fact that her own ideals are already the norm and rule. It's all much ado about nothing. Besides, the nature of the distinction hinges on the definition of a stranger: Couldn't one argue that shared status as Americans makes all of us more like friends than strangers?

shrifting *Lolita* (he doesn't mention the narrative pillars of Lo's mom, Charlotte Haze, or Humbert's nemesis, Clare Quilty) but amply panning Rand's *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged.* He occasionally shares specific insights — weighing in on Rand's rapey eroticism, for example — but he prefers a wide-angle lens and broad-brush verdicts. Of Rand's epics, he writes, *The Fountainhead* is "a competent, commercial, middlebrow novel," while *Atlas Shrugged* "is a narrative inordinately made up of relentless speechifying and counter-sermonizing, the contents of which are thoroughly predictable and lacking in subtlety of any sort."[15] Hyperbole reverberates throughout Bell-Villada's book: he sometimes resorts to name-calling (Nabokov as "spoiled brat, semi-feral child, and anti-social snob"[16]), and details, when they arrive, are scanty and ill-chosen.

THUMBNAIL SIDEBAR

Bell-Villada's reading of Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941) is a typical low point, a real poacher's delight. He labels the book a novel of ideas,[17] "publicist fiction"[18] with an aestheticist message, owing to its portrait of a secondary character, one Mr. Goodman, who published an unflattering biography of the title character and who "serves Nabokov as a whipping boy with which to mock historically-minded literary critics."[19] The novel's writer/narrator — Sebastian's half brother, V. — does parrot Nabokov's own ideas in this regard, and the novel makes Goodman look ridiculous as he falls prey to Sebastian's prankster wiles (Sebastian tells him old college jokes as if they were campus reminiscences, recites the plot of *Hamlet* when asked for a synopsis of his aborted first novel, and Goodman swallows these fictions as

15 Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov,* 28.
16 Ibid., 153.
17 Ibid., 72.
18 Ibid., 87.
19 Ibid., 73.

biographical facts).[20] Given that Bell-Villada prefers Goodman's brand of historical criticism, his discontent is understandable: one repugnant idea could, in theory, spoil a book entire. But Bell-Villada appears to have missed the novel's intricate design: as V. composes his biography, having interviewed the relevant living witnesses to and participants in Sebastian's life, he exhausts his resources and reaches a dead end, and thus he turns to fiction, plagiarizing Sebastian's novels, to complete the "real-life" portrait in the book's second half. And the portrait of Sebastian shifts along the way, from aestheticist lionization (which Bell-Villada mentions) to an airing of dirty laundry as Sebastian behaves in ways increasingly contemptible and pitiful (which Bell-Villada ignores). What's more, the structural play has led scholars to debate whether V. is a mask for Sebastian, or Sebastian an invention of V.'s. (The book's last pages promise that "any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations.")[21] The so-called Real Life, its factual Truth, dissolves in layers of imagination. This critical insight — that the second half of the book is twice fictive, a flight of perplexing fancy — is so well known that Michael Dirda lays out most of the crucial particulars (spoiler alert) in his introduction to the 2008 New Directions edition.[22] A book with such deceptive surfaces, so multifaceted, is a pretty poor delivery system for any single idea, even one as nebulous and capacious as "aestheticism." That Bell-Villada never acknowledges the problematic entirety of the text suggests he's reading with blinders on, practicing what I call "pounce-and-denounce" criticism.

20 Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: New Directions, 2008), 64.

21 Ibid., 204.

22 A full exposition of this reading was available, until recently, online: Michael H. Begnal, "The Fledgling Fictionalist," *Zembla,* 1996. Julian W. Connolly, "From Biography to Autobiography and Back: The Fictionalization of *The Narrated Self* in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,*" *Cycnos* 10, no. 1 (1993), http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/508, takes this reading as a point of departure.

Similar attention deficits undermine the memoir portions of Bell-Villada's book. He describes his father as an undifferentiated Randian capitalist (narcissist), which might be accurate, but it doesn't make for very good reading. He shares how his dad exploited and controlled his mother, and even had her committed, briefly, to an asylum, which gave him, the dad, custodial license to relocate the children. Yet Bell-Villada is content to mention the episode in passing; it registers as little more than a bump in the road on his scholarly path to the University of Arizona (where the frat-bro atmosphere offended his sensitivities) and Berkeley (where he found kindred spirits). Reflecting on his experience as a "hidden" immigrant — his Caucasian father and Asian mother raised him in Latin America — Bell-Villada actually wrote this line: "In my teaching and writing I have endeavored to live each of my backgrounds and combine from them the best of both."[23] With hand on heart, no doubt.

When he describes his literary development and reading habits, he is content to drop names or recite glib pieties that manage to make a lot of great books seem hollow: "[Beckett's] novel *Molloy* had me transfixed; I gobbled it up in a couple of sittings […] chuckling silently at the extensive joke sequences surrounding Molloy's bicycle and his sucking stones. The day after finishing *Molloy,* I felt like a different person."[24] Here's what he makes of the magic realists:

> For months I steeped myself in Pablo Neruda's hallucinatory surrealist verse, with its Dalí- and Magritte-like images, and imbibed its existential angst and anger; or I savored the spare humor and understated wit of his "Elementary Odes" devoted to such mundane subjects as artichokes and onions, elephants[?] and house cats. I first dipped into Borges's short stories, feeling both baffled and amazed by the metaphysical conundrums of "The Babel

23 Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov,* 62.
24 Ibid., 29.

> Library" and "The Aleph." And I discovered and delved into Cortázar's recent novel *Hopscotch,* with its verbal experiments and its random, aleatory shape, something unprecedented in literature.[25]

It's difficult to do great books justice in a brief space, but here, each sentence hangs like a trophy and is just as empty. The praise he reserves for Nabokov feels likewise rehearsed and obligatory: *"Pale Fire* soon astonished me with its sheer artifice, its spectacle of a verbal juggler throwing about the weightless bricks of an invisible, floating architecture. Ditto for the hard, sharp, gem-like prose of his best short stories."[26] Some students recite the answer key, others learn to do the math, some never know the difference.

The style too is a tell, signaling the book's dearth of sense and substance. Bell-Villada writes fluid prose, but the syntax often rings with the grating orotundity of someone singing in the shower: "If Nabokov were a satirical brand of artist, in the vein, say, of Jonathan Swift or the countercultural cartoonist R. Crumb, [his derisive character portraits] could be seen as emanating from, and imbued with, the spirit of a bitter yet sensitive misanthrope, outraged at the morally and socially grotesque nature of his fellow citizens and human brethren."[27] He also starts and ends his book by assuming the role of a cringey emcee (*And in this corner…*), frequently addresses his "dear reader," refers to Rand repeatedly as "La Rand," a kind of fastidious pejorative, and at one point labels her a "Gorgon cum Queen Dido,"[28] possibly the clunkiest epithet ever coined. A close second is this one, on Nabokov, the "aristocrat cum artistic purist and high verbal artificer."[29]

25 Ibid., 30.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 149.
28 Ibid., 140.
29 Ibid., 150.

In *How Bad Writing Destroyed the World: Ayn Rand and the Literary Origins of the Financial Crisis* (2016), Adam Weiner squarely confronts the question that's latent in Bell-Villada's lambasting: Can books incite sociopolitical disasters? (His answer: yes.) Weiner, a comp-lit historian at Wellesley College, approaches the Rand/Nabokov twinship only through the mediating presence of Chernyshevski, which underscores the incompatibility of the two writers' ideals. Like Bell-Villada, Weiner denigrates Rand, for nearly identical reasons, but where Bell-Villada spits on most of Nabokov's early novels, Weiner considers only *The Gift* — and then, only the fourth chapter, the inset *Life of Chernyshevski* — and never doubts its merit. Instead, he plunges, enthusiastically (if digressively and unconvincingly), into a kind of fine-grained analytical sleuthing that is special to Nabokov studies.

THUMBNAIL SIDEBAR

Weiner devotes an entire wayward chapter of his book to Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev's (FGC) *Life of Chernyshevski,* described as a "ritualistic execution of [NC's] cultural influence,"[30] an effort to "distill [NC's] essence, his ideas, out of history and into literature."[31] He recounts the biography's peculiar publication history (initially elided and omitted from the serialized novel) and summarizes its thematic structure (its airing of the paradoxes and problems in NC's materialism), but then charges headlong into a sort of "perspectivist" goose chase (to use Michael Rodgers's term, discussed much later, in "The Asymptote of Objectivity"), excavating a crisis of internal authorship within the text.

30 Adam Weiner, *How Bad Writing Destroyed the World: Ayn Rand and the Literary Origins of the Financial Crisis* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 169.
31 Ibid., 185–86.

If what follows seems inordinately meta and complicated, consider this as evidence of how ill-fitting and digressive the chapter is within Weiner's book.

To compose his biography, the novel's protagonist, FGC, draws on the work of NC's real-world biographers (such as Yuri Steklov and NC's second-born son, Misha). He plunders also NC's own essays and diaries, plus the assorted works of the age's materialist thinkers and literary critics. But among the actual writers and biographers, FGC plants an imaginary biographer, a bogus figure named Strannolyubski (Strangelove), who has a lyrical, philosophical style and a flair for laconic mythological comparisons. This Strannolyubski shares his name with an actual peripheral actor in NC's life story: a mathematician who, for a time, takes in NC's mentally unstable firstborn son, Sasha.

Let all that soak in.

A smattering of textual details (including semantic cues in Sasha's poetry) conspires to persuade Weiner that Strannolyubski is none other than Sasha himself: the prodigal son adopts his foster father's name in order "to exact revenge upon"[32] his biological father's ghost via his (Strannolyubski's) critical biography. Weiner goes as far as to suggest that the actual magnanimous Strannolyubski, who takes Sasha in as a lodger, is Sasha's true biological father, given the well-documented adulterous ways of NC's wife, Olga. Granted, this reading would be consistent with *The Gift*'s larger themes in which fathers and sons are constantly disappointing each other; FGC's own dad was, like NC, a larger-than-life figure, a naturalist and adventurer who disappears without a trace, and FGC tries haltingly to eulogize him in a biography. And similar interpretive debates, all crises of narratorial identity, embroil at least three of Nabokov's English-language novels (*Pale Fire, Lolita,* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*). In fact, internal authorship problems are linked to a more pervasive and broadly observable phenomenon in Nabokov's

32 Ibid., 182.

fiction: portions of the narrative, initially portrayed as "real," turn out to be imagined or illusory (see the discussion of "Tyrants Destroyed" below, in "Of Rulers and Erasures").

Weiner chases even farther down this rabbit hole. Because Sasha's mental illness is described as a fear "of space, or more exactly, he was afraid of slipping into a different dimension,"[33] and because the novel contains another character, as "real" as FGC, named Alexander (a.k.a. Sasha) Chernyshevski, who is haunted by the ghost of his own prodigal son, Yasha (a suicide), Weiner concludes that NC's son Sasha has in fact slid[34] through temporal dimensions to take up spectral residence in the body of his namesake.

So Sasha is both Strannolyubski, by pseudonym, and the Alexander Chernyshevski of the novel's 1920s, by metempsychosis.

Even these transmigration-of-souls hypotheses are common in Nabokov studies. One recent academic paper argues that the principals in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* are the reincarnated spirits of the lovers in Nabokov's 1936 "Spring in Fialta." So Weiner's chapter on *The Gift* tracks with a prominent thread of Nabokov criticism, and it does connect too — a figurative, not a literal case — to Weiner's central premise: that the line between fiction and reality is permeable. In this chapter, Weiner tries to show how an actual historical personage (Sasha) crosses ontological borders or categories, posing as an imaginary biographer and transmigrating into a fictional character (Alexander). But even if Weiner's interpretation were convincing (which it isn't, quite), we still seem to have traversed a long steep tangent away from Weiner's main concerns: the literary incitements of the Bolshevik and Tea Party revolutions.

33 Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 297.

34 Not very far: Sasha dies in 1914, according to FGC's biography, and we meet Alexander Chernyshevski, already middle-aged, in the mid-1920s.

The subtitle of Weiner's book constitutes another, more egregious bait and switch, promising a sound thrashing out of Rand's destructive influence that never materializes. He dedicates a mere two chapters, first and last, to Rand. The dodge frees Weiner to travel back to nineteenth-century Russia, where his scholarly interests lie, and he revisits the first time that a bad novel engineered a sociopolitical disaster: when Chernyshevski's *What Is to Be Done?* (1863) (or, in Nabokov's translation, *What to Do?*) threw gasoline on the dumpster fire of Bolshevism. If it's not clear by now, the book, written from a cell in the Peter and Paul Fortress, is a political treatise disguised as fiction, a forerunner of the tractor operas of Soviet Socialist Realism. It dramatizes, in by all accounts clumsy prose — "all this pleiade of radical critics in fact wrote with their *feet*," per Nabokov[35] — the utopian fantasies of materialist philosophers, such as Charles Fourier and Ludwig Feuerbach. The characters live by a creed of rational egoism, enlightened self-interest, which for NC leads inevitably to communism (with its concomitants of atheism and sexual freedom), given that the good of the individual is logically bound to the good of the whole. The plot centers on a partner-swapping romance and the creation of a sewing cooperative, or phalanstery, where everyone enjoys open relationships and honest nonexploitative labor. Much is made of aluminum's life-quickening potential. And the novel spawned a minor character — a rigorous ascetic named Rakhmetov, given to spectacular acts of renunciation (including his aristocratic roots) and to manly feats of strength (hauling barges, for example) — who became a legend among and model for actual Russian revolutionaries.

Most notably, in 1902, a young V.I. Ulyanov fell under the novel's spell and reinvented himself in Rakhmetov's image, donning the nom de guerre of Lenin. As Weiner describes it, "Lenin denied himself physical comforts, tamed and trained his flesh, tried to make himself hard and to harden himself to the sufferings of others. He did not smoke, hardly drank, and lifted

35 Nabokov, *The Gift*, 260.

weights."[36] The connection to Rakhmetov remains vague until Weiner divulges that, once Lenin became Supreme Ruler, he and his wife chose "to live in an austere room […], sleeping on bunks, washing in the morning with cold water, and calling one another 'comrade.'"[37]

Rakhmetov's influence lingers even today, when souvenir coffee mugs at the Moscow airport depict a bare-chested Putin astride a ruddy bear wending through a wintry Russian forest. One person's camp is another's iconography.

Weiner eventually notes the ways, big and small, in which this heritage shapes Rand's work. NC's rational egoism becomes Rand's rational selfishness; his atheist materialism is hers entirely; his dreams of perpetual motion (on top of everything else, he was an ambitious if frustrated tinker) become her vision of limitless energy (in John Galt's miracle motor); his enlightened partner-swapping, without rancor or jealousy, finds its echo in Rand's principled mate-changing. Weiner notes too — as did Bell-Villada and Johnson before him — how the Rocky Mountain redoubt of Galt's Gulch has some specific affinities with NC's utopian phalanstery: fetishizing new metals, challenging sexual mores, aggregating didactic speeches, presaging triumphant futures.

But the vast majority of Weiner's book concerns the literary rivalry between NC and his contemporary Dostoevsky. His story begins, in fact, with the young Dostoevsky's dabbling in revolutionary nihilism, which culminates in his mock execution and Siberian exile. If, like me, you've never heard that *Notes from Underground* is a direct rejoinder to *What to Do?,* and that *What to Do?* is itself a direct rejoinder to Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons,* Weiner's book can feel like a revelation: the whole heyday of the Russian novel snaps into sharp focus as you come to see how these works are entwined and even mired in their social context, a generation of writers vying for the nation's soul, or at least its political future. But the connection between Dosto-

36 Weiner, *How Bad Writing Destroyed the World,* 158.
37 Ibid.

evsky and NC was established long ago — see, for example, Jane Barstow's essay in *College Literature* (1978)[38]; the discovery has even surfaced on Wikipedia (see the page on NC's *What Is to Be Done?*).[39] Still, Weiner rehashes all of this lucidly, and he labors to sketch the historical backdrop, describing in detail the terrorist antics of the revolutionaries: they conspired in annular (or cellular) networks and encouraged suicidal devotion, enshrined in a figure called a "mortus." An entire chapter, "Rigor Mortus, or Waiting for Rakhmetov," recounts at length the exploits of one Sergei Nechaev, an intermediary figure between NC and Lenin, mainly because his career culminates in the farcical murder of a co-conspirator named Ivanov,[40] and this clumsy brutality finds its way into the pages of Dostoevsky's *The Devils*.

Weiner's central premise — that fiction and reality cross-pollinate — is something most readers would readily grant, but Weiner pushes the conceit to such literal extremes that it seems sensationalistic. In the example above, a specific historical event migrates into Dostoevsky's fiction, or, in Weiner's summation, "*The Devils* attempts to neutralize Cherynshevsky's novel and the real-life Rakhmetovs it had spawned [….] The idea is to contain the revolutionary chaos, by recapturing the real-life Rakhmetovs […] and putting them back into literature, which is where they came from in the first place."[41] Weiner is especially keen to show the opposite passage — when fictional characters cross over into reality — and this forms the basis for his claim that Bad Writing Destroyed the World, *twice:* first, Rakhmetov becomes Lenin, then Rand's John Galt finds his own way through the looking glass of fiction. As Weiner tells it, Rand is

38 Jane Barstow, "Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* versus Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?*," *College Literature* 5, no. 1 (1978): 24–33.

39 *Wikipedia,* s.v. "What Is To Be Done? (novel)," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What_Is_to_Be_Done%3F_(novel).

40 The victim was lured to a pitch-black lakeside cave on the pretext of recovering a (nonexistent) buried printing press; the ensuing struggle, total chaos, lasted so long that a hole prebored in the frozen lake (for the body's disposal) had in the interval refrozen. All of this straight out of *Fargo.*

41 Weiner, *How Bad Writing Destroyed the World,* 143.

almost single-handedly responsible for precipitating the 2008 economic collapse, via the intermediary of her protégé and inner-circle confidante Alan Greenspan. According to Weiner, Rand had "programm[ed]" Greenspan and, in 1967, "literally, walk[ed] him into the highest circles of government"[42] to unleash the hounds of predatory capitalism.[43] The bill for the Greenspan era of free-market profiteering came due in 2008, when the Dow–Jones shed half its value, the banking industry collapsed, and nearly a million people lost their homes to foreclosure. Weiner reports how Greenspan himself, testifying before Congress, had a come-to-Jesus moment when he copped to the flaws in his and Rand's economic theories.

If even this gripe inspires déjà vu, that's because the pop-philosopher Slavoj Žižek made the same argument, more succinctly, in a 2013 op-ed for *The Guardian*.[44]

THUMBNAIL SIDEBAR

By far the weirdest of Rand's admirers is Žižek, he of *Welcome to the Desert of the Real,* bane of "Gangnam Style," foil of Jordan Peterson. Though he would blame Rand belatedly for the 2008 economic collapse, a decade earlier, in "The Actuality of Ayn Rand" (2002), he makes the case that only "a thin, almost imperceptible line […] separates Rand's ideological and literary trash from the ultimate feminist insight."[45] Unlike most of Rand's critics, Žižek understands how her characters embody positions along an ideological or philosophical

42 Ibid., 2.

43 Excepting a short interval when Jimmy Carter kicked him to the curb, Greenspan's reign spanned four decades, ending with his retirement from the Federal Reserve Bank in 2006.

44 Slavoj Žižek, "Who Is Responsible for the US Shutdown? The Same Idiots Responsible for the 2008 Meltdown," *The Guardian,* October 11, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/11/who-responsible-us-shutdown-2008-meltdown-slavoj-zizek.

45 Slavoj Žižek. "The Actuality of Ayn Rand," *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 3, no. 2 (2002): 225.

spectrum — of *The Fountainhead,* he says, "Its four main male characters constitute a kind of Greimasian semiotic square,"[46] which maps opposing concepts. For Žižek, "The true conflict in the universe of Rand's two novels is […] not between the prime movers and the crowd of second handers," but "within the prime movers themselves."[47] Internal conflicts plague many of Rand's central characters, but her champions manage to vanquish all uncertainty and reach a nirvana beyond the social contract; Roark and Galt are "being[s] of pure drive,"[48] "subject[s] beyond subjectivization,"[49] totally free agents indifferent to the existence of Others. Žižek juxtaposes the realm of *drive* with the realm of *desire,* a sexual marketplace in which all wants are sanctioned by a third party of sorts (social conventions and norms, such as property ownership), which contaminates and subordinates the human dyad (even threatening castration). These terms of desire are unacceptable to Rand's ethical purists, an incursion on and infringement of their autonomy. Dominique Francon, of *The Fountainhead,* performs elaborate acts of self-sabotage and practically chews off her own limbs in order to escape the (triangular) dialectic of desire, per Žižek, but finally she does escape, and she couples with Howard Roark, in a quasi-lesbian arrangement, in the plane of pure drive.[50]

Žižek can only make this argument by abstraction, turning a blind eye to the contradictory details in Rand's novels, which he ends up endorsing tacitly. He allows that "love for others" is compatible with heroic selfishness because it evidences one's "capacity to realize through [one's] relationship

46 Ibid., 217.
47 Ibid., 221.
48 Ibid., 217.
49 Ibid., 222.
50 To explain what makes Rand's "ultimate […] insight" intrinsically, and inadvertently, "feminist," Žižek writes, "What Rand was not aware of was that the upright, uncompromising masculine figures with a will of steel with whom she was so fascinated, are effectively figures of the feminine subject liberated from the deadlocks of hysteria" (Žižek, "The Actuality of Ayn Rand," 225).

with others [one's] own innermost drives."[51] It's not clear to me how this sort of erotic self-actualization could ever be mutual without constituting a paradox, one that precisely compromises the autonomy of either partner, both of whom are self-assertive and submissive to the other's prerogative at the same time. In any case, the name for this sort of coupling would no longer be *love*.

But the bigger problem is that, in Rand's novels, those beings of pure drive never maintain a posture of perfect indifference to the social construct. In *actuality,* none of them can leave the marketplace alone. In the realm of pure drive that Žižek imagines, a total reveling in self-plenitude and power, a perfect solipsism, there would be no need for words, no need for speech, much less anger for those "second handers" and moochers who presume to tax the achievements of the elect. Intelligibility, reasoning itself, is a concession to the social contract. If John Galt were a being of pure drive, a hero of selfishness, he wouldn't lapse into a scathing indictment of the political order, he wouldn't broadcast his convictions to the masses. He would be as indifferent to the world, physical and social, as it is to him; he would have the consciousness of an insect, beyond rage or recognizable joy or sorrow (some mammals — elephants, for example — appear capable of grief). The *real* hero of selfishness would be silent, his (or its) truth incommunicable. Or this hero might resort to a veiled language, in which meaning is eclipsed, shielded behind the false front of words. Pure drive is incompatible with instrumental reason (in which desires are always mediated by constructs beyond the self).

Put it this way: to the extent that Rand wants to be a philosopher, she can't be an ideologue. The being of pure drive would have to recognize that the whole apparatus of human civilization is a floating circus or phantasmagorium, a fantastical contrivance of cheap plastics, precious metals, and arbitrary values, a vast and intricate lie (which it is) stacked atop

51 Ibid., 216.

> a fundament of honest corpses. Between the realm of pure drive and this specious reality, there is an irreconcilable rift or severance. No social/political action can follow from the kind of philosophical nihilism that Rand gestures toward. The relationship between Rand's heroic agents and the social world is one of non sequitur. But Rand, mired in contradiction, depicts her sociopathic heroes as deeply, indissolubly, and even emotionally vested in mundane economic relations. The book is all too-loud insistence and no sense.
>
> Arguably, a proper Objectivist would make no value judgments whatsoever, about anything, would merely accord with the moral silence, the Nietzschean silence, of the universe.

Retreating from these high-minded concerns, Bell-Villada and Weiner are content to revisit some of the more common complaints about Rand, knocking her Objectivist credibility from the ground level, as it were, rehashing lurid anecdotes. She had a miserable falling out — hysterics, shrieking, a curse upon the penis — with her one-time protégé Nathaniel Branden. Their romance had been adulterous on both sides, though all parties knew about and consented to the arrangement, just like Dagny's amicable-all-around swapping of Hank Rearden for John Galt, and just like Chernyshevski's principled communist polyamory. But when Branden broke things off to take up with a younger, hotter woman, Rand flipped out, succumbing to simple irrational rage and despair. (In "The Actuality," Žižek tells a different version of this story: he sees Rand as behaving in a principled fashion, embarking on the affair to cure her writer's block and returning Branden to his wife as soon as the remedy took effect.[52]) Likewise, everyone notes Rand's early fascination with a child rapist and murderer, William Edward Hickman, whose crime involved mutilating the girl's corpse, stuffing it with towels, and driving it around to fool the grieving parents and extort ransom. Squinting very hard, Rand could block out

52 Žižek, "The Actuality of Ayn Rand," 224.

Hickman's crime and admire his indomitable spirit, his heroic disregard for both laws and social conventions (including the sanctity of human life). He provided the model for a character in an unfinished Rand novella. Weiner claims that residue from Hickman's courtroom declaration (his refusal to acknowledge the court's legitimacy) lingers in Rand's big books, transmuted into Howard Roark's courtroom speech in *The Fountainhead,* and Hank Rearden's in *Atlas Shrugged.*

THUMBNAIL SIDEBAR

Objectivists just roll their eyes when they hear the Hickman stuff. They have some cause to vindicate Rand from the charges that she "admired" a butcher. Rand is a determined contrarian, averse to conventional mores (the Nietzschean in Rand). Her Hickman fascination, they might posit, is not so different from, say, Nabokov's with the Humbert of *Lolita* (or Humbert's real-world counterpart, Frank La Salle). In fact, the cases are quite different. Rand looked at a murderer and eviscerationist and discerned the silhouette of a hero. Nabokov looked at a child rapist and saw a pathetic manipulative predator — "with a cesspoolful of rotting monsters behind his slow boyish smile"[53] — with perhaps some modicum or doit of conscience, and, thus, some meager claim to redemption. To closely paraphrase Nabokov's judgment, Humbert is paroled from a tormenting hell just once each year and permitted to stroll, at dusk, through a green lane in paradise.

In online forums, what practicing Objectivists actually posit are elaborate rationalizations for this particular inversion of values (see the exchange on *Objectivism Online,* dated May 20, 2006[54]). Some emphasize Rand's marginal

53 Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita,* ed. Alfred Appel Jr. (New York: Vintage, 1991), 44.

54 "Rand's Views on Murderer William Hickman," *Objectivism Online Forum,* May 20, 2006, https://forum.objectivismonline.com/index.php?/topic/16917-rands-views-on-murderer-william-hickman/.

> ambivalence about the "degenerate" (her word) Hickman; others wax weirdly empathic and imagine the psychological stimuli driving Rand's creative process. One cites Galt's (much later) proscription against physical violence, but fails to ponder the contradiction. The thought never occurs that the victim might have been a young Dagny Taggart, or worse, a young Alissa Rosenbaum, rather than the twelve-year-old stranger Marion Parker. Instead, the loudest voices are keen to endorse the basic error of Rand's vision, the pretense that the heroic can be leached and distilled from the monstrous or the mundane, that human multifacetedness, the flux of identity, is a glitch and not a feature. In literary terms, Rand would have us believe that real people should aspire to be flat characters, not live in the Forsterian round. She seems, in this delusion, to conflate two different denotations for integrity: a devotion to *moral principles* isn't necessarily the same thing as an undifferentiated wholeness. The latter appears incompatible with being human.

For all their good intentions and support for charitable works, both Bell-Villada and Weiner gloat a bit over Rand's sad end, turning it into a morality play worthy of Rand's own pen. After reviewers panned *Atlas Shrugged,* she went on strike, like her heroes, and stopped writing fiction (the publishing industry, remarkably, did not collapse), though she continued to write nonfiction and give lectures and offer politico-economic counsel. Bell-Villada mentions her hypocritical reliance on Medicare benefits to weather the treatment costs for her lung cancer, and he imagines her alone, abandoned and reviled in her final years, sort of like the Scrooge as conjured by the Ghost of Christmas Future. Weiner also considers her fatal lung cancer (she died of complications, namely, heart failure), but portrays Rand as a victim of a deceptive 1929 marketing campaign. Designed to popularize smoking among women, through an Easter Parade PR spectacle, the campaign branded cigarettes "torches

of freedom."[55] Rand would go on to idealize smoking in *Atlas Shrugged,* as if it had no health consequences; her heroes manufacture their own brand, marked with a dollar sign, no less, and divine something mythic or Promethean in the habit (taming and wielding fire, as it were). Weiner suggests that Rand's Objectivism is the same kind of fantasy, an affront to reality, and just as toxic.

If Bell-Villada and Weiner are eager to point out the hypocrisies in Rand's life, they treat her work itself more scantily. In his single short chapter on *Atlas Shrugged,* Weiner careens all across the narrative terrain. One inspired riff concerns the notion of obscenity bandied in the novel, and Weiner echoes, with more precision, the verdict available on *goodreads:* the real "obscenity […] in a Rand novel," he writes, "is the reduction of people to robots through a hollowing out of their moral core."[56] By way of illustration, he cites passages that portray Rand's heroes and heroine as machines: see John Galt, the mysterious leader of the Objectivist revolution, whose body possesses, to Dagny's approving gaze, "the hardness, the gaunt tensile strength, the clean precision of a foundry casting." He appears to have been "poured out of metal, but some dimmed, soft-lustered metal, like an aluminum-copper alloy."[57] Dagny herself has android tendencies, per Weiner, as do most of Rand's capitalist overlords. Bell-Villada chips in, with some help from a Williams College colleague, that Rand's sci-fi gadgets are at odds with the laws of physics[58] (and thus "fake" reality), but neither scholar is prepared to withstand the bare-bulb, chapter-and-verse interrogation at the hands of Rand's most devoted supporters.

55 Weiner, *How Bad Writing Destroyed the World,* 217.
56 Ibid., 213.
57 Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Signet, 1996), 643.
58 Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov,* 25.

Vegma(nia) and the Gonorrheal Megaphone

Blaming Rand for Greenspan's economic malpractice is a little like blaming Trump for becoming president, and, in fact, blaming Rand for inaction on climate change or the Tea Party platform seems unjust. When Skye Cleary describes Rand as "a prime example — and warning — of fiction's influential power," she reminds us that Rand's novels remain bestsellers, wholly eclipsing her nonfiction tracts, such as *The Virtue of Selfishness.*[1] Even so, Rand, her novels, their toxic philosophy, would amount to nothing if readers were wise enough to shrug off her advances. Bad Writing doesn't destroy the world; Bad Reading, in theory, might.

Rand's followers would dispute the premise of Weiner's historical narrative. In fact, Rand's supporters tend to reject every criticism of the writer, evidently incapable of giving ground or conceding miscues on her behalf. They are eerily similar to the Trump apologists who once populated the cable news networks' panel discussions (mostly truculent, anvil-headed whiteish men or flint-eyed, smirking, blonde women with their boss's fallen-cake faces or world-weary and woebegone Rick Santorum or

1 Skye Cleary, "Philosophy Shrugged: Ignoring Ayn Rand Won't Make Her Go Away," *Aeon,* June 22, 2018, https://aeon.co/ideas/philosophy-shrugged-ignoring-ayn-rand-wont-make-her-go-away.

poor lost Paris Dennard). But to locate Rand's supporters, with their autodidact ethos, pathological know-it-all-ism, and typically low overheads, you have to splash around in online environments, such as the customer reviews of books on Amazon, where I found Vegma, a proud vegan and self-made Rand scholar who might also be Madelen, a Norwegian snow enthusiast with a Hollywood fetish, a decent command of written English, a likely subscription to *The Economist,* and a barely there Instagram presence. Of Vegma's eight posted Amazon reviews, five or six concern books by, about, or adjacent to Rand (one of the outliers lauds a Beatles biography). Both Weiner and Bell-Villada get panned at length, and the verbal drubbing reveals a lot about the mentality of Rand loyalists (call it the perils of confirmation bias).

Vegma's reviews show that she understands the basic principles of argument.[2] She doesn't peddle conspiracy theories or go in for ad hominem attacks; instead, she proceeds empirically, gathering relevant data and countering with evidence of her own. Regarding Weiner's account of the 2008 economic collapse, she balks and instead blames the mortgage crisis on government intervention in the markets, particularly the home-ownership initiatives of the Clinton and Bush eras, plus the Fed's inversion of the "yield curve" for interest rates. Vegma might have a point, but when arguing at this scale, it's impossible to say for certain, and this is her downfall, a Randian inheritance: she argues with the inflexible certitude of the mind-blind. Not all of her complaints land: she disputes, for example, Weiner's

2 All quotes from Vegma are taken from two of the eight Amazon reviews posted by this username. The reviews are identified, respectively, by subject in the main text. See Vegma, "Gross Misrepresentation of Ayn Rand," review of Weiner, *How Bad Writing Destroyed the World,* Amazon: Customer Reviews, March 12, 2017, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/RGSI9O6CPJNHQ/ref=cm_cr_arp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=1501313118; and Vegma, "Worse Than Expected about Rand," review of Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov,* Amazon: Customer Reviews, July 20, 2014, https://www.amazon.com/Nabokov-Rand-Libertarian-Mind-Russian-American/dp/1443850403/ref=sr_1_5?dchild=1&keywords=bell+villada&qid=1606753993&s=books&sr=1-5#customerReviews.

definition of rational egoism, the core of Rand's philosophy. For Weiner, "Rational egoism insists that people will always seek out their selfish interest"; Vegma counters, claiming that Weiner confuses an "ethical theory" with a "psychological" theory, offering her own definition a few lines later: "Rational egoists are people who do their best to achieve happiness through productive work." Weiner's definition sounds both more accurate and less psychological than Vegma's rose-colored paraphrase.

But there's a strange tone-deafness in Vegma's criticisms, which could stem in part from her status as a nonnative speaker of English, or it could reflect the kind of Vulcan tone-deafness of Objectivism itself, its (doomed) effort to conflate reason and emotion. Vegma writes (typos and all):

> On page 208, Wiener claims that Rand's word for workers are "sloppy bums." Not so. It is true that Rand once uses the expression "sloppy bums" in Atlas Shrugged, but it is not about workers. Here is the quote: "[…] this sort of spirit, courage and love for truth — as against the sloppy bum who goes around proudly assuring you that he has almost reached the perfection of a lunatic, because he's an artist who hasn't the faintest idea what his work is or means, he's not restrained by such crude concepts as 'being' or 'meaning,' he's the vehicle of higher mysteries, he doesn't know how he created his work or why, it just came out of him spontaneously, like vomit from a drunkard, he did not think, he wouldn't stoop to thinking, he just felt it, all he has to do is feel — he feels, the flabby, loose-mouthed, shifty-eyed, drooling, shivering, uncongealed bastard!" "Sloppy bums" are not workers, "sloppy bums" is a description of a certain kind of artists.

Vegma's claim that the phrase occurs just once in the 1,069-page novel — which I can't affirm or deny — has an admirable chutzpah, implying total knowledge of the text. But her commentary reproduces the creepy example of Rand's characters. The passage Vegma cites is spoken by Richard Halley, the mysterious composer of classical concerti whom Dagny Taggart meets face-

to-face in Galt's Gulch. In the novel, Halley's physical person is not described during the exchange, but his speech is practically spittle-soaked, fuming, down to its terminal exclamation point or bang.[3] You have to imagine Halley with the wild eyes and quaking gesticulation of the lucidly insane. Yet Dagny, per the novel, is perfectly oblivious of his rage and speaks not a word in reply. The next paragraph merely records her placid recognition of the essential truth in Halley's position, that business is art and that art has "the stern discipline of business"[4] (take that, Andy Warhol). It's all very weird.

The sequence reminds me of Sean Hannity's anchor-desk cordiality following one of Michelle Malkin's seething tirades.

Vegma has the same sort of zero-affect reaction to Halley's speech; she splits hairs about the definition's denotative target, willfully blind to the connotative context. (You have to read in this tone-deaf way if you wish to endure Rand.) A more chilling example arrives when Vegma fillets Bell-Villada on Rand's definition of "parasites." Note the scrupulous documentation in the exchange:

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3 Galt's speech is likewise unhinged, and sometimes inadvertently funny:

> You, who dare to regard us as the moral inferiors of any mystic who claims supernatural visions — you, who scramble like vultures for plundered pennies, yet honor a fortune-teller above a fortune-maker — you, who scorn a businessman as ignoble, but esteem any posturing artist as exalted — the root of your standards is that mystic miasma which comes from primordial swamps, that cult of death, which pronounces a businessman immoral by reason of the fact that he keeps you alive. You, who claim that you long to rise above the crude concerns of the body, above the drudgery of serving mere physical needs — who is enslaved by physical needs: the Hindu who labors from sunrise to sunset at the shafts of a hand plow for a bowl of rice, or the American who is driving a tractor? Who is the conqueror of physical reality: the man who sleeps on a bed of nails or the man who sleeps on an inner-spring mattress? [HA!] Which is the monument to the triumph of the human spirit over matter: the germ-eaten hovels on the shoreline of the Ganges or the Atlantic skyline of New York? (Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* [New York: Signet, 1996], 963)

Line by line, sentence by sentence, the passage is impeccable nonsense, but it's the raging tone that controverts Rand's pretensions to pure selfishness (solipsism) and absolute reason.

4 Rand, *Atlas Shrugged,* 719.

> Bell-Villada quotes a Rand-supporter: "Parasites who persistently avoid either purpose or reason perish as they should" — and Bell-Villada thinks that "parasites" means "the poor, the orphaned, the unemployed, the maimed, the sick" (p. 30–31). This is really strange. Bell-Villada really says that Rand's view is that the poor and the sick should die (Bell-Villada: "'Perish' does mean 'die,'" p. 32) There is absolutely no basis for inferring that by "parasite," Rand means "the poor and the sick."

Vegma follows with three quotes (lacking page references) from the novel that correct Bell-Villada's error. Dagny Taggart, John Galt, and another character named Eugene Lawson all associate parasitism with white-collar workers (of labs, offices, or universities), as opposed to "real" factory workers and their "callused hands."[5] Thus vindicated, Vegma concludes, "To have read this, as Bell-Villada has, and to claim that Rand by 'parasite' means 'the poor and the sick' is really strange and has absolutely no basis in fact." Notwithstanding the meticulous collation of counterexamples, Vegma never blinks at the propriety of the death sentence itself.

The absence of page numbers from *Atlas Shrugged* suggests Vegma is working from an online copy, perhaps a (searchable) Kindle file — which would also account for the pervasive tone-deafness, a symptom of online reading, in her reviews. Vegma does, however, highlight some of the shortcomings of Bell-Villada's takedown. She quarrels admirably with him over the meaning quotient in the abstract noun *society;* where Bell-Villada disputes Margaret Thatcher's famous assertion that "Society doesn't exist," Vegma delivers a convoluted rebuttal, which nevertheless hits the mark. (The simple rebuttal is that the word lacks an intelligible, concrete referent.) More pointedly, Vegma catches out Bell-Villada in a moment of inaccurate hyperbole. Bell-Villada writes of Rand's heroes, "They're inevitably tall, square-jawed, handsome (of course), stouthearted,

5 Rand, quoted in Vegma, "Worse Than Expected."

fiercely independent, Anglo-Saxon, and alone. Men of absolute genius, they are unfailingly right about *everything.*"[6] And Vegma coolly counters: "Not true. Francisco d'Anconia was not Anglo-saxon [*sic*], and Roark, Dagny and Rearden were wrong on important issues. And non-hero Keating was also handsome; he even worked as a model in his student days." But Vegma's project of point-by-point rebuttal results in a kind of undeliberate randomness in her reviews, abrupt swings between major and minor grievances (another symptom of online literacy).[7] In the case of Weiner's *How Bad Writing Destroyed the World,* her method blinds her to the book's global and more glaring flaw.

Weiner's premise is that Chernyshevski's and Rand's novels incited political revolutions, leftward and rightward, respectively. But the macro problem with Weiner's argument is that he never considers how or why these two mediocre writers succeeded where better writers — such as, say, Dostoevsky or Nabokov — failed. If anything, Weiner's book inadvertently suggests that fiction can't change the world, for better or worse; it can only be co-opted, or not, by prevailing social movements, elevated, or not, by their "visionary" leaders. Another possibil-

6 Gene Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov, Ayn Rand and the Libertarian Mind: What the Russian-American Odd Pair Can Tell Us about Some Values, Myths and Manias Widely Held Most Dear* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 64.

7 Ironically, in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,* Nabokov portrays this kind of grand, perspectiveless equalization as the "absolute solution" to existence. Sebastian himself floats the idea in his last deathbed novel, with an air of generosity and triumphant insight:

> And as the meaning of all things shone through their shapes, many ideas and events which had seemed of the utmost importance dwindled not to insignificance, for nothing could be insignificant now, but to the same size which other ideas and events, once denied any importance, now attained." [Here, Sebastian's brother's voice takes over, seamlessly, a narrational shell game.] Thus, such shining giants of our brain as science, art or religion fell out of the familiar scheme of their classification, and joining hands, were mixed and joyfully levelled. Thus, a cherry stone and its tiny shadow which lay on the painted wood of a tired bench, or a bit of torn paper, or any other such trifle out of millions and millions of trifles grew to a wonderful size. (Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* [New York: New Directions, 2008], 179)

ity is that, per Weiner's argument, only certain mediocre books have this motive power: fiction as manifesto, literary propaganda, with rewards for the heroes and damnation for the villains, of which some additional features can be observed.[8] The book must be plainspoken, rigorously artless, and, thus, conducive to inattentive reading: it must be possible to skip passages and skim pages, nod off midchapter and continue leafing on autopilot, without jeopardizing the ideological gist. The book, in short, must suit the tastes of semiliterate readers. Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* checks most of these boxes. Her work is an endurance challenge, and demands a strong stomach for vituperation and scapegoating, but word for word, line for line, excepting the occasional long sentence or John Galt's epic tongue-lashing (which spans fifty-five uninterrupted pages of small dense type in the Signet edition), her prose is readily comprehensible, digestible as skim milk or low-dose Kool-Aid.[9]

The book's girth alone repels close scrutiny, but one small swath — a seventeen-page road trip across the upper Midwest — can suffice to illuminate the zany machinations of *Atlas Shrugged,* particularly for those uninitiated readers who want to know what all the fuss is about. Let this illustrate in micro-

8 Another problem with Weiner's book is that neither revolution "destroyed the world," just unleashed varying amounts of havoc, misfortune, and death. And Weiner's hypothesis also seems to imply a corollary: if Bad Writing twice "destroyed the world," might Good Writing, if not "save" us, at least spare us some measure of havoc and misfortune?

9 Page by page, the book's Flesch–Kincaid readability score hovers around the middle-school level. The representative Wisconsin interlude (roughly 9,000 words), discussed just below, yields a Reading Ease score of 87.3, with a correlated Grade Level score of 2.5 (accessible perhaps to a third-grade whiz kid?), as calculated by Microsoft Word's built-in genie. By contrast, "Tyrants Destroyed," one of Nabokov's lighter reads (also roughly 9,000 words), scores 45.1 on the Reading Ease scale and 15.2 on the Grade Level chart (fit for college juniors). This isn't to say that difficulty is always preferable to simplicity, or that the Flesch–Kincaid statistical calculations can adequately capture textual depths, only that a capacity to handle difficult prose would allow readers to distinguish wisdom from mere intelligibility. It's naïve or ludicrously shortsighted to believe that Rand has all the answers if you have a limited basis for comparison.

cosm the relative proportions of skill and ineptitude in Rand's novel. In a reasonable world, the quoted passages from the novel would serve as a self-evident refutation.

* * *

The interlude begins *in medias res,* with the recently coupled Dagny and Hank cruising through the central Wisconsin countryside. The contrast between asphalt and greenery prompts a metaphor (one of Rand's favorite old-school devices): of a bridge spanning an organic sea. Dagny notes, "The sea rolled softly, in sprays of yellow and orange, with a few red jets shooting up on the hillsides, with pools of remnant green in the hollows, under a pure blue sky."[10] (Later still, as a kind of mnemonic tag to restore temporal continuity after a prolonged flashback, "the yellow leaves [glitter] like a sea of gold coins."[11]) Dagny admits to herself here that "the countryside was beautiful."[12] But the next few paragraphs clarify that Dagny's affection is misplaced; the setting becomes an occasion for ideological commentary as Hank bemoans the absence of billboards on the roadside, craving some sign of human activity. And Dagny agrees, claiming, of those who prefer unspoiled nature, "They're the people I hate." Even the road's pristine surface condition turns ominous: "The long strip of concrete was bleached to the powdery gray of bones left on a desert [metaphor number 2], as if sun and snows had eaten away the traces of tires, oil, and carbon, the lustrous polish of motion."[13]

Another word for this vehicular residue is *pollution.*

The procedure here, in which cognitive error is followed by explicit correction, is typical of the book's method; in fact, this one — the cycle from the natural world's seductive beauty to the dire recognition of civilization's absence — repeats exactly, the

10 Rand, *Atlas Shrugged,* 261–62.
11 Ibid., 264.
12 Ibid., 262.
13 Ibid.

first time arriving in a flashback account of the couple's tour through equally distressed Michigan. There, Hank seconds Dagny's appreciation of the landscape's beauty: "I'm beginning to like [the wilderness]," he says, but the mood ebbs when he and Dagny spot, among the weeds, the ruins of an old gas station.[14] The pattern, from error to correction, and its meticulous redundancy, is part of Rand's debt to Chernyshevski, who also adopted the manner of a pedant and bore for proselytic purposes, following up his characters' missteps with rationalizing commentary. As Weiner puts it, "Whenever [a character] appears to do something irrational or, worse, philanthropical, he panics and rushes to find some way to square his action with rational egoism."[15] Elsewhere, Weiner equates this stratagem with the doublethink from George Orwell's *1984*.[16]

Eventually, Dagny recalls that the Twentieth Century Motor Company[17] once had a factory in these parts, and the two, determined to mix pleasure with business, resolve to find it, a decision that leads them to the place where the pavement ends, a town so dilapidated and derelict as to be preindustrial: the inhabitants, the factory's former employees too shiftless to seek better

14 Ibid., 264.

15 Adam Weiner, *How Bad Writing Destroyed the World: Ayn Rand and the Literary Origins of the Financial Crisis* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 46–47.

16 Ibid., 193.

17 In 1974, Geraldine "Liz" Carmichael, a transgender woman, Rand fan, and gifted con artist, founded the Twentieth Century Motor *Car* Corporation: the company's brainchild, a three-wheeled, space-age *Jetsons*-mobile called the Dale, was featured in the 1975 Los Angeles Auto Show. The car never reached functionality, but still managed to appear as a game-show prize on *The Price Is Right* (under an alias, the Revelle), also in 1975. Later that year, Liz was arrested for embezzlement and fraud, but she skipped bail and remained at large until 1989, when an *Unsolved Mysteries* episode helped to bring her in. She had settled in Dale, Texas. True, all-American story, courtesy of Wikipedia and the stalwart reporting of Jason Torchinsky, writing for *Jalopnik*. See Jason Torchinsky, "Murder, Transsexuals, and *The Price Is Right*: The Story of the Dale Car Hoax," *Jalopnik,* April 1, 2013, https://jalopnik.com/murder-transsexuals-and-theprice-is-right-the-story-464820740.

fortunes elsewhere, have neither electricity nor running water, nor even a need for currency (they've regressed to a barter system). Rand's portraits of these townsfolk are, typically, merciless. Dagny and Hank approach a house, seeking directions to the factory: "An old woman came shuffling out at the sound of the motor. She was bent and swollen, barefooted, dressed in a garment of flour sacking. She looked at the car without astonishment, without curiosity; it was the blank stare of a being who had lost the capacity to feel anything but exhaustion."[18] And this woman's reaction to the car is quite different from the reactions of the likewise downtrodden Michiganders, who viewed the car not as "a rare sight, but as if the glittering black shape were an impossible vision from another world."[19]

The woman's description is transparently prejudicial and inadvertently funny, overwrought not in the stylistic but in an imaginative sense: she wears a flour sack for a dress. When her husband shows up, toting well water in salvaged oil cans (no kidding), he gets the same treatment. Hank offers him ten dollars in exchange for directions to the factory, but the man only "stared at the money with sullen indifference[….] If one were ever to see a man devoid of greed […] there he was."[20] This man's problem and main failing, per Rand, is that he lacks greed. At the close of the Starnesville interlude, Hank and Dagny get a glimpse of another man, "moving slowly, contorted by the ugliness of a physical effort beyond the proper use of a human body: he was pushing a plow by hand,"[21] and another woman, in the town of Rome, "moving painfully on her knees, scrubbing the steps of a house."[22] But perhaps we reach the nadir of Rand's human portraiture in her parting description of the flour-sack woman. As Hank and Dagny return to their car, determined to "find [their] own way" to the factory, some local urchins heave a rock at their windshield, and "a sunburst of cracks" spreads across the shat-

18 Rand, *Atlas Shrugged,* 265.
19 Ibid., 263.
20 Ibid., 266.
21 Ibid., 268.
22 Ibid., 276.

terproof glass.[23] The woman's reaction is the utter absence of a reaction, maybe the lowest insult Rand could imagine: "She had stood there silently, watching, without interest or purpose, like a chemical compound on a photographic plate, absorbing visual shapes because they were there to be absorbed, but unable ever to form any estimate of the objects of her vision."[24] The woman is not just devoid of ambition, but incapable of basic sentience.[25]

Rand's final comment on this particular woman is limited to mere mortification, when Dagny learns the woman's age is close to her own: "God [?!], how did they ever come to such a state?" she asks.[26] But later we learn the ultimate penalty awaiting the flour-sack woman in Rand's moral ledger. When Dagny et alii arrive, armed, to free John Galt from capture and torture at the hands of Jim Taggart and the forces of collectivist evil,[27] a locked door and a guard stand between Dagny and her goal. Instead of trying to disarm Dagny, the guard just pleads a wheedling case about following orders and not being able to decide what to do for himself. Dagny grants him a generous, ellipsis-laden three count; then, "calmly and impersonally, she, who would have hesitated to fire at an animal, pulled the trigger and fired straight at the heart of a man who wanted to exist without the responsibility of consciousness."[28] This is Rand's heroism.

Dagny's calm impersonality notwithstanding, Rand writes with a maliciousness — a rage, or even a furious sanctimony — that is perfectly antithetical to the self-satisfied objec-

23 Ibid., 267.

24 Ibid.

25 If you take pleasure in this kind of debasing one-dimensional portraiture, it's likely you also own a MAGA hat. Ironically, Rand herself would have loathed Trump, as her followers attest.

26 Ibid., 268.

27 Let's note the absurdity of the dramatic situation: Galt's captors *beg* Galt to become Supreme Ruler — "We order you to give orders! […] We demand that you dictate!," they plead, but Galt's silence voices his refusal (Rand, *Atlas Shrugged,* 1046).

28 Rand, *Atlas Shrugged,* 1051. Of the guard's murder, Bell-Villada remarks, "Melodrama, as we know, can be unintentionally humorous and campy" (Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov,* 158).

tivity, absolute reason, and nominal happiness she purports to advocate.[29]

As metaphors (or similes) go, however, the one concerning chemical photographic processes at least isn't hackneyed or clichéd. It has a kind of novelty and, if you can stomach the full-frontal debasement and vilification, a situational aptness; the same could be said of the (dehumanizing) comparison of Galt to a foundry casting. But just as often, the figurative language is not just tendentious and overdetermined, but trite. Rand piles on the death imagery in the upper Midwest: in Michigan, a rusty gas pump is called a "corpse,"[30] a distant telegraph pole stands "like a cross over a vast grave,"[31] and, arrived in Wisconsin, amid the ruins of Starnesville, the characters spot a schoolhouse that "looked like a skull, with the empty sockets of glassless windows, with a few strands of hair still clinging to it, in the shape of broken wires."[32] By contrast, the engine factory still looks "impregnable, like a fortress" from a distance. The prefab, timeworn metaphors reflect a kind of simplemindedness and monomania that literally repel attention.

Back in Michigan, in an anonymous town, "the houses stood like men in unpressed suits, who had lost the desire to stand straight: the cornices were like sagging shoulders, the crooked porch steps like torn hem lines, the broken windows like patches, mended with clapboard."[33] The mention of hemlines makes the place sound transvestitic, and the metaphor's vehicle suggests a

29 It's all the weirder, the malice and rage totally misdirected, because Rand's ideals were already more or less the norm at the time of her writing (as they are at the time of this writing). She might have seen the New Deal as a step toward communism, but having experienced the Russian Revolution firsthand, Rand should have known better, should have acknowledged the comparative absence of terror and murder, the enormous profits reaped by American capitalists in the postwar era, should have recognized the vast difference between FDR and Lenin.

30 Rand, *Atlas Shrugged,* 264.

31 Ibid., 265. Note how the atheist Rand borrows the iconography of religion here.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 263.

naïve materialism in that word's more common sense, conflating shabby clothes with a lack of moral fiber. What's worse is that this chintzy metaphor purports to be monitory, woeful and menacing, laced with dread; in context, it constitutes a thinly veiled threat. Elsewhere, we find this description of the decor in the flour-sack woman's house, made weird by its circularity and scrupulous redundancy: "There was no paint left on the floor; its boards were scrubbed to a soggy gray that looked like the visual expression of the pain in the bones of the person who had bent and scrubbed and lost the battle against the grime now soaked into the grain of the boards."[34] There's an intelligence of a sort at work here, a logical or ideological consistency, though it makes for rotten company.

For contrast, consider a metaphor from Nabokov's story "Tyrants Destroyed" (1938), a derisive anatomy of an authoritarian Ruler. Of the Ruler's public addresses (attentive listening is compulsory), the narrator writes,

> Apparently no one except me has noticed an interesting feature of his frenzied oratory, namely the pause he makes after a particularly effective sentence, rather *like a drunk who stands in the middle of the street, in the independent but unsatisfied solitude characteristic of drunks, and while declaiming fragments of an abusive monologue, most emphatic in its wrath, passion, and conviction, but obscure as to meaning and aim, stops frequently to collect his strength, ponder the next passage, let what he has said sink in; then, having waited out the pause, he repeats verbatim what he has just disgorged, but in a tone of voice suggesting that he has thought of a new argument, another absolutely new and irrefutable idea.*[35]

The comparison between the Ruler's speech and a drunk's isn't particularly imaginative; Rand herself makes such a com-

34 Ibid., 266.

35 Vladimir Nabokov, "Tyrants Destroyed," in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 455 (my italics).

parison between vomiting drunks and irrational artists. But Nabokov lavishes attention on the comparison, draws out its specifics, its nuances, in a way that neutralizes or unsettles the derogatory intent. The figure becomes almost tender, funny (even hilarious — "most emphatic in its wrath […] but obscure as to meaning and aim"!). The accuracy, the *fidelity,* of the comparison leavens its animosity.

This metaphor also serves as a decent description of Rand's literary style.

Even better is this one (another simile), from Rand's own epic: "as if spit by the infected throat of a loud-speaker coughing its malicious hatred of existence."[36]

And despite their surface consistency, Rand's clunky metaphors seem to erode one of Objectivism's central tenets, "A Is A," the title of *Atlas Shrugged,* part 3. Aristotle's law of identity establishes the thingness of things, their isolate quiddity, an objective reality independent of, but graspable by, the perceiving mind. Galt hammers on this theme in his radio address to the nation, but he presents it less as a principle for cognizing phenomena than as a flog for dispelling wishful thinking: "that an A will remain an A, no matter what their tears or tantrums — that a river will not bring them milk, no matter what their hunger — that water will not run uphill, no matter what comforts they could gain if it did."[37] Figurative language, however, Rand's favored metaphors, show over and over how the A-ness of A is susceptible to interpretation and spin, human manipulation and distortion, courtesy of the B-ness of B (more — that the A-ness of A is not fully intelligible without the B-ness of B). A proper Objectivist would probably lay off all the metaphors and communicate in a purely denotative speech (think *Star Trek's* Vulcans or the *Next Generation's* Borg) — a language utterly devoid of connotative differences (which sounds like a collectivist fantasy). Instead, Rand traffics in metaphors that are always connotative, slanted, skewing the meaning of the facts

36 Rand, *Atlas Shrugged,* 717.
37 Ibid., 948.

of her novel. The telegraph pole that stands like a funeral cross against the Michigan landscape might have borne comparison to a lot of other things — a letter in an alien alphabet, the barbed shaft of an arrow lodged in a mastodon's hump, a filament of a light bulb awaiting ignition, Alfalfa's erect cowlick on *The Little Rascals* — and all of them would warp the description, inflect the tenor differently. The point isn't that these are better metaphors, but that Rand's overdetermined metaphors always stack the deck, steer the reader's understanding of events to convey her view of Good and Evil.

Her characters practice the same semantic sleight of hand. They make mountains of molehills, conflate incursions on their wealth with attacks on their lives, construing material problems, through a kind of slanted paraphrase, in metaphysical — moral or mythic — terms. Here's what happened at the Twentieth Century Motor Company: the sons and daughter of Jed Starnes decided to change the company wage scale (stupidly, yes, but implausibly). Instead of basing salary on competence and the relative difficulty/value of tasks, they resolved to pay workers each according to "need" (which would require a pretty complicated calculus to determine, even if it weren't preposterous from the start).[38] Under this plan, Galt, an engineer and a bachelor, would take a pay cut, while his "needier" head-of-household colleagues would get raises. But here's how Galt sums up what happened at the plant during his radio tirade: "One night at a factory meeting, I heard myself sentenced to death by reason of my achievement."[39] No, John, no one sentenced you to death; your wages were garnished.

This slantwise translation of the facts is, of course, the opposite of laying bare an Objectivist Reality.

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38 Ibid., 301. Apparently, per Rand, the Starnes family chose to implement by fiat, and independent of any wider change to the economic infrastructure, Marx's famous slogan "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need" (quoted verbatim and identified as a "noble historical precept"). This literal-minded conceit is implausible as both literature and history. Even the Bolsheviks knew better.

39 Ibid., 959.

The Wisconsin interlude also exposes simple ruptures in the narrative continuity, obvious marks of shoddy craftsmanship, further tears in the fabric of the book's alt-reality. Hank and Dagny eventually find the factory, where they stumble upon the remains of Galt's fantastical motor (coincidence or fate?), along with a manual that partly explains its operation. Determined to track down the motor's inventor, they visit the local "Hall of Records" to investigate the factory's ownership history, and we learn that the motor is now "a large object wrapped in canvas, roped tightly under the raised cover of the car's luggage compartment."[40] The motor's weight is hard to estimate, and this one has been heavily scavenged for parts, but any metal machine large enough to jut from a car's trunk — and formerly immovable when Dagny yanks on its cords — would likely weigh in the hundreds of pounds. Yet, there's no mention whatsoever of how Dagny and Hank manage to convey the motor to their car, hoist it into the trunk, wrap it in canvas, and rope it in place. Neither is any reference made again to that sunburst of cracks on the car's windshield (which must have made the drive a nuisance, and possibly a hazard). Do they have the glass replaced when they get to Rome?[41] Rand's obliviousness to these mechanics of being in the world, the physics of her own creation, makes her a very unlikely oracle; it's not reasonable to expect big truths from a writer who traffics in small lies.

All the dialogue in *Atlas Shrugged* deserves mention. The book is sodden with it. Bell-Villada helpfully divides the characters' "utterances" into two common types: "1) sententious, abstract speeches in which they aggressively expound their general principles, or 2) characteristically brusque, curt statements that are blunt and churlish, even rude and hostile."[42] Pierpont adds some texture to this assessment: she notes how Rand's terseness can blossom into a florid or floral "flushed-

40 Ibid., 274.

41 An actual city in Wisconsin, the next stop on their journey, where they interview the mayor (Bascom). Earlier, with the couple en route to the factory, a flat tire is mentioned in passing, with no words allotted to its repair.

42 Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov,* 156.

pink prose," infusing bodice-ripper sentiment into the Objectivist diatribes.[43] And particularly funny is how Rand often simulates the corny vernacular of non-Objectivist characters, such as Mayor Bascom of Rome, who peppers his speech with *naw, nope,* and *sure,* amid lots of flinty sentence fragments. The aggregate effect is tedium, but what's striking to me is that Rand assents to this rationing of dialogue at all. Rand is so desperately plying those timeworn populist strategies for lifelike narration — such *dutiful* scene-setting and plot construction — that it all reads like patent make-believe. Early in *Atlas Shrugged,* she satirizes writers who reject traditional plot and character constructs, exposing their pretentiousness, their lefty tendencies, and, thus, their moral bankruptcy.[44] The war on plot and character in fiction can, for sure, misfire. But Rand, who fashions herself as an elitist, who pretends, like Nietzsche, to revalue all values, follows a pretty orthodox script for writing her novel.[45] What are the conventions of Rand's Romantic Realism if not a bid for popular appeal, an implicit concession to collectivism?[46]

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43 Claudia Roth Pierpont, "Twilight of the Goddess," *The New Yorker,* July 24, 1995, 76.

44 Such as the cringily named Balph Eubank, author of *The Heart Is a Milkman,* who says, "Plot is a primitive vulgarity in literature," pooh-poohs profitability, and whose message, paradoxically, is "Brother-love" (Rand, *Atlas Shrugged,* 129).

45 To be fair, Rand writes, "*all* work is creative if done by a thinking mind, and no work is creative if done by a blank, who repeats in uncritical stupor a routine he has learned from others" (*Atlas Shrugged,* 933). At best, Rand's narrative manner collapses the binary: a thinking mind clinging to literary routine.

46 Weiner and Bell-Villada arrive at a similar conclusion by a more direct route, calling out the central contradiction in Rand's epic plot: her Creators must go on strike in concerted numbers, *together,* in order to topple the world order. Had any of these players acted alone, there would be no revolution. Quite against her will, Rand's novel affirms the power of collective action. To which I would add another question: If Galt's Gulch is a fully functional utopia, why do the Creators bother to come down from the mountain at all? The best they can hope for is to scale their interests, which implies that their self-worth is dependent on the size of their yields, i.e., dependent on the approbation and patronage of other people and thus mired in the social/collective.

I could find only two aspects of the novel that might scan as artful or artistic. When Dagny and Hank board a Taggart train to test the strength and functionality of Rearden metal, we fall into Dagny's point of view as she stares out the window, where "trees and telegraph poles sprang into sight abruptly and went by as if jerked back."[47] The line captures an experiential phenomenon (rail travel), the uncanny shifts in relative ground speed, depending on one's angle of parallax, and it does so without any ideological agenda. It just is. This style (ironic example notwithstanding) might be the beginnings of a genuine Objectivist art.

Maybe the most stylistically innovative (i.e., artistic) technique, with the most Objectivist integrity, is Rand's rendering of Galt's radio address, those fifty-five-odd uninterrupted pages of small dense type. A disembodied voice dressing down the nation. A joyless harangue from a writer who purports to propagate joy. This is Randian art.[48]

Rand's followers would likely dismiss all that's artsy anyway; the faithful want nothing to distract from the megaphonic propaganda. But Rand's novel conceals a kind of artistry, visible too in the Wisconsin interlude, that might surprise and possibly offend her staunchest supporters.

Indigent Starnesville, Wisconsin is more than just a target for Rand's drive-by excoriation; it plays a role in the novel's design as the opposite of and structural counterpoint to Galt's Gulch, the holograph-cloaked Rocky Mountain redoubt where the Creators consort in their utopia of greed. Whereas Starnesville has regressed to the barter system, Galt's Gulch is a fully functioning commune, supplied with energy, food, educational lectures, and even entertainment, all for a nominal fee (compensation is a matter of principle). The novel works like this. Incidents and episodes *rhyme*.

47 Ibid., 224–25.

48 Then again, for someone who insists that A is A, Galt spends a lot of breath denouncing the B squad, defining A apophatically just like the negative Nancy secondhanders who steer by negation.

Lester Hunt, an emeritus philosopher at University of Wisconsin-Madison, has noted this aspect of Rand's novel, its structural integrity; he calls it a "twinning device," a principle of "mirroring-with-a-difference," and he shows how it extends from minor descriptions (a passage on Rearden's forge echoes and inverts a passage on Halley's Fourth Concerto) to the plot (Galt's life-giving motor versus Robert Stadler's death-dealing x-ray), and to the characters. The marital predicament of James Taggart, a wealthy poser who suffocates his low-rent but right-minded wife (Cheryl Brooks), is a symmetrical inversion of Hank Rearden's marriage woes (he's a Randian hero, but his uptown wife, a high-class looter, suffocates him). Not for nothing does Taggart commit adultery with Rearden's former wife.[49]

A simpler example, per Hunt again: the question "Who is John Galt?" opens and closes the novel's first chapter, but voiced by antithetical characters (one, a mooching bum; the other, budding Objectivist and Taggart Rail functionary Owen Kellogg).

And in Wisconsin (per me): When Dagny and Hank pick through the rubble at the Twentieth Century Motor Company, their scavenging echoes the behavior of the Starnesvillians, with their telegraph-wire clotheslines and oil-can ewers.[50]

This patterning is the essence of novelistic artistry, evidence that Rand's novel embodies an impressive design intelligence. Hunt is quick to stress that this formal exactitude "does not persist beyond the early chapters of the book, and would become rather oppressive if it did." Nor does Rand aim to contrive an empty nonutilitarian "formalist beauty." Rather, the method is part and parcel of the book's didactic (for Hunt, salutary) message: it forces readers to discern, through surface similarities,

49 Lester Hunt, "Some Structural Aspects of *Atlas Shrugged*," in *Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged,* ed. Edward W. Younkins (London: Routledge, 2007), 225–36; *Lester Hunt's Web Page,* https://lesterhunt.philosophy.wisc.edu/home/writings-on-ayn-rand/structural-aspects-of-atlas-shrugged.

50 Weiner also riffs on the theme of scavenging in the novel, though he never mentions the Starnesvillians. Instead, he gathers up other far-flung details to suggest that Rand inadvertently portrays her protagonists as carrion-eating vultures (see Weiner, *How Bad Writing, Destroyed the World* 210).

important moral distinctions. As Hunt puts it, "Rand structures *Atlas* in a way [that] gets the reader's mind to mimic the sort of functioning that her epistemology treats as the best." In other words, the book is a primer in doublethink. It engineers false consciousness. Hunt calls this functionality the "real beauty of the twinning device."[51]

In Hunt's analysis, Rand's Objectivism, despite its basis of noncontradiction, sounds almost compatible with the concept of paradox. A similar kind of conceptual sophistication inheres in Rand's character portraits; as supporters such as Vegma rightly note, her titans of industry are not always uniformly good. In Wisconsin, Hank and Dagny "fake reality," an Objectivist no-no, by pretending to be a married couple (concealing their adultery), and both will need a push (as does the Spanish American copper magnate Francisco D'Anconia) to raze their corporate holdings and abscond to Galt's Gulch. All three dwell for a time in relative error. And Mark Yonts and Mayor Bascom, former owners of the Twentieth Century Motor factory, reveal what unprincipled capitalism looks like. Yonts is a scoundrel and law-bender, and Bascom a confirmed cynic: he tells Dagny and Hank, "No principle ever filled anybody's milk bottle. The only thing that counts in life is solid, material assets."[52] Both positions, in Rand's book, are preferable to collectivism, but neither qualifies for residency in Galt's Gulch — which is to say, capitalism and greed are not absolute goods. Cheryl Brooks also deserves mention here: she's Jim Taggart's low-rent mistress, then wife. Although a lowly dime-store clerk, Cheryl recognizes the greatness of business leaders — she has the right ideas — but she's easily deceived, mistaking Dagny's brother, Jim (a wimpy moocher), for a bona fide capitalist hero. Most critics — from Whittaker Chambers to Adam Weiner — overstate the starkness of the black/white dichotomy in Rand's novel, but understand-

51 Hunt, "Some Structural Aspects."

52 Ibid., 275. Mark Yonts would serve as Rand's dismissive commentary on Trump. For his part, Bascom is described as looking at Dagny and Hank "without kindness." In Rand's world, I suspect this is a compliment.

ably so. Because what flattens out any burgeoning complexity is that her heroes fail when they accommodate and compromise, when they fall short of Galt's Olympian ideal. Once they burn off all traces of equivocation, once they consent to make the ultimate sacrifice (of other people's lives, of their own livelihoods), they attain a kind of perfection, a state of grace that, for Rand, is unambiguous (and apparently cloneable). The poles of her Good and Evil are fixed and immutable; the only thing that's in doubt is the human capacity to recognize and embrace her Absolute Truth. It's allegory all over again.[53]

53 When cognitive psychologists consider the difference between literature and propaganda, they focus on something they call *cognitive closure.* Literature resists such closure: the narrative defies clean conflict resolutions, leaves unanswered questions, inspires us to linger, to doubt, to question, to remain pleasurably ill at ease. This quality is what compels attention, encourages rereading, induces wonder. One time-tested strategy for closure resistance, as Rand well knows, is strategic paradox, the construction of an unresolvable conundrum. By contrast, propaganda aims for the opposite effect: total closure, zero ambiguity with regard to messaging. When novels become vehicles for ideology, they're less expensive in terms of cognition, requiring less conscious attention, and thus are easier to take for granted, put down, or cast aside: they package themselves as fully known and knowable quantities. One recent study, with Canadian scholars and cog-sci stalwarts Maja Djikic and Keith Oatley heading up the research team, called "Opening the Closed Mind," suggests that a taste for propaganda fiction correlates with diminished creativity and suboptimal problem-solving skills (a strategy known as "seize-and-freeze," in which people make rushed judgments from too-little data — seems like the only game in town these days). Per the study, exposure to literature, "good" ambiguous books, can remedy such deficiencies. I won't vouch for the study's findings, but regardless, literature continues to do its thing, whether it's good for us or not. The best books, what we call art, devise fresh ways of contriving mystery, generating doubt, ambivalence, irony, ambiguity, paradox. Thus, they remain animate, alive in the mind, for decades or centuries. This New Critical distinction, once central to literary understanding, has been out of fashion for so long that it might now qualify as abandoned wisdom.

And should our political narrative — which likewise defies clean conflict resolution and leaves us suspended in doubt, perpetually subdivided — appear to be aping properties of literary art, let this be an object lesson in the crucial difference between life and literature.

The obvious failure of Rand's philosophy is the way it aims to disabuse readers of ambiguity. The book is rife with paradox, yet every instance, for Rand, constitutes a stark and menacing either/or proposition.

The Starnesvillians might be dirt-poor, but maybe, given that they scavenge just like Hank and Dagny, the two sides could find common cause, instead of irrevocable enmity.

While *Atlas Shrugged* posits a loudly amplified and grossly simplified ideological conflict, any reasonable mind would concede that self-interest and social welfare, independence and cooperation, like pure reason and pure emotion, are false binaries, interwoven in every conceivable socioeconomic scenario, separable only in isolation chambers. Which is to say, the magic doctrine, or loyalty oath, that the Galt's Gulchers affirm is itself nonsensical: "I swear — by my life and my love of it — that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine."[54] It isn't possible to "live" entirely for the sake of other people. It is possible to perform occasional acts of kindness (let's not call it *altruism*), as even Rand admits, but Christ himself broke bread and presumably took restful sleep (exercising self-interest). The very presence of the word "never" implies a temporal dimension to the vow, as if the oath-taker possessed more than one life, or as if living were an occasional activity. The phrase "will never live for" is oxymoronic. The oath is perfect nonsense, claptrap, something only fanatical minds could take seriously.

Anyone hoping to dissuade Rand's admirers is going to crash into the Cheryl Brooks problem. Recall that Cheryl is the dime-store clerk in *Atlas Shrugged,* who coincidentally (or fatedly) sells Kleenex to Jim Taggart, Dagny's brother and inept, mooching proprietor of Taggart Railroad, the only character weak enough to contract a head cold. The two strike up an affair in which Taggart toys with Cheryl, enjoying the power he wields over her, the admiration he elicits. Cheryl, though she's low-class, is a budding Randian; she has prudently abandoned her family in Buf-

54 Rand, *Atlas Shrugged,* 979.

falo, knows the value of capitalist creators, and she steers by the principle of rational egoism. But, misled by fake news of a sort (Taggart takes credit for a Hank Rearden triumph), she confuses Taggart's wealth and status for authentic Randian prowess, and she abases herself before the guy like a good idolater. The two marry, disastrously as it turns out, because eventually Taggart shows his true colors as an evil collectivist, and Cheryl, devastated by the discovery, hurls herself from a bridge, death in this circumstance being preferable to divorce.

The Greeks called it *anagnorisis.*

Joyce would have called it an *epiphany.*

Though Rand sought to cast her heroes — Dagny, Galt, Rearden — in her own image (or to refashion herself in theirs), I think she inadvertently stumbled into self-portraiture in the case of Cheryl Brooks. Just as Cheryl mistakes a fraud for a hero, Rand is similarly self-deluded, blind to the failures and flaws and imperfect humanity of her capitalist titans. And Rand's followers, then, make the same Cheryl Brooks mistake in believing Rand to be an oracle and sage. Like much of *Atlas Shrugged,* Cheryl's suicide might be double-edged, ambivalent or paradoxical, despite Rand's best intentions. Either it constitutes an Objectivist error, as emotion (despair) overwhelms reason (self-interest), or it proves Cheryl's fanatical devotion to Objectivist principles (having abetted or tacitly perpetrated a faking of reality, she condemns herself to a well-deserved death). In either case, her doom shows how perilous or fraught it can be to disabuse people of their misconceptions and dispel cherished illusions. Randians, like Ever Trumpers, will cling to their allegiances even in the face of irrefutable evidence. There's no reasoning with a zealot, particularly when the zealot believes herself to be reasonable.

* * *

There is a way to defend Rand's millenarian novel, but it would require one to contradict the very tenets of Objectivism: namely, one might argue that the novel and all of its facets are meant to

be taken figuratively, not literally. Rand herself pivoted in this direction. The Signet edition closes with a two-page primer in Objectivism, written presumably by Leonard Peikoff, Rand's executor and cofounder of the Ayn Rand Institute. It is a marvel of doublethink, with flatly asserted contradictions that promote cognitive dissonance. Here goes: "The goal of Ayn Rand's novels is not didactic but artistic: the projection of an ideal man: 'My purpose, first cause and prime mover is the portrayal of Howard Roark or John Galt or Hank Rearden or Francisco d'Anconia *as an end in himself* — not as a means to any further end.'"[55] Rand would deny, it seems, any real-world applications for her novels, claiming for her propaganda fiction the inviolability and irresponsibility — the solipsism and hermeticism — once accorded to art, as if she were a proponent of art for art's sake. But this defense is precisely contradicted by Rand's own words (Pierpont shares a quote in which Rand self-identifies as a literary propagandist[56]), her personal practice (she measured her own conduct against Galt's example, and cited Galt as a supportive case in her nonfiction tract *The Objectivist Ethics,* per Weiner[57]), and her followers' actions (they ride Rand's ideas into public office — excepting the atheism and partner-swapping).

The flour-sack woman is apropos here. The only way to argue that there's Truth in this character portrait is to claim that it shouldn't be taken literally, to see the woman as a kind of effigy or symbol for the benightedness of the unreasoned, anticapitalist life. But if you're arguing that Rand's work should be taken figuratively, in part and as a whole, you're not an Objectivist (and neither is Rand) because you're assenting to a distortion (i.e., a faking) of Reality. This is why Rand is more of a mystic, unbeknownst to herself, than a materialist, as Weiner says.

No, the figurative defense leads us straight through the mirror, into the works of Nabokov and Nietzsche.

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55 [Leonard Peikoff(?)], "The Essentials of Objectivism," in *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Signet, 1996), 1075.

56 Pierpont, "Twilight of the Goddess," 70.

57 Weiner, *How Bad Writing Destroyed the World,* 201.

NABOKOV

Of Rulers and Erasures: The Lessons of Literature

A lot of the Right's talking points do converge in the figure of Rand. She serves as a convenient boogeyman, or effigy, to absorb the abuse of the fuming Left. In this capacity, she reminds me too of Donald J. Trump, the perfect embodiment of all that's wrong with contemporary civilization, a pure distillate of a culture's disease. That a vile bezonian like Trump, grossly and transparently incompetent, a living parody of the ghoulish mogul, human emblem of the bloated and osteoporotic real estate sector over which he claims to preside: that this clown could attain wealth and status at all, much less occupy the Oval Office, is something possible only in a deranged culture. And for the women who willingly gratify his sexual cravings — proxies for his adoring fans, the personal mirrors the political here — someone will have to explain to me what marvels they descry in the shambles of the big guy's interiority, those depths of character that might transfigure the shambolic physique, turn imperfections into endearments, make the whole, if not desirable and lovable, at least tolerable for the duration of coitus.

In identifying a singular incarnation of an entire nation's disease, there is, for sure, a kind of methodological convenience. It supplies a viable premise for a story, less so for political action.

In 1938, Nabokov was living with no fixed address in Paris, the second stage of his exile, after Hitler's rise chased him, his

Jewish wife, and their son from Berlin (his exile's first stage). Meanwhile, back in Soviet Russia, Stalin, another of Chernyshevski's devotees, had been in power for fifteen years (following Lenin's death), and the Great Purge was, as it's known, going gangbusters. This is the context in which Nabokov wrote "Tyrants Destroyed," his love letter to autocrats everywhere, as rendered by an art teacher bent haplessly — and, in the end, futilely — on tyrannicide. And this story floats a tenuous proposition, the corollary of Adam Weiner's Bad Books theory: that good books, what we call *literature,* might somehow deliver us from political oppression.

"Tyrants Destroyed" begins on a note that will surely resonate[1] with the statistical majority of the US electorate:

> The growth of his power and fame was matched, in my imagination, by the degree of the punishment I would have liked to inflict on him. Thus, at first, I would have been content with an electoral defeat, a cooling of public enthusiasm. Later I already required his imprisonment; still later, his exile to some distant, flat island with a single palm tree, which, like a black asterisk, refers one to the bottom of an eternal hell made of solitude, disgrace, and helplessness. Now, at last, nothing but his death could satisfy me.[2]

The narrator's murderous rage, his mounting desperation, gives the story a developmental arc of sorts, but not a causal chain or purposeful chronology: the action sprawls and lurches across a sequence of numbered subsections, a series of snapshots or vignettes, for twenty-odd pages. Each narrative segment contains an inspired riff or a choice flight of fancy: recounting, for example, the evolution of the State portraiture, which at first "looked rather blurred[….] Something human, certain possi-

1 A bipartisan resonance, what with the Right's equal and opposite loathing of Hillary Clinton and Hunter Biden's father.

2 Vladimir Nabokov, "Tyrants Destroyed," in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 438.

bilities of [the Ruler's] failing, his cracking, his falling ill, heaven knows what, came feebly shivering through some of his photographs in the random variety of not yet standardized poses and in a vacillating gaze which had not yet found its historical expression."[3] This iconographic vulnerability proves fleeting: "Little by little,[…] his countenance consolidated: his cheeks and cheekbones […] became overlaid with a godly gloss, the olive oil of public affection, the varnish of a completed masterpiece; it became impossible to imagine that nose being blown, or that finger poking on the inside of that lip to extricate a food particle lodged behind a rotten incisor."[4] Soon enough, the narrator observes how all the apparatus of the state, and the culture at large, warps to reflect the Ruler's image: "Legislation began to show a ludicrous likeness to his gait and gestures. Greengrocers began stocking a remarkable abundance of cucumbers, which he had so greedily consumed in his youth[….] Newspaper articles and the novels of sycophantic writers" echo the Ruler's clumsy oratorical style. The narrator sums up the predicament:

> He […] was penetrating everywhere, infecting with his presence the way of thinking and the everyday life of every person, so that his mediocrity, his tediousness, his gray habitude, were becoming the very life of my country. And finally the law he established — the implacable power of the majority, the incessant sacrifice to the idol of the majority — lost all sociological meaning, for *he* is the majority.[5]

The communist collectivism Nabokov is here reviling sounds a lot like democracy. Except, in the present US democracy, the statistical majority can sometimes be overruled by electoral procedures. Still, if the 2016 presidential election proved anything, it's that 60 million Americans can be wrong — not so much for

3 Ibid., 438.
4 Ibid., 438–39.
5 Ibid., 442.

preferring rightward policies (though that too) as for inaugurating a circus of Graft, Grope, and Troll.

But the narrator returns obsessively to the problem of tyrannicide, hatching and rejecting assorted plots, berating himself for his lack of action. He likens himself to Hamlet ("dull and fat," "o moony oaf"[6]), who also balks at the prospect of regicide, only to achieve his murderous goal despite himself and all his splendid agonized dithering. Unable to imagine the logistics of a successful assassination, the narrator speculates reasons for the blockage, chastening violent revolutionaries everywhere:

> Perhaps it is so because murder, the intent to kill, is after all insufferably trite, and the imagination, reviewing methods of homicide and types of weapons, performs a degrading task, the shame of which is the more keenly felt, the more righteous the force that impels one. Or else, maybe I could not kill him out of squeamishness, as some people, while they feel a fierce aversion to anything that crawls, are unable so much as to crush a garden worm underfoot because for them it would be like stamping on the dust-begrimed extremities of their own innards.[7]

Tempering somewhat this obsessive portrait of the tyrant, the tale includes a backstory, flashback elements that telescope to the time before the revolution, when the narrator's brother dabbled in political fervor and rabble-rousing. The tyrant, it turns out, was a peculiar member of the narrator's brother's revolutionary entourage. This is what allows for the intimacy of the narrator's observations; he was a firsthand witness of the Ruler's preruling incarnation (analogous to Rand's role in the Nabokov household circa 1917). The narrator can describe how "his sloppily laced town boots were always dirty, as if he had just walked many miles along a cart road between unnoticed meadows," and how the "nails of his large, humid hands were so closely bitten

6 Ibid., 447, 454.
7 Ibid., 454.

that it was painful to see the tight little cushions at the tips of his hideous fingers."[8] When the narrator's brother dies tragically, poignantly, in a swimming accident, the Ruler hangs around the house of grief "solely because nowhere did he breathe so naturally as in the sphere of gloom and despair, when uncleared dishes litter the table and nonsmokers ask for cigarettes."[9] This glimpse of the tyrant as a young man adds some depth to the portrait, which is not quite in the round. The Ruler's character is in many ways static, but the time-lapse method captures at least the outward signs of his personal growth and change (among other things, he goes bald, like Lenin). None of this is humanizing or redeeming.

When the narrator undertakes some unnamed funeral errand, the Ruler accompanies him, and the narrator recalls how, in his grief, awkwardly, perhaps motivated by "condolence for another's condolence," he had squeezed the Ruler's hand.[10] The tactile sensation survives and still mortifies the narrator twenty-five years later. And he recalls how, at that moment, with his brother's revolver in his pocket, he had an opportunity to accomplish in the past what eludes him in the present:

> [to kill the Ruler] with a shot at point-blank range, and then there would have been nothing of what there is today — no rain-drenched holidays, no gigantic festivities with millions of my fellow citizens marching by with shovels, hoes, and rakes on their slavish shoulders; no loudspeakers, deafeningly multiplying the same inescapable voice; no secret mourning in every other family, no assortment of tortures, no torpor of the mind, no colossal portraits — nothing.[11]

This galling hindsight — a gesture toward counterfactual history familiar from "assassinate Hitler" fantasies, such as *Inglourious*

8 Ibid., 443.
9 Ibid., 446.
10 Ibid., 447.
11 Ibid.

Basterds — textures the story's timeline and embeds a layer of pathos in the narrative.

Eventually, the narrator stumbles upon a viable assassination method, which proves to be a marvel of passive-aggressive ingenuity, and a most literary method besides, evoking comparison to the act of omnivorous reading. Namely, the narrator attempts to attune his consciousness to that of the Ruler, obsessively imagining and participating telepathically in the Ruler's every outward movement and inmost thought until, by some cosmic law of vibratory harmonics, both would die instantly, like the all-at-once falling to pieces of a "suspension bridge whose own oscillations have coincided with the cadenced step of a detachment of soldiers crossing it."[12] It's a brilliant conceit, and it dramatizes powerfully something the story had been promising since the second paragraph: the eclipse of the narrator's autonomous existence, a total loss of self, the narrator's psyche consumed by his own hatred and displaced by its putative object.

Which is more or less what happens when we read.

Here's how the Belgian theorist–critic Georges Poulet described the process in his "Phenomenology of Reading" (1969): "As soon as I replace my direct perception of reality by the words of a book, I deliver myself, bound hand and foot to the omnipotence of fiction[….] I surround myself with fictitious beings; I become the prey of language. There is no escaping this take-over. Language surrounds me with its unreality."[13] Later, cementing the link with Nabokov's story, he writes, "My consciousness behaves as though it were the consciousness of another."[14] Elsewhere, Poulet stresses the phenomenological upsides of literary reading, but here he makes it sound like a form of servitude, a voluntary submission to tyranny: reading as a kind of mind-melding, or spirit possession, the book behaving like a disembodied consciousness that wholly displaces the

12 Ibid., 455.

13 Georges Poulet, "Phenomenology of Reading," *New Literary History* 1, no. 1 (1969): 55.

14 Ibid., 56.

reader's prerogative. In his *Lectures on Literature,* Nabokov invests the reader with a greater autonomy than Poulet, making the process more participatory and dialogic, but it's fitting that his overwrought narrator in "Tyrants Destroyed" would conceive of this psychic simultaneity, this pseudoliterary communion of minds, as potentially murderous.

The story has another feature or twist — a tremor of unreliable narration — that thematizes the phenomenon of reading (and leavens the overt political messaging). Of the seventeen numbered subsections, two — sections 10 and 12 — recount imagined events as if they were real occurrences. Section 10 (another budding murder plot) begins, deceptively: "Yesterday I invited several people, unacquainted among themselves but united by one and the same sacred task, which had so transfigured them that one could notice among them an inexpressible resemblance, such as occurs, for instance, among elderly Freemasons."[15] These invited guests are all attendants of the Ruler — "a tailor, a masseur, a physician, a barber, a baker"[16] — and from them, the narrator hopes to learn intimate details about his nemesis, as if this would get him closer to his murderous goal. He can't bring himself to broach the subject directly, fearing the group's alarmed response, and then, without segue or explanation, he "[finds himself] wearing a suit cut by [his] neighbor on the right, and eating [his] vis-à-vis' pastry, which [he] washed down with a special kind of mineral water prescribed by [his] neighbor on the left."[17] The absurdist turn of events hints at the narrator's self-dissolution, the merging of his identity with that of his enemy. It also prompts the belated explanation: "I was overcome by a dreadful, dream-significant feeling, which immediately awakened me."[18] The entire encounter had been fanciful.

The literary effect repeats in the nonmurderous section 12, which also begins with a deadpanned lie: "I have just had yet

15 Nabokov, "Tyrants Destroyed," 448–49.
16 Ibid., 449.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.

another visitor: a very seedy old man, who was evidently in a state of extreme agitation: his tight-skinned, glossy-backed hands were trembling, a stale senile tear dampened the pink lining of his eyelids, and a pallid sequence of involuntary expressions, from a foolish smile to a crooked crease of pain, passed across his face."[19] This visitor communicates by means of signs and a photograph that he is none other than the Ruler's long-lost father. Despite the wonderfully concrete and palpable description, this man is himself a phantasm, a product of the narrator's fevered imagination. He records the interview's conclusion: "I noticed that the mazy and issueless design of the wallpaper was showing through his body; I stretched out my hand to detain my guest, but the dodderer dissolved, shivering from the chill of vanishment."[20] The narrator perpetrates a kind of hoax upon the reader, who is made to experience the virtual event as if it were actual, until the moment when the narrator comes clean, owns up to the deception. Such moments are frequent across Nabokov's fictions, and they carry a thematic charge, dramatizing among other things the power of literature: for all their absurdity or twinges of madness, the gambits function as miniature allegories of literary reading, underscoring our capacity to experience unreal events as pseudoreal happenings.

In the narrator's fever dreams, then, the story invites us to contemplate the technics of reading, as if it might constitute a viable method for vanquishing tyrants. And repeatedly the method fails — scans as an extension of the narrator's impotence, a symptom of his derangement, and/or a succumbing to his own tyrannical impulses (becoming precisely what he loathes).

In this, the story would seem to posit that books, reading, literature can't deliver us from history.

But the text ultimately proves paradoxical on this point. As the story nears its end, the narrator reaches the end of his rope, the extremity of despair; section 15 reads, almost in its entirety:

19 Ibid., 452.
20 Ibid., 453.

> I cannot stand it any longer. Everything is full of him, everything I love has been besmirched, everything has become his likeness, his mirror image, and, in the features of passersby and in the eyes of my wretched schoolchildren, his countenance shows ever clearer and more hopelessly[….] [E]ven the simple white cube I give the younger classes to draw seems to me his portrait — perhaps his best portrait. O cubic monster, how can I eradicate you?[21]

Apparently, Trump Derangement Syndrome is not a new phenomenon.

Following this outburst, again without any segue or causal stimulus, the narrator strikes upon a solution, a sure way to destroy the tyrant: "By killing myself I would kill him, as he was totally inside me, fattened on the intensity of my hatred."[22] But as he readies himself for suicide, preparations for the Ruler's birthday are under way in the street outside his window, and the narrator experiences a second epiphany: that he has been ungrateful, has misjudged the Ruler's magnanimity. "Is it not he who manured our fields, who directed the poor to be shod, he whom we must thank for every second of our civic being?"[23] the narrator asks. On the radio, an actor reads an encomium by the State poet — rendered in full by Nabokov — and the narrator falls to his knees to beg forgiveness for his error, even welcoming the "pardon" of execution itself, and he vows "to serve [the Ruler] from this day on,[…] to be like all [his] other nurslings,[…] to be [his] indivisibly, and so forth, and so forth, and so forth."[24]

In the story's short final section, the narrator strikes a didactic note and makes explicit the message encoded in the tale: "Laughter, actually, saved me. Having experienced all the degrees of hatred and despair, I achieved those heights from which one

21 Ibid., 457.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 458.
24 Ibid., 459.

obtains a bird's-eye view of the ludicrous[….] Rereading my chronicle, I see that, in my efforts to make [the Ruler] terrifying, I have only made him ridiculous, thereby destroying him — an old, proven method."[25] Those declarations of fealty and contrition recorded in the previous section were pure sarcasm, as perceptive readers would discern immediately ("manured our fields" is hilarious praise, even among farmers).[26] And the narrator imagines a pseudosocial utility for his manuscript:

> This is an incantation, an exorcism, so that henceforth any man can exorcise bondage. I believe in miracles. I believe that in some way, unknown to me, this chronicle will reach other men, neither tomorrow nor the next day, but at a distant time when the world has a day or so of leisure for archaeological diggings, on the eve of new annoyances, no less amusing than the present ones. And, who knows — I may be right not to rule out the thought that my chance labor may prove immortal, and may accompany the ages, now persecuted, now exalted, often dangerous, and always useful. While I, a "boneless shadow," *un fantôme sans os,* will be content if the fruit of my forgotten insomnious nights serves for a long time as a kind of secret remedy against future tyrants, tigroid monsters, half-witted torturers of man.[27]

The narrator does, it seems, "believe in miracles," that literary reading might offer a kind of salvation — albeit one that precludes any direct intervention in political history. It constitutes a private and passive revolution, though maybe something more complex and faceted than it sounds.[28]

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25 Ibid.

26 This deception is the third installment in the deceptive series. The phantasmal visitors, discussed above, prefigure this terminal deception.

27 Ibid., "Tyrants Destroyed," 459–60.

28 This ending is one reason why the story ranks among Nabokov's less-lauded works: the declaration neatly wraps up the disjunctive segments and overcompensates with an excess of a cognitive closure. The last section also includes this sentence: "Modest as I am in evaluating my muddled

The story's power might lie not in the simple clichéd prescription *laughter is the best medicine,* but in the particular type of laughter the text embodies, couched in ambivalence and paradox: the double-dealing comment on the utility of reading, that nourishing laughter *latent* in all the punctilious and ostensibly savage character assassination. See, for example, lines such as "the olive oil of public affection," or the "night-bird eyes"[29] of the Ruler himself, or the figure he cuts over tea and pretzels: his "strange and unpleasant way of rinsing his mouth with his milk before he swallowed it, and when he bit into the pretzel he cautiously twisted his mouth; his teeth were bad, and to deceive the fiery pain of a bared nerve by a brief whiff of coolness, he would repeatedly suck in the air, with a sidewise whistle."[30] The patriotic birthday celebration includes a "new kind of fireworks" that reproduce in broad daylight the "Ruler's gem-bright likeness"![31] The narrator's anti-State portraiture hoards such a swarm of moist and crunchy and pyrotechnic details that we might overlook those poignant turns, accesses of affection and grief, as in this account of the narrator's brother's death:

> He drowned at twenty-three, bathing one summer evening in a wide, very wide river, so that when I now recall my brother the first thing that comes to my mind is a shiny spread of water, an islet overgrown with alder (that he never reached but toward which he always swims through the trembling haze of my memory), and a long, black cloud crossing another, opulently fluffed-up and orange-colored one, all that is left of a Saturday-morning thunderstorm in the clear,

composition, something nevertheless tells me that it is not the work of an ordinary pen" (ibid., 459). The self-congratulation grates a bit, even if it's true. Still, to my mind, the story contains thematic depths and imaginative particulars that exceed and defy the purported neat resolution.

29 Ibid., 444.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., 458.

> turquoise Sunday's-eve sky, where a star will shine through in a moment, where there will never be any star.[32]

If the forked-tongue *cri de coeur* fails to move you, the story still embodies an *imaginative fecundity,* which offers its own kind of consolation.

* * *

Gene Bell-Villada, in fact, detests this story, which he summarily dismisses along with Nabokov's likewise dystopian and not-very-good novel *Bend Sinister* (1947).[33] To be fair, the story does

32 Ibid., 442.

33 Gene H. Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov, Ayn Rand and the Libertarian Mind: What the Russian-American Odd Pair Can Tell Us about Some Values, Myths and Manias Widely Held Most Dear* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 118.

Among *Bend Sinister*'s few highlights is a ludicrous unreading of *Hamlet,* by a communist (or "Ekwilist," as the book dubs it) critic, one Doctor Hamm. Hamm argues that Fortinbras, a kind of proletarian leader with a just claim to the Danish throne, is the play's real hero: "Consciously or unconsciously, the author of *Hamlet* has created the tragedy of the masses and thus has founded the sovereignty of society over the individual"; Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 108. Hamm also hazards a hypothesis that recalls Adam Weiner's take on Strannolyubski in *The Gift:* per Hamm, the ghost on the battlements from the play's first scene is not Hamlet's father, but rather Fortinbras's father, incognito, deceiving everyone and setting in motion the tragedy that will hand his son the throne. The article in which Hamm lays out his theory is titled "The Real Plot of *Hamlet,*" though Nabokov's protagonist is unconvinced: "intricate convolutions of sheer stupidity," he calls it (ibid., 111).

Another of *Bend Sinister*'s interesting wrinkles is that it imagines, like *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,* a communion of souls, but inverts the valence from positive to negative (or sinister). The novel's tyrant, authoritarian leader of the Ekwilists, declaims from a loudspeaker: "Your groping individualities will become interchangeable and, instead of crouching in the prison cell of an illegal ego, the naked soul will be in contact with that of every other man in this land; nay, more: each of you will be able to make his abode in the elastic inner self of any other citizen, and to flutter from one to another, until you know not whether you are Peter or John, so closely locked will you be in the embrace of the State" (ibid., 97). *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*'s expansive dream of heartfelt commingling — "any

bear out some of his grievances, does show the Randian fangs of Nabokov's fiction. Most obviously, it denounces communist collectivism in a way that's roughly comparable to *Atlas Shrugged*. And it shows how Nabokov's brand of individualism verges on Rand's extreme egoism: the narrator professes, "I don't give a hoot for the welfare of mankind, and not only do I not believe in any majority being automatically right, but I tend to reexamine the question whether it is proper to strive for a state of affairs where literally everyone is half-fed and half-schooled."[34] Later, he writes, "There is nothing about me of the civic hero who dies for his people. I die only for myself, for the sake of my own world of good and truth."[35] Yet, unlike the strict materialist Rand, he claims not to "fear the black nausea and agony of death" because he "anticipate[s] a degree of bliss, a level of supernatural being undreamt of either by barbarians or by modern followers of old religions."[36]

Nabokov perhaps comes closest to Rand when his narrator remarks that "the real human being is a poet and […] he, our ruler, is the incarnate negation of a poet."[37] I confess that this line has a flavor of truth about it when I consider the presidential example of Trump, who strikes me as a travesty of humanity. And the poet, as a paragon, seems like the most benign and winsome of all possible choices. But it is, nevertheless, callous and dangerous to classify human beings as falling off some standard of authenticity.

A similar Randian elitism surfaces later, when the narrator hallucinates his interview with the Ruler's long-lost father. The guy, around seventy years old, produces a photograph of himself at twenty, and the narrator says, "It was easy to fill this interval with the trite account of one of those third-rate lives, the imprint of which one reads (with an agonizing sense of superi-

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soul can be yours if you find and follow its undulations" — is here a threat, a compulsory and inescapable nightmare.

34 Nabokov, "Tyrants Destroyed," 439.

35 Ibid., 453.

36 Ibid., 454.

37 Ibid., 450.

ority, sometimes unjustified) on the faces of old ragmen, public-garden attendants, and embittered invalids in the uniforms of old wars."[38] The working title of Rand's *The Fountainhead* was "Second-hand Lives." Rand's phrase denotes not just inferiority, but economic parasitism; still, at a glance, only "agonizing […] superiority" and "sometimes unjustified" distinguish the two forms of snobbery.

The story also displays some of the Rand-caliber nastiness that Bell-Villada decries, loosely equating physical flaws with moral failings. Nabokov's narrator claims to have knowledge of the Ruler's preruling romances, one with "a heartless hunchbacked girl, whose massive braid and ink-blue eyes were so attractive to many that she was willingly forgiven a resemblance to a black chess knight."[39] If it sounds like there's some qualification and phenotypic nuance in the girl's portrait, consider that the narrator blithely speculates about a second liaison involving "another woman (also with a physical defect of some kind, I believe),"[40] as if to malign the Ruler's character vis-à-vis his sexual partners' deformities. Likewise, the narrator makes a cheap crack about the Ruler's mother: "The wench was a loose one."[41]

The descriptions of the Ruler himself don't always emphasize ugliness, per se, but we do catch the scent of his "goatish smell,"[42] and we learn of his "lean, yet broad-hipped body, with its odd, womanish pelvis and round back."[43] And we learn too of his stunted capacity for memory, through an anatomical metaphor: "If the gods were to propose that he synthesize himself out of his memories, with the condition that the synthesized image be rewarded with immortality, the result would be a dim embryo, an infant born prematurely, a blind and deaf dwarf, in no sense capable of immortality."[44]

38 Ibid., 452.
39 Ibid., 444.
40 Ibid., 445.
41 Ibid., 453.
42 Ibid., 443.
43 Ibid., 449.
44 Ibid., 451.

Some readers might contend that the story thereby flaunts its privilege, alienating everyone but an audience of heterosexual, ableist, white Russian men with robust stores of memory.

Touché.

Bell-Villada's grievances clearly anticipate and slouch toward the Cancel Culture phenomenon — in which literary reading is a form of sensitivity training (as, in some ways, it is), in which zealous critics, with the best intentions, scrutinize the identity credentials of books and the people who write them. This pseudoanalytical practice is problematic and inadvisable for many reasons, but its most obvious failing is a lack of rigor. Tallying the number of offenses taken, at the exclusion of all else, is symptomatic of the "seize-and-freeze," or "pounce-and-denounce," mentality, that suboptimal strategy for problem-solving and information processing. It yields a distorted and often grossly foreshortened view of the textual field. And in the case of "Tyrants Destroyed," the story, far from promoting or coercing bias, proves to be elusive and equivocal: it portrays the narrator's callousness and rage but doesn't ultimately endorse it. This narrator is clearly impaired, prone to self-serving dreams and hallucinations, yet lucid enough to recognize that his own character is polluted by his hatred. Time and again, the story reminds us that he is becoming the very thing that he loathes, and, besides, the cheapest shots that he doles out (regarding women) are undercut by authorial irony ("I believe," in Nabokov's prose is a nudge to disbelieve, as surely as Trump's "believe me" signals a patent lie).

Consider too how the whole reasonable world is comfortable lampooning Trump's physical person (the spray-tan-orange hide, the suspicious depilation of the occipital hair, that slobbery whistle when his dentures fall ajar midspeech). The potential caricaturist lies in all of us. Charges of "lookism" sometimes get things backward; the foul portrait follows from the moral failure, not vice versa. The same set of physical features might inspire exactly opposite emotional responses (endearing vs. repulsive, though the systematic hair depletion gestures toward an ethical failure, a self-mutilating vanity perhaps, impossible

to redeem). In any case, it wouldn't be possible to argue, as Bell-Villada tries, that Nabokov maintains a hard line about looks making the man, or that, like Rand, he consistently valorizes glamorous aristocrats as an ideal human type. In "The Admiralty Spire" (1933), Nabokov explicitly derides the glamour-mongering typical of certain political thrillers and romance novels. The story's narrator discovers too much of himself, a rendition of his own youthful love affair, in such a novel, and he writes the author to expose the air of "pretentious fabrication" in the book.[45] The offending novel includes "an elegant young man, with his hair parted *à l'anglaise* exactly in the middle of his small, lacquered-looking head,"[46] a member of an "exquisitely cultured beau monde."[47] And the narrator deflates the pretty illusion by countering with his own authentic memories of the affair:

> Today, my memory reacts with irony to the breast-pocket handkerchief and white spats of those days, but, on the other hand, can in no way reconcile the remembered torments of adolescent shaving with your [character's] "smooth opaque pallor." And I shall leave on your conscience his Lermontovian lusterless eyes and aristocratic profile, as it is impossible to discern much today because of an unexpected increase in fleshiness.[48]

This story better reflects Nabokov's aesthetic manner. Bell-Villada's conclusion is exactly backward, 180 degrees from the truth.

45 Vladimir Nabokov, "The Admiralty Spire," in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: 2008), 350.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 351.

48 Ibid., 350.

THUMBNAIL SIDEBAR

In the chapter "On Their Nasty Side," Bell-Villada singles out *The Gift* as "particularly rife with this sort of thing."[49] Amid the catalogue of instances in which Nabokov behaved poorly in public life and betrayed insensitivity in his fiction, Bell-Villada cites nine "selective" examples from the novel, one of which contains a telling typo. He quotes the description of an "elderly, nosy-faced [*sic*] beggar woman with legs cut off at the pelvis,"[50] but himself truncates the line misleadingly, stepping on the description's tone: this "*rosy*-faced beggar woman […] was set down like a bust at the foot of a wall and was selling paradoxical shoelaces."[51] Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev (FGC) observes this woman just as he's about to board a bus, where he sees a pair of sexy legs debarking, or, in FGC's phrase, "a pair of charming silk legs" (the shoelace peddler's phantom limbs?). He continues, "We know of course that this has been worn threadbare by the efforts of a thousand male writers, but nevertheless down they came, these legs — and deceived: the face was revolting."[52] Feminists will understandably scowl. And both descriptions precede a passage in which FGC reflects on his pathetic circumstances, the drudgery of his work as a tutor, and the world's indiffer-

49 Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov,* 149.

50 Nabokov, quoted in Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov,* 149.

51 Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 163 (my italics).
Nabokov is surely no realist — not in the usual sense of the term. Weighing the similar nastiness of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire,* Bell-Villada exonerates these novels because "the unreliable narrator is already nasty by nature, [and] such perverse verbal sallies belong ipso facto to his overall make-up and their humor is thus intimately bound up with the entire book-length joke" (Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov,* 149). Also recall that Bell-Villada would excuse Nabokov's bruising style if it were "emanating from, and imbued with, the spirit of a bitter yet sensitive misanthrope, outraged at the morally and socially grotesque nature of his fellow citizens and human brethren" (ibid.). Recognizing only satire or naturalism, he can't see Nabokov's unclassifiable, *sui generis* absurdism for what it is.

52 Nabokov, *The Gift,* 163.

ence to his self-professed talent. The passage bears citing in full:

> What he should be really teaching was that mysterious and refined thing which he alone — out of ten thousand, a hundred thousand, perhaps even a million men — knew how to teach: for example — multi-level thinking: you look at a person and you see him as clearly as if he were fashioned of glass and you were the glass blower, while at the same time without in the least impinging upon that clarity you notice some trifle on the side — such as the similarity of the telephone receiver's shadow to a huge, slightly crushed ant, and (all this simultaneously) the convergence is joined by a third thought — the memory of a sunny evening at a Russian small railway station[— all this] while your mind runs around the outside of your own words and along the inside of those of your interlocutor.[53]

He turns his gaze outward, as it were, to note a second instructional topic:

> A piercing pity — for the tin box in a waste patch, for the cigarette card from the series *National Costumes* trampled in the mud, for the poor, stray word repeated by the kind-hearted, weak, loving creature who has just been scolded for nothing — for all the trash of life which by means of a momentary alchemic distillation […] is turned into something valuable and eternal. Or else [a third topic]: the constant feeling that our days here are only pocket money, farthings clinking in the dark, and that somewhere is stocked the real wealth, from which life should know how to get dividends in the shape of dreams, tears of happiness, distant mountains.[54]

53 Ibid., 163–64.
54 Ibid., 164.

The self-celebration, palatable in Whitman, here might make democratic Americans squirm and cringe, but the passage still continues:

> All this and much more […] he would have been able to teach, and teach well, to anyone who wanted it, but no one wanted it — and no one could, but it was a pity, he would have charged a hundred marks an hour, the same as certain professors of music. And at the same time he found it amusing to refute himself: all this was nonsense, the shadows of nonsense, presumptuous dreams. I am simply a poor young Russian selling the surplus from a gentleman's upbringing, while scribbling verses in my spare time, that's the total of my little immortality. But even this shade of multifaceted thought, this play of the mind with its own self, had no prospective pupils.[55]

The closing rebuttal graciously deflates all the high-flown self-pity (which is nevertheless marvelously imagined and shaded with earthy tenderness). The portrait of FGC is nuanced, the text of the novel glinting with details, by turns poignant, deep, only occasionally boring, well worth a reader's attention (parts of *The Gift* are as good as anything you will ever read). One thing that mars the text is the outsized role allotted to the narrator's poetry, which sometimes erupts from the prose unannounced, rhyming stanzas camouflaged amid workaday paragraphs. Nabokov's poetry always sounds a bit arch to my ear, and here the poeticizing spoils the novel's beginning and end. But to cull, from the long sequence quoted above, a single "offensive" half sentence, to conclude that Nabokov's "nastiness" is identical to Rand's, is not just uncharitable, but facile and inaccurate. It's possible to read widely but never well.[56]

55 Ibid.

56 Weirdly, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* prefigures exactly this phenomenon of poor, prejudicial reading. Late in the novel, V. reports one of Sebas-

What it boils down to, for Bell-Villada, is that Nabokov, like Rand, saw himself and his (male) heroes as *Übermenschen,* Nietzsche's innately gifted and genetically blessed superhumans who rule by natural right over the herd. In the two snippet-view discussions of Nabokov's *The Gift* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,* Bell-Villada concludes, "The fictional authors in these two novels of ideas correspond in many ways to La Rand's high and mighty heroes. Like Roark, Galt, et al., they too are handsome men of genius and fortitude, 'nobles' in both the moral and the social senses of the world [sic], set upon by 'social' demands on the part of lesser breeds[….] And of course they exemplify Nietzsche's conception of the Superman."[57] Barbs and gibes notwithstanding, Nabokov's distraught narrator in "Tyrants Destroyed" would appear to represent the opposite case. Owing to his self-professed faith in humanity's good, he is consigned to lead "a hard, lonely life, always indigent, in shabby lodgings," buoyed only by "the obscure sensation of [his] real home being just around the corner."[58] This narrator is more underground man than *Übermensch.*

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tian's (feminist-baiting) maxims: "He used to say […] that if you looked well at the prettiest girl while she was [spouting commonplace ideas], you were sure to find some minute blemish in her beauty, corresponding to her habits of thought" (Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,* 149). A few pages later, this disclosure pays out when V. notices the protruding teeth of his otherwise beautiful but temperamentally clichéd hostess. Bell-Villada, seizing upon perceived minor flaws in novels of disagreeable ideas, appears to practice a similar sort of principled fault-finding.

57 Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov,* 73. Bell-Villada seems to conflate the novelist Sebastian Knight, who is dead, with his half brother, V., who is the clumsier, much less suave writer/narrator of Sebastian's biography (which is the novel we're reading). One of the few glimpses we get of V.'s appearance arrives very late in the book, as he's interviewing Sebastian's attractive mistress: seated beside her on a bench, he says, "As the bench was very short, and I am rather — well — on the sturdy side — her shoulder touched mine" (171). Sebastian, too, is portrayed as attractive to women, but louche and Proustian, and prone to reprehensible behavior (he cheats on his girlfriend, breaking her heart and his). Neither character has the physique or indomitable will of an *Übermensch,* much less of a Randian hero.

58 Nabokov, "Tyrants Destroyed," 440.

In fact, at two junctures in "Tyrants Destroyed," it's possible to hear precise echoes of Nietzsche's philosophy. The narrator describes how the Ruler looms large in his (confabulated) memories of his brother's cohort, endowed now with "the kind of somber, concentrated will deeply conscious of its sullen self, which in the end molds a giftless person into a triumphant monster."[59] That solipsistic "concentrated will," fixated on its own selfhood, evokes Nietzsche's idea of the will to power, an anarchic reveling in self-plenitude and self-potentiality that gleefully seeks out conflict and surmounts obstacles (trampling the meek underfoot). And later, to describe the Ruler's capacity for memory, the narrator mentions, for comparison, a famous writer who had at last ascended to the mountaintop of literary fame; when that writer considers the squalor of his past in the light of his present fame and "sumptuous" straights, he experiences a "vital, romantic thrill": "That initial insignificance, that penumbra of poetry and pain, in which the young artist is on a par with a million such insignificant fellow beings, now lures him and fills him with excitement and gratitude — to his destiny, to his craft — and to his own creative will."[60] Note how the writer, far from regretting those past deprivations, relishes them, as narrative testimony of his singular talent. This attitude toward time approaches Nietzsche's notions of eternal recurrence and/or *amor fati:* the conscious volitional embrace of every iota of one's lived experience, down to the last ingrown nose hair, converting the phrase "It was" to "I wanted it thus."[61] The parting reference to "creative will" shows the link between eternal recurrence and the will to power, the affirmation of both being prerequisites for *Übermensch* status. But of course, here the field marks of the superior being belong to the ludicrous Ruler.

59 Ibid., 442.

60 Ibid., 450.

61 Nietzsche, quoted in Michael Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche: Problems and Perspectives* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 128. One presumes such an affirmation would have to extend to, say, the results of the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections.

The Asymptote of Objectivity

If the Nietzschean connections in "Tyrants Destroyed" seem tenuous or far-fetched, then you're well prepared for Michael Rodgers's *Nabokov and Nietzsche: Problems and Perspectives* (2018), the third recent book to touch on the Rand/Nabokov twinship nexus (through the eyehole of Nietzsche). Rodgers's book is in some ways the most admirable of the lot — assiduously researched, bursting with attributions, the bibliography has the heft of a chapter — but it too is seriously flawed. The book leads scrupulously nowhere, as if it were a dissertation that no one had the heart to refuse.

Rodgers reads Nabokov's work through the lens of Nietzsche's philosophy, which he reduces to tag phrases, such as "the will to power," "eternal recurrence," "transvaluation of values," and "perspectivism," each of which occasions a separate chapter, paired with an apposite fiction. Rodgers cites from the primary texts sparingly, sussing out most of Nabokov's passages that emit a loose Nietzschean resonance, but he doesn't skimp on the secondary research — with the unfortunate consequence that he is often outclassed by his sources (like the eminent critic Michael Wood, who outclasses most everyone[1]). The resulting

1 Wood contributes a back cover blurb to Rodgers's book, calling it "subtle and intelligent," "a series of astute readings."

comparisons have a rigid linearity; for each of Nietzsche's "concepts," Rodgers examines a different fiction from Nabokov, here a novel, there a short story, and this structural method makes for brittle connections, leaves Rodgers prone to oversights and regrettable contradictions. It also manages to make both writers' works, Nabokov's and Nietzsche's, a little less exciting.

One thing Rodgers understands very well is that Nabokov's characters are no supermen:

> There are numerous examples in Nabokov's works where characters perpetuate the Nietzschean values of pride, daring, intelligence, aesthetic inclination, a seeming indifference to the welfare of others, and distrust, disregard even, of social conventions[….] Yet, there is seldom neat assimilation with Nietzsche's views — none of the protagonists fully succeed in convincing the reader of a robust superiority or irrevocable difference from the rest of society[….] Nabokov does not simply glorify the conception of the *Übermensch*.[2]

In Rodgers's long list of such characters, villains (like Humbert) mingle with martyrs (like Nabokov's chess master, Luzhin, a victim of his own genius) and paragons (like father and philosopher Adam Krug in *Bend Sinister*). And Rodgers helpfully locates the Nabokovian fiction that responds to the *Übermensch* syndrome most directly: the little-known short story "Ultima Thule," in which an ordinary businessman experiences a radical epiphany that endows him with "superhuman knowledge of the ultimate truth,"[3] the meaning of life itself. He roars uninterruptedly for five full minutes (according to the most credible report) in the immediate wake of the revelation, and when the roaring ceases, the man, named Adam Falter, is utterly changed: now oblivious to social conventions (he urinates on the stairs),

2 Michael Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche: Problems and Perspectives* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 129.

3 Vladimir Nabokov, "Ultima Thule," in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 521.

bemused by all earthly phenomena, and beyond good and evil. Per the story, "Falter had utterly lost the knack of loving anyone, of feeling pity, if only for himself, of experiencing kindness and, on occasion, compassion for the soul of another, of habitually serving, as best he could, the cause of good, if only that of his own standard, just as he had lost the knack of shaking hands."[4] Elsewhere, we learn of "Falter's basic trait," prior to his transformation: "The passion and power of his 'volitional substance' [a.k.a. will to power], as […] poor Adolf put it in a quite different context."[5] Touches such as these lead Rodgers to conclude, "Falter's *Übermensch* characterization is explicit throughout."[6]

Far from being supremely empowered, the guy becomes an invalid, relying on his sister and brother-in-law to steer him through the world (they try to profit from his legend, sort of like Nietzsche's opportunistic sister, though Rodgers doesn't mention it). The story's narrator, recently widowed, in a state of crazed bereavement, seeks out Falter to try to get him to impart his secret, his solution to the "riddle of the universe,"[7] and the two engage in an exhausting interview — a virtually disembodied philosophical dialogue, distantly comparable to Galt's monological radio address (but minus all the tendentious seething; Falter favors placid convolutions, parables, and mysteries). The talk proceeds *via negativa,* with Falter explaining why the secret is unimpartable to an ordinary human mind (the revelation is supposedly lethal for everyone but Falter). The narrator can't decide, and doesn't allow us to decide, whether Falter is a legitimate seer or a bogus prophet, but as if the ambiguity and comic tone weren't enough evidence of Nabokov's antipathy to Nietzsche's supermania, Rodgers tallies the story's fine-print divergences from Nietzsche's script (the role of chance in Falter's discovery, Falter's ambivalence regarding *amor fati*), including a literal-minded dilation on Falter's comparison of himself to

4 Nabokov, "Ultima Thule," quoted in Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 129.
5 Nabokov, "Ultima Thule," 504, misquoted in Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 126.
6 Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 126.
7 Nabokov, "Ultima Thule," 509.

a monkey who draws the winning numbers in an Indochinese lottery.[8] For all the facetiousness, the narrative is anchored to the most dire emotional pain — the narrator's loss of his wife, the larger fact of human mortality, which leaves him totally unhinged ("sort of stamping and even dancing with pain"[9] as he leaves her deathbed: the entire story is framed as a colloquy with the wife's spirit). This collision of the comic and tragic, the absurd and the horrible, is Nabokov's wonted style. Falter is indeed Nabokov's answer to the *Übermensch,* and that answer is intellectually taxing, lighthearted, and deadly serious mirth.[10]

Expect from Nabokov no Randian coronation of the Elect.

For Rodgers, the main bones of contention between Nabokov and Nietzsche lie in their respective attitudes toward pity and the afterlife: both elemental for the former's art, both verboten for the latter's philosophy. But even here, Rodgers labors to reconcile the parties: Nabokov's pity, he claims, is a uniquely aestheticized experience, not the garden variety emotion,[11] while his otherworldly intimations are duly nested in this-worldly phenomena[12] — and thus still consistent with Nietzsche's iconoclasm and his materialism, respectively.

Likewise, Nabokov's "critique" of the materialist *Übermensch* is itself, for Rodgers, an enactment of the Nietzschean

8 Ibid., 519. Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 127–28.

9 Nabokov, "Ultima Thule," 501.

10 The narrator of Vladimir Nabokov, "Terror" (1927), in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage, 1997, 2008), also has a brush with Nietzschean Reality (eleven years prior to Sartre's *La nausée*). Without warning or explanation, the cozy fit between words and phenomena slips: "I saw the actual essence of all things […] I understood the horror of a human face[….] I am convinced that nobody ever saw the world the way I saw it during those moments, in all its terrifying nakedness and terrifying absurdity" (177). Unlike Falter, this narrator experiences the glimpse of the Truth as ghastly, nightmarish, and intolerable. Only the death of his girlfriend intervenes; ironically, tragically, the simple fact of "human grief" restores him (178). Note the close opposition to and near inversion of the case in "Ultima Thule," where the narrator's bereavement drives him *to seek out* Falter and the Truth.

11 Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 131.

12 Ibid., 143.

project: "In his divergence from Nietzsche, Nabokov surpasses him in the very way that […] the *Übermensch* must surpass man."[13] Convolutions notwithstanding, Rodgers doesn't come across as a neutral observer of the two writers' crisscrossed metaphysics. The book Dopplers strangely. The early chapters show how Nabokov follows, to his detriment, the Nietzschean grain: Rodgers's lens exposes something irritating or vexing in Nabokov's fiction. Yet, the later chapters, which show Nabokov's transmutation of Nietzschean precepts, cast the Russian in a more flattering light, as he infuses Nietzschean tendencies with a special warmth and large-heartedness. The chapters rig up an evaluative spectrum, with inverted poles: a passage from snubbing Nabokov while elevating Nietzsche to snubbing Nietzsche while elevating Nabokov. (The writers swap hats and take turns in the role of evil twin.)

In one of these late chapters, Rodgers touches on another irreconcilable difference between Nabokov and Rand, and thus rectifies another critical problem in Bell-Villada's assault: against Rand's Objectivism stands Nabokov's trademark unreliable narration (or *narrational instability*), which Rodgers gives the Nietzschean name of "perspectivism." Simply put, perspectivism proceeds from the devastating recognition that all truths are local (that is, bogus); multiple perspectives on the Truth and Reality are not just possible but inescapable. Rodgers links this epistemic conundrum to the "internal authorship" problem in Nabokov's fiction, emphasizing the case of *Pale Fire,* whose narrational peculiarities have fueled a long-running debate among Nabokov scholars. The novel consists (primarily) of a 999-line rhyming poem (by American John Shade) and its endnoted commentary (by Slavic immigrant Charles Kinbote). Both of these parts relate an autobiographical narrative: Shade's poem tells of his daughter's death and his own near-death experience; Kinbote's commentary, of his personal ouster from the imaginary land of Zembla, where he was beloved king (Kinbote is insane; his endnotes, their bulk, dwarf the poem, like a para-

13 Ibid., 134.

site that consumes its host). Details subtle and unsubtle in the text have led scholars to posit two competing "single-author" theories, in which either Shade has invented Kinbote or Kinbote has invented Shade. But at least three other interpretive theories circulate: the characters are distinct people, the novel's puzzle is unsolvable, and a ghost is conspiring behind the scenes to steer the novel's events (a theory hatched by Nabokov's eminent biographer Brian Boyd).[14] For Rodgers, the perspectivist takeaway here is that all the theories are equally plausible; the one we prefer will reflect our own priorities and values as readers.[15] Rodgers tacitly applauds this phenomenon as a sign of what's liberating or generative about literary reading. His chapter ends on an upbeat note (mind the clunky phrasing): in disabusing readers of unitary interpretations, "Nabokov can be seen to replicate Nietzsche's privileging of interpreting human experience only in life-affirming ways."[16]

By Nietzsche's logic, everything's a lie, so you might as well embrace the one that makes you happiest.

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14 Rodgers never mentions the DeRewal/Roth hypothesis, from a 2009 paper, in which Kinbote is Shade's schizophrenic alter ego, the Hyde to his Jekyll. See Tiffany DeRewal and Matthew Roth, "John Shade's Duplicate Selves: An Alternative Shadean Theory of *Pale Fire*," *Nabokov Online Journal* 3 (2009), http://www.nabokovonline.com/uploads/2/3/7/7/23779748/v3_06_roth.pdf.

15 Maurice Couturier arrived at the same conclusion in his "'Which is to be master' in *Pale Fire*?" (1998): "[critics] do not, properly speaking, interpret the text; they analyse it more or less scrupulously according to their own metaphysical or aesthetic preconceptions, according also to what they know or think they know about the author's expectations and values." Until very recently, the article was readily available on *Zembla,* a website devoted to Nabokov studies, but it fails to appear in Rodgers's impressive bibliography, and Rodgers merely gestures toward Couturier's related essay, "The Near-Tyranny of the Author: *Pale Fire,*" thus side-stepping the proximity of their positions. The Nietzschean lens appears to add little to the debate surrounding the novel. See Maurice Couturier, "The Near-Tyranny of the Author: *Pale Fire*," in *Nabokov and His Fiction: New Perspectives,* ed. Julian W. Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 54–72.

16 Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 112.

This is how postmodern perspectivism gives cover to Rand followers and Trump supporters. There's no wrong if there's no right.

THUMBNAIL SIDEBAR: Toward the Ultimate Insight

The Gift demonstrates Rodgers's perspectivism in two ways, one performative and subtle and closely analogous to the case of *Pale Fire,* the other so obvious and literal it boomerangs around to defy comparison with Nietzsche at all. For orientational reasons, let's look first at the latter, about which Gene Bell-Villada also has his say.

Recall that Bell-Villada is no fan of *The Gift* as a whole and the *Life of Chernyshevski,* in particular. He finds the biography, with its zig-zag motival structure, "highly opaque," also "exceedingly mannered, precious, and filled with supercilious sarcasm."[17] He's not entirely wrong. Lacking the crucial and appropriately foregrounded datum that NC's novel fueled the Bolshevik Revolution, the chapter is bewildering; at least, it was for me when I first read the book twenty-odd years ago. But readers generous enough to read *The Gift* twice — Nabokov's recommendation — will likely find the biography less baffling, partly because a clarifying composite portrait of the biographee emerges in the chapter that immediately follows the *Life.*

This chapter (the book's fifth) samples from the reviews of Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev's (FGC) work in the Russian émigré press, and these assorted reviews serve to literally embody the perspectivism that Rodgers describes. Just as real-world critics squabble over the authorship problem in *Pale Fire,* these (fictitious) reviewers constellate around

17 Gene Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov, Ayn Rand, and the Libertarian Mind: What the Russian-American Odd Pair Can Tell Us about Some Values, Myths and Manias Widely Held Most Dear* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2015), 136–37.

FGC's biography. The first reviewer is Valentin Linyov, writing for an émigré paper in Poland. Sympathetic to NC and hostile to FGC, Linyov actually gets his facts twisted: he offers an error-prone capsule summary of NC's life, as a putative antidote to FGC's scrupulous opacity (all those inversions of figure and ground). Most egregiously, Linyov writes that NC's mock execution was in fact a real death-dealing execution[18] (it wasn't), but he also deadpans some less conspicuously bogus factoids: he suggests that *"What Are We to Do?"* was composed in Moscow (actually written in the Petersburg prison); claims "Lyubov' Yegorovna Lobachevski […] infected [NC] with a love for art," when, per the biography, Nadezhda Yegorovna *Lobodovski* persuaded NC of art's inferiority to life; and complains that the biography omits the date and place of NC's birth, though this information arrives (ironically) in *Life's* last paragraph ("July 12th, in the third hour of morning," in Saratov).[19] These factual errors don't really interfere with the "truth" about NC's political legacy — his role in fomenting Bolshevism — but it's understandable if readers lose the thread of the actual history amid all of the distortions and shifting parallax.

Bell-Villada passes explicit judgment on these fictional paratexts (pure "indulgence"), though he acknowledges that these "dreamt-up reviews […] do hit the nail on the head."[20] He mentions the above review as a nail-sinking example (oblivious to its factual errors and assorted howlers), but it's likely that he would sympathize, as a champion of cultural-historical criticism, with the two ampler reviews that follow. The first, by Christopher Mortus, finds "something […] profoundly tactless, something jarring and offensive" in FGC's biography, and he observes how "that golden time has passed irretrievably when the critic or reader could be interested above all by the 'artistic' quality or exact degree of talent of a

18 Nabokov, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 302.
19 Ibid., 300–301.
20 Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov,* 137.

book."[21] The second, by a "Professor Anuchin of Prague University," is the most vicious, with, ironically, the most insight to offer on FGC's performance. Anuchin takes FGC to task for the ahistorical quality of his work, and he bemoans its lack of a consistent ideological perspective:

> The point of view is "everywhere and nowhere"; not only that, but as soon as the reader, as he descends the course of a sentence, thinks he has at last sailed into a quiet backwater, into a realm of ideas which may be contrary to those of Chernyshevski but are apparently shared by the author — and therefore can serve as a basis for the reader's judgment and guidance — the author gives him an unexpected fillip and knocks the imaginary prop from under him, so that he is once more unaware as to whose side [FGC] is on in his campaign against Chernyshevski — whether he is on the side of the advocates of art for art's sake, or of the government, or of some other of Chernyshevski's enemies whom the reader does not know.[22]

Anuchin neglects or never considers those moments when FGC expresses some sympathy for the utilitarian devil, for NC's solitude and anonymity following his exile, and for his quotidian humanity that gets swallowed up by his revolutionary legend. It's this ambivalence, this equivocality and vacillation, that causes FGC's work to draw ire from both communist and monarchist reviewers (also imaginary): where the communists see only "vile slander"[23] of NC, the tsarists detect an unflattering portrait of the old regime's criminal justice system[24] (that bumbling and cruel mock execution). Nabokov captures the way in which critics read

21 Nabokov, *The Gift*, 303.
22 Ibid., 306–7.
23 Ibid., 309.
24 Ibid., 308.

his avatar's work in their own image, in the light of their local agendas (just like critics of *Pale Fire,* per Rodgers), and he thwarts efforts to pigeonhole his narrator with regard to morality or ideology.

For the record, here is FGC's explicit verdict on Chernyshevski:

> [FGC] tried to sort out the mishmash of philosophical ideas of the time, and it seemed to him that in the very roll call of names, in their burlesque consonance, there was manifested a kind of sin against thought, a mockery of it, a blemish of the age, when some extravagantly praised Kant, others *Kont* (Comte), others again Hegel or Schlegel. And on the other hand he began to comprehend by degrees that such uncompromising radicals as Chernyshevski, with all their ludicrous and ghastly blunders, were, no matter how you looked at it, real heroes in their struggle with the governmental order of things (which was even more noxious and more vulgar than was their own fatuity in the realm of literary criticism), and that other oppositionists, the liberals or the Slavophiles, who risked less, were by the same token worth less than these iron squabblers.[25]

Nabokov himself, as an artist, might well be perceived as Chernyshevski's "opposite number," yet his protagonist harbors a measure of human sympathy for even his adversary. And, contra Rodgers, Nabokov's take on perspectivism would appear to defy Nietzsche's radical relativism. Not all of the biography's reviews are equally valid. The first, by Linyov, is patently erroneous, and only one, a favorable review, meets with FGC's approval. A leading émigré poet, Koncheyev, "had his say in the literary annual *The Tower,*"[26] and after accounting for the ideological shock of FGC's biography,

25 Ibid., 202–3.
26 Ibid., 307.

he praises the work in terms that make the biographer flush with excitement:

> Alas! Among the emigration one will hardly scrape up a dozen people capable of appreciating the fire and fascination of this fabulously witty composition; and I would maintain that in today's Russia you could not find even one to appreciate it, if I had not happened to know of the existence of two such people, one living on the north bank of the Neva and the other — somewhere in distant Siberian exile.[27]

As if to dispel any air of gratuitous self-congratulation, FGC later has a long literary conversation with the reviewer, a proper dressing down as Koncheyev ticks off all the glitches and flaws in FGC's style and vision. (The conversation, first presented as actual, turns out to have been fanciful and imaginary, all in FGC's head.) Nonetheless, in this evident privileging of accounts, one *mostly right,* many *mostly wrong,* Nabokov proves less Nietzschean than Rodgers suggests.

Bell-Villada too believes some interpretive responses to be better, more *accurate,* than others. He just replaces the novel's hierarchy with one of his own (flawed) devising.

* * *

The other, performative instance of perspectivism in *The Gift* also boomerangs in such a way as to controvert Rodgers's Nietzschean latitude: it too argues for the recuperation of testability standards, however asymptotic, for interpretive conclusions. The case in point is Adam Weiner's perspectivist reading of FGC's biography, the crisis of internal authorship hashed out above (in "Evil Twin Quadrille"). Recall that Weiner believes the bogus biographer Strannolyubski

27 Ibid., 308.

to be a mask for NC's actual son Sasha. The problem with Weiner's sleuthing, however, is that *The Gift* itself exposes Strannolyubski as a cipher, a fiction, a made-up biographer. As FGC peruses those reviews of his biography, we see Professor Anuchin lay bare the deception: "Among the well-known authorities on Chernyshevski a nonexistent authority is cited, to whom the author pretends to appeal."[28] Shortly after, to mop up any lingering doubts as to the cipher's identity, Anuchin notes that, in FGC's work, "there are no factual untruths (if one does not count the fictitious 'Strannolyubski' already mentioned, two or three doubtful details, and a few slips of the pen)."[29] Weiner acknowledges this revelation, but loses sight of its significance.

If FGC has invented Strannolyubski, and if readers are alerted to the deception, then Strannolyubski makes a rather clumsy mask for an actual historical personage such as Sasha Chernyshevski. The reasoning would seem to be doomed by a kind of redundancy: because Anuchin unmasks Strannolyubski as FGC's plant, it seems gratuitous or illogical or just artistically awkward — *retarded* in the sense of *bent backward* — for Weiner to then unmask FGC's dummy as the historical Sasha. At best, the Sasha = Strannolyubski equation would amount to a transparent flight of FGC's fancy (not necessarily beyond the pale for Nabokov's fiction). And it's tempting to object that Weiner's reading violates the novel's epistemic coherence, distorting its character portraits (Sasha is too unstable to have written a lucid, elegant biography) or making a mockery of its emotional "realities" (FGC is a poorer artist and a cad for sporting with lives in this manner). We might say that Weiner's hypothesis lacks "artistic sense," as Nabokov called it in a short essay on the virtues of good readers.[30]

28 Ibid., 306.

29 Ibid., 307.

30 Vladimir Nabokov, "Good Readers and Good Writers," in *Lectures on Literature* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1981), 3.

For Rodgers, these eye-of-the-beholder objections — unresolvable quarrels over values, irrespective of evidence — are all that stand in the way of a total interpretive relativism. We might feel that one interpretive account yields a better, more artistically satisfying book than another account, but the difference is no more (and no less) than a feeling. And taking a page from Nietzsche, Rodgers encourages readers to privilege their own accounts, regardless of veracity: "The falseness of a judgment is to us not necessarily an objection to a judgment[. …] The question is to what extent it is life-advancing, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-breeding."[31]

At one point, Rodgers considers, in passing, a hypothetical case: someone arguing that *Lolita*'s Humbert Humbert is the real author of *Pale Fire* (or of *The Gift,* or of Rodgers's book for that matter). This viewpoint *"cannot be ruled out,* but has *absolutely no evidence* to validate it. As such, it would be considered a *poor perspective* based on this notably major 'con.'"[32] Rodgers recognizes the importance of evidence in lending credence to a "perspective," but seems to render lip service to the notion, because, rather than examining the evidentiary merits of each tendered "perspective" (which would be *hugely,* even *heroically,* expensive in cognitive terms), Rodgers settles for a Nietzschean workaround, granting the viability of any "perspective" that is "internally consistent enough to be statable."[33] This sets a pretty low bar for plausibility, and Rodgers's reluctance to banish even the most nonsensical theories (like the Humbert-authorship theory) from among the teeming "perspectives" begins to make the term itself meaningless. (It opens the door for conspiracy theories, fake news, executive-branch post-truths, and one-eye-shut undergraduate exegetical Hail Marys: the whole panoply of so-called reader responses. Strange that

31 Nietzsche, quoted in Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 109.
32 Ibid., 103 (my italics).
33 Ibid., 101.

literary studies should condone disciplinary malpractice.) What's more, such generosity, however endearing, is here both patronizing and hypocritical: Rodgers himself is marshaling evidence and trying to argue *reasonably* to persuade us of his conclusions.

Weiner's perspectivist reading of *The Gift* reveals how empirical reasoning (objectivity) defines the parameters for artistic sense (subjective response): the textual evidence in the novel sabotages his interpretive hypothesis. But brace yourself for some seriously costly cognitive expenditures. When Nietzsche describes the "perfect reader" as a "monster of courage and curiosity,"[34] I think that he had something like what follows in mind.

To establish the "real" identity of Strannolyubski, Weiner draws a thin but plausible connection between the bogus biography and a six-line sample of Sasha's poetry. The texts hold in common a general concern for NC's efforts to smother emotion with reason: the poem mentions the "affectionate heart in [NC's] breast," the biography mentions how NC "distilled his feelings in the alembics of logic."[35] By the same deductive process, Weiner concludes that Sasha is actually the author of the sonnet that enwraps FGC's biography: both poems contain the word "bitter," and the sonnet references a "child's care," as if written by a caring son.[36] Here, Weiner ignores two relevant textual details that, together, preclude Sasha's authorship of the sonnet.

The first omission, if rectified, might actually help Weiner's case. FGC tells us that the sonnet appeared in *Century* magazine in 1909 (five years before the crazed Sasha's death, "in the heat of wild inspiration," in Rome); it was published under the pseudonym "F.V.……ski,"[37] a likely reference to

34 Nietzsche, quoted in Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 155.

35 Nabokov, *The Gift,* quoted in Adam Weiner, *How Bad Writing Destroyed the World: Ayn Rand and the Literary Origins of the Financial Crisis* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 184.

36 Ibid., 184, 186.

37 Nabokov, *The Gift,* 300.

NC's godfather, "Fyod. Stef. Vyasovski," who also lent his name to a character in NC's unpublished "Evenings at Princess Starobelski's." Weiner never mentions that Sasha would, by his logic, have adopted two different pseudonyms, but notice how both have been stripped from history and bear godfatherly connotations. Even so, something in the text would have to motivate this reading, to clarify the artistic aptness of Sasha adopting not one but two pseudonyms. Ignoring the detail altogether leaves a hole in the argument.

Weiner's second omission is more damaging. In *The Gift*'s chapter 3, as work proceeds on the biography, FGC talks over his progress with his (brilliant) girlfriend, and he describes his structural plan: to compose "his biography in the shape of a ring, closed with the clasp of an *apocryphal sonnet* (so that the result would be not the form of a book, which by its finiteness is opposed to the circular nature of everything in existence, but a continuously curving, and thus infinite, sentence)."[38] The reference to circularity recalls a passage cited from Strannolyubski in the *Life,* regarding the roundness of truth: "truth's merry-go-round, for truth is always round [permitting a view of] the hump of truth; but no more."[39] And both passages then evoke the sonnet's depiction of a feminized Truth who "bends her head to fingers curved cupwise," and thus conceals from prying eyes "something she is holding there."[40] FGC's fingerprints are all over both the sonnet and the passages from Strannolyubski. The novel makes the connections explicit. Weiner might argue, more reasonably, that FGC *aims to imply* that Sasha is the author of both the sonnet and Strannolyubski's biography, that *FGC is aping* Sasha's poetic style in the former and echoing Sasha's themes in the latter.[41] But it doesn't follow logically (it's non-

38 Ibid., 204 (my italics).

39 Ibid., 244.

40 Ibid., 212.

41 Pertinent evidence, mentioned but unrecognized by Weiner, that FGC intends to impersonate Sasha is that he, FGC, calls the sonnet "mediocre but curious" (Nabokov, *The Gift,* 300); earlier, he appraises Sasha's poetry

sensical, in fact) to assert that Sasha *is* the bogus biographer "upon whom [FGC] most leans as a source of information,"[42] or that he has *actually written* the apocryphal sonnet, when explicit evidence points to FGC's authoring of both. Weiner's mistake, in short, is that he confuses the figurative and the literal dimensions of the text.

To account for an intimate detail in Strannolyubski's biography, concerning NC's prison lodgings (a green table has a sliding drawer with an unpainted bottom), Weiner goes so far as to speculate that only "a small child [i.e., Sasha] who had actually visited [NC] in prison" could have noticed such a detail, "assuming family visits were permitted."[43] Think about it: Weiner is here summoning unverifiable historical events to validate a hypothesis about a certifiably imaginary biographer's identity. He elides the difference between something putative (FGC's literary hijinks) and something accomplished (Sasha's actual life).

And Weiner says nothing at all of the significant tonal differences between Sasha's blunt poetry ("it's best to admit it's your fault") and Strannolyubski's lyrical prose ("alembics of logic") and/or the allegorical sonnet ("Truth bends her head to fingers curved cupwise").

But maybe the flimsiness of Weiner's "perspective" is most evident in what he believes it to account for. Immediately following the sonnet's sestet, in the first sentence of the biography, FGC comments on the odd epigraph: the shorn sonnet doesn't bar the reader's entry to the text, but rather might "provid[e] a secret link which would explain everything — if only man's mind could withstand the explanation."[44] Weiner believes "the secret link is that Chernyshevski's son has become his biographer."[45] This "secret" hardly seems to

with similar terms: the poems show "a gleam of talent," only one line in a quoted sample has "an authentic poetic ring" (Nabokov, *The Gift,* 298).

42 Weiner, *How Bad Writing Destroyed the World,* 183.

43 Ibid., 188.

44 Nabokov, *The Gift,* 212.

45 Weiner, *How Bad Writing Destroyed the World,* 185.

threaten the human faculty for cognition or tolerance for Truth (a "values" objection, per Rodgers). In fact, the mind-blowing revelation here refers to something that transpired just a page or two earlier (an "evidence" objection), at the end of *The Gift*'s chapter 3.

FGC meets up with a crackpot novelist named Busch — who ultimately helps FGC to publish his biography — and Busch, droning on awkwardly, describes his own novel-in-progress: "the tragedy of a philosopher who has discovered the absolute formula," namely, that "the whole is equal to the smallest part of the whole, the sum of the parts is equal to one part of the sum." Following this earth-shattering discovery, "the human personality can no longer go on walking and talking."[46] Busch's novel depicts something virtually identical to Nabokov's "Ultima Thule," in which Adam Falter accidentally solves "the riddle of the universe" and sheds his identity, becoming weirdly posthuman. Weiner doesn't mention Busch at all, and thus he never notices how small or frail, by comparison, his own account of the sonnet's "secret" is. Of course, Weiner's "perspective" is valuable insofar as it spotlights neglected elements of the novel; it widens the field of our attention. Some of his minor discoveries might well be pursued in other readings, but his hypothesis doesn't therefore constitute a viable "perspective." Artistic sense is not wholly separate from empirical observation and logical reasoning.

The Nietzschean in Rodgers believes otherwise. When he notes that perspectivism allows for the notion of "hierarchy," he refers only to certain operational assumptions, slighting the role of empirical evidence. Nietzsche's "perspective that is self-conscious of its being a perspective is privileged"; "perspectives that attempt to dominate reality [such as Brian Boyd's reading of *Pale Fire*] are less valid than those that accept their own conditionality."[47] Rodgers derives

46 Nabokov, *The Gift,* 209–10.
47 Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 103–4.

some of this logic from the work of Alexander Nehamas, on Nietzsche's perspectivism, and he shares a quote to the effect that all attention is selective: "We bring some things into the foreground and distance others into the background. We must assign a greater relative importance to some things than we do to others, and still others we must completely ignore. We do not, and cannot, begin (or end) with 'all the data.'"[48] As if, therefore, one partial view is as good as another.

Nabokov's own thoughts on the subject read like a gentle admonition of such epistemological pessimism. In his lecture on Kafka, from the *Lectures on Literature,* he offers perhaps the clearest deconstruction of *objective reality* ever recorded. In a narrative example, almost childlike in its simplicity, he invites us to imagine three individuals passing along the same stretch of country road: "a humdrum tourist" from the city, a "botanical taxonomist," and a "local farmer."[49] Each of these people will experience the landscape differently: the first mostly blind to his surroundings, thinking only of his destination; the second, making a close inventory of the specific trees and grasses; the third, with intimate local knowledge of seasonal changes and past events, his landscape awash in "warm connection[s]" and thick with memories.[50] From this list of travelers, Nabokov goes on to consider the passage of any other conceivable person:

> In every case it would be a world completely different from the rest since the most objective words *tree, road, flower, sky, barn, thumb, rain* have, in each, totally different subjective connotations. Indeed, this subjective life is so strong that it makes an empty and broken shell of the so-called objective existence. The only way back to objective reality is the following one: we can take these several

48 Nehamas, quoted in Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 103.

49 Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1981), 252–53.

50 Ibid., 253.

> individual worlds, mix them thoroughly together, scoop up a drop of that mixture, and call it *objective reality.*[51]

His contempt for such a solution evident, he continues:

> We may taste in it a particle of madness if a lunatic passed through that locality, or a particle of complete and beautiful nonsense if a man has been looking at a lovely field and imagining upon it a lovely factory producing buttons or bombs; but on the whole these mad particles would be diluted in the drop of objective reality that we hold up to the light in our test tube. Moreover, this *objective reality* will contain something that transcends optical illusions and laboratory tests. It will have elements of poetry, of lofty emotion, of energy and endeavor (and even here the button king may find his rightful place), of pity, pride, passion — and the craving for a thick steak at the recommended roadside eating place.[52]

God's perspective would presumably be the sum, then, of all possible perceptions — present, past, future, and hypothetical — of that landscape, plus at least one more, unimaginable to mortals.

But Nabokov doesn't necessarily or therefore advocate a total epistemological relativism. In a 1962 interview, when pressed on the subject, he said,

> Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information; and as specialization. If we take a lily, for instance, or any other kind of natural object, a lily is more real to a naturalist than it is to an ordinary person. But it is still more real to a botanist. And yet another stage of reality is reached with that botanist who is a specialist in lilies. You can get nearer

51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.

> and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it's hopeless. So that we live surrounded by more or less ghostly objects.[53]

Nabokov again stresses how Truth and Reality ultimately elude us. However, he allows for a hierarchy of perceptions: the specialist in lilies gets us "nearer and nearer […] to reality." That is, Reality, the Truth, for Nabokov, is like an asymptote: something we can approach, with concerted effort, but can never ultimately reach.[54]

Of course, this is a long way from the epistemological monad of Rand's Reality. But it lays the foundation for a modest rebuttal to the hermeneutic assumptions of Rodgers and/or Nehamas. Namely, even though "all" of the data might forever elude us, we can *try:* we can try to encompass, if not the "all," as much data as possible. Some observers will

53 Nabokov, quoted in Priscilla Meyer, *Nabokov and Indeterminacy: The Case of "The Real Life of Sebastian Knight"* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 12.

54 In "Rereading Barthes and Nabokov," which relates her gradual disenchantment with French theory, Zadie Smith says the same thing, reaches the same conclusion. She writes, "In Nabokov's portrait of subjectivity you can still decipher by degrees. The lily can be *more or less real,* and there *exists* an ultimate reality even if we can never know it. Still, we can come close[….] There can be ever more accurate readings of the lily. And there can be, consequently, philistine misreadings"; Zadie Smith, "Rereading Barthes and Nabokov," in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 48. Because her essay predates this book by several years, and because Smith is widely and justifiably revered, it would be prudent, and maybe cowardly, for me to attribute the insight to her alone. Cover my nakedness with the mantle of her authority, so to speak. Unfortunately, only a long lag in the publication process allowed me to discover Smith's essay at all, so it would simply be untrue to suggest that she led me to this conclusion. I discuss Smith's essay more fully below, in "Truth, Lies, Education, Politics."

get closer to and deal more reasonably with the "all" than others, and this is what makes one account "better," more adequate, than another. It gets us closer to the asymptote of Reality, grants a fuller view of Truth's dorsal hump.

Rodgers himself inadvertently demonstrates how it is that some interpretations fail to be plausible or reasonable. In a footnote related to his discussion of *The Gift,* he cites a by-now-familiar passage in which a character is said to be "afraid of space, or more exactly, he was afraid of slipping into a different dimension,"[55] from which Rodgers concludes, "Nabokov, here, appears to satirize [Nikolay] Chernyshevsky's supposed inability to entertain the transcendent possibilities of matter."[56] This line has a nice ring to it, but in the novel, the character who fears dimensional slippage is NC's crazed son Sasha, not NC himself. The misconstrued passage arrives on the novel's page 297, in a paragraph concerning Sasha's hard-knock life: "After 1882 [Sasha's] mental ailment was aggravated, and more than once he had to be placed in a nursing home. He was afraid of space, or more exactly, he was afraid of slipping into a different dimension."[57] Rodgers's "perspective," on this minor point, is not just specious but erroneous and empirically falsifiable.

Funny that the ultimate discovery, in Busch's novel and Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and his "Ultima Thule," should involve a leveling of all hierarchies, which would presumably apply to perspectivist interpretations of difficult novels, erasing all difference between wrong and right. Even so, this insight, as Nabokov figures it, isn't assimilable by human intelligence and can't be glibly conscripted into hermeneutic practice. All arguments (as Adam Falter warns) emanate from and are constrained by the focalizing (hierarchical) ambit of human cognition. If total relativism were to reign, communication itself would be not just futile

55 Nabokov, *The Gift,* quoted in Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 142.
56 Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 142.
57 Nabokov, *The Gift,* 297.

> but impossible. Language would fail. Nothing would be sayable.

In concentrating on the plurality of readers' responses, Rodgers loses sight of how perspectivist techniques typically operate within the narrative, slighting their ontological consequences. In Nabokov's fiction, perspectivist discoveries, stemming from metamorphic details, serve to reveal that parts of the narrative are hoaxes of a sort, illusory: that some of the narrative sequences are twice fictional, contrivances of a character's pen, not "lived" events. For example, if Kinbote invents Shade, then neither Shade nor his daughter dies, because neither ever really lived. If Shade invents Kinbote, then Shade never dies (his murder is described, for obvious reasons, only in the endnote commentary: the poem could not itself chronicle the poet's murder), because there is no Kinbote who survives him to tell the tale. The narrative reality proves to be hinged, destabilized, concealing trapdoors. Our understanding of the novel's plot is in flux.

This focus on the *textual,* rather than Rodgers's *hermeneutic,* implications of "perspectivism" might make it sound as if Nabokov is toying with readers, playing us for fools.

Rodgers suspects as much earlier in his book. In a chapter titled "The Will to Disempower," and another on the morality of *Lolita,* Rodgers takes issue with Nabokov's narrative trickery. He makes a distinction between "close reading" and the kind of "vigilant reading" required to appreciate, say, Nabokov's 1951 ghost story "The Vane Sisters": the story ends with an acrostic, an all-but-invisible coded communication from a deceased title sister, signaling that the narrative is literally haunted. What vexes Rodgers is something that we might call Nabokov's *pointillism,* his tendency to plant crucial narrative details in a way that reverses standard reckonings of figure and ground in literature. For Rodgers, such devices are booby traps, a kind of

"bad faith" authorial practice, requiring "defensive vigilance in reading."[58]

Gene Bell-Villada would share Rodgers's antipathy for the pointillistic elements of Nabokov's fiction, which are part and parcel of Nabokov's empiricism (the diametrical opposite of Rand's "way of knowing," but equally addled). For Bell-Villada, Nabokov is not just a bully, but hamstrung by a mental defect: "The Russian–American novelist seemed to suffer from some sort of metonymic disorder whereby he could see every detail yet could scarcely understand abstract thought, let alone produce it."[59] Bell-Villada's Nabokov "was not at all a thinker, and his own attempts at thought, when not schematic or simplistic, are unusually murky, delusional, and inept."[60] He cites a single short passage from the bulging *Ada* to make his case, but his complaint is virtually identical to that of Mr. Goodman, the unauthorized biographer and historical-minded critic in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight:* "It is as though a conscientious inquirer into the life and machinery of some great enterprise were shown, with elaborate circumlocution, a dead bee on a windowsill."[61] Professor Anuchin, the fictive reviewer of the *Life of Chernyshevski* in *The Gift,* voices the complaint with even greater style:

> There is no detail too repulsive for him to disdain. [FGC] will probably reply that all these details are to be found in the "Diary" of the young Chernyshevski; but there they are in their place, in their proper environment, in the correct order and perspective, among many other thoughts and feelings which are much more valuable. But the author has fished out and put together precisely these, as if someone had tried to restore the image of a person by making an elaborate collec-

58 Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 85, 69.
59 Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov,* 85.
60 Ibid., 87.
61 Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: New Directions, 1959, 2008), 117.

> tion of his combings, fingernail parings, and bodily excretions.[62]

Nabokov gifts some great lines even to his protagonist's invented adversaries. Bell-Villada is apparently unbothered about parroting, with less grace, such complaints.

But Nabokov foresaw the dangers of his approach, and, not surprisingly, he chronicles these too in *The Gift,* as he narrates FGC's research process in the run-up to composition. FGC plunders the "national library," reads exhaustively, and gathers up a teeming mass of quirky details, trifling but somehow charmed discoveries, that run for two pages. In inverted syntax, he notes, for example,

> into what metaphysical monsters turned sometimes the most sober judgments of these materialists [like NC] on this or that subject […] Belinski, that likable ignoramus, who loved lilies and oleanders, who decorated his window with cacti (as did Emma Bovary), who kept five kopecks, a cork and a button in the empty box discarded by Hegel and who died of consumption with a speech to the Russian people on his bloodstained lips, startled [FGC's] imagination with such pearls of realistic thought as, for example …"[63]

What follows is a consternating quote about the beauties of nature being found everywhere but in those places that nature itself conceals (underground, deep sea, etc.). FGC finds risible metaphors in Steklov's and Lenin's speechifying, and in Pomyalovski discovers "this lexical fruit-salad: 'little raspberry-red lips like cherries.'"[64] Small solecisms and entomological ignorance, each instance with a kind of lovely peculiarity, and for each of these FGC intimates a place waiting for it in the book, though few surface explicitly.

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62 Nabokov, *The Gift,* 307.
63 Ibid., 200.
64 Ibid., 201.

Yet, FGC acknowledges the risks in his approach: "Such a method of evaluation, taken to its extreme, would be even sillier than approaching writers and critics as exponents of general ideas." "What is the significance," he asks, "of Suhoshchokov's Pushkin's not liking Baudelaire, and is it fair to condemn Lermontov's prose because he twice refers to some impossible 'crocodile' (once in a serious and once in a joking comparison)? [FGC] stopped in time, thus preventing the pleasant feeling that he had discovered an easily applicable criterion from being impaired by its abuse."[65]

This moderating impulse, this wariness of either epistemological extreme (particular or general), would alone seem to refute both Bell-Villada's charges of mind-blind savantism as well as Rodgers's charges of authorial tyranny.

The Nietzschean filter allows Rodgers to translate his chagrin into something like neutrality. By such tactics, Nabokov actively courts "resistance" for the better exercise of his authorial will to power, and readers too find in his fiction an opportunity for the same sort of volitional exercise. (The more irritating Nabokov's work is, the better it would serve us). In the case of *Lolita,* the novel's moral turpitude invites readers to relinquish inherited ideas about good and evil and reflect instead, in fine Nietzschean style, on their cultural genealogy (which is ultimately liberating for Rodgers). But all the faint praise rings of passive-aggressive, backhanded compliments, a way of throwing shade at Nabokov's wiles, as if Rodgers is dressing up a much simpler verdict in academic clothes. In these chapters, he speculates about readers' aptitudes for Nabokovian reading in a way that feels both casual and presumptuous, and when he imagines an enlightened Nietzschean reader's response to "The Vane Sisters," he can't quite conceal his distaste. Such a reader "laments the interpretive closure that the acrostic 'solution' brings, but also questions the ethics of Nabokov's textual practices"[66] — which

65 Ibid., 201–2.
66 Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 60.

sounds like an invitation to sit in non-Nietzschean judgment on Nabokov himself.

One odd feature of Rodgers's book is that the narrative examples in his various chapters are readily transposable, which sabotages the argument's negative-to-positive arc. He implicitly lauds *The Gift* (a late chapter) for its rendering of the "other-world," but he might just as well have concentrated on "The Vane Sisters" (which his early chapter snubs); and for its part, *The Gift* invites the same charges of authorial tyranny as the ghost story (ask Gene Bell-Villada). Likewise, when discussing Nabokov's charmed perspectivism (in *Pale Fire*), he might have concentrated instead on the slighted *Lolita; Lolita* is itself at the center of another perspectivist interpretive maelstrom (though Rodgers never mentions it), and *Pale Fire* has its own moral quandaries. All of this feels inherently contradictory. But Rodgers contradicts himself more explicitly when he, on the one hand, shows how Nabokov's characters are no supermen (chap. 5), and, on the other, charges Nabokov himself with authorial tyranny and supermania (chap. 2): How can an author embody the very thing that his fictions and their characters belie? The same befuddling contradiction also underlies the false dichotomy that Rodgers creates between Nabokov's perspectivism and his pointillism. Perspectivist readings of *Pale Fire* necessitate as much interpretive vigilance — as much "diligent" reading, in Rodgers's words, "based largely on the identification of puzzles and clues within the text"[67] — as anything that *Lolita* or "The Vane Sisters" demands. That is, the off-putting pointillism is ultimately the engine of the benevolent, life-affirming plenitude in Nabokov's fiction.

The most glaring problem in Rodgers's book is another sin of omission, concerning the peculiar ambivalence of Nabokov's prose: his bumblers, clowns, and fools will often scatter grains of truth. For example, Professor Anuchin, the fictive reviewer in *The Gift,* charges FGC with temporal malfeasance: "One senses in him absolutely no consciousness of that classification

67 Ibid., 93–94.

of time, without which history turns into an arbitrary gyration of multicolored spots."[68] To this complaint, one imagines FGC nodding enthusiastic approval: recall the blunt confession, from Nabokov's *autobiography,* "I do not believe in time."[69] Anuchin's verdict is accurate, though the sentiment, its emotional valence, is upside-down. Such moments abound in Nabokov's fiction: authentic insight rapidly gives way to, or even coincides with, imbecility. Likewise, Nabokov's most "noble" protagonists prove fallible. Consider FGC himself, perhaps the closest thing we have to a flattering self-portrait of the author: at one point, with FGC at work on the biography of his own father, he finds himself recalled from his project (he has been mentally reconstructing his naturalist father's exotic travels) by his tutoring obligations (he has to go to his mind-numbing job). When he boards a tram, he feels the onset of "a vague, evil, heavy hatred for the clumsy sluggishness of this least gifted of all methods of transport, for the hopelessly familiar, hopelessly ugly streets going by the wet window, and most of all for the feet, sides and necks of the native [German] passengers." The passage continues,

> [FGC's] reason knew that they could also include genuine, completely human individuals with unselfish passions, pure sorrows, even with memories shining through life, but for some reason he got the impression that all these cold, slippery eyes, looking at him as if he were carrying an illegal treasure (which his gift was, essentially), belonged only to malicious hags and crooked hucksters. The Russian conviction that the German is in small numbers vulgar and in large numbers — unbearably vulgar was, he knew, a conviction unworthy of an artist; but nonetheless …"[70]

And he proceeds to indulge exactly that unworthy conviction.

68 Nabokov, *The Gift,* 305–6.
69 Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Putnam's, 1966), 139.
70 Ibid., 80–81.

When a man comes aboard and, sitting opposite FGC, bumps him with his knees and briefcase, FGC's interior monologue becomes a diatribe:

> He instantly concentrated on him all his sinful hatred (for this poor, pitiful, expiring nation) and knew precisely why he hated him: for that low forehead, for those pale eyes; […] for the Punchinello-like system of gestures […]; for a love of fences, rows, mediocrity; for the cult of the office; for the fact that if you listen to his inner voice […] you will inevitably hear figures, money; for the lavatory humor and crude laughter; for the fatness of the backsides of both sexes, even if the rest of the subject is not fat; for the lack of fastidiousness; for the visibility of cleanliness […]; for taking pains with dirty tricks, for the abominable object stuck carefully on the railings of the public gardens; for someone else's live cat, pierced through with wire as revenge on a neighbor, and the wire cleverly twisted at one end; for cruelty in everything, self-satisfied, taken for granted; for the unexpected, rapturous helpfulness with which five passersby help you to pick up some dropped farthings.[71]

After mentally unloading all of his fury and anti-Germanic sentiment on the guy sitting opposite him, FGC watches as this guy removes from his briefcase a Russian-language newspaper and then, for confirmation, hears the "Russian intonation" in his cough.[72] All the malice was misdirected. The offensive passenger was a compatriot, a Russian, after all. FGC was not only mistaken, but caught out in a moment of meanness, small-mindedness, a failure of imaginative generosity.

Neither Rodgers nor Bell-Villada accounts for this pervasive feature of Nabokov's fiction. The Finnish scholar Pekka Tammi,

71 Ibid., 81–82.
72 Ibid., 83.

in an encyclopedic study, calls it "an inherent property of all Nabokovian narration."[73]

In Rodgers's case, the omission is particularly regrettable because this trait might have constituted the most promising intersection of Nabokov's and Nietzsche's works. In Nabokov's fiction, it's hard to know what to take literally and what figuratively; in Nietzsche's prose, the distinction is even more problematic, a textual phenomenon familiar enough to bear summation, by R. Lanier Anderson, in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:*

> Nietzsche's writing is full of figures of speech and literary tropes, and decoding these modes of indirection demands active engagement and subtlety from the reader. Indeed, some of Nietzsche's most favored and widespread figures (e.g., hyperbole, litotes, irony) involve purposely saying something more, or less, or other than one means, and so forcing the reader to adjust. What is more, Nietzsche makes heavy use of allusions to both contemporary and historical writing, and without that context one is very likely to miss his meaning[….] Almost as often, Nietzsche invents a persona so as to work out some view that he will go on to qualify or reject […] so it can be a steep challenge just to keep track of the various voices in action within the text.

Anderson goes on to explain how the rigorous demands of Nietzsche's prose stem from "some rather straightforward features of the texts." In the following example, he eventually considers one way of accounting for such stratagems:

> Consider, for instance, what the point could be of that most obvious feature of Nietzsche's rhetoric — the heat and vitriol with which his condemnations of traditional values are presented. The *Genealogy of Morality* advertises itself as "a

73 Pekka Tammi, *Problems of Nabokov's Poetics: A Narratological Analysis* (Helsinki: Suomalainen, 1985), 300.

> Polemic," but even in that genre, it is an outlier for rhetorical intensity; Nietzsche passes up no opportunity for emotionally charged attacks, he repeatedly blasphemes what is held most sacred in the culture, he freely deploys offensive anti-Semitic tropes (turned back, ironically, against anti-Semitic Christians themselves), he fairly shouts, he sneers between scare quotes, he repeatedly charges bad faith and dishonesty on the part of his opponents, and on and on. It is impossible to conclude that the work is not *deliberately designed* to be as offensive as possible to any earnest Christian believer. Why? Given Nietzsche's expressed conviction that many Christians ought to remain ensconced within their ideology because it is the best they can do for themselves […], perhaps the right way to understand this much rhetorical overkill is that it operates as a strategy for *audience partition.* In Nietzsche's mind, those who cannot do without Christianity and its morality would only be harmed by understanding how destructive and self-defeating it is[….] [T]hose [devout Christian] readers will be so offended by his tone that their anger will impair understanding and they will fail to follow his argument. If this is right, the very vitriol of the *Genealogy* arises from an aim to be heard only by the right audience — the one it can potentially aid rather than harm[….]
>
> That such an interpretation of Nietzsche's intentions is even possible shows how great a challenge these explosive, carefully crafted texts pose to their readers.[74]

It's regrettable that Rodgers never touches on this conceptual live wire; instead, he concentrates on the cleanly extractable and rather literal-minded takeaways from Nietzsche's philosophy (the will to power, perspectivism, etc.). Neither do Bell-Villada and Weiner consider this uncertainty dilemma in their condemnation of Rand, whose seething novels might be defended in similar terms (*audience partition*). But the omission, in their

74 R. Lanier Anderson, "Friedrich Nietzsche," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* May 19, 2022, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche/.

case, is for the best: what Anderson construes as a benevolent strategy in Nietzsche, a form of figuration, a trope, devolves, in Rand, to mere invective. The tenets of Objectivism seem incompatible with figuration and ambivalence.

Truth, Lies, Education, Politics

The epistemic treachery of Nabokov's fiction would seem to preclude both practical applications and political implications, but Herner Saeverot, a professor of education at Western Norway University (in coastal Bergen), is the first of two scholars to argue otherwise (Timothy McCarty is the other).[1] In the radical ambivalence of Nabokov's fiction, Saeverot finds a model for real-world pedagogical practice, albeit one that would sustain as much as stem post-truth politics. He gives the stratagem a French name, borrowed from Derrida, calling Nabokov an *escamoteur,* a conjurer or "hyperphenomenological deceiver," one who "makes the reader 'see' hyperphenomena that are made invisible as they appear."[2] By way of demonstration, Saeverot offers a broad and thin reading of Nabokov's *Lolita,*[3] but the

1 Whereas Adam Weiner believes bad books can cause sociopolitical disasters, this pair of scholars invites us to consider the opposite scenario, alluded to in "Tyrants Destroyed": good (edifying) books might help to avert them. The scholars' positions mirror each other, like a body and its shadow. One will prove to be right, for the wrong reasons, the other wrong, for the right ones. We start with the latter, in the shade.

2 Herner Saeverot, "Educative Deceit: Vladimir Nabokov and the [Im]possibility of Education," *Educational Theory* 60, no. 5 (2010): 606.

3 He mentions just two facets of the teeming novel: its fictional foreword, penned by psychotherapist John Ray Jr., which tries, speciously, to steer the reader's understanding of Humbert's confession, and Humbert's own

illusionist acts from "Tyrants Destroyed" capture his meaning just as well: the imaginary interview with the Ruler's long-lost father, first portrayed as actual, literally dissolves into something spectral ("shivering with the chill of vanishment"). This instance also has the advantage of chiming resonantly with Derrida's talk of ghosts in *Hamlet* and the *Specters of Marx,* to which Saeverot alludes broadly in "Educative Deceit" (2010).[4] Deceptions such as these occur "all the time, in all of [Nabokov's] novels,"[5] according to Saeverot, but he eventually qualifies (sort of) this assertion. Nabokov, rather, stages a conflict between deceit and what Saeverot calls "adverse forces,"[6] by which he means correctives to the deception (think, the revelation of the Ruler's father's spectrality).

In the case of *Lolita,* the deceit usually centers on the reader's perception of Humbert's crime: the text initially (mis)leads readers to minimize, unwittingly, the "hell of pain"[7] that Lolita experiences, but later calls attention to this lapse in moral awareness. This process, for Saeverot, is inherently, if harshly, educational, "analogous to, upon being caught in the act of wrongdoing, then

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initial misrepresentation (later corrected) of the relationship between Lolita and her mother, Charlotte.

4 Saeverot's essay is no one-off. It was first published in 2010, pre-Trump, in an academic journal, but Saeverot later revised the article for inclusion in a book coauthored with Peter Roberts (of New Zealand's University of Canterbury), published when Trump was in office, and titled with anti-Randian resonance: Peter Roberts and Herner Saeverot, *Education and the Limits of Reason: Reading Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nabokov* (London: Routledge, 2018). Under its new title, "Pedagogy of the Gaze: An Educational Reading of *Lolita,*" the older article still survives in outlines and traces, but the whole has been so transformed and disfigured — by unfocused paragraphs, unsubstantiated claims, top-of-the-head examples, and tone-deaf comparisons (plus two wacky detours through Freud and Kierkegaard) — as to become incoherent. (I urge you to acquire the book and do the math for yourself.) The 2010 article is deeply problematic in its own right, but lucidly so, and it both warrants and allows for a closer look at its problems.

5 Saeverot, "Educative Deceit," 603.

6 Ibid., 607.

7 Ibid., 608.

to be slapped hard [*sic*]."[8] When Saeverot imagines a pedagogy inspired by Nabokov's methods, he considers comparatively banal conversational tactics, such as overstatement or understatement, or the propounding of false claims, in order to "create a space of uncertainty, making it almost impossible for the students to hear what they think they hear," ideally leading them to "think for themselves."[9] What's most crucial for Saeverot is that such stratagems prevent both the author and the teacher from posing as moral authorities or communicating truth of any kind: "The deceit distorts any clear message and makes it impossible to understand what is communicated in one way only. The content can never be pinned down to a single, unified meaning, and for that reason the teaching is not a moralizing lesson."[10] Saeverot invites us to contemplate (again) an education that is no longer strictly didactic.

Regarding the novel, Saeverot labors to vacuum truth from the narrative, yet still fails to mention many obvious, even ubiquitous, examples of *escamotage* that would lend credence to his position.[11] Early on, in a cryptic phrase (echoing Barthes, without attribution), he describes Nabokov's strategy as leading readers "to grasp 'the secret' *with no essence behind it.*"[12] And much later, he explains how the novel's adverse forces don't add up to truth, but instead cause readers to perceive relationships among layered realities, none of which is sufficient on its own.[13] As Saeverot has it, all of Nabokov's fiction would war-

8 Ibid., 615.

9 Ibid., 617. By Saeverot's logic, Trump might qualify as an exemplary educator were it not for his self-serving intentions; Saeverot makes a distinction between exploitative "harmful deceit" (lying and hypocrisy) (618) and service-oriented "educative deceit," the latter arising on behalf of the students and leading them from "a state of passivity" to "a state of action" (617).

10 Ibid., 617.

11 Starting with all the pseudonymous characters in Humbert's manuscript confession and including the very category of the nymphet, which is, in the novel, an imaginary construct.

12 Saeverot, "Educative Deceit," 607 (my italics).

13 Ibid., 611.

rant the same verdict rendered by the writer-narrator of "Spring in Fialta" against his nemesis, Ferdinand, another of Nabokov's brutal author-figures:

> At the beginning of his career, it had been possible perhaps to distinguish some human landscape, some old garden, some dream-familiar disposition of trees through the stained glass of his prodigious prose […] but with every new book the tints grew still more dense, the gules and purpure still more ominous; and today one can no longer see anything at all through that blazoned, ghastly rich glass, and it seems that were one to break it, nothing but a perfectly black void would face one's shivering soul.[14]

Nabokov's aversion to the "Literature of Ideas," message-bearing fictions (like passenger pigeons with tiny scrolls strapped to their shins), is certainly no secret. Saeverot cites the author's afterword to *Lolita* to capture Nabokov's position; in that essay, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita,*" Nabokov cautions readers that his novel has no moral to impart, explaining that his only aim is to cultivate an experience of aesthetic bliss.[15] But Saeverot seems

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14 Vladimir Nabokov, "Spring in Fialta," in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 420.

In *Nabokov and the Question of Morality,* two essays — by Gennady Barabtarlo and Tom Whalen, respectively — show how Nabokov's fiction is intrinsically and unimpeachably moral, though both give *Lolita* a wide berth. Another essay, by Leland de la Durantaye, considers the case of *Lolita,* but seems to plead the Fifth: the novel is a "moral book for the reason, and in the sense, that from its first page to its last, it explicitly treats moral questions"; see Leland de la Durantaye, "The Art of Morality, or On *Lolita,*" in *Nabokov and the Question of Morality,* eds. Michael Rodgers and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (New York: Palgrave, 2016), 190.

15 Vladimir Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," in *The Annotated "Lolita,"* ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. (New York: Vintage, 1991), 314–15; quoted in Saeverot, "Educative Deceit," 609–10.

In "L'Envoi," Nabokov's short goodbye to his Cornell students, he elaborates on his aims: to discourage reading "for the infantile purpose of identifying oneself with the characters," or for "the adolescent purpose of learning to live," or for "the academic purpose of indulging in generali-

to think that the novel is educational nonetheless, not because it frees students to consider moral obligations from an aesthetic remove (as Rodgers might say), but because it invites readers to derive their own singular moral judgments.[16]

Saeverot's line of inquiry is haunted by its own ghosts, pocked or pitted with traces of its forebears. Most notably, Saeverot appears to be drafting on Brian Boyd's prize-winning *Nabokov's "Ada": The Place of Consciousness* (1985). In the chapter "Resistance and Solution," Boyd describes how Nabokov "encourages us to fail to make a necessary judgement, then by the controlled irony of his recurrent patterns makes us suddenly aware how readily we could make a moral blunder."[17] And when Boyd writes that "the shock of realizing how easily we can condone insensitivity […] has a salutary forcefulness,"[18] it sounds like a direct precursor of Saeverot's hard slap. But for Boyd, Nabokov's

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zations." Instead, he writes, "I have tried to teach you to feel a shiver of artistic satisfaction, to share not the emotions of the people in the book but the emotions of its author — the joys and difficulties of creation." When he tells readers to expect no moral from *Lolita*, he is not equivocating with regard to Humbert's crime, but cautioning against a curtailed, foreshortened, and depleted experience of literature. See Vladimir Nabokov, "L'Envoi," in *Lectures on Literature,* ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt, 1980), 381, 382.

16 This freedom and latitude sounds appealingly democratic, but I can't ignore the conundrum: If authors and teachers are doubtful sources of moral authority (as they often are), if the greatness of great books and great teachers lies in their equivocality, what is it that makes the moral prerogative of students sacrosanct?

17 Brian Boyd, "Resistance and Solution," in *Nabokov's "Ada": The Place of Consciousness* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), 40.

18 Ibid., 41. Both Saeverot's and Boyd's arguments are reminiscent of Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin* (1967), that foundational text of reader-response theory, which shows how *Paradise Lost* inveigles readers to commit the ghost of a sin before receiving (after a poetic line break, say) a pious reprimand. And, of course, even Chernyshevski and Rand deployed similar tactics, though with less subtlety or aplomb. The difference between the three writers' methods boils down, perhaps, to a simple distinction. Rand and Chernyshevski make the corrective immediate and explicitly didactic, preaching hard-line politics. Nabokov concerns himself, rather, with singular human feeling and perception, and he camouflages the correctives, which sometimes arrive inconspicuously, after a considerable delay, their

artistry is explicitly a "moral strategy,"[19] while Saeverot takes pains to sandbag his position from first to last, disavowing any didactic intentions in both the novel and, weirdly, the classroom (he forswears all pretenses of truth in general).

THUMBNAIL SIDEBAR: Déjà Vu

Scores of scholars and critics have weighed in on the subject of *Lolita*'s morality, many concluding that, yes, the novel is not just impeccably moral (as Nabokov himself avowed elsewhere, in a much-cited letter to Edmund Wilson), but instructively so. In his chapter on the novel, Michael Rodgers quarrels with this not-yet-decisive critical consensus. He concentrates on the representative case of Richard Rorty, whose position he conflates with Boyd's on *Ada*[20]: namely, that the text invites lapses in moral attention, which readers later recognize and regret, thus leading to greater sensitivity and moral vigilance as a daily practice. (The same argument motivates the perpetual sweeping of texts for identity-category offenses.)

Rodgers voices some literal-minded objections to this "didactic theory" of the novel, reminding us of the chasm between life and literature: books might not influence behav-

moral or thematic implications accessible only by inference. The old saw *Show, don't tell* still has teeth, it would seem.

19 Ibid., 40.

20 In the chapter "Resistance and Solution," Boyd describes how Nabokov's artistic method "puts into kinetic form," not just growth in moral awareness, but "the philosophical […] problem of consciousness." He explains, with a distant echo of Viktor Shklovsky and his notion of enstrangement: "Nabokov makes the relationship between reader and text an image and an enactment of the tussle between the individual mind and the world[….] the tireless effort of all the powers of one's consciousness is required if one is to see life as freshly and as sharply as possible." Boyd aptly characterizes the cognitive challenges and rewards of Nabokov's fiction, and this focus on the phenomenological experience of that fiction seems less contentious than his claims concerning moral sensitivity. The fiction is, after all, one teeming facet of a teeming world. See Boyd, "Resistance and Solution," 43.

ior, and attending to narrative details is not the same thing as caring for actual people.[21] But Rodgers's main grievance hinges on the distinction he makes between "close reading" (preferred) and "vigilant reading" (pooh-poohed). His definitions of each type are telling: "A close reader is sensitive to form and its relationship to content, interested in the work as a whole constructed from multiple aspects. He or she can identify formal patterns in the text and is interested in these, rather than in apparently contingent details of plot and background." The hazy, bland language — "multiple aspects," "[interesting] formal patterns," "apparently contingent details of plot and background[?]" — makes me doubt whether Rodgers perceives or feels form (which tends to dissolve on contact into a puddle of content). "A vigilant reader," he continues, "might be quite indifferent to form and have a simple inability to discriminate between foreground and background elements in the story."[22] This is where Rodgers's position echoes Gene Bell-Villada's, imputing a cognitive impairment to Nabokov and certain of his readers. When Rodgers goes on to speculate about readers' ethical aptitudes, I find myself reaching for the signal cord on the bus: he laboriously contrasts "a vigilant reader of Nabokov's texts, who is callous about the suffering of those around him or her," and "careless readers who skim-read but who are also good people."[23] Nabokov himself was prone to ranking readers by mettle, but Rodgers's speculations strike me as empty, vague, and tedious. What does it mean to read exclusively "for the plot"? Is anyone, excepting John Galt, uniformly callous about the suffering of others? The problem isn't just that these imaginary readers are made of coarse, fraying straw. There might, in fact, be a grain of truth lurking behind these

21 Michael Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche: Problems and Perspectives* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 72, 68.

22 Ibid., 75.

23 Ibid., 76

assertions, but, if you'll indulge the tired old joke, you can't get there from here.

To close the case against "vigilant reading," Rodgers again waxes cognitive, reflecting on the attention allotted to various textual cues (such as, say, chapter endings or syntactic patterns of emphasis), time-tested narrative techniques for heightening and subordination that Nabokov's artistry at times epitomizes but elsewhere flouts and inverts. Confronting the ultimate insight intimated by Nabokov's characters (Falter, Busch, and Sebastian Knight), Rodgers finally throws up his hands: "If all readers were to read like this consistently [tracking peripheral details], it would be difficult to process the narrative at all given that we would have to accord all incidents equal importance."[24] Rodgers then weighs the artistic pros and cons of "difficulty," only to conclude that Nabokov is writing in "bad faith," betraying the trust of and abusing his readers.[25]

Rodgers's chapter rankles for several reasons, though he's not entirely wrong. In conflating Rorty's and Boyd's positions, he tramples on one of Rorty's premises — that *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* constitute the "acme" of Nabokov's achievement, a pinnacle that *Ada,* for all its genius, fails to reach, for the very reason that aggravates Rodgers. Where *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* are luminous, *Ada* is rather opaque, a position even Bell-Villada shares. Rorty cites Robert Alter's apt summation: "*Ada* is a dazzling, but at times also exasperating, near-masterpiece that lacks the perfect selectivity and control of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire.*"[26] When Rodgers tries to redraw the dis-

24 Ibid., 76–77.

25 Ibid., 85.

26 Alter, quoted in Richard Rorty, "The Barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov and Cruelty," in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 161.

Then again, perhaps all of us are wrong to malign *Ada,* which is no more inert or opaque than *Ulysses*. Or perhaps narrative inertia and stylistic opacity are better suited to writers of chills (like Joyce) than to writers of fevers (like Nabokov).

trict map of Nabokov's fiction and reconceive *Lolita* in *Ada*'s unflattering image, his argument breaks down, belying and betraying his own assertions. In the end, Rodgers's chapter is so muddled as to make me doubt whether *Lolita* constitutes a "moral problem" at all.[27]

To exemplify the hazards of vigilant reading, Rodgers concentrates on Rorty's singular discovery, of a thematic pattern connecting four far-flung passages. The first involves a fifth-business character — a barber in the town of Kasbeam, who gives Humbert a bad haircut while talking about his son, who Humbert only belatedly realizes is long dead.[28] The second arrives in Charlotte Haze's written declaration of love for Humbert (then her lodger); her letter mentions Lolita's baby brother, who died at two, the news of which Humbert mocks as rank sentimentality. Rorty connects both passages to two others: Lolita's offhand comment about the terrifying solitude of death, and a scene with Lolita's schoolmate, Avis Byrd, who has a "fat pink dad and a small chubby brother [still alive], and a brand-new baby sister, and a home, and two grinning dogs, and Lolita had nothing."[29] The last two passages surface amid the "the limbless monsters of pain" that assail Humbert late in the novel, "smothered memories" that he divulges penitently, ruefully[30]: his moral culpability is explicit. But for Rorty, the novel's moral tuition depends, in part, upon the reader's ability "to make the connection — to put together Lolita's remark about death with the fact that she once had a small, chubby brother who died."[31]

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27 Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 71.

28 Nabokov numbers this passage, in his author's afterword, among the "nerves of the novel" ("the secret points, the subliminal co-ordinates by means of which the book is plotted"). Rorty endeavors to explain why this peripheral passage warranted a "month of work" from Nabokov. See Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita,* 316.

29 The four passages appear, respectively, in Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita,* 213, 68–69, 284, 286.

30 Ibid., 284.

31 Rorty, "The Barber," 163.

Rodgers is wise to doubt this link between pattern-detection and moral awareness, but disjunction clouds his thinking, and he seems to miss the forest for the trees. He cites in full the first and second of the relevant passages above and concentrates his ire there. At times, he attempts to explain why capable readers will "overlook the significance" of the passages in isolation; elsewhere, he inveighs against the need to "spot the link" between them in order to model moral awareness.[32] But even if readers fail to detect the pattern, which is part of the novel's beauty and formal unity (itself a poignant thing, though Rodgers is unmoved), in all four passages, the first two no less than the last two, Humbert's insensitive lack of curiosity, his moral failure, is obvious. Humbert essentially *reports* his callous indifference to the news of Lolita's dead brother (which he "more or less skipped at the time" of initial reading and later consigned to "the vortex of the toilet"[33]) and that of the barber's dead son. Far from being diabolically camouflaged, these passages would fit right in among the listed examples that Rodgers alludes to, by page number only, when he writes: "There is clear evidence that Humbert can be identified as a monster of solipsism, vanity and cruelty and, notwithstanding his seductive narrative voice, few readers have trouble identifying these moments (*Lo* 21, 29, 60, 125, 161, 308)."[34]

Rodgers's list evidently includes Humbert's treatment of his first wife, Valeria, specifically his "visions of putting on [his] mountain boots and taking a running kick at her rump,"[35] but in aggregate, he seems to highlight those few scenes of explicit sexual assault, while neglecting the various and sundry expositional reminders of the heinousness of Humbert's crimes. At The Enchanted Hunters hotel, on the brink of a rape that is statutory at best, Humbert reflects

32 Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 74, 75.
33 Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita,* 68–69, quoted in Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 73.
34 Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 69.
35 Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita,* 29.

how "lust is never quite sure — even when the velvety victim is locked up in one's dungeon."[36] Rodgers includes this page number in his list of plain-sight examples, but instead of this clear expositional marker of sinister criminality, Rodgers is probably alluding to the more graphic, paragraph-long description of Humbert's victim on the same page (he imagines Lolita drugged and nude). Well before Humbert meets Lolita, he underscores and draws alarming squiggles, in bright red ink, around his villainy. At one point, when he seeks out a procuress, he struggles to "blurt out his *criminal* craving" in order to be directed to what we would now call a sex trafficker (and a farcical scene ensues).[37] Elsewhere, Humbert himself draws attention to the "cesspoolful of rotting monsters behind his slow boyish smile."[38] And when he first attempts to define the warped vision associated with "nympholepsy," "despair and shame" (and also "tears of tenderness") count among the factors preventing Humbert from divulging the anatomical particulars of his obsession.[39] He also notes the following precondition for his strain of pedophilia, which sounds, in Nabokov's aesthetic vocabulary, like a hypertrophied case of criminal, and toxic, misreading: the textbook nympholept is "an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in [his] loins and a super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in [his] subtle spine."[40] The novel's morality — the fact that Humbert is a villain — would seem to be obvious with or without the vigilance that vexes Rodgers.

36 Ibid., 125.

37 Ibid., 23 (my italics).

38 Ibid., 44.

39 Ibid., 17.

40 Ibid. In Vladimir Nabokov, "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," in *Lectures on Literature,* ed. Fredson Bowers (San Diego: Harcourt, 1980), 371–80, an essay and *ars prosaica* from the 1940s, Nabokov explicitly differentiates the artist from the madman, contrasting the former's "associative" bent with the latter's "dissociative" one (377). Elsewhere, and often, in his *Lectures on Literature,* Nabokov stresses the imperative to read with one's tingling spine (though not with one's poisonous loins).

It makes less sense, then, when Rodgers goes on to argue that morality is nowhere to be found in *Lolita*. He suggests that, with Humbert as our narrator and guide who routinely "violat[es] the reading contract,"[41] the novel creates a moral vacuum,[42] but then proffers other figures — such as psychotherapist John Ray Jr., or Lolita's mother and Humbert's second wife, Charlotte Haze — as candidates for a "new morality," only to expose them as dolts and fools ("an undermining of available moral discourses," Rodgers calls it).[43] Rodgers's argument requires readers to identify with the moral perspectives of Charlotte and Ray[44] (and feel likewise mocked and, thus, morally disoriented) rather than with Humbert (and find, in their own moral lapses, a semblance of Humbert's cruelty). But I'm not sure that any such identifications are warranted or verifiable. In fact,

41 Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 79.

42 Rodgers argues that Humbert's monkeying with literary conventions (toying with allusions, playing with readers' expectations) is analogous to Nietzsche's assault on moral conventions (which are *merely*, for Nietzsche, conventions). The apples-to-oranges connection fizzles, excepting the lone moment when Rodgers finds Humbert's artistic gamesmanship also plausibly confounds moral conventions: when Lolita falls ill, or fakes an illness, Humbert euphemistically reports his means of taking Lolita's temperature (cunnilingus), "Her brown rose tasted of blood" (quoted in Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 83). Unfortunately, Rodgers never establishes that this lone sentence is typical of Humbert's confession (it isn't). And evidently, Rodgers wants readers to take seriously and literally Humbert's self-serving rationalizations for his desires: besides positing the confusion of state laws concerning the legal designation of childhood, Humbert notes, as a defense exhibit, how "Lepcha old men of eighty copulate with girls of eight, and nobody minds" (Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita,* 19). Rodgers confuses this sham litigation for the novel's thematic core, a "questioning of the rules and codes of society" (*Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 89). Me, I think Humbert's rationalizations are transparently that, damp with flop sweat (and rife with black comedy), better placed among Rodgers's list of obvious examples of Humbert's solipsism, vanity, and cruelty. Some readers take John Ray Jr. seriously, too. Decide for yourself whether these disputes are a matter of "perspective," or whether they can be adjudicated with evidence.

43 Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 87, 88.

44 Ibid., 88.

I'm dazed by the conundrum: Are readers not aligning with Humbert if/when they accept Humbert's verdicts on Ray's psychotherapy and Charlotte's suburban decor? Is Humbert's mockery of such things not further evidence of his "solipsism, vanity and cruelty"? In any case, Rodgers closes his chapter with what amounts to a nonsensical assertion: "There is no suggestion that *Lolita*'s protagonist goes on a 'moral journey.'"[45] Actually, there is, are, many such suggestions, some more dubious than others (start with the "limbless monsters of pain"). And Rodgers doesn't seem to recognize the problem in his chapter's final line: if readers are left with "no confusion about the extent of Humbert's cruelty," then the novel doesn't appear to "package" an "experience of moral disorientation."[46]

It's bad form, too, that Rodgers, for all his decrying of vigilant, mine-sweeper reading, makes several weak stabs at exactly this kind of reading. In the novel's mention of Van Gogh's *Arlésienne* in Charlotte Haze's hallway, Rodgers hears an allusion to T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," with its pretentious women who "come and go, talking of Michelangelo."[47] (The conjecture, for me, rings as hollow as the talk of Eliot's art patrons.[48]) The song that Humbert garbles to distract or entrance Lolita on the Lawn Street sofa repeats the phrase "Oh, my Carmen," with lots of associated hard rhymes (though never "darlin'"), and here

45 Ibid., 91.

46 Ibid.

47 Eliot, quoted in Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 87.

48 Rodgers includes the ability to recognize allusions among the talents of "general readers" (58–59, 80), as opposed to those of "vigilant readers." But tracking allusions is, in part, what distinguishes Boyd's vigilant reading of *Ada.* Of the novel's cryptic phrase "mollyblob, marybud, maybubble," Boyd proceeds incrementally through the stages of discovery, noting first the sonic euphony, then the dictionary definitions of the terms (identifying the neighboring *maybud* as a *marigold*), before decrypting the allusion: "mollyblob" conceals a reference to Ulysses's Molly Bloom and particularly her thoughts on lost maidenheads and deflowering (Boyd, "Resistance," 44). Rodgers, by contrast, prefers to take his allusions neat.

Rodgers detects an echo of the 1884 folksong "Oh, My Darling Clementine."[49] (Nabokov might be gesturing toward the 1946 John Ford movie of the same title, but Rodgers's connection feels dissonant and thin, the song's twangy yodel unsuited to the novel's melodious frames of reference; Barbara Wyllie argues persuasively for the pop song "Frankie and Johnny" as a template for Humbert's invention.[50]) And when Humbert describes his reader's eyebrows as sliding to the top of "his bald head,"[51] Rodgers tells us we've missed one of the novel's bad faith deceptions: the image constitutes an early reference to Humbert's pedophiliac nemesis, Clare Quilty — one of the novel's notorious tests of readerly "vigilance" (including a "cryptogrammatic paper chase" through motel guest registers[52]) — and here, Humbert stoops to paint readers in Quilty's image. Each of Rodgers's suppositions feels like a gratuitous reach, doubtful on its face, empty of consequence, and incongruous with the novel's sensibility, but Rodgers's antipathy to "vigilant reading" becomes more understandable when the labored sleuthing yields duds.

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Rodgers might be right to challenge the correlation between vigilant, assiduous attention and moral awareness. But his great mistake is that he takes Nabokov to task for what is actually, and obviously, one of Nabokov's grand themes. Even "Tyrants Destroyed" — no less than the immortal *Lolita* and *Pale Fire,* or "Signs and Symbols" with its clinical case of "ref-

49 Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 81.

50 Barbara Wyllie. "Popular Music in Nabokov's *Lolita,* or *Frankie and Johnny:* A New Key to *Lolita?," Revue des Études Slaves* 72, nos. 3–4 (2000): 443–52. Wyllie also blurbs Rodgers's book ("a lively and insightful analysis"). I'm confused too.

51 Nabokov, quoted in Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 84–85.

52 Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita,* 250.

erential mania"[53] — invites readers to mind the line between devoted, conscientious attention and destructive obsession. Peter Roberts, the lucid yin to Saeverot's brooding yang in the scholarly duo, considers the same binary from the opposite perspective. For Roberts, the act of giving sustained nonjudgmental attention is inherently moral, an act of love, and deserves a place in educational practice. To Rodgers's plaint, "less is more," Roberts counters, "more, please."

Like many scholars before him, Roberts finds this attentive love to be a prominent message emergent in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov.* In Alyosha, the saintly youngest brother (as opposed to the cerebral Ivan or the sensual hothead Dmitri) — and even more persuasively, for Roberts, in the elderly Father Zossima — we find embodied this spiritualized cognition, a patient, charitable, tireless giving of attention. Roberts tentatively considers the educational function of both characters within the novel — the extent to which each plays the role of teacher among the novel's cast — but in order to pursue the pedagogical applications of this novelistic theme, he looks to Iris Murdoch, who championed a capacity for attention as an educational outcome, an idea she herself borrowed from Simone Weil (as Roberts traces the genealogy). To illustrate Murdoch's approach, Roberts shares her hypothetical example, in which a mother reflects on her antipathy toward her daughter-in-law, "mak[es] a careful, attentive effort to consider [her son's wife] in a fresh light," and thereby changes her own mind: the daughter-in-law is no longer "vulgar," but vivacious.[54]

Roberts sums up Murdoch's sensible position: through such acts of attention, "our understanding of that to which we are attending becomes deeper and more complicated[….]

53 Nabokov, "Signs and Symbols," in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 599.

54 Roberts and Saeverot, *Education and the Limits of Reason,* 34. I have tried to take Trump as the subject of this thought experiment, but the transformation simply doesn't come off. He remains a raging imbecile (that cryptozoological marvel, the half-cocked boob).

> Our use of words, including as concepts in our private inner activity, plays an important role in this process."[55] When Roberts explores for himself the pedagogical implications and applications of this principle, he considers the attentive "love" of which each student is deserving and which existing needs-based, student-centered pedagogies shortchange. He poses this deliberate and considerate attention as antithetical to the metrics fixation of modern institutions, which "provide unfriendly soil for the cultivation of attention and active love." "There is an obsession," he writes, "with measurement and assessment that works against the patient, unpredictable, often unknowable forms of learning," of which attentive love is one instance.[56] Regarding Murdoch's own teaching practice, he claims that she encountered friction from administrators because her efforts to develop "students' abilities to reflect and to pay attention" required "unorthodox [methods] that had nothing to do with performance on tests."[57] Thus, active attention — or love, as Roberts figures it — lying beyond empirical measurement, ushers us past the outer limits of reason itself.[58]

55 Ibid., 35.

56 Ibid., 40.

57 Ibid., 41.

58 In another chapter, on Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground,* Roberts revisits the novella's critique of rational egoism, and finds therein further reason to distrust reason itself, and to square education with all things that resist squaring. On this point, Nabokov himself would come to Roberts's aid. In "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," an essay composed for the literary lecture circuit (but divinely inspired), Nabokov considers the entanglements of literature, reason, and morality, and avers: "Commonsense is fundamentally immoral, for the natural morals of mankind are as irrational as the magic rites that they evolved since the immemorial dimness of time" (372). In the essay, common sense stands as a metonym for reason itself, and Nabokov explains how his own favored aesthetic principles — the primacy of details, associative alchemical unities — are inherently aligned with both irrationality and morality. He writes, "The main delight of the creative mind is the sway accorded to a seemingly incongruous detail over a seemingly dominant generalization" (374); he elaborates: "This capacity to wonder at trifles […] these asides of the spirit, these footnotes in the volume of life are the highest forms of conscious-

Few left-leaning educators would want to be associated with those bloodless and miserly pinch-penny –isms: materialism, positivism, rationalism, empiricism, pragmatism, and even Objectivism.[59] But when Roberts tries to prioritize,

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ness, and it is in this childishly speculative state of mind, so different from commonsense and its logic, that we know the world to be good" (374). Where Nabokov's fiction differs from and arguably outdoes Dostoevsky's, on this antirational front, is that it elicits from readers, in the entirety of its textual surface, the heightened, suprarational attention that Dostoevsky explicitly thematizes or embodies in a single character (such as Alyosha).

59 And who among us, except perhaps a Rand or today's literary ideologues, would wish to quibble with Keats's divination of *negative capability,* that rare facility, typical of poetic genius, to abide in "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason"? Keats relates his discovery of this talent (in a yuletide letter to his brothers, George and Tom) in aptly hazy and epiphanic terms, rather like Adam Falter's accidental solving of the "riddle of existence" in "Ultima Thule": "several things dove-tailed together in my mind, and at once [the insight] struck me." Keats proceeds to make an example of Coleridge, who thought his way to the ruin of many a poetic passage, some evanescence "caught from the Penetralium of mystery," but spoiled by the poet's inability to remain "content with half-knowledge." And he conveys his disappointment with Benjamin West's apocalyptic painting *Death on a Pale Horse,* which fails to sublimate the "repulsiveness" of its terrible content: "The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth." Keats's final word on the subject: "With a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration"; see John Keats, "To George and Thomas Keats, 21 Dec. 1817," in *The Letters of John Keats,* 3rd edn., ed. Maurice Buxton Forman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), 71–72.

Nabokov's notion of aesthetic bliss is no less obliterative. But, as Zadie Smith explains, Nabokov understands literary creation to occur in two stages: an initial Keats-ian stage of inspiration, characterized by suprarational "rapture" (*vostorg,* in Nabokov's Russian — *vorstog* or *vorstorg* in Smith, "Rereading," 49), followed by the stage in which "the actual writing gets done" (ibid.), a conscious effort to recreate and "recapture" (*vdokhnovenie*) the thrill of the preceding stage. It's this second stage that the reader participates in, endeavoring, no less than the writer, to reconstruct the blissful transcendence of the first stage. That is, in Nabokov's fiction, the palpable beauty of literary form arrives not by suppressing or suspending reason, but rather by plying one's craft, stirring and stoking the medium of language (which is also and always the medium of reason) until it achieves

pedagogically, "unknowable forms of learning," I find myself wondering, albeit commonsensically, if he is willing to accept unspendable forms of payment for his efforts. And when he stresses that "active attention" is something that defies measurement and assessment, I have to ask, instead, if assiduous textual attention is not exactly what humanities teachers seek to measure, maybe all that they can hope to measure, via tests and essays.

Reason certainly has its limits (paradoxical assertion and all). The last century or so of Western thought, from Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Freud, the flood tide of modernism (flowing over Rand, around the archipelago of Nabokov), on through deconstruction and its aftermath, can read like a sustained, at times precipitous, erosion of reason. Meanwhile, the material forces of civilization, heedless, paying no nevermind, have blithely continued to demonstrate the awesome power of this cognitive Death Star and, in a planet-altering explosion of industries and technologies, reveal exactly what reason can do. In the whole library of well-reasoned debunkings of reason, William Gass's slender and idiosyncratic "The Case of the Obliging Dinner Guest" bears remembering. He shows how no logical argument can proscribe the heinous act of deception, murder, and cannibalism alluded to in his title, but he contends that some moral positions, some truths, defy logical argumentation not because they're "inexplicable" or indefensible but because their rightness is stubbornly "transparent."[60] So yes, yes, let's all gather round and sing the

a kind of escape velocity and transmutes into suprarational emotion (this, exceeding or adjacent to the emotions percolating in the work's content).

60 William H. Gass, "The Case of the Obliging Stranger," in *Fiction & the Figures of Life* (Boston: Nonpareil Books, 1971), 230. Gass also accurately diagnoses, in this 1957 essay, our present ideological division: "Many ethical disputes are due to the possession, by the contending parties, of different accounts of the same occasion, all satisfactorily clear, and this circumstance gives the parties a deep feeling for the undoubted rightness of each of their versions. Such disputes are particularly acrimonious, and they cannot be settled until an agreement is reached about the true description of the case" (237).

> liturgy of the limits of reason. But reason would seem to be the only viable line of defense against the world-historical stupidity incarnated in the likes of Trump and Putin (or any authoritarian disinformationist). That reason has its limits, that it will never answer the most interesting and urgent existential questions, that it is unlikely to aerate, much less pierce, life's greatest mysteries, can never be a reason not to exercise reason exhaustively.

No less than Michael Rodgers, Herner Saeverot has grave concerns about "unfruitful hierarch[ies] of thinking, where one truth is regarded as higher and better."[61] Lest he be mistaken for a "demystifier who appears to think that truth is on his side,"[62] Saeverot aligns himself and his pedagogy with the notion of "antithetical truth"[63] embodied in Nabokov's *Lolita*. Forswearing truth would seem to be a mug's game (a pose that wears well only on a Nietzsche or a Derrida). The conundrum, reminiscent of the Cretan liar's paradox, could grant Saeverot a Trumpian license to peddle perfect nonsense. Instead, in his article, through its contradictions and pratfalls, truth emerges as something obdurate, inevitable, and nonfungible. Quite against his expressed intentions, Saeverot inadvertently affirms *Lolita*'s rather obvious and noncontroversial moral "message" (Humbert's crimes are heinous).

In referring to Lolita's suffering as a "hell of pain," Saeverot, heart on sleeve, already reveals that which he purports to conceal: namely, where his human sympathies lie, as both reader and educator. Later, to illustrate the precarity of educative deceit, the danger that it will lead inattentive readers into error, Saeverot quotes one of the midcentury critics, Thomas Molnar, who was duped by Nabokov's novel: in Molnar's view, Lolita fails to elicit the thoughtful reader's sympathy because of her checkered past

61 Saeverot, "Educative Deceit," 602.
62 Ibid., 603.
63 Ibid., 610.

and lewd behavior (as reported by Humbert). To this position, Saeverot turns indignant, affirming the novel's bona fides: "Molnar claims that it is impossible to be [Lolita's] 'knight-protector'! […] The fact that H.H. has destroyed her childhood is totally overlooked. Without a doubt, Molnar stared himself blind on Nabokov's deceit."[64] And when Saeverot sums up the educative function of the novel, he can't help but emphasize (thankfully) its bald morality: "The text almost forces the reader to be more awake and aware in the future. The deceit is used in this [criminal] context, then, because it enables the reader to understand the seriousness of incest and to start to see the pain and suffering this produces."[65]

Given the argumentative context — Saeverot is, after all, urging educators to adopt deception as a teaching strategy — it's tempting to think such blunders themselves have a Socratic function: occasions planted by Saeverot for readers to exercise their own intelligence and call foul. But I don't think so. The contradictions (that is, truth claims) are so pervasive as to be both central (to Saeverot's thoughts on *Lolita* and on education) and peripheral.

For one major example, Saeverot starts from the premise that education is "(im)possible," its outcomes unpredictable, and that, in pedagogy, there are no better or worse, only different methods.[66] Saeverot borrows this conclusion from another pedagogue, Gert Biesta, whose work he seems to accept as entirely truthful (and which begs a simple rebuttal[67]). Despite Saeverot's

64 Ibid., 609. Saeverot rightly accuses Molnar of misreading.

65 Ibid., 615. In "Educative Deceit," Saeverot oddly and gratuitously stresses incest, rather than pedophilia, as Humbert's crime against his stepdaughter, apparently because it allows him to shoehorn Freud's thoughts on incest taboos into the discussion.

66 Ibid., 603.

67 My own longtime experience confirms Biesta's position: it doesn't seem possible to verify that one pedagogy yields better results than another. Learning outcomes are inevitably (and rather predictably) uneven for students. But this ambiguity lends zero support for the cause of implementing educative deceit. By Saeverot's reasoning, it would be impossible to choose between the rationalist, the Taoist, and the Dadaist pedagogy. Even a coin

liturgical invocations of these postmodern and progressive mantras, by the end of his article, he does appear to take sides, commit to a position, and pitch battle: "The teacher who puts things in plain words does limit and control the lives of the students," who are merely "obedient listeners"[68]; instead, "the teacher *must* create"[69] a more open and ambiguous instructional environment by means of deceit, which "may be a powerful contribution to education."[70] More broadly, truth claims — about social and literary history, about mimicry in the natural world, about specific novels and scholarly articles, about education itself ("The teacher must be trusted"[71]) — are rampant, of course, in Saeverot's article, despite his theoretical anxieties about the concept. But even here, Saeverot's assertions can abruptly disclose falsehoods. When referencing a conversational exchange in *Lolita,* a humble truth claim, Saeverot misidentifies the speaker, mistaking Humbert's narratorial interjection ("Of course not, my hot downy darling"[72]) for a "mother's ironical answer" to her daughter.[73] None of this rings of argumentative strategy.

When Saeverot considers Nabokov's model of literary reading, his aim, again, is to banish the (chimerical?) notion that a single uncontested "meaning" or message (or moral) awaits readers of *Lolita.*[74] Here, Saeverot belatedly brings into the light

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flip presupposes its own necessity. My two cents, the remainder of twenty years of teaching: pedagogies can be more, or less, coherent, and their effectiveness can be weighed in those terms.

68 Ibid., 616.

69 Ibid. (my italics).

70 Ibid., 619.

71 Ibid., 618.

72 Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita,* 55.

73 Saeverot, "Educative Deceit," 610.

74 Ibid., 613. That Humbert is a villain, that the novel is "a highly moral affair" (as Nabokov wrote to Edmund Wilson), is obvious, transparent even. Equally obvious is that Humbert is not wholly a villain (he has a modicum of human conscience, or capably dupes us into thinking so). These observations do little to limit the wide latitude readers enjoy to parse, inflect, and misread the textual evidence. Rather than foreclosing possibilities of interpretation, this view — that the novel's morality is obvious, as moral verdicts tend to be — might offer a viable beginning.

another of his article's forebears, the Roland Barthes of "The Death of the Author," and he attempts to square Nabokov's directives with "Barthes' famous utterance: 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.'"[75] To illustrate Nabokov's view, Saeverot revisits "Good Readers and Good Writers," a slender pedagogical essay from Nabokov's teaching days at Cornell. Nabokov expects a reader "to curb his imagination […] by trying to get clear the specific world the author" has created.[76] But despite this admonition to attend closely to textual details, Nabokov also, per Saeverot, obliges readers to finally "swerve away from [the textual] world, thereby creating something 'new'[….] The authority is, in the end, given to the reader."[77] Readers inevitably contribute something of their own, uniquely, to the Gestalt virtuality of the textual world (as Wolfgang Iser puts it[78]), but Saeverot seems to imagine this contribution to be specifically a decryption of message, a designation of "meaning." This sort of conclusive swerve, which Saeverot attributes to Nabokov, is rather a projection, wishful thinking, a figment of his imagination.

THUMBNAIL SIDEBAR

Zadie Smith, in an essay from *Changing My Mind* (2009), elaborates on the vexed relationship between Barthesian and Nabokovian aesthetics, and she recounts the shift in her own loyalties from the former to the latter. Unlike Saeverot, Smith views the writers as being more different than similar, opposing riders on the see-saw of author–reader relations. But like Saeverot, she associates Barthes, perhaps wrongly, with reader-response criticism, of the kind that liberates readers to "reinscribe dusty old novels into our own interests

75 Barthes, quoted in Saeverot, "Educative Deceit," 613.
76 Nabokov, quoted in Saeverot, "Educative Deceit," 613.
77 Saeverot, "Educative Deceit," 613.
78 See Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," *New Literary History* 3, no. 2 (1972): 279–99.

and concerns,"[79] the blank-check school of interpretation. She shares hypothetical examples of essay titles that result from such wide-latitude perspectivism: "The Trans-gendered Suitor: Reflections of Darcy as Elizabeth's True Sister in *Pride and Prejudice*."[80] But she understands that Barthes's "The Death of the Author" also imposes a death sentence of sorts on the reader, who is likewise depersonalized, "without history, biography, or psychology."[81] This kind of reading culminates in an interpretive text such as Barthes's *S/Z,* a study of a novella so giddily and divergently annotated as to make confetti of the narrative, rendering it incomprehensible (or uncovering its incomprehensibility). To the hypothetical essayists that Smith imagines, Barthes would probably advise them, as a matter of principle, to stop making sense.

Smith takes pains to misconstrue Nabokov too, overstating, for the sake of argument, his hostility to Barthes's notion of authorial obsolescence. She understands very well Nabokov's terms in the writer–reader contract: "What [Nabokov] offered [readers] […] was not the antic pleasure of their own interpretation but the serious satisfaction of *twinning the emotion of creation.*"[82] But she initially emphasizes the cost of this reader's holiday from self-interest: "In practice this means subsuming your existence in his, until you become, in effect, Nabokov's double."[83] In Nabokov's intricate artistry, Smith senses a residue of Nabokov's personal self-regard, a refusal to give up the ghost and entrust his work to the reader's animating imagination.[84] Eventually, she comes around

79 Zadie Smith, "Rereading Barthes and Nabokov," in *Changing My Mind* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 51.

80 Ibid., 50.

81 Barthes, quoted in Smith, "Rereading," 43.

82 Smith, "Rereading," 53.

83 Ibid., 52.

84 Ibid., 52–53. Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* takes up the same topic — Barthes versus Nabokov — and reaches the same conclusion as Smith by another path: "Nabokov rallies not only against the death of the author by inveigling readers to bring him into their interpretations but

to see this compact as not a burden but a gift, an offer of genuine contact with another consciousness, a welcome visitation to the solitary confinement of the self.[85] Even so, one doesn't have to look far to reconcile Nabokov's position with Barthes's.

Nabokov often and loudly discouraged readers from "study[ing] a work of fiction in order to gain information about a country or about a social class or about the author."[86] And in his lecture on Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time,* in which the book's author and its narrator share the same name, Nabokov writes, "One thing should be firmly impressed upon your minds: the work is not an autobiography; the narrator is not Proust the person, and the characters never existed except in the author's mind. Let us not, therefore, go into the author's life." He goes on, "Proust is a prism. His, or its, sole object is to refract, and by refracting to recreate a world in retrospect. The world itself, the inhabitants of that world, are of no social or historical importance whatever."[87] Barthes also mentions Proust (along with two other writers dear to Nabokov, Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Valéry) as a poster child for the lapsed author: "By a radical reversal, instead of putting his life into his novel, as is so often maintained, [Proust] made of his very life a work for which his own book was the model."[88] But even without these explicit and perhaps equivocal textual traces, it seems likely that Nabokov would have shared Joyce's attitude about authorship — refined out of existence, paring fingernails, like the God immanent in but absent from the Creation — a position that Barthes's essay chases after and arguably overtakes (plunging right into the abyss). Nabokov would have no

also […] by cajoling readers to mistake narrators or speakers for himself" (57).

85 Smith, "Rereading," 57.

86 Nabokov, "On a Book," 316.

87 Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature,* 208.

88 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text,* trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 144.

quarrel with the notion of the writer as disembodied scriptor and the reader as essential reanimator — "the only immortality [Lolita] and I may share," Humbert closes his confession, is "in the minds of later generations"[89] — but he would probably urge a scrupulous reconstruction, rather than Barthes's systematic deconstruction, of the text.

Which is to say that Nabokov's and Barthes's aesthetics are not entirely compatible, but are perhaps better understood as identical and opposite.

Smith's essay does help to redress a glaring omission in Saeverot's article. In portraying Nabokov as an exemplar of French theory, a guarantor of the reader's moral and epistemic freedom, Saeverot gives surprisingly little attention to Nabokov's own methods in the classroom. In a footnote, he finds meager support for educative deceit from a former Cornellian's recollection: "Nabokov himself was known for playing different roles as a teacher," including that of "'the horrified professor,'" always "'with a subtle, gleeful irony.'"[90] However, Smith clarifies just how empirically stringent and exacting, just how far from Continental philosophy, Nabokov's pedagogy was. "When I first read his *Lectures on Literature,*" she writes,

> I was disappointed. Was this really Nabokov? The apparent analytic simplicity, the lengthy quoting without commentary. The obsession with (what seemed to me) utterly banal details: the shape of Gregor Samsa's shell, a map of Dublin, the exact geographical location of *Mansfield Park.* And the questions he set his students! What color are Emma Bovary's eyes? What kind of house was Bleak House? How many *rooms* are in there? You have to reset your brain, away from the overheated hustle of English

89 Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita,* 309.
90 Saeverot, "Educative Deceit," 617.

> departments, before you can see how beautiful these lectures are. How attentive. How particular.[91]
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> Far from disrupting narrative cohesion in quest of Barthesian bliss (self-dissolution, smeared laterally across ramifying cultural codes), Nabokov expected students to have concrete and exhaustive knowledge of textual details, to chase the bliss of their role in the singular design.

Given that Saeverot's goal is to educate students in intellectual processes rather than disciplinary content, an education that requires "struggle [and] action," rather than passivity and obedience,[92] it's strange that he never considers, in "Educative Deceit" (2010), a more obvious solution. He imagines a pedagogy *inspired by and modeled on* Nabokov's novelistic techniques, but rather than literally performing such techniques in the classroom (adopting character personas, making false claims, simulating intentionally *aimless,* poker-faced deceptions), why not simply invite students to read Nabokov's work, as a kind of training ground for this attentive and skeptical intelligence?[93] Timothy McCarty, the other scholar referenced in this chapter's opening (once a visiting professor at Franklin & Marshall College, now on the tenure track at University of California, San Diego), does imagine this possibility.

Like Saeverot, McCarty discerns the upside in Nabokov's fine-grained, flickering artistry, but where Saeverot sets course

91 Smith, "Rereading," 51.

92 Saeverot, "Educative Deceit," 617.

93 In the concluding chapter of Roberts and Saeverot, *Education and the Limits of Reason,* the authors do consider this possibility, which they treat gingerly. Sustained literary reading might "teach us, against the spirit of our time, the value of *slowing down*" (119), and reading Nabokov's fiction in particular "can" prepare readers to detect deceptions in cyberspace or the media at large (123). Still, Roberts and Saeverot caution that such reading does not "provide an inoculation against deceits imposed by others" (ibid.). However obtusely, I find myself wanting evidence from these educators to shore up either pole of this sensible equivocation.

for the educative void, McCarty imagines tangible civic applications for the fiction. In "Good Readers and Good Liberals: Nabokov's Aesthetic Liberalism," McCarty also revisits Nabokov's short lecture on literary reading and recovers two imperatives: the good reader must "have memory" (for retaining textual details) and "some artistic sense."[94] Both talents, for McCarty, conspire to provide a model for the "ideal liberal citizen."[95] By way of demonstration, McCarty examines Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* (1938), a novel with particular political resonance in that the Kafkan protagonist, victim of a farcical police state, awaits execution in a prison fortress for the novel's duration. Tacking away from the critical consensus, McCarty reads the book as not just a critique of rightward and leftward totalitarianism (Nabokov's own estimation), but also of liberal-minded prison-reform movements — and more broadly of the individual's relationship with the law. In admonishing readers to "fondle details" or "lovingly" collect a book's "sunny trifles,"[96] Nabokov's fiction embodies a strategy for the administration of justice: an attentiveness to the details of particular cases would prevent the thoughtless prosecution of too-general laws.

And McCarty niftily demolishes those familiar allegations of authorial tyranny by insisting that the good *reader,* not the lordly (often cruel, in Nabokov's fiction) writer-narrator, provides a model for citizenship. Because the good reader, like the good author, chases an experience of "aesthetic bliss," and because this bliss in Nabokov's fiction entails a connection to "states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm,"[97] such readers are positioned to both see the whole field and render compassionate verdicts. In McCarty's words, "The curious reader finds ecstasy in aesthetic discoveries

94 Vladimir Nabokov, "Good Readers and Good Writers," in *Lectures on Literature,* ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt, 1980), 3.

95 Timothy Wyman McCarty, "Good Readers and Good Liberals: Nabokov's Aesthetic Liberalism," *Political Theory* 43, no. 6 (2015): 753.

96 Nabokov, "Good Readers," 1.

97 Nabokov, "On a Book," 314–15; quoted in McCarty, "Good Readers and Good Liberals," 765.

[gleaned from details] that are matched with the moral force of the narrative, which inclines toward the kind and tender treatment of others."[98] That is, the empirical challenges of Nabokov's fiction bend toward a benevolent emotional (and thus, subjective) experience, and this balance, then, of heart and mind constitutes a civics lesson.[99]

Should you doubt that Nabokov's aesthetic, for all its difficulties, is ultimately humane and nourishing, consider his descriptions of literary reading and its rewards. In *Lectures on Russian Literature,* he offers a "practical suggestion":

> Literature, real literature, must not be gulped down like some potion which may be good for the heart or good for the brain — the brain, that stomach of the soul. Literature must be taken and broken to bits, pulled apart, squashed — then its lovely reek will be smelt in the hollow of the palm, it will be munched and rolled upon the tongue with relish; then, and only then, its rare flavor will be appreciated at its true worth and the broken and crushed parts will again come together in your mind and disclose the beauty of a unity to which you have contributed something of your own blood.[100]

In *Speak, Memory,* Nabokov elaborates, indirectly, when he describes the joys of butterfly hunting, which affords an experience of timelessness, the precondition of ecstasy, and includes "something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary

98 McCarty, "Good Readers and Good Liberals," 765.

99 McCarty also quarrels with Richard Rorty, not for his attention to the particulars of *Lolita*, but for the way he frames Nabokov as a writer whose best books belie his avowed aestheticism. McCarty argues that the dichotomy between art and politics in Nabokov's work is a false one: "Seeking the political teachings of his novels in contrast to his ostensibly anti-political aesthetics fails to account for both the complexity of Nabokov's aesthetic thought and the degree to which his fiction is shot-through with it [i.e., that aesthetic thought and its political implications]" (McCarty, "Good Readers and Good Liberals," 755).

100 Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature,* ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt, 1980), 105.

vacuum into which rushes all that I love."[101] Artistic appreciation, literary reading, Nabokov's fiction in particular, is like that too.[102]

Excepting a sensitive reading of *Invitation's* first line and a discussion of a lone peripheral character (a prison librarian), McCarty argues for the primacy of novelistic details without noticing very many himself.[103] And though McCarty understands the prerequisite of artistic sense for literary appreciation, predicated on the experience of bliss, his civic-minded reading of *Invitation to a Beheading* delivers less bliss than bland democratic satisfaction. Despite faltering on both crucial fronts, McCarty's argument, with portions of each, still boasts more traction than Saeverot's, or the heftier efforts by Bell-Villada, Weiner, and Rodgers.

It isn't much of a leap to presume that McCarty's ideal reader-citizen would be averse to Rand and immune to all Trumps.

Still, like a good, prudent, self-effacing liberal, McCarty acknowledges that this prospect — of civic benefits from artistic appreciation — amounts to no more than wishful thinking. Good readers will always be the exception, rather than the rule; cherishing particulars and exercising compassion are less attainable goals than aspirational ideals. And McCarty also

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101 Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Putnam's, 1966), 139.

102 In "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," Nabokov describes the experience of creative bliss, that emotion readers might twin, in this way: "It is a combined sensation of having the whole universe entering you and of yourself wholly dissolving in the universe surrounding you. It is the prison wall of the ego suddenly crumbling away with the nonego rushing in from the outside to save the prisoner — who is already dancing in the open" (Nabokov, "Art of Literature," 378; quoted in Smith, "Rereading," 49).

103 McCarty says nothing at all of the novel's female characters, the young Emmie, one of Lolita's precursors, who seems to embody the perverse machinations and cruel enticements of the State, or the protagonist's creepy, baby-talking wife, Marthe, who at one point is coerced into fellating (sort of agreeably) a jailer. Nor does he mention the surreal flashback sequence in which the protagonist steps out an upper-story schoolhouse window and appears to walk on air. In order to discern grounds for straightforward uplift in Nabokov's fiction, you have to squint.

touches on the meliorist conundrum, liberalism's classic double bind: "There is no general idea so good as to necessarily justify imposing it on an individual who experiences that imposition as cruel," he writes.[104] Even if literary appreciation (call it *taste,* call it *wisdom*) could forestall miscarriages of justice and/or electoral travesties, any program to this end would itself constitute an exercise in cruelty, a kind of tyranny.

McCarty's caveats and qualms are understandable, in theory, but he might be too quick to dismiss the modest gains that could be achieved through concerted practice. Perhaps there is an untapped cultural potential latent in Nabokov's fiction (or any fiction of this order, which we call *literature*). Where McCarty concentrates on the fiction's jurisprudential applications, its effects might be better construed as *cognitive*.

With the promise then of changing everything.

104 McCarty, "Good Readers and Good Liberals," 770.

Conclusions

The Promise of Good Books

Whereas Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* is merely a peripheral contributor to our country's rightward drift, an object-lesson in the Trumpist incapacity for reason, Nabokov's fiction might harbor the potential to effect a sea change. As it incites an effortful striving for textual omniscience, tempered by a heartfelt exercise of artistic sense — this aspirational synthesis of objectivity and subjectivity — Nabokov's fiction promotes a cognitive style or intellectual hygiene that could well serve the body politic and all of its constituent humans.[1] Equipping larger numbers of readers to handle the challenges embodied in Nabokov's fiction — his stout Flesch–Kincaid numbers, narrative trapdoors, prismatic characters, iridescing details, gut-punching humor — would have to effect a change in civic discourse. Would it not be enough at least to cut into Rand's waning influence among the electorate and inoculate more swing voters against all billionaire-yokel come-ons? And could it not help, gradually, to recall a frazzled

1 To underscore the irony: Rand's so-called Objectivist work, besides being stylistically inept, is mired in contradictions and not at all objective, while Nabokov's fiction, for all its illusive depths and virtuoso difficulties, propels us toward the asymptote of objective truth.

Left to its senses? Imagine, with a massive literacy drive, a widespread inculcation of sharper skills and better taste, we might reach at minimum a +5 percent differential in our Electoral College loggerheads, tipping the scales in holdout swing states to favor truth, justice, discipline, respect, beauty, wisdom: all the recognizable field marks and concomitants of *character.*

We could call it the +5 Project.

A success rate any higher would likely spell the end of the world as we have known it.

Of course, you don't need literacy in order to have character (which I understand as a simple ethic, a perpetual willingness to do hard things well). But if you happen to lack character, literacy can be a way to build it. Any discipline might do — anything from playing piano to coding software to digging graves — but language, as a discipline, is special.

Because consciousness.

For Nietzsche, consciousness and language are so closely and intricately intertwined that their development proceeds "hand in hand."[2] Rodgers takes this to be an affirmation, that Nietzsche, like Nabokov, sees in "verbal art" "the highest manifestation of consciousness."[3] Nietzsche also wrote, in *The Gay Science,* that "all becoming conscious involves a great and thorough corruption, falsification, reduction to superficialities, and generalization,"[4] so it's unclear whether the synonymy he finds between language and consciousness constitutes a ringing endorsement for either. Even so, if language, for Nietzsche, inevitably breeds error and obfuscation, it remains our only recourse and remedy for both.

And not every consensus is a curtailment of freedom. On the inevitability of death, say, do we not almost unanimously agree that it, the fact of human mortality, *hurts,* is a source of

2 Nietzsche, quoted in Michael Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche: Problems and Perspectives* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 150.

3 Rodgers, *Nabokov and Nietzsche,* 150.

4 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs,* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 2010), 300.

perpetual, unredressable grief? Or that, say, the phenomenon of human consciousness itself is, as it was for Nabokov, a source of profound and abiding wonder, something without parallel or precedent in all the known universe? Maybe we could reach this same kind of unoppressive, no-brainer consensus on, say, the ecological unsustainability of global capitalism. Or about the antiwisdom of awarding maximum political power to a malignant narcissist. Or that, at a certain point, wealth becomes grotesque. Or that there's a culturally consequential difference between literacy and semiliteracy, and this difference is manifest in the difference between Nabokov and Rand.

This conclusion is not entirely facetious, the words not quite entirely veiled. Still, the evidence of this book alone suggests that a library revolution would prove doubly futile. Consider the gallery of scholars and enthusiasts assembled here. We have Gene Bell-Villada, whose lifetime of ardent reading allows him yet to underestimate Rand (slightly) and misjudge Nabokov (grievously — and this despite his professed youthful *love* for Nabokov). Of course, his heart remains in the right place. A taste for Nabokov isn't a prerequisite for loathing Rand.

And Michael Rodgers, a similarly assiduous scholar, with a research library at his beck and call, is merely a model of academic rectitude, as if even prolonged immersion in the works of Nabokov and Nietzsche will not, by itself, boost cognitive function, much less induce satori. Likewise, Adam Weiner, who proves an observant and nimble reader of the *Life of Chernyshevski,* who practices "perspectivism" with a joyful and consequential air, nevertheless ends in error, both big and small, in his earnest, well-meaning book.

And what of Lester Hunt, the emeritus philosopher, with his keen empirical eye and nascent sensitivity to literary form? He can recognize the artifice in *Atlas Shrugged,* but he remains oblivious to the work's glaring flaws, its logical contradictions and stylistic blunders, all the lame-brained, noxious soothsaying and double-fisted brow-beating that makes the novel a heaping pile of insufferable bullshit. And let's not forget Vegma, who

marshals meticulous evidence-based reasoning on behalf of a demonstrably unreasonable work.

Whittaker Chambers, Claudia Roth Pierpont, D. Barton Johnson, Zadie Smith, and Timothy McCarty band together on the side of slim, long-shot hopes.[5]

As representatives of the Western world's educational system, as evidence of that system's efficacy, this lot makes, on the whole, a modest showing. Despite the best efforts of all concerned, wisdom is in short supply. And even if there were a meaningful, unexceptionable correlation between political sense and literary taste, there's no sure way to cultivate the latter, much less fix the terms of the former.

That the wise can be foolish, that human fallibility, small-mindedness, unreason, and error spring eternal, doesn't mean that we should lay down arms and abandon the cause of wisdom altogether. Even Bell-Villada, in his usual ham-handed fashion, rows in this direction. In the chapter "On Their Literary Loves and Hates," he takes issue with Nabokov's and (to a lesser extent) Rand's taste-mongering. Drawing special ire are the portmanteau putdowns in Nabokov's *Ada:* "Faulknermann," "Heinrich Muller," "Lowden," among others. Bell-Villada views these as evidence of Nabokov's "virulent hates"[6] (a more accurate term would be *ungentle mockery*), and the intolerance inspires him to wax sentimental about "small, well-crafted" works consigned to marketplace oblivion.[7] He doesn't extend this charity to Nabokov's Russian-language novels; instead, he gloats a bit over the fact that Nabokov expressed admiration for the French *nouveau roman,* an arid, nearly Objectivist, and largely forgotten literary

5 To the Department of Education at Western Norway University, we send our warm regards and best wishes.

6 Gene H. Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov, Ayn Rand and the Libertarian Mind: What the Russian-American Odd Pair Can Tell Us about Some Values, Myths and Manias Widely Held Most Dear* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 88.

7 Ibid., 96.

movement.[8] And when he writes that there are many other reasons to enjoy books besides literary excellence, he makes a case that would, ironically, vindicate Rand admirers: we read such less-skilled authors, says Bell-Villada, for "their plots, their ideas or their fanciful notions; for the types of human beings they portray[….] In addition, we may feel fascinated by and even sympathetic to the personality, sensibility, soul, and character of such authors themselves."[9] Vegma, I'm looking at you.

These breezy reflections conceal yet another cross-eyed contradiction: Bell-Villada attempts to establish both that literary taste matters (trashing Rand, Nabokov, and their bullying palates) and that it doesn't (you do you, sister). For my part, I believe it would be possible to argue, convincingly, that Nabokov was wrong about Faulkner[10]; that Nabokov's own works are demonstrably uneven (as are Faulkner's and Shakespeare's and everyone else's); and that Rand's novels are objectively bad. That

8 Zadie Smith refers to this literary movement as "the thrilling space of the *nouveau roman,* of Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute and Claude Simon"; see Zadie Smith, "Rereading Barthes and Nabokov," in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 45. My own necessarily limited reading of Robbe-Grillet does not accord with her characterization.

9 Bell-Villada, *On Nabokov,* 90.

10 Julian Connolly challenges Nabokov's low opinion of Dostoevsky in exactly this way; see Connolly, "Nabokov and Dostoevsky: Good Writer, Bad Reader?," in *Nabokov and the Question of Morality,* eds. Michael Rodgers and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (New York: Palgrave, 2016).

Nabokov's summary judgments are unequivocal, certainly, but more nuance tends to emerge if you look closely into individual cases. Zadie Smith tells how Nabokov's verdict "poisoned" her mind against Dostoevsky (Smith, "Rereading Barthes and Nabokov," 52). That verdict is borne out, roundly, by Nabokov's lecture on the writer, but he also makes finer distinctions, noting that *The Double* was "the best thing [Dostoevsky] ever wrote" (Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature,* 100), that Dostoevsky was "an intricate plotter" who "builds up his climaxes and keeps up his suspenses with consummate mastery" (109), and that the climactic scene in *The Possessed* is "incredible nonsense, but it is grand booming nonsense with flashes of genius illuminating the whole gloomy and mad farce" (130). Faint praise, perhaps, but glimmers of charitable qualification often underlie Nabokov's harsh appraisals.

Bell-Villada's own claims are so readily falsifiable would alone seem to prove that we *can* argue, reasonably, about literary taste. Some arguments, like some novels, really are better than others. It's easier to see the difference when you examine the bad ones.

So when our books get tangled up in our politics, their promise — to help us see to the bottom of things and scooch closer to the asymptote of truth and reality — might be something more than a mirage.

But if a literacy drive strikes you as a doubtful remedy for our polarized politics, if literary wisdom requires too much labor for too little reward and arrives much too late to save the bygone day, you're not wrong. Approaching literature from this administrative angle is inherently doomed anyway, would just perpetuate the problem we're trying to solve, extinguishing *taste* from the outset. If one reads *The Gift,* or *Lolita,* in order to become a better person or wiser citizen, the end can't help but smother the means (reducing books to mere "means"). It's a perfect conundrum: more and better literary reading might do the republic good, but only when practiced as its own reward.

To stare straight into the double barrel of this lost cause, to acknowledge, without shirking or evasion, this not-quite-perfect futility, and still to persist? Sounds like an irrational project worthy of literature.

With even this weak, unpushy faith in literary wisdom, you start to recognize in yourself a little of the crazed Sasha Chernyshevski, NC's prodigal son and Nabokov's own doppelgänger, who "died suddenly in sinful Rome, in a small room with a stone floor, declaring his superhuman love for Italian art and crying in the heat of wild inspiration that if people would only listen to him life would be different, different!"[11]

You start to fret that you're prosecuting your own private Cancel Culture, advocating a new rigor like the second coming of Rakhmetov.

All that stands between you and him is your corporeal form, a barge-load of politics and a modicum of artistic sense, its con-

11 Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 296.

comitants of wonder, love, joy, plus all their disproportionate costs.

You contemplate the hard faces of your own new-spawned doppelgängers.

You squeeze your dread so tight — *there's no convincing anyone of anything anymore* — it starts to feel like hope.

Still, none of the books assayed here — which range from *very bad* to *meh* — is likely to bother anyone. They will gather dust on the shelves of university libraries (not far from the carrels where *The Gift* languishes and *Atlas Shrugged* molders), their pages rotting in slow motion, invisible to the naked eye, but their catalogue numbers immortalized in the cultural catchall of cyberspace to ensnare, perhaps, some next-gen dissertation, to equally little purpose.

If bad books threaten little, good books promise less.

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