

**The Impossible Knowledge of Excess: An
Appraisal of Works by Georges Bataille and
Vladimir Nabokov**

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Word Count: 73011 words

Number of Pages: 197

**A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in English**

Department of English

University of Kent

April 2022

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Acknowledgements

Immense gratitude to Professor David Ayers and Dr. Will Norman for their immense patience and support during these five and a half years of seeing the project through.

Abstract

The thesis examines Bataille's formulation of heterology and its correlative notions in Nabokov's fictional work. A heterological theory of knowledge, according to Bataille, opposes "any homogeneous representation of the world [...] any philosophical system."¹ In a strict sense, all perceived reality consists in the homogeneous - the term *homogeneity*, in Bataille's philosophy, signifies "the commensurability of elements and the awareness of this commensurability: human relations are sustained by a reduction to fixed rules based on the consciousness of the possible identity of delineable persons and situations..."² Conversely, the heterogeneous concerns elements that are unassimilable not only to the social realm but to any data of sense and thoughts. In theory, the complete renunciation of human consciousness delivers one to the core of the heterogeneous, whose approximate aspects, however, are discernible in the present world.

Excess approximates the heterogeneous proper in its implications of non-production and the absence of explanatory matter. The living organism, receiving more energy than is needed for its growth, is naturally susceptible to impulses beyond its capacity and will. Violence, eroticism, an extravagant display of wealth, sacrifice are all manifestations of such expenditure of the surplus energy. Death looms on the horizon, both as a reminder of our material servitude and as the final warning for the inevitable consequence. But it is in death that excess enters into the realm of the heterogeneous proper.

All these questions will be explored in the following chapters. The objective is less to arrive at a definitive idea of something so defiant of the dialectical process as excess and the heterogeneous, than to provide a way of thinking wherein the primacy of reason and coherence is, in the interest of going beyond the limits of the homogeneous, openly thwarted. Nabokov's writings are used partly as proving ground of the primary theories and propositions, and partly as one end of an intense

¹ Bataille, Georges. *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 97.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 137-38.

conversation with Bataille. On account of their shared propensity for an intellectual pursuit that runs counter to ordinary calculations, Bataille and Nabokov were without question two of the radical chroniclers of the aberrance of human condition. Their attempts to grasp the ungraspable essence of the heterogeneous are further testament to the eternal gulf between representation and reality, to the poverty of language.

Introduction

Apparently the chief purpose for stating intentions in an introduction is to have something later for contradiction and denial.

- M. F. K. Fisher, *Serve It Forth*¹

General Propositions

Bataille's initial idea of excess drew on a well-known ecological fact: "On the surface of the globe, *for living matter in general*, energy is always in excess; the question is always posed in terms of extravagance."² The statement would thereon be extended to the implication of two essential aspects: on the level of social stability, the excessive energy needs its proper outlets; and regarding Bataille's philosophy in general, the character of extravagance demands a thinking that founders (and is indeed predicated on such disintegration) no sooner than when it is posited. The thesis delves into four of the common outlets, some of which may be said to be constitutive of the excess per se: violence, eroticism, sovereignty, death. They are loosely categorised in Bataille as manifestations of the heterogeneous, running up against a homogeneous reality which, in Bataille's words, consists in the "abstract and neutral aspect of strictly defined and identified objects (basically, it is the specific reality of solid objects)."³ In a strict sense, what is heterogeneous is essentially *foreign* to the homogeneous - the latter marked by the faculties of intelligence and reason. To so much as assign the heterogeneous proper an affirmed subjectivity dissolves the whole abstraction, the essence of which entails the *absence* of the homogeneous.

But in so far as Bataille was concerned with the pursuit of the heterogeneous, whose prescribed end saw if not a reconciliation of the conflicting elements between the heterogeneous and the homogeneous, then at least an indication of their theoretical

¹ Fisher, M. F. K. *The Art of Eating* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004), p. 154.

² Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share: Vol. I*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1988), p. 23.

³ Bataille, Georges. *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 169.

discrepancy; certain concessions and admission of paradoxes must be in place. A basis for such reasoning is the elemental divide between life and death. According to Bataille, men are by nature “discontinuous” beings, in the sense that each maintains throughout his life a separate existence from the others. Death restores them to continuity, a state that is thought to be common to the animals (“[...] every animal is *in the world like water in water.*”)¹ Phenomenologically speaking, death signifies a total void of the terrestrial world; it is not so much the “death” that we know of as a NOTHING. This NOTHING - which, in Bataille’s terminology, is interchangeable with “nonknowledge”, denoting the not-knowing - is the price to be paid once continuity is reached.

The premise of the argument thus contains this irreversible clause: the heterogeneous remains for the most part a hypothetical adjunct to the homogeneous world. Such acknowledgement would doubtlessly be fatal to an enterprise that seeks to justify the actuality of an abstract conception - but Bataille’s main concern lies beyond the imperative of devising definitive answers and solutions. Michael Richardson, in his introduction to *The Absence of Myth* (1994), a collection of Bataille’s key writings on surrealism, aptly describes the nucleus of Bataille’s philosophy as a “potentiality to be realised.”² This can be further evidenced in Bataille’s own view of philosophy, which, as he claims in *Eroticism* (1957), is a “sum of the possibles in the sense of a synthesis, or nothing”; and that, even as a “specialised undertaking,” is “at fault in being divorced from life.”³ All told, the study of the heterogeneous is at once centred on the uncertain (which for Bataille always spells instability) and drawn from experiential facts of human existence. Much of perceived reality seems to more or less adhere to such rule but most signally the so-called heterogeneous operations (the heterogeneous as invariably inflected by the homogeneous), such as acts of violence or eroticism, which, for all their futility of ultimately breaching the confines of the immediate world, presuppose a partial dissolution of the individual as he, succumbing to human fear, clings to his discontinuous existence. Those operations are constantly suspended between the discrete realms of the heterogeneous and the homogeneous, figuring no more than a

¹ Bataille, Georges. *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 2012), p. 19.

² Richardson, Michael. “Introduction” (1994) in Bataille, Georges. *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, trans. Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 2006), p. 3.

³ Bataille, Georges. *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), p. 254, 258, 12.

simulacrum of the indefinable subjectivity they are after.

In theory, the heterogeneous proper can never be evoked in the present scheme of things. Bataille says of men's incapacity to go for the absolute extreme: "The stirrings within us have their own fearful excesses; the excesses show which way these stirrings would take us. They are simply a sign to remind us constantly that death, the rupture of the discontinuous individualities to which we cleave in terror, stands there before us more real than life itself."¹ The "sign" itself, in this context, is enough an affirmation of what is apparently a yet-unverifiable conception, if by death the eradication of consciousness is entailed. But death is also a certainty, an inescapable end for the living, and not infrequently might one, being still discontinuous, steal a few glimpses of its soon-to-be-acknowledged presence.

Literature figures prominently in the variety of possible means through which the proximity to the heterogeneous proper may be effected. It is Bataille's contention that poetry, whose elliptical form suggests a "beyond" of expression, a language pushed to its limit, is the "only sovereign cry."² In *Literature and Evil* (1957), Bataille allows a broader definition: a literary communication is a "sovereign process" that exists independent of the work and the reading of the work.³ A genuine communication, as Bataille claims elsewhere, requires individuals "whose separate existence in themselves is *risked*, placed at the limit of death and nothingness..."⁴ An author's task is thus to generate a mode of communication that rests on the paradoxical basis of its destruction. Since a self-defeating consequence in this case defeats in its turn the very purpose of the practice (and invalidates it altogether), a new approach is devised which Bataille terms as the "disappearance of the discursive real", to wit the exhaustion of existing language, the collapse of representation.⁵

Even in philosophical disquisition, this discipline against established meaning is at the heart of Bataille's technique. "I could provide no more than an obscure expression of

¹ Bataille. *Eroticism*, p. 19.

² Bataille, Georges. "Take It or Leave It" (1946) in *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, p. 96.

³ Bataille, Georges. *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 161.

⁴ Bataille, Georges. *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 19.

⁵ Bataille, Georges. *Inner Experience*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), p. 205.

my ideas owing to the turmoil in my mind”, he says. “Turmoil is fundamental to my entire study...”¹ It may be argued that this resultant turmoil is also in a large sense incidental, given the essential ineffectuality of bypassing the conventions of language. But the end - whether the attempt is successful or not - obviously counted much less to Bataille than did the whole process, within which a forward movement towards the heterogeneous is prefigured. The writers whose works he held as models of this particular operation were Emily Brontë, Charles Baudelaire, Jules Michelet, William Blake, Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, Jean Genet and Marquis de Sade. According to his individual tributes to them in *Literature and Evil*, a doggedness for the disruption of the Good, the notion of which stands widely for traditional morality, for common interest, for the primacy of the future, for reason, knowledge, society, servility, for life itself, constitutes the writings’ incongruence when judged alongside their respective contemporaries. This deviant spirit was in fact partly attributed to those writers’ backgrounds - how they consciously rebelled against the accepted norms of their time, which did not always lead them to the discovery of Evil, the antithesis of the Good. In Sade, for instance, Bataille finds an “evident monotony” which is due to the “decision to subordinate literature to the expression of an inexpressible event.”² The approach then is the reverse of what Bataille is looking for: Sade would always begin with the “examination of violence ‘releases’ in practice of which he wanted to make intelligible”, whereas, for Bataille, philosophy must start from “a calm consciousness - from distinct intelligibility - in order to bring it to the point of fusion.”³

Had Bataille read Nabokov, one is curious to know, would he find in the author of such norm-breaking novel as *Lolita* the identical tendency for the transgressive ideals? In terms of subject matter alone, Nabokov appeared to have shared with Bataille a certain penchant for the perverse and the illicit. But such is only a surface affinity that should not be registered as valid basis for the main argument. The underlying connection between Bataille and Nabokov, in my opinion, hinges on this aspiration towards an ineffable, and ultimately unattainable, summit that characterises the substance of their thoughts and works. This “summit”, a refined form of which for Bataille would be “sovereignty”, is less in the sense of an

¹ Bataille. *Literature and Evil*, p. 6.

² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³ *Ibid.*

implausible ideal than the indication of a split between temporal compromise and absolute freedom. Instead of relating to the major pointers, an abstract concept like that needs to be unraveled by way of examining individual cases, for the essence of the subject calls for an emphasis on the course through which the representation of the heterogeneous (a contradiction in terms) is approximated. In this light, the structural device of the text, its thematic ideas, the texture of the writing, its stylistic strategy, the theoretical framework, the play of symbolism are all pivotal concerns for how the common ground between Bataille and Nabokov might be substantiated.

Not counting the introduction and the conclusion, the study here undertaken consists of four chapters. Each chapter begins with an introduction of Bataille's theory and thoughts on the given topic, which, by way of illustration, will thereon be applied to the analysis of Nabokov's novel. Ideally, individual theses concerning Bataille and Nabokov should interweave each other in every aspect to form a united whole; but such result cannot be achieved without a number of snags: first, there are certain ideological incompatibilities between Bataille and Nabokov in spite of their mutual passion in the quest of the essential truth of sovereign reality (known in Bataille as true heterogeneity) and their awareness of the personal inadequacy in the face of, for want of a better, more illuminating term, "wanting the impossible." Secondly, the nebulosity of Bataille's philosophy demands, naturally enough, a thoroughgoing explication before the primary questions and arguments can be broached. Moreover, this results in, some might say, a disproportion of interests which I have tried to remedy by confining, as much as I can, the philosophical discourse to what is immediately at stake with regards to Nabokov's writings. Last of all, a perhaps puerile and, considering the nature of the task at hand, not entirely practical wish to abide by both Bataille's and Nabokov's disdain for dialectical rigour and systematisation informs the elusive tone and indefinite texture that this thesis sometimes takes on.¹ Clarity still being of paramount importance, should it occur that an abstract notion or terminology is at issue, explanations will be given in the

¹ Literary critic Sylvère Lotringer says of Bataille: "He was diffident of concepts, resilient to systems and deeply suspicious of language." (*On Nietzsche*, p. vii). And as for Nabokov, he once said in an interview: "I have never belonged to any club or group. No creed or school has had any influence on me whatsoever. Nothing bores me more than political novels and the literature of social intent." (Nabokov, Vladimir. *Strong Opinions*. London: Penguin Books, 2011, p. 3).

first instance. Occasional recapitulations and glossaries of some of the recurring notions are also given for the benefit of the readers.

Failure to evoke a scheme fully befitting the particular thematics of the thesis, the essence of which, as shall be seen, finds its most accurate expression in the impairment of dialectical sense, testify to, if not the devious success of apprehending the heart of such an “impossible” subject (in the twofold sense that it cannot be reduced to a reasoned conception and that it necessarily opposes possibility), then at least the basic orientation that this project, carrying over into a movement once the textual boundaries are breached, should be advancing. That is, the methodology presupposes a powerlessness which is to be treated nonetheless as the authentic spirit that the principal task calls for. As Bataille explains in the preface to *Theory of Religion* (1973, published posthumously): “This powerlessness defines an apex of possibility, or at least, awareness of the impossibility opens consciousness to all that is possible for it to think [...] the cry of this powerlessness is a prelude to the deepest silence.”¹ All shall be made clearer as the thesis unfolds; it needs to be remarked, for the nonce, that paradox is inseparable from the primary reasoning of the argumentation, which, again, is implicit in the thinking and characteristic style of Bataille. Conversely, definitive statements are hard to come by unless one reads Bataille’s work solely for informative data - which, for certain, not many do. Language has much to answer for in this insuperable difficulty: it is the permanent reminder of the servitude of human life, of our limited capacity and intelligence, of a world in thrall to the primacy of production and accumulation, both of which refer, in turn, to another immutable element - time. It is known that words automatically posit a subject and an object, and such a rule is also inherent in a thinking irrevocably steeped in and structured by the linguistic. A thought of the heterogeneous, on the other hand, requires the fusion - to the point of mutual undifferentiation - of the subject and the object; the apparent contradiction cannot be resolved through any practical means if by striving for a oneness of men and the universe the validity of such enterprise, which is defined by men’s otherness, by their “thinghood” (the abiding condition of being reduced to a mere thing), is altogether lost.

¹ Bataille. *Theory of Religion*, p. 10, 13. He also writes in *On Nietzsche*: “[...] such an experience of helplessness can’t be effected till all other experiences have been attempted and accomplished - till all other possibilities have been exhausted.” *On Nietzsche*, p. xxvii

Since arriving at a tenable solution is no longer feasible, and to concede to the false glory of acknowledged failures throws the central rationale into doubt, a different tactic and approach to giving a more conclusive shape and purpose to the project becomes imperative. The performative utterance as advanced by the postmodernists - above all, Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler - may provide a possible angle here (Bataille employs a similar method, dramatic mimicry, most prominently in his book *Inner Experience*, 1943); but even in practice what it amounts to is not so much a de facto medium for reifying the heterogeneous as, indeed, a mere transitioning from one linguistic constraint to another (this performativity becomes the new identity that language has to reckon with).¹ Within the limits of an academic dissertation, the methodology is only allowed certain flexibility, or even anarchy, to the extent that it thereby serves itself as the praxis to the dominant thesis. This rule, whilst by no means cut and dried, has the double advantage in this particular preoccupation of offering a detailed analysis of the thematic ideas and of relating them in the evidence of actual writing, which, however, may seem initially a misguided objective.

Of the subject itself (excess, the heterogeneous), the various disciplines and relevant concerns involved are too numerous for the present work to provide a comprehensive overview. The arguments are therefore confined to the following topics that, in my estimate, are the most crucial ones: violence, eroticism, sovereignty and death. Others which happen to be left out of the list, but which are no less inherent in the collective context, will be given their due notice should the occasion calls for it. A more extensive, methodical project will surely take care of all oversights.

In terms of the fundamental orientation, the thesis may be described as having its

¹ Derrida's theses on the performative aspects of language involve various complex interrogations that range from the "iterability" of an individual text (the past and possibility of the text) to the illocutionary force that accompanies every word uttered. In short, Derrida holds that performative text demonstrates markedly a dissolution of the text-context divide by deploying the versatility that underlies the monotonousness of repetition. Butler proposes a similar belief in that the boundaries of a discourse are re-demarcated every time the speech is given; emphasis is placed on the "silence", which is the factor for language's freedom from formal constriction, that is implicit in the utterance. See Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997); Derrida, Jacques. "The University Without Condition" in *Without Alibi*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 202-37. For Bataille's dramatic mimicry in *Inner Experience*, see Kendall, Stuart. "Translator's Introduction: A Debauchery of Thought" (2014) in Bataille, Geroges. *Inner Experience*, p. xiii.

roots in a theoretical matrix, with arguments formulated largely in a dialectical vein. Whilst it may gain in philosophical insights, historical exposition of Bataille's and Nabokov's respective backgrounds seems in need of further delineation. To do so, the later part of the introduction will give space to a broad survey of the various interdependent aspects of the biographical data as they appear from the standpoint of both figures' takes on the question of heterogeneity. This will supplement the general understanding of Bataille's and Nabokov's works, and place the overall thesis within a wider frame and tradition of critical analysis.

Chapter Summaries

The contents of each chapter are summarised in the following:

Violence - A crucial reference for this chapter is Zeynep Direk's essay, "Bataille on Immanent and Transcendent Violence" (2004), in which a contrast is made between external violence (transcendent violence) and an external violence turned inward (immanent violence). Direk's proposition is by no means faultless (as in, indeed, the problems that arise from such clear-cut distinction, which will be addressed later in the chapter), and yet, in certain respects, it helps clarify a common notion whose meaning in Bataille's definition is underscored of its heterogeneous quality. The succeeding argument follows two threads: Bataille's thoughts on violence in general and his thoughts on immanent violence. For the former, a possible heritage of his theory is traced, coupled with a brief survey of the major theses of violence in Western philosophy; for the latter, illustration is lent by way of Bataille's dialectics of potlatch and sacrifice.

In Nabokov, violence tends to be aestheticised as a result of the often poetic imagery that accompanies it. Other instances show Nabokov refraining from overt descriptions of the matter. This part investigates in the main Nabokov's methods of wedding the trope of violence to those of eroticism and human perversity, as well as the intricate device through which the author evokes a "violent" interchange between the text and the reader. As Bataille demonstrates, language poses a hindrance to such task (in the sense that words inevitably transform the violence proper), and how Nabokov manages to overcome the issue, by way of a tyrannical exertion of authorial will, is analysed. The section closes with a consideration of

Bataille's and Nabokov's respective treatments of the connection between violence, eroticism and death.

Eroticism - The word eroticism signifies a sexual desire that is specific to human beings. The first part of the chapter shows the continuity and interconnectedness between violence and eroticism in Bataille's philosophy. To supplement the argument, works by Freud, Thomas Nagel, and Roger Scruton are brought in. The reference to Freud is especially problematic in this case as he was a declared anathema for Nabokov. How the author remonstrated against the Freudian conception of sex will be much expanded upon, followed by an inquiry into the disparity between Nabokov's personal opinion on the subject and its thematisation in his novels. A note on sexual violence in modernism is made, wherein the commonality is found with the movement's emphasis on the consideration of physical integrity and the issue of body politics in Bataille's and Nabokov's works.

Next, a focused look at the *jouissance*-free depiction of sex in Nabokov's novel and its association with the idea of solipsism. The condition whereof the hypertrophy of individual ego brings in its wake the objectification of others, as in, for instance, Humbert Humbert's draining Lolita's free will to enhance his sexual prowess, points towards the link between sex and death. This, in Bataille, further justifies the idea of eroticism as a mere semblance of the heterogeneous proper, as well as the illicitness that invariably accompanies the experience. Bataille's novella, *Story of the Eye* (1928), is duly given a meticulous reading to illustrate how the skein of sex, violence and death is constructed. Emphasis is placed on the loaded mechanism that makes possible the liberation of the narrative's intense erotic mysticism from the monotony of discourse and symbolism. Finally, by exploring the potentials for pornography to serve as an optimal medium for conveying the unparalleled force of the erotic proper, Bataille's and Nabokov's respective approaches to the question are examined.

Sovereignty - Since the word, in Bataille's definition, is frequently conceived as synonymous with heterogeneity per se, a list is drawn up to highlight the nuances between these similar notions. Bataille was not alone in Western intellectual history in aspiring vainly to the beyond of the sovereign. Two paradigms of supreme power are analysed alongside Bataille's formulation: Albert Camus's rebel and Hegel's

master/slave dialectic.

There is not in Nabokov's fiction an equivalence to sovereignty but a handful of possible synonyms. The following section looks into notions like God and illusive power. It ends with a consideration of the paradox that is central to Bataille's proposal of a non-activated power (the essence of sovereignty) and how such paradox is related to the power dynamic in Nabokov's characterisation and creative scheme.

The last two sections revolve around the textual representation of sovereignty. John Searle's thesis on the representational act of language is cited to explain Nabokov's heavy reliance on parodic pattern in his novels. The link between parody and solipsism is bolstered by Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen's theory of literary individualism. The argument then follows that parody is a tactic for getting across to a sovereign emotion by way of rupturing the fundamental textuality of a given work. The parallel between Nabokov's parody and Bataille's wry solution to expressing the sovereign proper (through sticking to the futility of finding a satisfactory solution, which itself prefigures the right direction to attaining true sovereignty) is addressed. The chapter ends with a reassessment of the initial premise, which is modified into the proposition that sovereignty, in terms of figurative speech, denotes not so much a summit as the unknown, or at least the process towards the unknowable.

Death - In continuation from the previous chapter, the sole solution to the difficulty of attaining the sovereign proper lies in an irrevocable measure - death. But it poses in the first instance a trickier problem: death also negates that which is meaningful and necessary for the attainment of the sovereign. In other words, the desired result is reached in the absence of ensuing confirmation. The first section of the chapter looks into Bataille's complex reasoning of death's nature and the improbable project of establishing the certitude of death (in plainer terms, to posit the integrality of self-consciousness in death). For the latter aspect, references are made to Lacan's death drive and Hegel's abstract negation, both of whose objects consist in denying death's implacable disparateness to the realm of knowledge.

On Nabokov's part, the curiosity of the possible coexistence of death and human consciousness is equally as strong. This can be seen in the motif of afterlife in his

novels, whose source points towards a more palpable sensitivity to the fear of death. The reaction itself is, according to Bataille, symptomatic of men's adherence to the sterile logic of perception: that, to be more precise, all things are necessarily divided into the subjects and the objects. The question again returns to the basic themes of representation and reality, of language and freedom. Wrapping up the chapter are final thoughts about the correlation of death and sovereignty, and death's immanence to Bataille's heterology.

Evil and Excess - The chapter addresses and sums up the recurring arguments of the thesis: the paradoxes of the heterogeneous referents (violence, eroticism, sovereignty, death), men's thinghood as an irreversible condition until death, the irreconcilable wishes to attain human totality and to persist in self-consciousness, moral ambiguity as the prescribed valuation system for the heterogeneous, the contradiction between appearance and the facts of being, the exercise at the limits of representation with which the heterogeneous is the most vulnerable to possible contacts (with the homogeneous). Serving as counterpoint and theoretical guidance is Bataille's dialectics of Evil and excess; both concepts are considered at the heart of the tension between the homogeneous and the heterogeneous.

Historical Background

At first glance, it seems odd to discuss Georges Bataille and Vladimir Nabokov in conjunction with one another. They were contemporaries, at the very least: Bataille was born in Billom, France in 1897 (he later moved to Reims where most of his childhood was spent), and died in 1962 in Paris. Nabokov was born in Saint Petersburg, Russia, in 1899, spending his life traveling from one country to another, and finally retiring, after a long exile in America, to Montreux, where he died in 1977.¹ The World Wars were naturally a formative element of their lives and works. Of delicate health from a young age, Bataille, just days after he was drafted for service in Rennes, contracted pulmonary disease and spent the first year of World War I in a military hospital. As he was not physically present on a battlefield, war for Bataille was a longed-for ideal, suffused with the aura of resplendence and

¹ In an interview with Alvin Toffler for *Playboy*, 1964, Nabokov considers his peripatetic nature: "The main reason, the background reason, is, I suppose, that nothing short of a replica of my childhood surroundings would have satisfied me..." Nabokov. *Strong Opinions*, p. 37.

sacredness. Such a rosy illusion was to be shattered decades later, during World War II, when Bataille, who witnessed first-hand the carnage that tore through the country, the many people who were left homeless or forced to be separated from their families, was duly reminded of the hasty departure that he and his mother made from their father, bedridden from syphilis, in World War One.¹ The period offered a volatile backdrop for the germination of Bataille's philosophical contemplations, many of which later evolved into three seminal books: *Inner Experience* (1943), *Guilty* (1944) and *On Nietzsche* (1945).

For Nabokov, war meant the resigned existence of a nomad, the "tremendously dull peripatetics [...] nightmares full of wanderings and escapes, and desolate station platforms."² The Nabokovs made their first move from Saint Petersburg to the Crimea, from the Crimea to Livadiya in the Ukrainian People's Republic soon after, and then to England, where Nabokov studied at Trinity College Cambridge; later, he joined the rest of the family in Berlin, where his father, once a prominent member of the Constitutional Democratic Party and secretary to the Provisional Government after the 1917 February Revolution, was fatally shot whilst trying to shield the real target, Pavel Milyukov, the exile leader of the Constitutional Democratic Party. This geographical rootlessness continued into his adulthood when, fearing the rise of anti-Semitism, Nabokov and his wife Véra fled Germany for France, then to Prague, and then finally to the United States, where he lectured at Wellesley and Cornell, contributed scientific studies and papers on lepidoptery, and turned out masterworks with which his status as one of the leading "word-stylists" of the English tradition was established.³

In terms of literary development, both Bataille and Nabokov appeared to have benefited much from their predicaments, and it showed in the high volume and quality of their outputs during their prolific periods. Bataille's intellectual activities

¹ This latter memory haunted Bataille all his life and to it he owed his nascent interest in scatological matters and the genesis of his novella (*Story of the Eye, My Mother*). See Bataille, Georges. *Story of the Eye*, trans. Joachim Neugroschal (London: Penguin Books, 2001), pp. 75-78.

² Nabokov. *Strong Opinions*, p. 137.

³ This is according to Clarence Brown, who, in his essay "Nabokov's Pushkin and Nabokov's Nabokov" (1967), correctly identifies a predominant element of literary modernism as style preceding matter. See Clarence Brown, "Nabokov's Pushkin and Nabokov's Nabokov", *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 8, No. 2. A Special Number Devoted to Vladimir Nabokov (Spring, 1967), pp. 280-93.

before World War II had been devoted largely to research on numismatics at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, where he held a post as one of its principal archivists; the founding of various journals and literary groups including *Documents*, a short-lived surrealist journal from 1929-1930; *Contre-Attaque*, an anti-fascist political movement co-founded with André Breton in 1935; *Acéphale*, a public review and secret society (wherein the idea of an actual human sacrifice was provisionally mooted) running from 1936-1939; and the writing of an erotic novella, *Story of the Eye*, under the pseudonym, Lord Auch.¹ Philosophy for Bataille was evidently a calling that had been cultivated from the beginning, even though it was not until much later, in 1943, with the publication of his first book-length philosophical treatise, *Inner Experience*, that his authority in the field was further affirmed or opened to question, depending on how one might view the unorthodox nature of the book's theoretical foundation. It should be noted that a marked discursiveness of style and a lack of an articulated conceptual framework had been characteristic of his writings in the first instance. Consciously eschewing formal training in philosophy, Bataille, especially in the early years, inclined towards Surrealism and anthropology as his chief source of interest and inquiry.² His much-publicised fall-out with Breton, which saw the latter subjecting Bataille to a savage excoriation in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930), was repaired somewhat after the war, as he revised his critical remarks and deemed the movement a consistently vital vehicle for cultural revolution.³ This occurred in an especially unpropitious moment, however,

¹ The human sacrifice project was never carried out because, allegedly, all of the participants voted to be the victims, leaving the post of the executioner unfilled.

² Besides reading a few books by notables like Nietzsche and Hegel, and attending desultorily Alexandre Kojève's lectures on Hegel, Bataille's early contact with philosophy remained for the most part peripheral. See Surya, Michel. *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 187-90.

³ There have been many sides to what initiated the break between Bataille and Surrealism, but as far as the chronology of the events is concerned, Bataille, ever since he joined the group, had voluntarily maintained a relatively marginalised position due to, as he makes plain in a drafted introduction to a book on surrealism that was never published, the movement's verging on idealism. His friendship with renegade Surrealists like Michel Leiris and André Masson, with whom he co-edited *Documents*, deepened the misunderstanding between him and Breton. Breton issued what may be known as a pre-emptive attack in the *Second Manifesto*, and Bataille returned the favour in kind in a broadside

for Surrealism in the 1940s was forced to share its prestige with the French Communist Party and existentialism, and as a result of the war the ideology that once seemed so stimulating in its ceaseless attempts at controversy came to be viewed as no more than a passing indulgence. Bataille's distaste for the collective guilt and humiliation that marked the general mood of post-war France was the cause of his changed opinion: having disparaged the movement for its promotion of violence and euphoria, Bataille now embraced them as fillips to his own elementary thoughts.

Seemingly on the other side of the spectrum, Nabokov, for all his life, shunned the association of contemporary intellectual groups and activities. As he advises in an interview (*Playboy*, 1964), one should not generalise when it comes to original works of art: "Only talent interests me in paintings and books. Not general ideas, but the individual contribution."¹ He did, however, make occasional allowances for the convenience of labels, for instance conceding the term Russian Modernism in one of the courses he taught in Cornell and Harvard.² Personally and to a large degree in all artistic matters, Nabokov may be said to embody staunch monism. During his early exile in Europe, Nabokov hobnobbed with the likes of James Joyce, Nina Berberova, and Sergei Rachmaninoff, delivered lectures and talks in local literary seminars (usually at his friends' requests); and later in the United States, made friends with fellow men and women of letters like Edmund Wilson (whose scathing review of Nabokov's laborious translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* tipped the already contentious friendship to its breaking point), Morris Bishop, and Mary McCarthy. He thus wove in and out of those nuclei of luminaries maintaining, at least on the surface, a disinterested view of their collective impacts on the cultural scene. Perhaps the only group with which Nabokov felt a distinct affinity was the writers in exile, yet it was a scattered mass at best, and Nabokov's sense of exile consisted, according to one of his interviews (*The Listener*, 1968), not so much in geographical

entitled, ignominiously, "The Castrated Lion" (1930). For a more detailed account on the fraught history of Bataille and Surrealism, see Richardson, Michael. "Introduction" in *The Absence of Myth*, pp. 4-5.

¹ Nabokov. *Strong Opinions*, p. 41.

² The full title of the course is "Slavic 150, Modernism", which featured authors (Tyutchev, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Blok, Chekhov et al.) who were either against or on the brink of liberating themselves from the dictates of positivism (the extension of which was the realist fiction of 19th century).

displacement as in an emotional alienation from one's immediate surroundings that the act of writing occasions.¹

In his own books, such vehement emphasis on individualism, which, as we have seen, sometimes smacks of solipsism, has problematised the task of locating Nabokov within a wider context of critical discourse. Stylistically, few of Nabokov's writings present themselves as a challenge to the traditional form. Leona Toker, in *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* (1989), attributes Nabokov's eschewal of overt literary experiment to the general association of the notion with the social and military enterprise of Nazism (with Futurism as its most articulated expression in art).² To that other cultural movement which was his immediate forebear, Modernism, a speculative link has been frequently made with Nabokov's works. As David Rampton observes, Nabokov's first English novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), displays the author's finesse at readopting a prevalent modernist device - the "plurality of narrative voices and levels" - only to flout it altogether (the characters are licensed to speak out of their depth and disposition, and to speak on another's behalf whose account is thereupon appropriated and falsified).³ Other distortive tricks of this kind abound in his later books - in *Ada* (1969), for instance, Nabokov openly mocks Thomas Mann's treatment of themes like personalised time

¹ This is Nabokov's full answer to the question regarding the meaning of exile:

The type of artist who is always in exile even though he may never have left the ancestral hall or the paternal parish is a well-known biographical figure with whom I feel some affinity; but in a straighter sense, exile means to an artist only one thing - the banning of his books. All my books, ever since I wrote my first one 43 years ago on the moth-eaten couch of a German boardinghouse, are suppressed in the country of my birth. It's Russia's loss, not mine.

Nabokov. *Strong Opinions*, p. 114.

² Toker, Leona. *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 108.

³ To illustrate the point that the reader is constantly mystified by the source of the narrative voice, Rampton cites this puzzling description of Knight in the book:

[...] he belonged to that rare type of writer who knows that nothing ought to remain except the perfect achievement: the printed book; that its actual existence is inconsistent with that of its spectre, the uncouth manuscript flaunting its imperfections like a revengeful ghost carrying its own head under its arm; and that for this reason the litter of the workshop, no matter its sentimental or commercial value, must never subsist.

Rampton, David. *Vladimir Nabokov* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1993), pp. 66-67.

and the unity of emotive states - which effectively discourage further investigation in this direction.

And what about Nabokov's position *vis-à-vis* postmodernism? The author was once asked (*Swiss Broadcast*, 1972) for his thoughts on George Steiner's naming him alongside Beckett and Borges as the "three figures of probable genius of contemporary fiction", to which he replied, with genuine pleasure: "I would feel like a robber between two Christs. Quite a cheerful robber, though."¹ It is evident that with Nabokov's partial reliance on the realist template, as well as his emphasis on trans-historical, trans-cultural values, which are characterised by their evasion of the symbolic, the degree of commonality between his novels and those by, say, William Gaddis, William S. Burroughs, and Donald Barthelme, is minimal indeed.

Bataille's indeterminate status with regard to the intellectual trend of his time is equally marked. The figure whom Bataille came close to resembling, in his theoretical orientation and key concepts, was Nietzsche, but such comparison is only contingent on a superficial interpretation of some of their main tenets.² Scholars have struggled with the precise classification of his works, for they cover the complex run of perspectives, from those of the conceptual to the metaphysical, the psychological, the anthropological, the social-scientific, the mythological. It needs to be remarked that Bataille claimed only a partial authority in some of those disciplines. In others, however, his singular discovery and insights have been much credited. His writings on sacrifice have been widely considered one of the authoritative texts on the Aztec culture; its scholarship was much esteemed by Alfred Métraux, who held Bataille to be "the precursor of a whole school of anthropologists who sought to define *ethnos*, in other words the hierarchy of social values which gives each civilisation its own value."³ The criticism and misunderstandings that greeted his books at the time of their publication (amongst the famous critics were Breton, Sartre, Weil, Camus) were proportionately offset by the acclaims and the commendations (Blanchot, Leiris, Masson, Wahl, Queneau, Caillois et al.). It was only after his death that Bataille found himself an honorary member of a group, poststructuralism, thanks to the consistent efforts of the likes of

¹ Nabokov. *Strong Opinions*, p. 156.

² Their difference will be elaborated in the thesis, where Nietzsche is brought into the argument.

³ Quoted in Surya, p. 120.

Barthes, Kristeva, Deleuze, Derrida, who were just as reluctant to be bracketed within such a loose rubric, in promoting Bataille's legacy as the progenitor of a generation of thinkers and theorists whose theses stress, in Derrida's description, the possibility of nonmeaning as a potential of rectifying, or reaffirming in a way that reverts to the blind spots, the limitations of meaning.¹ Yet to them, Bataille was infinitely impenetrable: how may the readers affect a certain "blindness" to Bataille's text in order to register its non-meaning, and in a deep sense to redeem their incapacity to overcome meaning in the first place, when the concept itself implies a reinforced "security" against such sliding?²

To seemingly consolidate their fundamental individualism, both Bataille and Nabokov were liable to parody or satirise the canon in their works. Some of those common "victims" were Freud (more frequently a point of reference in Bataille), the Hegelian dialectic (along the terms of which their styles sometimes follow), Plato. In terms of current affairs, their stance was determinedly against far-right totalitarianism, which lent their books, of the period and onwards, a focus on men's will to freedom against the dictates of political tyranny and mass culture.³ However, Bataille and Nabokov rarely addressed directly the major events they had undergone and which had surely impinged their lives and sensibilities for the better and the worse. That Bataille and Nabokov represented states of mind at odds with their times cannot be accounted for in any precise way, although scholars have offered possible explanations that concern, above all, their vexation with the thwarted ideals and the persistence of social upheavals after the war. The relative absence of time in their works is compensated for by elements of the timeless that Bataille and Nabokov sought to localise through themes that enquire into, broadly, the complexities and mysteries of the human psyche. Their increasing popularity with later generations attests profoundly to their determined attitude of embodying an anachronism and idiosyncrasy which seem, as indicated by their legacy, to resonate through any period of time and place.

¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (New York: Routledge, 1978), pp. 331-32.

² This is according to Derrida: "The philosopher is blind to Bataille's text because he is a philosopher only through the desire to hold on to, to *maintain* his certainty of himself and the security of the concept as security against this sliding. For him, Bataille's text is full of traps: it is, in the initial sense of the word, a *scandal*." *Ibid.*, p. 268.

³ Whereas Bataille's opposition to the far-right was occasionally tainted with praises of the regime's actualisation of an untrammelled extremity, Nabokov had been consistent in his criticism of the Soviet totalitarianism and Nazism.

Research Questions

These three questions encapsulate the premise of the thesis:

- 1) How do Bataille and Nabokov conceptualise the idea of the heterogeneous and its logical disparity from the world of things?
- 2) What special techniques or strategies have Bataille and Nabokov devised in navigating the issue of language? In what way does language figure in the project of acquiring a full understanding of the heterogeneous?
- 3) Why is it important to study Bataille and Nabokov on account of their respective approaches towards illustrating the heterogeneous? What merits will the topic claim to its relevant fields?

As said in the foregoing, the heterogeneous proper defies human cognition. In Bataille's formulation, the abstract state can be reached only in death, but its essence may be found in violence, in eroticism, in the sacred, in excess. The exploration of these phenomena and their disruptive nature leads Bataille to sketch out a certain connection between the two primarily disparate worlds, if not arriving at any declarative statement of the matter. Thus what makes up Bataille's conception of the heterogeneous is indeed a farrago of homogeneous elements disguising themselves in various manners as beyond-the-homogeneous. It is the main objective of the thesis to probe the reasoning behind the proposed circumstance of the homogenisation of the heterogeneous, and illustration will be supplied by applying Bataille's theory to the analysis of tropes in Nabokov's novels.

Part of the second question then is implied in the first: language being what one must rely on for the evocation of the heterogeneous and an indelible reminder of the indissolubleness of the homogeneous. The thesis will concentrate on Bataille's and Nabokov's solutions to the dilemma, which take the customary form of what might be described as externalising the basic limitations and fallacies of written words. Such method is at once contradictory and deceptively self-evident: a representation of the heterogeneous by means of language fails to trace the concept to its true

essence, in which case to purposely display such ineptitude is in a way to acknowledge the invisible presence of the heterogeneous (relative to which is the limited capacity of the homogeneous).

In Bataille's and Nabokov's writings, the heterogeneous is mainly conceived as an extension of the problem of language. It may seem only reasonable to suggest that the quest of evoking the heterogeneous, or of converting it into a definable subjectivity, is doomed to failure from the outset, but this is discounting willfully the tangible efforts which both authors had made in determining the grounds of what in theory can only exist as an unsustainable postulation. The thesis will ponder the nature of this conflict between the theory and practice of making sense of the heterogeneous, which is in essence a conflict between representation and reality; on the significations and values which pledged Bataille and Nabokov to their apparently fruitless undertakings, and finally on the specific contexts and perspectives which the overall project may recommend to relevant fields of study.

Literature Review

For a subject that has not received the critical attention it deserves, the task of conceiving a systematic and, in many ways, original study implies an equally challenging task of setting up a rigorous frame of reference. The present thesis has the advantage of a clear formation of fundamental ideas, which themselves serve as guideposts for how the research might be conducted.

To thus concentrate the investigation of the topic in its individual categories - violence, eroticism, sovereignty and death - the complexity of the undertaking is greatly simplified. But as far as the coherence and the organisation of such method is concerned, the primary texts are much relied on in shaping up the central arguments.

With Bataille especially, the critical interpretations do not always warrant a clarified grasp of the original writing. The main fault, for most scholars, seems to lie in their inevitable impulse to explicate. Zeynep Direk, for instance, proposes in her essay, "Bataille on Immanent and Transcendent Violence" (2004), that Bataille's violence can be broken down into a transcendent violence and an immanent violence. Such

method obviously treats the concept in terms of its proximity to death, but it underplays the other troubling aspects like the presupposition of violence in the transition from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous (wherein the distinction between the transcendent and the immanent is less clearly marked).

The question of whether to follow a traditional analytical mode when it comes to reviewing Bataille's work divides the scholars into two camps: those who do (some of whom after acknowledging the apparent difficulty in either making or not making sense of Bataille) and those who boldly opt for a deviation. Of the latter ones, Derrida's "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve" (1967) is arguably the most exemplary in its simulation of Bataille's near-inimitable style (sportively elusive yet profoundly illuminating, Derrida's essay is an important reference and basis for my reading of Bataille's pressure against disowning the Hegelian negation). A more recent example is Nick Land's *The Thirst for Annihilation* (1992), which demonstrates with mesmerising, though at times befuddling result the rupturing of language in the realization of philosophical violence.

What Land has attempted with his methodology is ideally the paradigm for an authentic *praxis* of Bataille's main concepts. It is the principal rule of this thesis to focus on the issue of language without letting it affect the clarity of the text: namely, theory will always take precedence over practice, although, with Bataille and especially with the theme of heterology, practice is integral to, and should, indeed, dictate, the whole process of exposition. As such, Foucault's "A Preface to Transgression" (1963) and Denis Hollier's *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (1974) are the models here, for they deftly balance the necessity of intelligible arguments with idiosyncratic turns for a Bataillean evocation of non-meaning.

Early studies of Bataille, which were mostly authored by acclaimed or aspiring poststructuralists, are more flexible and inventive in their interpretive strategies, whereas the later ones generally abide by a rigorous system which allows for a revelation that is at once imperative and, because it makes no room for the sacrifice of meaning, misleading. But to what extent such sacrifice of meaning should be carried out is up for debate. In *Ecce Monstrum: Georges Bataille and the Sacrifice of Form* (2007), Jeremy Biles challenges Hollier's affective approach to Bataille's

intellectual contradictions. The formulation of an apparently formless concept like non-meaning, to Biles's mind, consists in the linking of the sacred with the monstrous. It is then the "monstrousness" of subverting natural laws that Biles finds to be underlying the sacredness of a sacrifice - in which light, non-meaning has the basis not of a singular conception but of a deliberate impulse to undermine established sense.

This thesis follows a similar line of argument: the heterogeneous is defined largely in terms of a dogged defiance of the homogeneous world and what it stands for. Further accent is placed on the presumed failure to fully transcend the homogeneous, relative to which the heterogeneous is, ironically, formulated. In other words, non-meaning is born out of numerous failed attempts to completely eradicate meaning.

Critics of Bataille unanimously point up the thematic ambivalences in his writing, but few of them acknowledge, with demonstration of tenable reasoning, the *process* through which those ambivalences come to be bound up with the whole of Bataille's philosophy.¹ To illustrate such process, the argument, I assume, must enlarge on the peculiar mechanism of language and meaning, which a purely theoretical framework cannot bring about. The pairing of philosophy with literature thus provides a viable angle here.

Despite Nabokov's professed apathy to the subject, philosophy has been taken up as a valuable analytic tool amongst recent scholarship.² Two books stand out in this regard: Michael Glynn's *Vladimir Nabokov: Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences in His Novels* (2007), which aligns Nabokov's epistemology with a Bergsonian sensibility of valuing immediate material reality; and Michael Roger's *Nabokov and Nietzsche: Problems and Perspectives* (2018), which traces the

¹ Besides the aforementioned ones, the works that succeed, in my opinion, in demonstrating Bataille's complex thought-process are Allan Stoekl's *Politics, Writing, Mutilation: The Cases of Bataille, Blanchot, Roussel, Leiris, and Ponge* (1986), Paul Hegarty's *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist* (2000), *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication* (2009), edited by Andrew J. Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree; and William Pawlett's "Bataille and the Left Pole of the Sacred" (2017).

² When asked in an interview (*Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 1967) about his contact with philosophy, Nabokov said: "No contact whatsoever. I am completely ignorant of Wittgenstein's works, and the first time I heard his name must have been in the fifties." Nabokov. *Strong Opinions*, p. 78.

influence of Nietzsche in Nabokov, especially on the topics of morality, memory, and the problematised conception of authorship. Both are extremely instructive, if not necessarily on account of their arguments, then at least as guidance on the strategies involved in a philosophy-literature crossover like that of the current project.

But where the principal method of research is concerned, the thesis orients towards the meticulous probing into the complex structures and wordplays of Nabokov's fiction, as Leona Toker exemplified in her *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* (1989), and towards Alfred Appel, Jr.'s extensive cross-pollination of relevant ideas in his voluminous annotation for *Lolita* (1971). As said in the beginning, to set up a common ground between Bataille and Nabokov cannot but rely on the synthesis of their respective treatments of the dominant concepts. Critical works which centre on the so-called transgressive notions in Nabokov mount up by the year; in terms of their actual connection with the thesis, individual insights and discoveries invariably count more than general assessments. And since a large part of the motive for this comparative study is to seek for a sufficient explanation of the heterogeneous through the representative vehicles of Bataille's and Nabokov's writings, language itself is the paramount object for both its theoretical and practical context.

It is naturally in the views of the scholars who treat Nabokov's style as a complex thematic figure, and not merely as a technical apparatus, that the thesis finds its chief resonance and support. The presumed link between the impossible conception of absolute freedom and language's limited capacity, which sums up as much the fundamental humanity in Nabokov's novel as Bataille's base materialism, is mooted or alluded to in some of these texts: David Rampton's *Vladimir Nabokov: A Critical Study of the Novels* (1984), in which Rampton characterises Nabokov's eroticism as confusedly entangled with violence and death; Leland de la Durantaye, in *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (2007), considers the equation between the iron dictates of morality and the ethics of writing and reading; *Nabokov, Perversely* (2010), by Eric Naiman, wherein the dominant concern is the interpretive perversity of Nabokov's work and its integrality with the question of sex and verbal performance. The thesis will solidify those claims and arguments by locating them within the dialogue of Nabokov and Bataille, in view of which, again, the original

texts and personal analyses are to be drawn on.

Finally, general sources concerning the authors' historical backgrounds, aesthetic traditions and relevant theoretical practices will be consulted mainly to accord the thesis a more rigorous framework and the arguments its due validity. Where the writings of other intellectual figures like Hegel or Camus are cited at length for the purpose of a deeper discussion, their interpretations will be supplemented primarily by prominent authorities on the subjects.

Objectives of Research

Besides modernism, its primary field, the present work may be of interest, and indeed addresses itself to the audience of social anthropology, the philosophy of language, and poststructuralism.

Interdisciplinarity being a standard practice in the study of modernism, the application of a philosophical framework to the assessment of a literary tradition should not be in any way a misguided approach even with regards to Nabokov, whose aesthetic, as we know, stresses the concept's irreducibility (namely that art should not be concerned with anything other than itself). Of the philosophers with whom Nabokov are often paired or compared, Bataille is curiously omitted. Reading *Literature and Evil*, which formed my introduction to Bataille, it dawned on me that had Bataille read Nabokov, the latter would surely be amongst the writers whose works he regarded as displaying a certain flair for a hypermorality that transcends the established good (known also as "Evil"). The question that naturally follows is how Bataille would rate Nabokov's style and literary efforts in terms of the illustration of such principle.

The contrast between the homogeneous and the heterogeneous, more proverbially known as the conditions of human and beyond-human, is an omnipresent topic in the history of anthropology. In light of the emphasis on cross-cultural or -societal contexts in the methodology of recent years, anthropological study has moved further within a more quotidian setting. One cannot say that there is anything anthropologically challenging in the questions and ideas that Bataille and Nabokov had raised with regards to the history and evolution of men. Yet in exploring as they

were the nuances and so-called grey areas of a wide spectrum of human relations and behaviours, Bataille and Nabokov effaced decisively the line that separates - even more emphatically in the study of anthropology - theory and practice. This is a rather paradoxical approach to establishing the facts of human nature and history, but, on the basis that all men are essentially marked by their own limitations, the only legitimate one indeed.

It is then in the implicit wish of acknowledging human failures that Bataille and Nabokov came to question, and to succeed in playing with, the facility of language as our indispensable instrument of communication. The problem has been of great interest to the poststructuralists and the modernists, by whom Bataille and Nabokov are frequently cited as cases in point. The thesis will attempt to synthesise and to expand on what is central to the argument, namely that the conflict between reality and representation is itself a facet of the phenomenology of *being*, by referring it to Bataille's and Nabokov's stylistic templates.

All of these will hopefully highlight the particular values that this thesis will bring to the individual fields of study, as well as to the respective scholarship of Bataille and Nabokov.

Chapter One: Violence

In our mythology, violence is caught up in the same prejudice as literature or art: we can attribute to it no other function than that of expressing a content, an inwardness, a nature, of which it is the primary, savage, asystematic language; we certainly conceive, no doubt, that violence can be shunted toward deliberated goals, turned into an instrument of thought, but this is never anything but a question of domesticating an anterior, sovereignly original force.

- Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*¹

I. Transcendent Violence and Immanent Violence

Bataille's philosophy in its entirety may be said to revolve around the eternal conflict between the homogeneous and the heterogeneous. In "The Psychological Structure of Fascism" (1933), one of the early essays wherein the so-called theory of heterology is advanced, Bataille writes of the homogeneous as consisting in "the commensurability of elements and the awareness of this commensurability: human relations are sustained by a reduction to fixed rules based on the consciousness of the possible identity of delineable persons and situations..."² In a more general sense, the homogeneous is the perceived reality per se and linked to the necessity of taboos and restrictions with respect to human conducts. Going against such a rationale, and lying beyond the traceable boundary of the homogeneous world, is the vast infinity (and indeterminacy) of the heterogeneous, which, Bataille continues in the essay, "can be represented as something *other*, as *incommensurate*, by charging these words with the *positive* value they have in *affective* experience."³ In principle, a heterogeneous reality takes the abstract and less than definable form of a "force or shock"; it is constituted, to varying degrees, of elements of "violence, excess, delirium, madness", as resulting from "breaking the laws of social

¹ Barthes, Roland. *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), p. 103.

² Bataille, Georges. *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 137.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

homogeneity.”¹

That violence characterises the nature of the heterogeneous is a blanket statement which describes a rather specious aspect of the notion - one whose roots are, in fact, firmly in the homogeneous. In the essay quoted above Bataille calls this a “vague” heterogeneity, as opposed to the “imperative” heterogeneity that stands independent of the need of “*having to be*.”² Put another way, an imperative heterogeneity presupposes an absolute dissolution of the homogeneous, a “*for itself*” that is fulfilled in the “denying of itself” (as a homogeneous existence).³

The dilemma of investing heterogeneity with what is called a “discursive real” (an operation that is refracted by language) characterises Bataille’s overall intellectual endeavour to grasp the matter.⁴ Zeynep Direk, in her essay, “Bataille on Immanent and Transcendent Violence” (2004), points up a distinction in Bataille’s thought on violence: the transcendent violence and the immanent violence. The primary source for this interpretation is *Theory of Religion*, published posthumously in 1973, in which Bataille posits the ontological difference of men and animals as what necessitates the fundamental contrasts between the sacred and the profane, between expenditure and conservation, between play and work, between the unknown and the known, the heterogeneous and the homogeneous.⁵ Animality, according to Bataille, is connected to the very idea of “immanence” in the sense that “there is no transcendence between the eater and the eaten [...] every animal is *in the world like water in water*.”⁶ With their capacity for transcendence, men withdraw from such immanence and pledge themselves to a world of utility in which the terms of a “thing” are imposed on them.

The annihilation of this *thinghood* thus constitutes the only condition for immanence to be attained. In plain words, the subject must die (a death that is not meant to merely destroy life but to “reveal life in its plenitude and dissolve the real order”).⁷

¹ Ibid., p. 143, 142.

² Bataille. *Visions of Excess*, p. 147.

³ Ibid., p. 148.

⁴ See Kristeva, Julia. “Bataille, Experience and Practice” (1990) in Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons ed. *On Bataille: Critical Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 241.

⁵ Bataille, Georges. *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1989), p. 19.

⁶ Ibid., p. 17, 19.

⁷ Ibid., p. 47.

The operative procedure of sacrifice serves as a model here: the victim, once killed, is drawn “out of the world of utility and restored to that of unintelligible caprice.”¹ This presents a typical instance of what Direk calls an “immanent violence”, a violence that, in Bataille’s words, “works havoc within” and is therefore antithetical to an “external violence”.² In theory, an external violence, or “transcendent violence” for Direk, has no place in a sacrifice unless the rite is being seen as no more than a brutal murder. The distinction - between the circumstances in which the killing should be treated as immanent or transcendent - is indeed hard to discern based on such crude formulations alone. According to Direk, a transcendent violence gives rise to “the regimes of servitude in which the subject loses itself in the power relations that belong to systems of production and restricted regimes of consumption and serves to establish the hierarchical differences among individual human beings.”³ Part of this definition embellishes on Thomas Aquinas’s famous passage in *Summa Theologica* (1485):

For we call that violent which is against the inclination of a thing [...] A thing is called voluntary because it is according to the inclination of the will. Therefore, just as it is impossible for a thing to be at the same time violent and natural, so it is impossible for a thing to be absolutely coerced or violent, and voluntary.⁴

In other words, violence shatters the illusion of a utilitarian ideal by positing, or, in a sense, highlighting, the entrenched division between the superior (the coercers) and the inferior (the coerced). The convenience of resorting to violence is thus commonplace in the function of justice and the state. Early philosophers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Immanuel Kant noted the “balance of horror” that resides in such extreme measure of redressing the imbalance of a legislature and governing body.⁵ More recent discourses on the matter were led by Hannah Arendt, whose

¹ Ibid., p. 43.

² Bataille. *Theory of Religion*, p. 57.

³ Direk, Zeynep. “Bataille on Immanent and Transcendent Violence,” *Bulletin de la Société Américaine de Philosophie de Langue Française*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Fall 2004, p. 30.

⁴ Aquinas, Thomas. *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas, Vol. II*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1948), p. 82.

⁵ Hobbes, in *Leviathan* (1651), emphasises the general thesis that justice is established by way of a measure of justifiable coercion. Locke holds a similar view, in *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), that the sovereigns are counted on as the potent wielders of legitimate force and violence. As for Kant, the role of coercion in the functioning of an established state is considered, in *The Metaphysics*

seminal essay, *On Violence* (1970), centres on the contradistinction between power (as property of a politically-driven plurality) and violence (as synonymous with coercion); and Slavoj Žižek, who, in *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2007), addresses the pernicious ramifications which society's habitual countenance of systematic violence unfailingly evokes.¹

The majority of those points were telescoped in Bataille's writings on taboo and transgression, which stress the antinomy that "the taboo is there in order to be violated" and, conversely, without taboos or other forms of prohibition, "it would be a return to violence, to animal violence."² Such acknowledgement points to the negativism inherent in Bataille's general views on the circumscription of human capacity: echoing Freud's central premise in *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1930), Bataille says: "To be free, he would have to be recognised as such by the dominant society."³

By the same token, violence, of varying degrees of intensity, must be permitted its right to exist by the dominant society, even as an intended act of transgression. In relation to its primary context, then, we may infer that the heterogeneous is essentially bounded by the dictates of the homogeneous, that it is, in a sense, the homogeneous pushed to its extreme. These facts are duly registered in Bataille's arguments as irreconcilable with the specific manner of thinking that is employed. With violence, such contradiction lends the exposition of the concept an equivocal tenor: nowhere in his writings does Bataille make the conscious differentiation between a homogeneous violence and a heterogeneous violence, but, especially in the discourse on sacrifice, there is every attempt to posit a hypothetical condition

of Morals (1797), in light of the question of personal rights and freedom.

¹ Arendt's thoughts during the 1970s were apparently still guided by her repugnance of totalitarianism in general, which spawned the important trio: *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *The Human Condition* (1958) and *On Revolution* (1963). She made a claim in *On Violence* that "power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent." (Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence*. San Diego: HBJ Book, 1970, p. 56.) In 1967, speaking on a panel at the Theatre of Ideas in New York City, Arendt appeared to express a less hostile, yet still critical, view on violence: "Generally speaking, violence always rises out of impotence. It is the hope of those who have no power to find a substitute for it - and this hope, I think, is in vain. Violence can destroy power, but it can never replace it." Quoted in Most, Stephen. *Stories Make the World: Reflections on Storytelling and the Art of the Documentary* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), p. 57.

² Bataille, Georges. *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2001), p. 64, 65.

³ Bataille, Georges. *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 134.

wherein violence ultimately triumphs over its limitations (and crosses over to the immanent). In this respect, Direk's essay, although widely cited for its authority and many valid points, is contested in its critical approach (on the whole by reducing to system a decidedly a-systematic abstraction). Yet, in the interest of coming to a better understanding of how Bataille tackles the built-in defects of his theoretical enunciation of heterology, Direk's proposal of a distinction between transcendent and immanent violence adds a needed dimension to the following arguments.

II. Violence and The Impossible

Violence constitutes an important stage of Bataille's primary thoughts on heterology. In an autobiographical note, Bataille credited Lev Shestov, a Russian existentialist whose book of theological aphorisms, *All Things are Possible* (1905), earned him the title of the "philosopher of despair", for initiating him into what was known as the philosophy of violence. Bataille recalls the wisdom that Shestov imparted: "[...] the violence of human thought is nothing if not its fulfillment."¹ Prior to their acquaintance around 1923, Bataille claimed to have glimpsed from time to time a "final violence" which was in many ways antithetical to Shestov's "fulfilled violence."² The term, in the essay, was never given any further explanation except that it signaled a point of departure for Bataille to eventually put an end to his tutelage to Shestov. The break came in the wake of Shestov's shift, in the 1930s, to a religious conviction that bordered on nihilism: the belief that God bespeaks "limitless possibility" was now substituted with the pronouncement, "God demands the impossible, he demands only the impossible."³

For all his unacknowledged disagreements with Shestov, Bataille, it seems, took from the latter the potential of striving beyond the conceivable limits of human reasoning. The "final violence", we might then assume, is a violence that exhausts itself, having exceeded its license for tampering with the established order. At the very least, it is the product of an imagination overflowing with a wild febrility, and, as such, it

¹ Bataille, Georges. *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 154.

² Ibid.

³ Quoted in Surya, Michel. *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (New York: Verso, 2002), p. 61.

proclaims no ends other than an utter impossibility, for to *fulfill* it is tantamount to reinserting it back within the realm of worldly affairs.

In Bataille's early writings on violence, much emphasis was placed on men's horror and fascination for the final violence and how it reflects their basic needs. Two of Bataille's early novellas - *Story of the Eye* (1928) and *Madame Edwarda* (1941), published under the pseudonyms of Lord Auch and Pierre Angélique respectively - associate extreme, grisly violence with sexual orgy. The unsettling tableaux of graphic violence and erotic frenzy in these novellas give rise to an uncanny idea that violence is a precondition for love and beauty: in the preface to the third edition of *Madame Edwarda* (1956), Bataille endorses the exigency of his early ideas: "[...] only beauty excuses and renders bearable the need for disorder, for violence and for unseemliness which is the hidden root of love."¹

And in what material reality, if any, should such violence partake? André Breton's bewildering claim in the *Second Manifesto* (1929) that "the simplest surrealist act consists in descending to the street with revolver in hand and shooting at random, as fast as one can, into the crowd," was to Bataille a "relation of the *amok* to the totality... expressed in a very beautiful but disarming way." ("Initial Postulate", 1947).² He clarified his position a year later in a conference at Club Maintenant:

[...] there is nothing possible about the act of shooting at random into the crowd. The will to shoot at random into the crowd decisively signals the will towards the impossible and nothing else, in the sense that no one, after all, has ever done it, in the sense that one cannot pass from the actual situation in which a civilized man lives to the situation experienced by others. All the same, it is something that signifies an orientation on which it is not possible to go back.³

This "will towards the impossible", in its true sense, is predicated on the unpossibility of the wild violence, in turn due to its fundamental impracticability. As

¹ Bataille, Georges. *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), p. 128.

² Bataille, Georges. *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, trans. Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 1994), p. 94.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

Bataille writes in an essay entitled “Surrealism and Transcendence” (included as an appendix in *On Nietzsche*, 1945):

His [Breton’s] concern for exteriority brings him up short when he arrives at transcendence. His method ties him to a position focused on *objects*, to which value belongs. He is forced by his decency to annihilate himself, to dedicate himself to the nothingness of objects and words. Nothingness is thus bogus: it sets up a play of competition, and nothingness subsists in the form of superiority. The Surrealist object is to be found essentially in aggression, its job being to annihilate or ‘reduce to nothingness.’ But this doesn’t of course make it slavish, since its attacks have no reason or motive.¹

This issue of exteriority was especially foregrounded in regard to the parallel between true heterogeneity and excess. Violence, the discharge of aggressive impulses, is excess, and so are ancient practices like sacrifice and potlatch, whose objective aims at the absence of productive instincts and mindless expenditure. Implicitly, as Bataille observes in *The Accursed Share* (1949), each purportedly munificent gesture is laden with ulterior meanings. In the tradition of potlatch, for example, the gift, Bataille reveals, usually takes on “the meaning of an acquisition [...] *giving* must become *acquiring a power*.”² Thus “the gift is the opposite of what it seemed to be: To give is obviously to lose, but the loss apparently brings a profit to the one who sustains it.”³ Bataille adds: “[...] in potlatch [...] what we seek is always this semblance – which by definition we cannot grasp – that we vainly call the poetry, the depth or the intimacy of passion.”⁴

With other aspects of the heterogeneous, too, the accent is on the *semblance* of the impossible. The basis for this is twofold: the unlikelihood for excess to supplant production (for then we would have to “pay the price of the inevitable explosion”) and human nature itself.⁵ On Bataille’s part, men’s superiority is a condition that must be suppressed with regards to wanting the impossible. Therein lies the

¹ Bataille, Georges. *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 179.

² Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share, Vol. I*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 2013), p. 69.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

apparent incompatibility between theory and practice, of which Breton was highly critical: "He [Bataille] is trying, with the help of the tiny mechanism in him which is not completely out of order, to share his obsessions: this very fact proves that he cannot claim, no matter what he may say, to be opposed to any system, like an unthinking brute."¹

The essence of Bataille's heterology more or less consists in the Kantian principle that pure reason exists independently of empirical facts, but "does not extend to establishing certain propositions [e.g., the existence of God] affirmatively..."² Thus a violence which is linked to the impossible cannot be apprehended as such if it remains closed to reason. All these may be further boiled down to the problem of representation. When reading *Madame Edwarda*, Japanese writer Yukio Mishima notices that the writing itself yields a curious mixture of the "impossibility of re-experiencing anything through language" and a "verbalization of a silence that is peculiar to God."³ In his later work, Bataille came to see in this conscious inability to "verbalise silence" a workable substitute for the non-verifiableness of staying silent. And yet such verbalisation should never amount to prolixity: Bataille says of the long-drawn dialogues in Sade's novels that they "fall short of the profound silence peculiar to violence, for violence never declares either its own existence or its right to exist; it simply exists."⁴

That violence "simply exists" without any declaration of rights or reason is proof enough of its intractable role in the general scheme of things. Bataille echoed Hobbes, Locke and Kant that "a calm opposite to violence would not suffice to draw a clear line between the two worlds. If the opposition did not itself draw upon violence in some way, if violent negative emotion did not make violence horrible for everyone, reason alone could not define those shifting limits authoritatively enough."⁵ What follows from this is a paradoxical corollary:

¹ Breton, André. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007, p. 182.

² Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason, Vol. V.*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 121.

³ Bataille, *Madame Edwarda*, p. 4.

⁴ *Eroticism*, p. 188.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 63

Since language is by definition the expression of civilised men, violence is silent [...] if language is to be extracted from this impasse [as civilisation permits the existence of violence to a certain point], we must declare that violence belongs to humanity as a whole and is speechless, and that thus humanity as a whole lies by omission and language itself is founded on this lie.¹

In other words, the silence of violence is graspable by human understanding insofar as its impossibility is already *subsumed* as an entrenched element of the present world.

A notable reference for those none-too-novel claims about the conflict between human conditions and the community is Freud's essay, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death" (1915). Written in the wake of World War I, the essay addresses the state's hypocrisy with regards to its totemic prohibition of violence. Freud gives a close look at the common reality:

[...] the state has forbidden to the individual the practice of wrong-doing, not because it desires to abolish it, but because it desires to monopolise it, like salt and tobacco. A belligerent state permits itself every such misdeed, every such act of violence, as would disgrace the individual. The state exacts the utmost degree of obedience and sacrifice from its citizens, but at the same time it treats them like children by an excess of secrecy and censorship upon news and expressions of opinion which leaves the spirits of those whose intellects it thus suppresses defenseless against every unfavourable turn of events and every sinister rumour.²

Whereas Bataille conceded that the realisable extreme suggests nothing beyond itself, Freud was less positive that men can be trusted with their moral maturity - as in dreams where "we throw off our hard-won morality like a garment, and put it on again next morning", we are liable of reverting to the primitive stage which we never truly leave behind.³

¹ Bataille. *Eroticism*, p. 186.

² Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans and ed. James Strachey, London: Hogarth, 1981, Vol. 14, pp. 279-80.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

In 1931, Freud was invited by Albert Einstein, via the Permanent Committee for Literature and the Arts of League of Nations, to exchange commentaries on the topic of war. Eighteen years had elapsed between that occasion and “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death”; Freud’s doctrines during the period had undergone many changes, amongst which notions like the death drive and the superego assumed primary importance for his mature works. In the 1915 essay, Freud urges his readers to refrain from ascribing causes to any individual death - the more positive attitude would be to inscribe death within the logic of life, to accept it as inevitable.¹ The inevitability of death, as it turned out, was taken as the basis for his conversation with Einstein. At one point, the talk touched on violence, whose origin Freud located in what seems to be its opposite- Right (*Recht*). Returning to his early thesis on the assimilation of violence in the state’s governance, Freud reconsidered the nature of justice:

Certain of the rulers will attempt to set themselves above the prohibitions which apply to everyone - they seek that is, to go back from a dominion of law to a dominion of violence [...] The oppressed members of the group make constant efforts to obtain more power and to have any changes that are brought about in that direction recognised in the laws - they press forward, that is, from unequal justice to equal justice for all.²

The tenor of this statement was echoed and expanded on in Michel Foucault’s 1976 speech at the Collège de France. Arguing against the notion that peace follows war, Foucault showed that most historical wars were succeeded by a certain period of relative unrest, wherein problems of inequality persisted, if not much worsened. The peace that marks the interim of wars must therefore be seen as a continuation of war: “[...] the end of the political would be the final battle, that is to say that the final battle at last would suspend, and only at the last, the exercise of power as continuous war.”³

¹ Freud wryly observes that man’s instinctual exercise of self-preservation renders “life as shallow and empty as, let us say, an American flirtation, in which it is understood from the first that nothing is to happen, as contrasted with a Continental love-affair in which both partners must constantly bear its serious consequences in mind.” (Freud, Vol. 22, p. 291)

² Ibid., p. 204.

³ Quoted in Sampson, Anthony. “Freud on the State, Violence and War,” *Diacritics*, Vol. 35, No. 3

Both Freud and Einstein agreed that “wars will only be prevented with certainty if mankind united in setting up a central violence to which the right of giving judgment upon all conflicts of interest shall be handed over.”¹ Freud proposed two further means for safeguarding social stability: “[...] the compelling force of violence and the emotional ties (identifications is the technical name) between its members.”² A similar advice can be found in his 1915 essay: since aggressiveness is constitutive of the human psyche, efforts should be directed from vainly eradicating violence to containing it in a more effective way. “Emotional ties” are thereby appealed to on the grounds of such understanding.

So far as his acknowledgement of violence’s indissoluble reality is concerned, Bataille, on the subject of war, disclosed what some suspected to be a tendency towards a “glorification of violence.”³ In one of his early pieces, “The Practice of Joy before Death” (1939), Bataille makes the emphatic statement: “I MYSELF AM WAR.”⁴ His vision of a near apocalyptic aftermath of a mass warfare presages the impending calamity of World War Two:

I imagine human movement and excitation, whose possibilities are limitless:
this movement and excitation can only be appeased by war.

I imagine the gift of an infinite suffering, of blood and open bodies, in the
image of an ejaculation cutting down the one it jolts and abandoning him to an
exhaustion charged with nausea.

[...]

I imagine myself covered with blood, broken but transfigured and in
agreement with the world, both as prey and as a jaw of TIME, which
ceaselessly kills and is ceaselessly killed.

There are explosives everywhere that perhaps will soon blind me. I laugh when
I think that my eyes persist in demanding objects that do not destroy them.⁵

(Autumn, 2005), p. 89.

¹ Freud, Vol. 22, p. 207.

² Ibid., p. 208.

³ See Colin MacCabe’s introduction to the Penguin edition of *Eroticism: Bataille. Eroticism*, p. xi.

⁴ Bataille. *Visions of Excess*, p. 239.

⁵ Ibid.

Such radical thoughts and language were hardly anomalous in relation to Bataille's general predilection during the period: in 1935, he and Breton founded a political group, *Contre-Attaque*, whose goal was to foster the development of a revolutionary offensive that stood independent of the affairs of individual nation or country. Bataille's speech at a meeting in November 1935, in which he expatiated on themes like force, agitation and violence, was marked by its absence of hackneyed political dogmas and structural debates. By the time the speech was published in written form, entitled "Popular Front in the Street", in May 1936, Breton had disclaimed his association with *Contre-Attaque*, denouncing it as "*sur-fasciste*".¹ In time, Bataille would also concede that there was in the group's ideology a certain "paradoxical fascist tendency."²

Like Freud, Bataille was later concerned with the question of the psychological consequence of war. He writes in *Inner Experience* (1943):

In the infinite horror of war, man has access *en masse* to the extreme point that terrifies him. But man is far from wanting horror (and extremity): his fate is in part to attempt to avoid the unavoidable [...] The horror of war is greater than that of inner experience. The desolation of a battlefield, in principle, has something more grave than "dark night". But in battle, one approaches horror with a movement that overcomes it: action, project linked to action permit the *surpassing* of horror. The surpassing gives action, project, a captivating grandeur, but horror in itself is negated.³

As we know, it was Bataille's conviction that this "negated horror" does not automatically lead to the removal of all limitations, since "a return to animality [...] is inconceivable in war."⁴ A war that is closest to the model of excess gives "primary importance to adherence to the rules when war is an end in itself", whereas most wars in history were inclined to "setting a premium on the hoped-for political

¹ See Allan Stoekl's introduction to the English translation of *Visions of Excess* (Bataille. *Visions of Excess*, p. xviii).

² Ibid.

³ Bataille, Georges. *Inner Experience*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), p. 50.

⁴ *Eroticism*, p. 80.

result.”¹ For Carl von Clausewitz, Prussian general and author of *On War* (1832), war is by definition an “act of violence, and there is no limit to the manifestation of this violence.”² In actual practice, however, this existential stance is bound to be questioned, for war is essentially an instrument, an “act of violence to compel the enemy to fulfill our will...”³

It seems, then, that all philosophy of violence arrives at the same unsatisfactory conclusion: the contradiction of the justification of theory in material reality. Adamantly pledged to the implausible task of restoring the violence proper to its silence, Bataille, throughout his writing, refrains from grounding his arguments firmly in a logical condition. The result is often a deliberate blurring of the sharp distinction between theoretical postulation and dialectical reason. And yet, in a short account on the torturing of war captives in the gold coast of West Africa, Bataille seemed to touch on a possible reversal of what rigorous syllogism would have him accept: that war, though demanding a “collective organisation of aggressive urges”, gives rise to a form of violence that is in many respects comparable to, if not exceeding, the horror of animal savagery.⁴ That violence is cruelty, which cannot retain its “outward surge” if the “return to stability afterwards is [not] at the back of the mind [...] It is as if the waters should overflow and yet be certain to subside again at the same time.”⁵ In other words, impossible violence is engendered from complicity in the complacent knowledge that, in Bataille’s words, “The transition from one state to another [from stability to its contrary] may be made as long as the basic framework is not risked.”

III. The Representation of Violence

A thematic analysis of his novels shows the extent of Nabokov’s struggle with the representation of violence. According to Eric Naiman, the majority of Nabokov’s works present a “defamiliarised world” where “all the potential for violence seems to have drained out.”⁶ Naiman attributes this to Nabokov’s penchant for wordplay, for

¹ Ibid.

² Von Clausewitz, Carl. *On War*, trans. A. M. E. Maguire (London: Clowes, 1909), p. 53.

³ Von Clausewitz, p. 14.

⁴ Bataille, *Eroticism*, p. 64.

⁵ Ibid., p. 80.

⁶ Naiman, Eric. *Nabokov, Perversely* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), p. 227.

aestheticising vulgarity, insofar as violence cannot but also be recast in a rhetorical garb. In an early short story "A Guide to Berlin" (1925), the narrator describes the sound of four workmen pounding violently with an iron stake as containing a "rhythmical succession" like "the four repeated notes of an iron carillon."¹ And in *Pale Fire*, Charles Kinbote's intense blow-by-blow account of John Shade's final moments rounds out with this poetic sequence: "I felt - I still feel - John's hand fumbling at mine, seeking my fingertips, finding them, only to abandon them at once as if passing to me, in a sublime relay race, the baton of life."²

In a rather overt way, Nabokov accedes to the thesis that violence, an impaired kind nonetheless, is a large element of civilisation. A conscious reluctance to confront violence head-on compels him to occasionally resort to periphrasis or hidden symbols when tackling the matter. This is most notably in *Lolita*, wherein violence, Leona Toker points out, "seems to escalate behind the curtain of the narrative."³ A woman at a lodge which Humbert Humbert and Lolita stop for the night asks curiously, in reference to the latter's scar: "Whose cat has scratched poor you?"⁴ Carrying an ailing Lolita to the hospital, Humbert Humbert wonders if he should inform the doctor, "with a chuckle", that his "fifteen-year-old girlfriend had had a minor accident while climbing an awkward fence with her boy friend."⁵ And when Humbert Humbert tracks down Lolita's potential new boyfriend, he waits outside the classroom, with a gun in his raincoat pocket, and suddenly realises that he is "demented [enough]... to do something stupid."⁶ The idea of doing something rash and violent appears to have been harboured in his mind for some time. Early in the novel, Humbert Humbert says, by way of an ostensibly casual remark, that a "spell of insanity" will give him the "simple energy to be a brute", who holds "a gun and aims at a bland, quietly interested enemy."⁷

The word "violence", whose occurrences are few and far in between the novel, seems curiously confined to the description of Lolita: Lolita flipping "violently

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), p. 157.

² Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pale Fire* (London: Everyman Library, 2011), p. 294.

³ Toker, Leona. *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 213.

⁴ Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Annotated Lolita* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 107.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

through the pages” of a magazine; Lolita’s mouth “working violently on a piece of chewing gum”; Lolita preferring to “load a question with violent signification”; and much later, an adult Lolita shouting to her husband in a “resounding violent voice” that strikes Humbert Humbert as “totally strange, and new, and cheerful, and old, and sad.”¹ The interplay between these two embodies the inner strife of a studiously civilised man with his animal instincts. Both Lolita and Humbert Humbert are congenitally predisposed to conveying their thoughts and feelings through violence - for Lolita, it is most often an impetuous, mechanical response; for Humbert Humbert, the resistance to violence can only be kept up for so long as his possession of Lolita is secured. At his most frenzied, Humbert Humbert entertains the necrophagic vision of turning “Lolita inside out and apply[ing] voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the seagrapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys.”²

The above passage illustrates an important feature of *Lolita*: a bold exploration of the dangerous commingling of violence and obsession. Martin Amis writes in the foreword to the Everyman’s Library edition of the book (1992):

It may be a nice bonus to know that Nabokov was a kind man. Everything he wrote tells us as much [...] But this is not a straightforward matter. *Lolita* is a cruel book about cruelty. It is kind in the sense that your enemy’s enemy is your friend, no matter how daunting his aspect [...] The author seems to plan it thus: Come with me, ungentle reader, who enjoys seeing a live dog inflated and kicked around like a soccer ball; reader, who likes, of a Sunday morning, on his way to or from church, to poke his stick or direct his spittle at a poor rogue in the stocks; come... I hope you will be amused at what I have to offer.³

The readership of Nabokov, according to Amis, is marked by this determining factor: they all share a flair for violence that gravitates to the senseless, to the downright perverse. Literary theorist Leo Bersani suggests that typical forms of modernist narrative are complicit in a fixation with violence and destruction, sometimes to the extent where they assume the essence of the dramatic, which in turn constitutes the

¹ Ibid., p. 40, 74, 81, 183.

² Nabokov. *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 110.

³ Amis, Martin. “Introduction” in Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita* (London: Everyman, 1992), p. ix.

author's ploy for enacting a sadistic identification on the reader's part.¹ Such a view, in fact, takes to a psychological extreme the acknowledgement, in general modernist theory, of violence as an index, both thematically and conceptually, of the movement's creative principle. Sarah Cole, in her densely researched book, *At the Violet Hour: Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland* (2012), observes that modernism addresses violence "as one of its central aesthetic problems, formalizing it in both new and old ways, employing radical innovations alongside ready conventions."² As a subject per se, violence in the modernist novel is often made to negotiate between attitudes of disenchantment, which Cole defines as "not a passive recognition of spiritual flatness, but the active stripping away of idealizing principles...", and enchantment, which posits the methods for understanding violence as a transformative (and inherently transgressive) force.³ (The book's title, *Violet Hour*, is a nod to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, in which the violet hour is the moment between sunset and the setting-in of evening gloom). A "disenchantment" mode of literary violence normally "strips language down to its most bodily and elemental forms [and] insist[s] on the resonant presence of bodily experience"; on the other hand, "there is an equal and opposite tendency to enchant violence, to see it as the germinating core of rich, symbolic structures."⁴

The oscillation between the poles of enchantment and disenchantment - which, as they are thus defined, do not seem to appear as mutually exclusive to one another - evinces, one might say, a fundamental difficulty for violence to be accommodated in a textual form. To conform to its essence, at once elusive and energising, violence, which can only function in this case as a literary technique, overwhelms the text, subjecting it to a progressive erosion. To express it by means of a signficatory process, violence founders, and is finally converted to its simulacrum. This paradox is, in a sense, the paradox with representation which Bataille located in the nucleus of heterology: insisting on silence, an authentic heterogeneous monad is *obscured*; it cannot even exist as an abstraction.

¹ Bersani, Leo. *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), pp. 300-301.

² Cole, Sarah. *At the Violet Hour: Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 13.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

In his novella, Bataille ventures no more than an elliptical style which indicates, rather crudely, the collapse of established sense as a result of a textual violence that “works havoc within.” With Nabokov’s novel, violence is commonly “enchanted” to a degree of implausible beauty and lyricism. In her book on the thematisation of violence in 20th century American fiction, Sally Bachner defends Nabokov’s conflicting approach: “[...] language does not represent violence, but it does transform, transfigure, and transcend it.”¹ As in the climactic scene of Shade’s death quoted earlier, its intensity and horror taper off as Kinbote’s recollection of the event becomes increasingly animated - all culminates in a mock-heroic sequence of a relay race. The same misplaced lightheartedness can be detected when Kinbote relates the story of a certain King Charles Xavier (later revealed to be Kinbote himself), who happens on a handful of prints depicting the plane crash with which his father, King Alfin, was involved. Here, Kinbote zeroes in on a droll moment preceding the tragic event:

In some of these ghastly pictures one could make out the shoulders and leathern casque of the strangely unconcerned aviator, and in the penultimate one of the series, just before the white-blurred shattering crash, one distinctly saw him raise one arm in triumph, and reassurance. The boy had hideous dreams after that but his mother never found out that he had seen those infernal records.²

The description comprises two contrasting perspectives regarding the plane crash: the boy’s traumatic response to its horror (“ghastly pictures”, “hideous dreams”, “infernal records”) and the incidental comedy (“strangely unconcerned aviator”, “saw him raise one arm in triumph, and reassurance”). In philosophy, violence is believed to be a major component of comedy and humour. Exponents of what is known as the “superior theory” of humour, like Henri Bergson, attribute the subliminal cause of laughter to an “unavowed intention to humiliate and to reprove.”³ To laugh at someone therefore means also to hold that person in a certain derision. This derision resembles an aggression of sort, for it enforces a provisional hierarchy within this

¹ Bachner, Sally. *The Prestige of Violence: American Fiction, 1962-2007* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2011), p. 33.

² *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³ Bergson, Henri. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Fred Rothwell (New York: Dover Publications, 2005), p.67.

isolated exchange. Other relevant theories include the relief theory, whose basis derives from the physiological evidence that laughter is a pressure-reliever of pent-up nervous energy; and the incongruous theory, which identifies incongruity (violence and comedy is one typical instance) as the main source of humour.¹

Bataille, in his own thesis, conflates the latter aspects: as in the odd circumstance when one is finding something funny in violence or in death, the laughter “assumes the absence of a true anguish, and yet it has no other source than anguish.”²

Drawing from personal experience, Bataille concludes that laughter is “part of an ensemble of possible reactions when facing the unknown.”³ It is a defiance against death and the fear of death expressed through the very sentiments of fear.

A comparable mixture of death and humour was entertained by Nabokov. As revealed in an interview with Alfred Appel, Jr. (*Novel, A Forum on Fiction*, 1971), the films that Nabokov particularly enjoyed were those by Laurel and Hardy, Keaton, Chaplin, and Lloyd - slapstick comedies that invariably underline the outsized courage of a bumbling Everyman against a powerful aggregate of infernal forces (mostly in the personification of a corrupted state).⁴ Nabokov adduced a scene in *The Great Dictator* (1940), which features a “parachute inventor who jumps out of the window and ends in a messy fall which we only see in the expression on the dictator’s face.”⁵ This seamless transition from horror to humour and then to horror again (the fall and the dictator’s smile) is delicately mirrored in the depiction of King Alfin’s crash. But it would be erroneous to suggest that these are the elements that constitute the substance of Nabokov’s violence. In *Laughter in the Dark* (1938), for instance, violence is shown to be at its most primal and naked of frills, arriving at the scene without premonition:

¹ See Farber, Jerry. “Toward a Theoretical Framework for the Study of Humor in Literature and the Other Arts”, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Winter, 2007), pp. 67-86.

² Bataille. *Inner Experience*, p. 98.

³ *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 136. For his personal experience, Bataille noted two of those remarkable incidents: his trip to Siena in 1923 when he was seized by an uncontrollable laughter at the sight of the cathedral; and the first time he entered a brothel he had to laugh to cope with the terror that he witnessed. See Surya, p. 51, 84.

⁴ This is also the theme of Nabokov’s political novels, *Invitation to a Beheading* (1935-36) and *Bend Sinister* (1947), but instead of concluding the story with the triumph of the little hero, both books end on an ambiguous note, seemingly suggesting the author’s own pessimism over the political future of Russia.

⁵ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 168.

One day, as she was standing at the corner of the street, a fellow on a red motor-cycle, whom she had observed once or twice already, drew up suddenly and offered her a ride [...] It was a sunny evening and a little party of midges were continuously darning the air in one spot. It was all very quiet: the quietude of pine and heather. He alighted and as he sat by her side at the edge of the ditch he told her that last year he had pushed on to Spain, just like this. Then he put his arm around her and began to squeeze and fumble and kiss her so violently that the discomfort she felt that day turned to dizziness. "You may kiss me," she sobbed, "but not that way, please." [...] She returned home on foot. Otto, who had seen her go off, thumped his fist down on her neck and then kicked her skillfully, so that she fell and bruised herself against the sewing-machine.¹

The style here is signally terse and emotionless; the brisk narrative pace suggests a touch of impatience as peculiar to a detached bystander - say, a journalist - whose job is to take notes of the facts and not getting himself involved. That same dispassionate tone opens the book:

Once upon a time there lived in Berlin, Germany, a man called Albinus. He was rich, respectable, happy; one day he abandoned his wife for the sake of a youthful mistress; he loved; was not loved; and his life ended in disaster.²

In its original Russian version, *Камера обскýра* (1932), readers are first introduced to Robert Horn (Axel Rex in *Laughter*) and a cartoon character he draws on his picture book, a guinea pig named Cheepy, who is ritually subjected to a series of cruel medical experiments. With the English version, Nabokov moved this unseemly episode to a later chapter and condensed it into the following:

As a child he had poured oil over live mice, set fire to them, and watched them dart about for a few seconds like flaming meteors. And it is best not to inquire into the things he did to cats. Then, in riper years, when his artistic talent developed, he tried in more subtle ways to satiate his curiosity, for it

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Laughter in the Dark* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 23.

² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

was not anything morbid with a medical name - oh, not at all - just cold, wide-eyed curiosity, just the marginal notes supplied by life to his art.¹

The whole book teems with examples of such a kind, as well as cinematic tropes which reinforce the urgency of the dominant themes: the objectification of love and of aesthetic ideal; the subterranean alliance between power and the perversion of power. As in *Lolita*, violence is principally utilised as a last resort for sexual objectification. Humbert Humbert admits at one point the warped nature of his obsession: "What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another fanciful Lolita - perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness - indeed, no life of her own."² Floating between life and lifelessness, in a portrait done by Humbert Humbert's unreliable hand, Lolita is, as aptly described by Amis, "dead on arrival," and seems to remain so, having been made an "object" of Humbert Humbert's affection, throughout the book. In his analysis of the novel, Frank Kermode regards Lolita's spectral-like presence as indicative of Nabokov's pronounced disdain for naturalistic storytelling, especially on account of its "associations with base entertainment, and because it traditionally encourages the reader 'to identify' with its characters."³

This doggedness to maintain a yawning chasm between the reader and the work was a reigning principle of Nabokov's art. When asked to sum up the general attributes of his readership, Nabokov, in a 1962 interview with *The Listener*, states: "I don't think that an artist should bother about his audience. His best audience is the person he sees in his shaving mirror every morning. I think that the audience an artist imagines, when he imagines that kind of a thing, is a room filled with people wearing his own mask."⁴ A parallel may be roughly drawn between this lack of a dignity that summarises the typical condition of a reader of Nabokov (which sometimes borders on an emotional violation), and the violence in his novel which, if we return to Direk's formulation for transcendent violence, sets down sharply the "regimes of servitude... the hierarchical differences among individual human beings." On the

¹ Ibid., p. 91.

² Nabokov. *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 62.

³ Quoted in Pifer, Ellen. "On Human Freedom and Inhuman Art: Nabokov," *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Spring, 1978), p. 52.

⁴ Nabokov. *Strong Opinions*, pp. 15-16.

surface, indeed, none of the examples we have seen so far presents an aspect of violence that is not associated with brute force. This particular angle offers itself as a popular topic of critical discussion. In *The Economics of Fantasy: Rape in Twentieth-Century Literature*, Sharon Stockton argues that *Lolita* centres initially on “desire unfulfilled” and becomes increasingly “insistent on material circulations of sex and money as it acknowledges the violence inherent in fetishism.”¹ The violence with which Humbert Humbert destroys the will and personhood in *Lolita* destroys, in turn, his claim to an image of a virile, insatiable sexual fiend that he tries to sell us - his professed masculinity, in Stockton’s reading, serves at best a “secondary function of consumer identity”, a cover-up of his incapacity to redress the balance of desire in the material and the ideological respects. Such a view was indirectly disputed by Appel Jr., Boyd and Lionel Trilling, who, in their individual assertions, call for a relocation of the consideration of the matter to within the novel’s artistic structure, through which aesthetic supremacy appears as an exclusive product of an authorial manipulation that precipitates an unwarranted application of cruelty.²

IV. Violence and Human Sexuality

Considering that the textual representation of violence succeeds at the most in, as we see in Nabokov’s fiction, creating a friction amongst the orderly words, in verbalising (for Nabokov an active tendency to *oververbalise*) the silence, the foreseeably futile but no less vital and symbolic endeavour of evoking the heterogeneous character of a violence proper should require a modification of the primary approach.

The key for how this may actually work has been alluded to throughout the argument, but needs here to be made more apparent: as David Rampton says in his commentary of *Laughter in the Dark*, the book was the result of Nabokov’s longstanding occupation of making “clearer links between desire and violence, sex and death” and of thereon underscoring man’s inclination for the “violence of attempted possession, the violence that turns people into objects, the desire that is

¹ Stockton, Sharon. *The Economics of Fantasy: Rape in Twentieth-Century Literature* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006), p. 98.

² See Nabokov. *The Annotated Lolita*, p. lii, 312 & 378. Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 56 & 85. Trilling, Lionel. “The Last Lover: Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*” in *Encounter*, October, 1958, pp. 9-18.

corrupt at its very source.”¹

Bataille states as much that the domain of human sexuality is “the domain of violence, of violation,” since it “entails a breaking down of established patterns, the patterns [...] of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals.”² The definition recalls the ongoing thesis of Freud’s *Civilisation and Its Discontents*: Eros plays a contradictory societal role in that it is at once essential to the core construction of a community and a menace to its common goods. The institution regarding the restriction of sexual freedom inevitably leads to the refashioning of sex as a form of aggression, as an ignominious reminder of our ancient past. “It is contended that much of the blame for our misery lies with what we call our civilisation,” Freud says, “and that we should be far happier if we were to abandon it and revert to primitive conditions.”³

In a more particular sense, an undue Eros is susceptible of converting itself into violence. The result is what Freud loosely termed a “sexual aberration”, the basis of which consists in a “pleasurable unpleasure”, a mixture of pleasure and pain that is characterised by its inclination towards excess, taking the form, mainly, of an insatiable craving for *beyond pleasure*. In sadism or masochism, two of the commonest types of sexual aberration, violence is invariably resorted to in achieving the pleasurable unpleasure. But for the most part, human sexuality is constitutive of a certain degree of violence. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud opposes the death drive, also known as the aggressive drive, to Eros. He later rethought about this distinction, and, in *Civilisation*, notes that a particular kind of death drive - the “inward-directed craving for destruction” - is hard to be discerned unless it is “tinged with eroticism.”⁴ According to Bersani’s reading, Freud ultimately came close to suggesting that “sexuality - at least in the mode in which it is constituted - could be thought of as tautology for masochism.”⁵

¹ Rampton, David. *Vladimir Nabokov: A Critical Study of the Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 20.

² Bataille. *Eroticism*, p. 16, 18.

³ Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), p. 35.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁵ Bersani, Leo. “Sexuality and Aesthetics,” *October*, Vol. 28, Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis (Spring, 1984), p. 34.

Nowhere in his life or work had Nabokov shown any pronounced interest in the more perverse and morbid aspects of the sex-violence fusion. But it can be observed that the idea of extremity looms in his habitual treatment of the individual themes. We have seen in Nabokov's novel how violence is frequently the incentive for the intensification of the sexual. In light of Bersani's remark that the dramatisation of violence in modernist literature is in part a function for the provocation of a sexualised, or even sadistic, identification on the reader's part, the controversial features in *Lolita* may be construed as merely adhering to a time-honoured template, which, in the name of entertainment, proves to be an unflinching draw.

Publicly at least, Nabokov scorned the idea that "sex sells." Asked about his view on the topic, Nabokov gave a terse, slightly disgruntled answer: "Sex as an institution, sex as a general notion, sex as a problem, sex as a platitude - all this is something I find too tedious for words. Let us skip sex." (Playboy, 1964)¹ The resounding denial notwithstanding, with books like *Lolita* Nabokov had shown himself to be one of the practised upholders of the modernist tradition. According to German literary scholar Jan Philipp Reemtsma, there are two major types of sexual violence in modernist fiction: the "raptive violence", with which the agent seeks possession of the other's body purely for sexual gratification; and the "*autotelic* violence", which aims at the destruction of the body. The sociology of the human body is a central concern in Bataille's writings on eroticism, as we shall see in the next chapter. In *Eroticism* (1957), Bataille writes that "to despoil is the essence of eroticism."² Such despoilment, because it merely *approximates* death, should never, Bataille continues, induce a permanent removal of the Other. A similar principle characterises Reemtsma's *autotelic* violence: what it destroys in essence is not so much the body *per se* but its *physical integrity*, in the process of which the Other becomes growlingly "objectified".³

On a superficial level, this objectification of the Other stands as part of the manifold schemes of the intentional violation of the homogeneous. In lieu of a wholesale destruction, the method allows for the possibility of the transition to come through,

¹ Nabokov. *Strong Opinions*, p. 19.

² Bataille. *Eroticism*, p. 145.

³ See Evers, Kai. *Violent Modernists: The Aesthetics of Destruction in Twentieth-Century German Literature* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), p. 61.

in which an instinctive negativity is adjusted. For Bataille, human sexuality, because of its dual origins in both life and death, assumes a more advantageous, and in many ways more viable, operation than sheer violence when it comes to evoking the heterogeneous. In Nabokov's novel, on the other hand, eroticism is a transgressive force whose violence simultaneously disrupts and cements the elementary textuality.

Chapter Two: Eroticism

The doctors of the grey medicinal couch say sex, once shocking to the freest prude, is not a riddle but a platitude.

- John Clellon Holmes, *Doctor Trustus: Man of Good Will*¹

I. Eroticism and Death

By definition, the word “eroticism” indicates a quality of sexual desire and pleasure specific to human beings. As stated in the French *Encyclopédie* of 1755, eroticism refers to “everything with a connection to the love of the sexes.”² The adjective, “erotic”, is therefore an epithet used “particularly to characterise [...] a dissoluteness, an excess.”³ This marks one of the earliest definitions wherein the heterogeneous nature of eroticism is alluded to. It is also closest to Bataille’s own exposition in *Eroticism*: “Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death.”⁴ As mentioned previously, Bataille located eroticism in the domain of violence, since, in general, it “entails a breaking down of established patterns, the patterns [...] of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals.”⁵ With the exception of a few extreme cases, death in an erotic experience is no more than a tangible sensation, for eroticism also denotes the plenitude of life and is thus not entirely driven by an irrational urge. In sum, we might say that the erotic evinces a diminishing but still entrenched discrepancy between man and animal, the latter of which unable to perceive the danger of excess that is inherent in a sexual activity.

In the second volume of *The Accursed Share*, subtitled *The History of Eroticism*,

¹ Holmes, John Clellon. *Night Music: Selected Poems* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1989), pp. 80-81.

² Quoted in Lynn Hunt ed., *Eroticism and the Body Politic* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 90.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Bataille, Georges. *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), p. 11.

⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

Bataille likens the nature of eroticism to that of a religious festival: both assume the “introduction of movement - the negation of withdrawal into self, hence a denial of the supreme value of avarice,” and a “communication”, which “requires an outward movement from the beginning.”¹ In Bataille’s terminology, a “communication” always implies a more intense affair than, what the word normally suggests, the imparting or exchanging of information: a communication, says Bataille in *On Nietzsche*, “cannot proceed from one full and intact individual to another. It requires individuals whose separate existence in themselves is *risked*, placed at the limit of death and nothingness; the moral summit is the moment of risk taking, it is a being suspended in the beyond of oneself, at the limit of nothingness.”² As a rule, no life is seriously imperilled in a communication, but a sense of self-loss is palpable enough to confer on the experience a degree of disquietude. The operative procedure of an erotic act then requires, as Bataille formulates in *Eroticism*, a passive participant who is the first to be “dissolved as a separate entity,” and a more active one to whom the dissolution of the other “means one thing only: it is paving the way for a fusion where both are mingled, attaining at length the same degree of dissolution.”³ Similarly, in a sacrifice, the killing of the victim provokes in the witness a sense of his own death. It is then the paradox of such a measure that discontinuity is the condition for the culmination of loss, in which case only a *semblance* of the real loss is finally acquired.

But this paradox is also, in a way, an advantage of sorts in terms of evoking the heterogeneous. A sexual union, says Bataille, is “fundamentally a compromise, a half-way house between life and death.”⁴ One’s awareness of death invariably “deepens the abyss of eroticism,” imparting to it at once elements of fear and fascination.⁵ In parallel with this conflicting attitude is the association we customarily make of sex’s

¹ Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share: Vols II & III*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1993), p. 43.

² Bataille, Georges. *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 19.

³ *Eroticism*, p. 17. In the book, Bataille assumes the active partner to be the more masculine one to its counterpart. This emphasis on the gendered difference between sexual partners has been a subject of criticism and much contention amongst contemporary scholarship. See, for instance, Carolyn J. Dean’s *The Self and Its Pleasures: Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992) and Judith Surkis’s “No Fun and Games Until Someone Loses an Eye: Transgression and Masculinity in Bataille and Foucault”, *Diacritics*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Georges Bataille: An Occasion for Misunderstanding (Summer, 1996), pp. 18-39.

⁴ *Eroticism*, p. 167.

⁵ *The Accursed Share: Vols II & III*, p. 84.

vulgar aspect with animalism: both embody a contrast to the calculated interests of a work-driven society.¹ Where civilisation is concerned, eroticism is inexorably and necessarily acculturated; the imperative to prohibit sex is as much a psychological reaction as it is a societal, moral one: in Bataille's words, "the place of sexual life is humanly delimited by a prohibition: sexual life is never unreservedly free; it must always be confined within bounds that custom sets."² What underlies the erotic act then is the ceaseless tension between taboo and transgression, neither of which can be completely eradicated in favour of the other.

This brings us back to Bataille's central assertion that eroticism is "the domain of violence, of violation." It may also be said that violence, in its outward form, precipitates eroticism towards the point of death. Although relatively few of Bataille's philosophical treatises are devoted to the subject of sexual violence (most of them are about Marquis de Sade), in his fictional work a rather graphic illustration of the problem is unduly foregrounded. In *Story of the Eye* (1928), the various outrageous sex games that are partaken in by the characters go beyond the radical extreme of forbidding sexual practice. Death is a common feature of those games; its connection with eroticism seems at times forged at the expense of a teleological basis. The narrator, in anticipation of an orgasm, says: "[...] it struck me that death was the sole outcome of my erection."³ Conversely, the sight of death also triggers his mounting desire for immediate sexual gratification. Along with his friend Simone, he embarks on a series of sexual exploits, the most abominable of which sees the pair having sex right beside the dead body of their friend, Marcelle, which the narrator notes bears an uncanny resemblance to Simone. This scenario was reprised seven years later in *Blue of Noon* (1935), in which Henri, the protagonist, masturbates in front of his mother's corpse; he meets up with Dirty, his lover, afterward and observes that she is starting to take on the appearance of death.⁴ There are a couple of examples of this combination of eroticism and death in Nabokov. In *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert flirts at one point with the idea of imposing

¹ Procreation, according to Bataille, is only an aspect of eroticism and should not be taken as its end. See *Eroticism*, pp. 12-13.

² *The Accursed Share: Vols II & III*, p. 23.

³ Bataille, Georges. *Story of the Eye*, trans. Joachim Neugroschal (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 50.

⁴ Bataille, Georges. *Blue of Noon*, trans. Harry Mathews (London: Paladon Grafton Books, 1988), pp. 38-39.

the image and identity of a childhood paramour, now deceased, on Lolita to put the latter squarely at the service of his sexual dominance. For the narrator of *Story of the Eye*, too, death greatly intensifies the *jouissance* of his erotic feeling, and, together with Simone, he further scales up their sadistic orgies, which culminate in a delirious bull-fighting game, whose climax sees Simone inserting the eye of a killed matador into her vagina, and in the murdering of a Catholic priest.

With the construction of the narrative centring on a psychoanalytic paradigm, *Story of the Eye* has attracted numerous scholarly attempts to unravel its matrix of obscure symbolism (a prominent case in point is Roland Barthes's 1962 essay, "Metaphor of the Eye").¹ According to Stuart Kendall, the novella's "parodic agenda" targets not only the psychoanalytic literature in general but its methodology: the story's plotline, instead of aiming for a psychological unity of characters and fictional elements, seems to be driven to displacement from one narrative object to another. The book's title is misleading: the eye has no story and even as a symbol what it denotes does not go any deeper than the most elementary, namely, that the eye stands for human sexual organs. On the whole, the narrative yields no interpretative key and cannot be read in a traditional way. Its textual logic falters the moment it is subjected to any analytic strategy. The story should be taken at its face value, Kendall advises, and be seen as an exercise in the externalisation of textual transgression, a mode which seeks, and inexorably fails, to assimilate the disruptive potential of a heterogeneous energy into the text. Bataille would eventually master such an exercise in his mature works, most notably the wartime diary, *Guilty* (1944).²

In regard to the link between eroticism and death, *Story of the Eye*, for all its studious and demonstrable efforts in bringing the subject to the fore, manages moreover to present an overview of many of the major themes which Bataille would explore, with greater depth and detail, in his later theoretical writings. These include, it should be noted, the idea of the impure sacred. The correlation between the killing of the priest and the passion and death of Christ is remarked by one of the characters:

The hosts, as you see, are nothing other than Christ's sperm in the form of

¹ See Bataille. *Story of the Eye*, pp. 85-96.

² See Kendall, Stuart. *Georges Bataille* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), pp. 52-61.

small white biscuits. And as for the wine they put in the chalice, the ecclesiastics say it is the *blood* of Christ, but they are obviously mistaken. If they thought it was the blood, they would use red wine, but since they employ only white wine, they are showing that at bottom of their hearts they are quite aware that this is urine.¹

Regardless of the Catholic imagery, Bataille's agnosticism appeared to have filtered through his writing at this point.² But the incipient thought that is revealed in the above passage would thereafter be elaborated into an important theme of Bataille's philosophy: the comparable nature and attributes of sexual ecstasy and religious experience. As we know, examples of what may be called the erotic representations of the divine are numerous across a variety of religious iconography and literature. A notable one in the Christian tradition is Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculptural compound, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647-52), the striking imagery of which was inspired by an erotically charged passage in Teresa of Avila's autobiography, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus* (1565).³ In the preface to *Eroticism*, Bataille states that "flights of Christian religious experience and bursts of erotic impulses are seen to be part and parcel of the same movement."⁴ The problem of such an association was noted by Foucault, who, in his tribute to Bataille, "A Preface to Transgression" (1963), argues that eroticism in Bataille is both heterogeneous and, in a narrow sense, pseudo-

¹ Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, p. 76.

² Bataille proclaims, in an autobiographical essay, that he was led to question his belief during a Siena trip (1923), but was yet to renounce it altogether without reserve. According to Michel Surya, Bataille's biographer, the loss of faith seemed to be definitive after the trip. This view, however, cannot be verified in Bataille's writing, and his stance towards Catholicism and its teaching is at best summed up as consistently equivocal throughout his life. See Bataille, Georges. *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 140; and Surya, Michel. *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 2002), p. 37.

³ In it, Teresa of Avila delineates with visceral language the epiphanous moment when an angel thrusts a golden lance into her heart:

I saw in his [the angel's] hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love for God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it.

See *The Life and Letters of St. Teresa: Vol. I*, ed. Henry James Coleridge (London: Burns and Oates, 1881), p. 95.

⁴ Bataille, *Eroticism*, p. 9.

heterogeneous; thus the comparison should not be between eroticism and Christian experience in general, but between eroticism and the absence of God.¹

Even in his early faith in Catholicism, the very notion of “God” was for Bataille inexorably profaned. By definition, gods are, in Bataille’s description, “mythical spirits, without any substratum of reality”; but insofar as their presence is ultimately endowed with some illusion of reality, a God is “divine (sacred), but he is not supremely so, since he is real.”² In other words, God would only retain His divinity and supreme status if He were free from the imposition of reality, if the notion amounted to an absence of God. Bataille sums up the double bind:

Religion, whose essence is the search for lost intimacy, comes down to the effort of clear consciousness which wants to be complete self-consciousness: but this effort is futile, since consciousness of intimacy is possible only at a level where consciousness is no longer an operation whose outcome implies duration, that is, at the level where clarity, which is the effect of the operation, is no longer given.³

For this reason, all religious experience succeeds only in conjuring up a *semblance* of the heterogeneous, in the like manner that an erotic experience fails to culminate in real death. But to the extent that eroticism *approximates* the heterogeneous proper, it must, Foucault argues in his essay, permit a “profanation without object, a profanation that is empty and turned inward upon itself and whose instruments are brought to bear on nothing but each other. Profanation in a world which no longer recognises any positive meaning in the sacred.”⁴ The concept then signifies the desecration of a God that transcends the exigency of thinghood, a God that thereby should not be named, apprehended, intellectualised; a God that is absent. Foucault, like Bataille, rejects the Nietzschean call for the death of God, because “what does it mean to kill God if he does not exist, to kill God who has never existed?”⁵

¹ Foucault, Michel, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. and ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 30-32.

² Bataille, Georges. *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 2012), p. 37.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁴ Foucault, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, p. 30.

⁵ Foucault, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, p. 32. Bataille once said that, “The *absence of God* is no longer a closure; it is the opening up to the infinite.” Bataille, Georges. *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, trans. Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 2006), p. 48.

This rhetorical question, and the problem it poses, would, years later, provide the uncertain ground for Foucault's monumental study of human sexuality in Western history: titled *The History of Sexuality* (1976), the four-volume work establishes the subject as a "historical construct" organised along the lines of various strategies of knowledge and power.¹ Contrary to other topics of societal interest or investigation, the discourse of sex, for Foucault, is essentially a ruptured and unstable one, for it has never "ceased to provoke a kind of generalised discursive erethism."² Foucault places sexuality at the centre of the hierarchical system of human cognition - a precarious position, indeed, since sexuality also forbids the very attempt to know (as a mode of communication, it is situated "at the limit of nothingness").³ A sense of powerlessness prevails, as it is powerless to kill and not to kill God. Foucault observes that "in the space of a few centuries, a certain inclination has led us to direct the question of what we are, to sex."⁴ In brief, the history of sex is indistinguishable from the history of mankind, both of which are still in a continual, presumably endless, process of being written and rewritten.

It is precisely by reason of its humanness that eroticism, in Bataille's dialectic, at once represents and misrepresents the heterogeneous. At its most eroticism allows a glimpse of the fearful ecstasy of death, whilst preserving its distance from the forbidden realm. Therefore, as much as it carries with it portents of death, sex is primarily life-affirming. Rarely, in his approach to the subject, does Nabokov also come to such a positive conclusion. The narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), Nabokov's first English novel, says: "I believe that granting 'sex' a special situation when tackling a human problem, or worse still, letting the 'sexual ideal', if such a thing exists, pervade and 'explain' all the rest is a grave error of reasoning."⁵ As we shall see, solipsism may be a cause of these characters' pronounced disinterest, sometimes bordering on abhorrence, in sexual matters; with Humbert Humbert, however, it is normally the reverse: sex is weaponised to reinforce his self-

¹ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: Vol. I*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 98.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 105. Of course, this remark can also be taken as yet another veiled attack against Freud.

centredness. According to Jean-Paul Sartre, it is typically in the course of the fulfillment of one's sexual need that a power relation gradually comes into view - there is one subjectivity to whom the other is bound to become subsumed: "When I caress the Other, I give birth to their flesh, underneath my fingers."¹ In light of this particular reasoning, Humbert Humbert's sadistic treatment of Lolita seems to be granted a bit more logical sense: that every sexual activity is an occasion for the exercising of license by the powerful. For Bataille, on the other hand, a heterogeneous concern is marked by its non-assertiveness, in the sense that it renounces outer justification or value - eroticism is much too involved with the dynamic of material power for it to summon true heterogeneity, and for this and other reasons, its capability is confined to "assenting to life up to the point of death."

Conceived nominally on the axis of "nothingness", Bataille's eroticism must ultimately forgo the necessities of language and reason. Ideally, an "erotic experience will commit us to silence."² A similar but more clarified statement was ventured by Foucault, who, taking into account the failure for eroticism to be delivered from the world of things, claims that although the language of human sexuality "will not reveal the secret of man's natural being, nor will it express the serenity of anthropological truths," it will lift us right into the "night where God is absent, and where all of our actions are addressed to this absence in a profanation which at once identifies it, dissipates it, exhausts itself in it, and restores it to the empty purity of its transgression."³

II. *Jouissance*-Free Eroticism

In Nabokov's novel, the association of eroticism and death takes a less precise and sometimes atypical form. A recurring idea in *Lolita* is the incongruity between the physical and the emotional properties of human sexuality. To Humbert Humbert, eroticism is an incorrigibly fraught matter that rarely conveys any joy. In the midst of a sexual experience, he invariably catches "glimpses of an incomparably more

¹ *Talking with Sartre: Conversations and Debates*, ed. and trans. John Gerassi (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 269.

² Bataille. *Eroticism*, p. 252.

³ Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*, p. 30.

poignant bliss.”¹ Such feeling becomes stronger and more persistent still after many failed advances with Lolita, at which point Humbert Humbert opines: “[...] the look of lust is always gloomy; lust is never quite sure - even when the velvety victim is locked up in one’s dungeon - that some rival devil or influential god may still abolish one’s prepared triumph.”² All these speak unmistakably of the anti-hero’s obsessive love of Lolita. The name “Lolita”, pronounced “Lo-lee-ta”, is a moniker that Humbert Humbert makes up and prefers to the plain Dolores, Lolita’s real name; the middle syllable, “Lee”, is apparently an allusion to Annabel Lee, a girl with whom a young Humbert Humbert had his first “unsuccessful” tryst, and who died shortly after of typhus. From the very first moment of their encounter, Lolita seems, in the eye of Humbert Humbert, indistinguishable from her dead namesake: trying to invoke the memory of Annabel Lee, Humbert Humbert describes her now blurred features as those of a “little ghost in natural colours (and this is how I see Lolita).”³ Annabel Lee is also the eponymous heroine of Edgar Allan Poe’s famous poem (Poe is referred to more than a dozen times in the book, another clue to Humbert Humbert’s morbid predilection). In the poem, the narrator and Annabel Lee share a passionate love that enrages the angels, who kill the latter out of envy. Not mourning for long the death of his beloved, the narrator believes that their love for each other is solid enough to sustain itself beyond death. He then vows to be his dead love’s eternal guardian, lying night by night beside the “sepulchre there by the sea - / In her tomb by the sounding sea.”⁴ A variant of this couplet can be found in Humbert Humbert’s opening paean to Lolita, whom he reveals to have a precursor: “[...] a certain initial girl-child. *In a principdom by the sea.*” (italics added)⁵

Seemingly supplying itself as a presentiment of sorts, this rather sombre portrait of Lolita is precluded by the fact, revealed by John Ray, PhD, in the fictional foreword of the book, that she eventually dies “giving birth to a stillborn girl.”⁶ In addition, Humbert Humbert specifically orders that the memoir should not be published until “Lolita is no longer alive.”⁷ Amis remarks in his introduction: “Like the sweat of lust

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 20.

² *Ibid.*, p. 125.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴ Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Essential Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Benjamin F. Fisher (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2004), p. 39.

⁵ Nabokov. *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

and guilt, the sweat of death trickles through *Lolita* [...] its heroine is, so to speak, dead on arrival, like her child.”¹ Another dimension to this fixation with death is Humbert Humbert’s conviction that true beauty must exist independently of time’s implacable law (“[...] to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets”).² But the unalterable reality cannot be disregarded:

I knew I had fallen in love with Lolita forever; but I also knew she would not be forever Lolita. She would be thirteen on January 1. In two years or so she would cease being a nymphet and would turn into a “young girl”, and then, into a “college girl” - that horror of horrors. The word “forever” referred only to my own passion, to the eternal Lolita as reflected in my blood.³

John Haegert, in his analysis of the book, sees Humbert Humbert’s “faintly onanistic” approach to amorous relations attributable to the “desire to recast Lolita in the role of her European predecessor, complete with stage crops and dramatic settings.”⁴ Such desire eventually eclipses any genuine affection that Humbert Humbert may have for the real Lolita and merges into the savagery of sexual manipulation, which, in Humbert Humbert’s defense, is merely to “safely solipsize” the beloved.⁵

According to Appel, Jr., the “transcendence of solipsism is the central concern in Nabokov.”⁶ Originating from a set of disciplines established by Greek Presocratic sophist Gorgias, solipsism holds that the self is all that is known to exist, hence the impossibility of objective knowledge. The idea takes to extreme the Cartesian cogito by predicating its ideology on the denial of the existence of other mentality.⁷ In Freud’s theory, the centralisation of self (egoism and narcissism being two of its most common manifestations) has its roots in a pathologised self-preservation. An egoist or a narcissist tends to be wary of all forms of communications, of any activity that

¹ Amis, Martin. “Introduction” in Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita* (London: Everyman, 1992), p. vii.

² Nabokov. *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 209.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁴ Haegert, John. “Artist in Exile: The Americanization of Humbert Humbert” in Ellen Pifer ed., *Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita: A Casebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 144.

⁵ Nabokov. *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 60.

⁶ Appel, Jr., Alfred. “Introduction” in Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, p. xxii.

⁷ See Todd, William. *Analytical Solipsism* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968) and Ural, Safak. *Solipsism, Physical Things and Personal Perceptual Space: Solipsist Ontology, Epistemology and Communication*, trans. Alev Bulut (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2009).

necessitates the involvement of other individual(s).¹ Bataille's understanding of the concept is more or less in kind - he sums up in *Inner Experience* that egoism is "inherent in despair: indifference to communication is born in it."² Elements of such tendency also appear to characterise human sexuality, as Bataille claims in a later thesis: "[...] sexual activity is a critical moment in the isolation of the individual. We know it from without, but we know that it weakens and calls into question that feeling of self."³

Nowhere in his narration does Humbert Humbert ever confess to having any problem with sexual intimacy; but his remarks on sex in general do disclose a marked apathy, despondency, negativity, and at times stark rationalism. At one point, in the midst of a particularly frustrating lovemaking with Lolita, he observes bemusedly that "what adults did for purposes of procreation was no business of hers."⁴ For Bataille, procreation is being "reduced in human terms to a lamentable mechanical activity" when seen as an end or a practical matter.⁵ Such a view, which posits a reversal of the Platonic Eros, was especially current amongst the early 20th century sociologists and philosophers, who tended to treat the dialectic of sex as a surrogate form for their rejection of the orthodox - Nietzsche, for instance, contends that "sexual instinct has no necessary relation to procreation", since the former is by nature "antisocial" and is therefore identified as a "negation of general equality and of the equality of value between human beings."⁶ It is rather curious that, for all his "antisocial" thoughts and proclivities, Humbert Humbert occasionally betrays a certain qualm when it comes to sex. He is not alone in this regard. The narrator of *The Eye* (1930), despite his leading a dissipated existence, confesses at one point:

¹ See Freud's "On Narcissism: An Introduction", ed. Joseph Sandler, Ethel Spector Person and Peter Fonagy (London: Karnac Books, 2012), p. 12-14.

² Bataille, Georges. *Inner Experience*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), pp. 43-44.

³ Bataille. *Eroticism*, p. 100.

⁴ Nabokov. *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 133.

⁵ The exception here is marriage, which Bataille conceives as the "framework of legitimate sensuality", comprising attributes of both work and pleasure. Since "the initial sexual act constituting marriage is a permitted violation," the meaning of procreation is thenceforth tintured with a sense of illicitness peculiar to eroticism, and, conversely, eroticism is rendered less as a mythical notion. See *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, pp. 109-112. This view is an elaboration and, in part, a modification, of Thomas Aquinas's theory that sexual acts are inherently good if they are regarded as necessary components of marriage. See McCluskey, Colleen. "An Unequal Relationship between Equals: Thomas Aquinas on Marriage", *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Jan. 2007, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Jan., 2007), pp. 1-18.

⁶ Quoted from Assoun, Paul-Laurent. *Freud and Nietzsche*, trans. Richard L. Collier, Jr. (London: Continuum, 2000), p. 98.

“The summit for lovemaking was for me but a bleak knoll with a relentless view. After all, in order to live happily, a man must know now and then a few moments of perfect blankness.”¹ Both of these instances present an inversion of Freud’s pleasure principle: that at the height and in the excess of the erotic, the “unpleasure” of the pleasurable predominates; the “beyond pleasure”, if any, is either completely negated or amplified into a lurid, voyeuristic ecstasy. This latter aspect is evident in a grotesque sequence in *Despair* (1936). Hermann Karlovich, the narrator, tries to visualise himself *witnessing* from afar a sexual act he is engaged in:

I longed to discover some means to remove myself at least a hundred yards from the lighted stage where I performed; I longed to contemplate that bedroom scene from some remote upper gallery in a blue mist under the swimming allegories of the starry vault; to watch a small but distinct and very active couple through opera glasses [...] one April night, with the harps of rain aphrodisiacally burbling in the orchestra [...] I was sitting at my maximum distance of fifteen rows of seats and looking forward to an especially good show - which, indeed, had already started, with my acting self in colossal form and most inventive.²

In his book on Nabokov’s epistemology, Michael Glynn suggests that Karlovich’s “auto-voyeuristic power” contains a Bergsonian allusion to the duality of human consciousness.³ According to Bergson, man’s consciousness is constitutionally afflicted by schism, which comes in the form of a dyadic mind:

[...] there are two different selves, one of which is, as it were, the external, its spatial and, so to speak, social representation. We reach the former by deep introspection, which leads us to grasp our inner states as living things, constantly becoming, as free states not amenable to measure [...] The greater part of the time we live outside ourselves, hardly perceiving anything of ourselves but our own ghosts.⁴

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Eye*, trans. Vladimir Nabokov (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 10.

² Nabokov, Vladimir. *Despair*, trans. Vladimir Nabokov (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 33.

³ Glynn, Michael. *Vladimir Nabokov: Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences in His Novels* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2007), pp. 119-21.

⁴ Bergson, Henri. *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2008), p. 231.

The theory may offer a summary explanation of Karlovich's mental state, which is said to have been prone to, from an early age, a "well-known kind of dissociation."¹ Once he grows dissatisfied with the trick of bi-locating himself, he exercises this extraordinary faculty on a tramp called Felix, whom he regards as his double, and sees to it that all physical contacts between them are barred: "I found it preferable to somehow hold Felix at a certain distance from him as though any proximity would have broken the spell of our likeness."² Given that Nabokov was well-acquainted with Bergson's work, the correlation here is not too presumptuous; but the author more likely had another purpose in mind.³ The fact that Karlovich refrains from direct contact with his double, and yet regards the two of them as a single indivisible entity, which, in Bergson's formulation, is nonetheless bipartite in essence, marks the novel as a complex parody of the doppelgänger tradition.⁴ Such a device is also instrumental in bringing forth a peculiar notion: as in Karlovich's erotic dissociation, physical distance, not only from one's sexual partner but from the whole sexual act, appears to be a precondition for the intense pleasure of Eros. The approach may seem the opposite of Humbert Humbert's insatiable urge to sexually enslave Lolita; in terms of their relation to the field of eroticism, however, both display a certain dread for its empirical aspects.

For Bataille, on the other hand, the theoretical conception of the heterogeneous should ideally be grounded in actual practice (*praxis*); thus, with eroticism, "we are fairly and squarely inside subjective experience."⁵ The general thematisation of sex in Nabokov's novel seems, at least on the surface, to incline towards the *rejection* of this argument. But in regard to the affinity between eroticism and death, which, as we saw, bears on Bataille's heterology in an important way, Nabokov offers a wry riposte in his work: that a certain *lifelessness*, either of the experience itself or the persons involved, is intrinsic to the erotic; sex is at most a means to fulfill other

¹ Nabokov. *Despair*, p. 37.

² *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³ See Boyd, Brian. *Stalking Nabokov: Selected Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 192.

⁴ The psychological phenomena of self-seeing and out-of-body experience are actually typical attributes of a doppelgänger portrayal, but in the case of *Despair*, the protagonist is endowed with the preternatural ability of living outside of himself *before* he tests it on Felix, who is, technically, a discrete individual made to become Karlovich's double. See Stuart, Dabney. "Nabokov's *Despair*: Tinker to Evers to Chance", *The Georgia Review*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Summer 1976), pp. 432-46.

⁵ Bataille. *Eroticism*, pp. 103-04.

personal goals, and is duly and invariably rendered *jouissance*-free.

III. The Representation of the Erotic

The *jouissance*-free eroticism in Nabokov further indicates a failure on both the characters' and the author's part of grasping the intimate facts of what, in its purest state, is essentially ungraspable. Bataille acknowledges this difficulty. In the province of speech, he says in a 1955 lecture, "eroticism must remain something exterior as far as we are concerned."¹ To perceive the erotic as "something beyond our present set of experiences" is tantamount, Bataille continues, to leaving "the world we inhabit to shut ourselves up in solitude."² This lecture, appended to the end of *Eroticism*, seems to offer a conclusion against the book's prior concerns. But it is also an inescapable dilemma that must be addressed if the conceptual property of the heterogeneous is to be given its residual legitimacy. In an early review on Malcolm de Chazal's *Sens-plastique* (1948), Bataille announces in the beginning his incompetence for discussing erotic matters in a formal way, for language "has the power only to acknowledge a movement of retreat" and as it belongs to the world of things, of duration, it fails to convey the "meaning of the instant."³

It is not merely in relation to heterology that language is exposed as a defective tool. Bataille says of its natural tendency to distort the reality of things:

Language scatters the totality of all that touches us most closely even while it arranges it in order. Through language we can never grasp what happens to us, for it eludes us in the form of interdependent propositions, and no central whole to which each of these can be referred ever appears. Our attention remains fixed on this whole but we can never see it in the full light of day.⁴

A similar observation was made by Ludwig Wittgenstein, who, in *Philosophical Investigations*, published posthumously in 1953, proposes a language game that

¹ Bataille. *Eroticism*, p. 252.

² Ibid.

³ Bataille, *The Absence of Myth*, p. 187, 190.

⁴ *Eroticism*, p. 274.

explores the levels of difference between expression and appearance. A simple word like “Yes” has multiple meanings, each of which denoting a different command or action (or reaction). Men have come to rely on the language game - the words, despite their multiple “mutations”, are after all closely related – that any venture outside of its province is well-nigh impossible. Wittgenstein says:

This language grew up as it did because human beings had – and have - the tendency to think in this way. So you can only succeed in extricating people who live in an instinctive rebellion against language; you cannot help those whose entire instinct is to live in the herd which has created this language as its proper mode of expression.¹

For Bataille, the limited scheme of the linguistic can only be demolished by language itself, but any tactics or caprice involved in the purpose are still conditioned by reason of their origins in human expression. That is to say an author is capable at the most of flouting the linguistic rule with an impaired latitude.

In his general preoccupation with the art of writing, Nabokov had taken particular notice of how words may be liberated from their inbuilt constraint. Concision appeared to be the key, as he said of Joyce’s *Ulysses*: “We think not in words but in shadows of words. James Joyce’s mistake in those otherwise marvelous mental soliloquies of his consists in that he gives too much verbal body to thoughts.”² The charge might as well have been extended to Nabokov himself, whose prose is rarely known to be light on the verbal weight. In a tribute to *Lolita* on its 50th anniversary, columnist Stephen Metcalfe compares the book to other amatory fictions of its time: “Your run-of-the-mill obscene masterwork - *Tropic of Cancer*, say - demands that you, enlightened reader, work your way past the sex and excrement to recognise how beautiful it is. But with *Lolita* you must work past its beauty to recognise how shocking it is.”³ This reversal of the conventional formula is borne out, in the book, by Humbert Humbert’s famous creed: “Sex is but the ancilla of art.”⁴ As it transpires, art is to Humbert Humbert essentially a mask (at one point, he asks: “Is ‘mask’ the

¹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), p. 55.

² Nabokov, Vladimir. *Strong Opinions* (London: Penguin Classics, 2011), p. 25.

³ Metcalfe, Stephen, “Lolita at 50. Is Nabokov’s Masterpiece Still Shocking?”, *Slate*, Dec. 19, 2005.

⁴ Nabokov. *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 259.

keyword?") that conceals his true colours.¹ This mask is temporarily dropped, in Chapter 26, the shortest chapter of the book, when Humbert Humbert, about to recount his first night alone with Lolita, is suddenly overcome with excitement: "Don't think I can go on. Heart, head – everything. Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita."² These frenzied, staccato ravings, interrupting his elegant, mawkish prose, signal the transition where, in Humbert Humbert's narration, art presently recedes into the background for the eruption and the manifestation of the erotic. Comparing to the more calculated scheme of Bataille's novella, Nabokov here resorts to a rather tame gesture to bring about the disruptive force of sexual releases, which succeeds nonetheless in creating an effective "rupture", where the heart of true eroticism is located.

Given that this "rupture" is a condition for words to express the essence of the erotic proper, a fictional framework, with its flexibility to textual transformation, seems a more viable option than a theoretical one. This latter approach can be seen in the example of Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), the writing of which evinces, Bersani points out in his reading, a conscious endeavour to "stabilise the perturbations of sexuality in a theory about the subversive, destabilising effects of human sexuality on the human impulse to form." Instead of aiming for clarity, the overall result, Bersani feels, yields a "precariousness of representational discourse."³ But is it possible to submit totally to the "destabilising effects" of the erotic? Sade put on a rather flagrant demonstration in his life and works a sexual prowess that consisted in a willful abandonment of reason and rationality. As Bataille perceived it, this outrageous display of inhumanness succeeded only in reclaiming a loss (of human consciousness) as the new order. To be sure, Sade managed to stage a collapse of formal relations, but in place of the debris were the furtive constructions of thoughts and principles, built on the very turmoil of human knowledge.⁴

¹ Nabokov. *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 53.

² *Ibid.*, p. 109.

³ Bersani, Leo. "Sexuality and Aesthetics," *October*, Vol. 28, Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis (Spring, 1984), p. 39.

⁴ Bataille, Georges. *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 97. Simone de Beauvoir's examination of Sade yields a similar view: "[...] philosophically, it [Sade's work] escapes banality only to founder in incoherence." De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Marquis de Sade: An Essay by Simone de Beauvoir*, trans. Annette Michelson, Cemal Sureya and Paul Dinnage (London: New English Library, 1953), p. 7.

This particular fact needs to be reiterated: as a rule, “an erotic experience will commit us to silence.”¹ But as we also said in the previous chapter, to give a heterogeneous phenomenon its due - that is, to commit it to silence - is tantamount to, basically, negating its actuality (that which is rooted in the world of things and thus necessitates a need for apprehension). In “A Preface to Transgression,” Foucault shows how language is able to provide a unique textual experience wherein the transgressive potential of a heterogeneous operation may be evoked.² The case in point is the bullfight episode in *Story of the Eye*, in which a toreador’s eye is removed:

[...] two globes of equal size and consistency had suddenly been propelled in opposite directions at once. One, the white ball of the bull, had been thrust into the “pink and dark” cunt that Simone had bared in the crowd [...] The coincidence, tied to death and to a sort of urinary liquidation of the sky, first brought us back to Marcelle in a moment that was so brief and almost insubstantial, yet so uneasily vivid that I stepped forward like a sleepwalker as though about to touch *her* at eye level.³

Here, Bataille plays with a range of conflicting images: the eyeballs are “propelled in opposite directions”; the intruding of the bull’s testicles and the extruding of the eye. All these conspire to conjure up, for a moment “brief and almost insubstantial”, the invisible presence of Marcelle - Foucault considers this the crucial juncture “when being necessarily appears in its immediacy and where the act which crosses the limit touches absence itself.”⁴ Such interpretation is continuous with a formula that Foucault proposes earlier in the essay concerning Bataille’s eroticism: “[...] a form of thought in which the interrogation of the limit replaces the search for totality and the act of transgression replaces the movement of contradictions.”⁵ For Derrida, a Bataillean contradiction is summed up in the matters of prohibition and transgression, and yet transgression, as we know, “dispels the prohibition without

¹ Bataille. *Eroticism*, p. 252.

² Foucault. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, p. 52.

³ Bataille. *Story of the Eye*, pp. 65-66. Of another level of connection between bullfighting and Catholicism, it is known that a ceaseless preoccupation with death is characteristic of Spanish religion. See Desmond, William H., “The Bull-Fight as a Religious Ritual”, *American Imago*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (June 1952), pp. 173-95.

⁴ Foucault. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, p. 52.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

suppressing it.”¹ Thus, with eroticism, the contradictory movement is not so much replaced as assuming itself the “rupture” into which sense and order dissolve.

It must be noted, moreover, that what this rupturing brings about is still very far from the full-scale demolition that a pure transgressive energy would surely occasion. With *Story of the Eye*, for instance, the entire narrative structure remains relatively *unmutilated* throughout. According to Jonathan Boulter, whose study of the novella concentrates on the themes of trauma and pornography, traditional narrative is perceived as “rigorously temporal and spatial” and is only capable of functioning as the “metaphor, the translation, the interpretation” of a given subject.² Therefore, any element or quality of a narrative is first and foremost a component of the “narrative progression (project)”, which also consists of the “communication”, so to speak, between the text and the reader, itself part of the narrative experience that emerges from the reading of the text.³ Boulter assumes that Bataille, from the early stage of composing the story, was aware of the overall futility of his undertaking - striving for a more tangible access of the heterogeneous, Bataille nonetheless could not let go of the homogeneous (in this case, the narrative as a medium). Hence the parodic overtone of the later part of the novella, which may be read, in some measure, as a veiled gibe at the overwrought depiction of the characters’ sexual adventure.⁴

The very notion of parody, although seldom addressed on its own in Bataille’s writing, had been central to his thought of the heterogeneous from the beginning. In an early essay, “The Solar Anus” (1931), Bataille writes of the world: “It is clear that the world is purely parodic, in other words, that each thing seen is the parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form.”⁵ He proceeds to illustrate the law of parody as manifested in natural objects:

¹ Derrida, Jacques. “From Restricted to General Economy” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 274-75.

² Boulter, Jonathan, “The Negative Way of Trauma: Georges Bataille’s ‘Story of the Eye,’” *Cultural Critique*, No. 46, Trauma and Its Cultural Aftereffects (Autumn, 2000), p. 167.

³ Ibid. This is a view commonly held amongst the formalist school of literary theory. See Davis, Todd F. and Womack, Kenneth. *Formalist Criticism and Reader-Response Theory* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

⁴ This differs from Kendall’s assertion that the parody was intended as an attack of the psychoanalytic methodology. Both Kendall and Boulter reach the same conclusion, however, that Bataille uses the parodic agenda to mock his own incompetence of writing about the heterogeneous.

⁵ Bataille, Georges. *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. 5.

Everyone is aware that life is parodic and that it lacks an interpretation.
Thus lead is the parody of gold.
Air is the parody of water.
The brain is the parody of the equator.
Coitus is the parody of crime.¹

At that point, the word “heterogeneous” had not yet entered into Bataille’s vocabulary, but the vision of a world hopelessly condemned to banal homogeneity is itself a crucial premise for the later exploration of the various aspects of heterology, of inner experience as a vital means for drawing mankind out of the parodic pattern.² In a sense, this characterisation of parody as circumscribing in its nature and operation bespeaks the mode that is most commonly found in Nabokov’s work. The narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* defines parody as a “springboard for leaping into the highest region of serious emotion.”³ For the protagonist of *The Gift*, who is an aspiring writer, parody is the reverse of a serious frame of mind: “I want to keep everything as it were on the brink of parody [...] And there must be on the other hand an abyss of seriousness, and I must make my way along this narrow ridge between my own truth and a caricature of it.”⁴ Both definitions emphasise parody’s departure from hard realism; in addition, parody strengthens an author’s hold on his audience and creative materials. As Appel, Jr. observes, parody is the “major means by which Nabokov breaks the circuit of reader-character identification one associates with the conventional novel.”⁵ It appears that the identification between the characters is broken as well. In his essay, “Parody and Authenticity in *Lolita*”, Thomas R. Frosch points up the *mise en abyme* of parodies in the novel: Humbert Humbert and his execution of parody are, in turn, parodied by Nabokov. This ingenious device serves to ultimately extract the real Humbert Humbert from the many personae that he takes on throughout the book. With his objectionable qualities thus exposed, the story, Frosch suggests, emerges as an essentially subversive but very affecting

¹ Bataille. *Visions of Excess*, p. 5.

² The concept of “heterology” was first introduced in “The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade” (1930), but its provenance may be traced to an even earlier date.

³ Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, p. 91.

⁴ Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Gift*, trans. Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 212.

⁵ Appel, Jr., Alfred, “‘Lolita’: The Springboard of Parody,” *Wisconsin Studies of Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 8, No. 2, A Special Number Devoted to Vladimir Nabokov (Spring, 1967), p. 215.

romance.¹

When asked to make a distinction between satire and parody, Nabokov says: "Satire is a lesson, parody is a game."² But he also claims, in a different context, that "games mean the participation of other persons; I'm interested in the lone performance - chess problems, for example, which I composed in glacial solitude."³ The following idea is thus inferred: parody is a game that the author plays with himself in solitude. In view of Nabokov's insistence on authorial control, it may be suggested that this particular type of recontextualisation is closely connected with the trope of solipsism, for a parody's referents are either itself or other works of art - it is sort of a magic mirror whose reflection is layered with a host of other similar, though distorted, ones.⁴ In modernism, parody is commonly seen as an artistic practice that liberates the text by way of imitating its background source. The result - a type of "recontextualising" parody as, according to Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (1985), most notably seen in Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) - redefines originality as necessarily turning against itself.⁵ Nabokov's parody seems to function somewhat to a different effect, but the process of self-reference, on the whole, has not so much the purpose of appropriating original work as that of generating new, autonomous art forms or ideas based on an old, borrowed model.⁶

The idea of originality in the word's strongest sense was to Bataille inherently dubitable. In "The Solar Anus", he writes of his belief that the world is inextricably

¹ Frosch, Thomas R., "Parody and Authenticity in *Lolita*" in *Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita: A Casebook*, Ellen Pifer ed. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 39-56.

² Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 65.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁴ The mirror is a motif in Nabokov's novel, indicating above all the characters' overriding self-obsession. Humbert Humbert is constantly confronted by a "prison of mirrors" (*The Annotated Lolita*, p. 121); the protagonist in *The Gift* ponders on man's incapacity for self-transcendence: "In our earthly house, windows are replaced by mirrors." (*The Gift*, p. 225) In spite of his fascination with doppelgänger, the narrator of *Despair* loathes mirrors, avoids them tirelessly, and believes that before those "monsters of mirrors" a person will be "pulled out like dough and then torn in two." (*Despair*, p. 21) According to Charles Kinbote, the Zemblan language is known as the "tongue of the mirror" (Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pale Fire*. London: Everyman Library, 2011, p. 242); as such, his commentary functions like a concave mirror confronting the so-called reality of Shade's poem.

⁵ Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 52

⁶ The Russian formalists were the first who viewed parody as a catalyst for artistic creation and innovation. See Hutcheon, p. 28, 35.

bound up with a parodic framework - every object or entity is a copy or a variation of the other. In *Guilty*, a recurrent motif is the impossibility of uttering original opinion or thought: "To me, nothing is more alien than personal modes of thought [...] if I utter a word, I bring into play the thought of other people."¹ Nabokov had likewise been troubled by language's inability to reflect the full measure of one's ratiocination, as he stated once that "I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more."² This frustration is voiced by Humbert Humbert in a sensual lament: "Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!"³ Eventually, he realises that words lend him only an illusion of empowerment which itself becomes cumbersome in his quest for the idealisations of love and lust. According to Bataille, the "summits of eroticism" are "necessarily beyond philosophical questioning" since philosophy "cannot escape from the limits of philosophy, of language, that is."⁴ The issue had been probed by a number of intellectual minds: Kierkegaard, for instance, regarded it as one of the phenomenological paradoxes of human thoughts, for an individual "can never reach the point at which he becomes absolutely independent [...] so too with language."⁵ With Bataille's thesis, the acknowledgement of this inherent limitation informs his pursuit of the heterogeneous in the sense that it has, from the start, the homogeneous as its basis. In his later writings on the subject, expositions are replaced by intentionally self-contradictory statements: "Principles of inner experience: to emerge through project from the realm of project [...] Inner experience is led by discursive reason. Reason alone has the power to undo its work, to hurl down what it has built up."⁶

Traversing the obverse realms of the concrete and the abstract, the representation of the erotic ultimately calls for a consciousness that is willed by the unconscious, striving towards a form of expression that negates the very desire to express. As we have shown in the early chapters, men's incapacity for giving in to the unconscious, to the unexpressed, is itself, in Bataille's paradigm, a veritable proof of the non-

¹ Bataille, Georges. *Guilty*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), p. 108.

² Nabokov. *Strong Opinions*, p. 38.

³ *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 32.

⁴ Bataille. *Eroticism*, p. 274.

⁵ Quoted in Cloeren, Hermann J. *Language and Thought: German Approaches to Analytic Philosophy in the 18th and 19th Centuries* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1988), p. 126.

⁶ Bataille. *Inner Experience*, p. 46.

commensurability of the heterogeneous. The failure then is a triumph of sorts - a Pyrrhic victory, admittedly. In Nabokov's novel, on the other hand, the heterogeneous comes hand in hand with the exigency of self-liberation, of renouncing the solipsistic mindset; not until death, or in a metaphorical or symbolic form of death (as in *Invitation to a Beheading* or *Bend Sinister*; more about this later), or in the end of a book, does their failure seem, in a more general way, redeemed.

Chapter Three: Sovereignty

All writing is an anti-social act, since the writer is a man who can speak freely only when alone; to be himself he must lock himself up, to communicate he cut himself off from all communication; and in this there is something always a little mad.

- Kenneth Tynan, "Valentine to Tennessee Williams"¹

I. Sovereignty, Revolt and Absolute Knowledge

In Bataille's terminology, "sovereignty" (*la souveraineté*) is less concerned with what the word normally means, that of supreme power or authority, than it is with the summit, or the heart, of the heterogeneous; the hallmark of excess. "Sovereignty is NOTHING," Bataille writes in the third volume of *The Accursed Share*, a volume dedicated to the examination of the subject.² A sovereign experience – an experience of NOTHING – is a "subjective experience of an objectlessness" which may be encountered "at the very point where knowledge and unknowing are both actual, knowledge being implied in the objectivity of experience, unknowing being given subjectively."³ At first glance, these definitions seem to point towards an aporia: a subjective experience of the objectless NOTHING, wherein the unknowing is nonetheless inflected with the authority of knowledge. As in common with his theorisations of violence and eroticism, Bataille's effort in setting forth the primary principles of sovereignty is undercut by a tendency to self-contradict, itself an indication of the difficulty, and the treachery, of ascribing meaning to the non-meaning (whose meaning is untranslatable to words).

Even more so than an erotic experience, an experience of sovereignty is decidedly

¹ Tynan, Kenneth. *Curtains: Selections from the Drama Criticism and Related Writings* (New York: Athenium, 1961), p. 99.

² Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share: Volumes II & III*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 2017), p. 256.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 202, 234.

extraneous to the world of things. It calls for the renunciation of servitude, which is equivalent to a “life beyond utility”, a life that disposes of the primacy of time and concentrates on the enjoyment of “the present time without having anything else in view but this present time.”¹ Thus placing itself beyond the demands of the future, sovereignty is naked of value, of sense, of object and of everything else that would enslave it to necessity and an ontological presence.

The interest of gaining access to sovereignty would then make it what Bataille calls a “locus of contradiction”: “[...] embodying the subject, it is its external aspect.”² Since sovereignty eschews all forms of external manifestation and justification, it can only be approached by way of an internal process: “[...] only an interior communication really manifests its presence.”³ In Bataille’s later writings, the interior communication, or “inner experience” as it is more commonly known, is not only a plausible means for getting to the heart of the heterogeneous, it becomes a synonym of heterogeneity itself. Hence the reason that these following terms, unless singled out for specified purposes, are basically interchangeable in Bataille: sovereignty, inner experience, excess, immanence, lost intimacy, and Evil. Immanence is a word that recurs in *Theory of Religion*, usually denoting a quality peculiar to animality. Bataille contends that since it is not animal nature to transcend itself, the relationship amongst the species is characterised by a lack of individualism, in the sense that “every animal is *in the world like water in water*.”⁴ More precisely, the animals are on a level with the world of undifferentiated continuity (in that they are continuous physically with the milieu they inhabit), of immanence.

Also recurring in *Theory of Religion* is the term “lost intimacy.” In the realm of religion, a lost intimacy is a supreme value, a state of grace which stands as the ultimate goal of spiritual pursuit. As such, the notion is sometimes superseded by its more familiar synonym, “sacredness”, in, for instance, the statement: “Religion, whose essence is the search for lost intimacy, comes down to the effort of clear

¹ Bataille. *The Accursed Share: Vols. II & III*, p. 198, 199.

² *Ibid.*, p. 245.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Bataille, Georges. *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 2012), p. 19. Numerous scientific researches in zoology, nevertheless, have shown that animal individualism is possible even amongst the small creatures. See David Mazel ed. *A Century of Early Ecocriticism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011) and Long, William J. *How Animals Talk* (New York: Dover Publications, 2009).

consciousness which wants to be a complete self-consciousness..."¹ Sacredness is also preferred to sovereignty in Bataille's early writings on Surrealism. And finally Evil, the subject of Bataille's 1957 book, *Literature and Evil*. Evil and Good are as antithetical to one another as they are, in essence, complementary. The idea recalls Nietzsche's "beyond good and evil."

Inner Experience (L'expérience intérieure) happens to be the title of Bataille's 1943 book, the first full-length work to carry his name on its cover. In it, he lays down the basis of the subject: "Inner experience cannot have its principle in a dogma (a moral attitude), in a science (knowledge cannot be either its goal or its origin), or in a search for enriching states (the aesthetic, experimental attitude), it cannot have any other concern or other goal than itself."² As a practice, the inner experience cannot but posit its own principles: "To get out through a project of the realm of the project", and the impulse of "discursive reason."³ The pure abstractness of the concept is underlined: an inner experience can either exist in its paradoxical character or *not exist at all*. In a deleted note, Bataille confesses to the ongoing difficulty of formulating a cogent argument: "[...] as 'inner experience' exists at the *heart* of the possible, there is no definition that I can give that is not linked to the necessity, of which I have spoken, to question everything without measure."⁴

The problem with the definition of inner experience refers, in turn, to the impossible conception of sovereignty: it is a subjectivity that must not be affirmed as such, that can only exist given that "it should never assume power, which is action, the primacy of the future over the present moment, the primacy of the promised land."⁵ This marks the divergence of the concept from its analogues - Schopenhauer's Will to Live, say, which puts a premium on self-preservation, and Nietzsche's Will to Power, whose sublimated expression, although dispensing with the exercise of physical power, is predicated on the potential of artistic efforts and of life's multiplicity (in

¹ Bataille. *Theory of Religion*, p. 57.

² Bataille, Georges. *Inner Experience*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), p. 13.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁵ Bataille, Georges. *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 136. In a commentary about René Char, Bataille says: "[...] what is sovereign is indefensible: in wishing to defend it, one betrays it." Bataille, Georges. *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, trans. Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 2006), p. 96.

Nietzsche's theory, a free spirit is an immoralist who aspires to the heights of culture and creativity). From an empirical standpoint, sovereignty is a fraught affair necessarily put up against its inevitable power-lessness. In the preface to *On Nietzsche*, Bataille advances his thought on human entirety, which stands opposed to the Hegelian totality: "Human entirety can't be transcended (that is, subdued) by action, since it would lose its totality. Nor can it transcend action (submit it to its ends), since in this way it would define itself as a motive and would enter into and be annihilated by the mechanism of motivation."¹ The notion would later evolve into what is called a "sovereign man", a theoretically improbable compound seeking to render into concrete embodiment the hypothetical force of sovereignty. "A sovereign man", says Bataille "lives and dies like an animal. But he is a man nevertheless."² As will be clarified later, death is the reason for a sovereign man's eventual failure to lead the existence of an animal, to whom the realm of the heterogeneous, because of its presumed incapacity for self-transcendence, is readily and unknowingly attainable. Thus a sovereign man is ultimately condemned to a game of charades, whose rule prescribes that "he [the sovereign man] is essentially the embodiment of the one he is but is not. He is the same as the one he replaces; the one who replaces him is the same as he."³ In other words, a sovereign man is not really possessed of true sovereignty, but, under the parodic framework, he is to be seen as that which he is essentially not, namely, a sovereign man, who represents the "image of adult play, whereas we ordinarily only have an image of juvenile play (suited to children)."⁴

This "adult play", deftly masking its impotence – the impotence of invoking the ingenuousness of a juvenile play, which is closer in spirit to animality - with ingenious subterfuges, offers a solution, artful and deceptive, to the general ungraspableness of heterology. It assumes various forms, the majority of which involve issues of language and representation. In the following, I will be looking at two of the paradigms of supreme power from which Bataille's sovereignty was derived.

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¹ Bataille, Georges. *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone (London: Continuum, 2008), p. xxx.

² *The Accursed Share: Vols II & III*, p. 219.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 222-23.

The first is Camus's Rebel. In his 1951 essay, Camus defines a revolt as an epochal event "born of the exhibition of irrationality in the face of unjust and incomprehensible conditions."¹ The objective of a revolt, whatever its express motives, is to be freed from servitude, to be bestowed the inalienable right, within men, as an individual. For a revolt to succeed, the irrational elements, which serve conveniently as the movement's initial impetus, must in time be eradicated; Camus says: "[...] an element of realism is necessary to any morality. Completely pure virtue is murderous; equally, an element of our morality is necessary to all realism: cynicism too is murderous [...] Revolt set us on a path of calculated culpability."² Such realism, viewed in a more practical light, ultimately comes to bear on another salient element: solidarity, or fellowship, as on the strength of the promise that the success of a revolt would bring in greater benefits for all.

Camus proposes the central doctrine of most revolts: "I rebel therefore we exist."³ The movement, despite its impulsive beginning, always unfailingly begins taking on qualities of an enterprise. It thereby demands in time order and morality. Bataille, in his review of Camus's book ("The Age of Revolt", 1951), concedes that a revolt "as it attacks morality – to the extent that morality becomes the base of the established order – is no less, from the first moment, engaged on a moral course."⁴ The initial impetus of a revolt then, Bataille continues, transforms into a "value that goes beyond vulgar interest: it is a benefit more precious than the advantage, or the favourable condition, of life; which even exceeds life (and is distinct from it), since we are ready to sacrifice life in order to preserve it."⁵ Such value, in Camus's text, is assumed to be intrinsic in the character of a rebel, for a rebel is one who is "willing to accept the final defeat, which is death, rather than be deprived of the last sacrament which he would call, for example, freedom."⁶ Thus, at least in thoughts and spirit, a rebel reveals glimmers of a sovereign man - the context for this, however, is significant: the rebel is only part of a collective whole, a part of a movement whose modus operandi hinges on the interplay of action and power, on

¹ Camus, Albert. *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage International, 1991), p. 21.

² *Ibid.*, p. 366.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

⁴ Bataille. *The Absence of Myth*, p. 161.

⁵ Bataille. *The Absence of Myth*, p. 161.

⁶ Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 15.

the necessity of solidarity and accord between the members.

By contrast, sovereignty, as Bataille formulates it, is an exclusive right of the individual: "Solidarity with everybody else prevents a man from having the sovereign attitude. The respect of man for man leads to a cycle of servitude that allows only for minor moments of disorder and finally ends the respect that their attitude is based on since we are denying the sovereign moment to man in general."¹ In this sense, the concept seems to be rooted in a Sadeian monism: solitude – the solitude that derives from the categorical rejection of conformism - is the sole key to true heterogeneity.² This is the central motif of Bataille's early tribute to the infamous author, "The Use Value of D. A. F. De Sade" (1929), which urges its reader to neither eulogise nor revile Sade, but, in the interest of safeguarding his sovereign status, to banish him, as it were, from the social milieu, thereby converting him into a "foreign body" (*das ganz Andere*). In terms of responding to the imperatives of the sovereign proper, however, to what extent is the foreign body able to hold up its "foreignness" – or to hold up *in the name of* foreignness - and, more important, since the foreign body must not be recognised as such, would it still retain its foreignness, as in relation to other common beings (to put it more simply, would it even be necessary to posit a foreign body when the sovereign proper calls for the end of relativism)? These questions must have been in the mind of Bataille for later, pondering on the legacy of Sade, he underlined the apparent inconsistency between the author's anti-social propensities and his feverish, though unavowed, desire to be accepted by the society that he had so flagrantly and purposely outraged.³ As Maurice Heine, Sade's biographer, also pointed out, an inability to part with rationalism prevented Sade from plunging headlong into utter and untrammelled abandon.⁴

Still, one cannot deny Sade his share of the sovereign quality, if only in the reckless execution of an anti-social impulse. The same is true with revolt, the character and

¹ Bataille. *Eroticism*, p. 171.

² According to Sade, fraternity is a baseless idea conceived by the intellectually inferior: "Now I beg of you to tell me whether I must love a human being simply because he exists or resembles me and whether for these reasons alone I must suddenly prefer him to myself?" (Quoted in De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Marquis de Sade: An Essay by Simone de Beauvoir*, trans. Annette Michelson, Cemal Sureya and Paul Dinnage (London: New English Library, 1953), p. 144). Solitude is preferred because it represents a static plenitude, a pure absence. By the same token, Bataille insists that sovereignty must be accompanied by silence.

³ See, for instance, Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, pp. 97-100, and *Eroticism*, pp. 164-77.

⁴ See De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Marquis de Sade*, p. 66.

inclinations of which are sovereign to a certain extent. In a 1944 essay for the French newspaper *Combat*, Camus remarks that a revolt is “first of all about the heart.”¹ Once it proceeds to the stage of a large-scale revolution, the “spontaneous impulse” is subsequently transformed into “concerted action,” thereby assimilating the event into the course of history.² The crucial reference here is the French Resistance, whereas in *The Rebel* the particular focus is on the French Revolution; writing the former essay in the midst of political unrest, Camus, evidently much affected by the furore and the burning need to assert his conviction, calls for a movement that starts from the basis of a “clear idea”, which will and must be eventually translated into a “historical experience.”³ With *The Rebel*, the underlying purpose is less to provide new insights than, now that the historical milieu undergoes transformations brought on by the War and the Resistance, to synthesise and to modify prior claims. Scholars have drawn attention to a marked transition between the two texts. Mark Orme, for instance, observed that *The Rebel* reflects Camus’s increasing familiarisation with Hegel, whose theses (the master/slave dialectic, most obviously) appear to have overridden those of Nietzsche, a dominant influence in Camus’s early writing, in shaping the thrust of the argument.⁴ The reason, Maurice Weyembergh suggests, was because Camus’s ethical system at this stage was much too developed and rigorous to reckon with the disruptive energy of the Nietzschean amorality.⁵ The conceptual model of Hegel’s dialectics, with their emphasis on the contrast between affirmation and negation, helped locate Camus’s theory further into the nucleus of moral philosophy. In the words of Philip Thody, Hegel emerges as the “real villain of *The Rebel*,” the one responsible for the theoretical formalism which confers on the conception of revolt a misplaced dignity, attenuating its volatile spirit to something close to a clinical soberness.

But in view of the conclusion of Camus’s argument, that revolt is destined to be a product of the contradiction between man’s quest for self-clarification and the fundamental meaninglessness of human existence (the drift of his absurdism), and

¹ Camus, Albert. *Camus at Combat: Writing 1944-1947*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 156.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 168.

⁴ Orme, Mark. *The Development of Albert Camus’s Concern for Social and Political Justice* (Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), p. 155.

⁵ Ibid.

hence its struggle to attain transcendental ideals (or sovereign values), the essay's constricted framework, in itself, figures a rather serviceable complement. Contrary to this approach were the series of revolts staged by the Surrealists, which, Bataille argues, did not ultimately go beyond their initial "strong affirmations."¹ Camus's emphatic moral position in his essay was sketched out vaguely in Breton's manifestoes, presumably out of fear of enslaving the movement to a too rational sensibility. Such was the charge that Breton levelled against *The Rebel*, for Camus's clear thinking was in every respect antithetical to the fundamental attitude of Surrealism, which valued above all the inner turmoil of human thoughts.² As mentioned in the chapter on violence, the Surrealists were capable of transgressive acts that rarely exceeded the emptiness of audacious, incendiary rhetoric. Yet, in regard to the turn of mind with which the subject of revolt is treated, Surrealism, Bataille suggests in "The Age of Revolt" (1951), imparts the "most visionary (and sometimes the most felicitous) expression of this elementary state of mind" as opposed to Camus's clarified and austere line of thinking.³ This is not to say that the Surrealists acquired a better understanding of the concept - Bataille credits *The Rebel* for extending its scope beyond the ideological aspects of revolt to include, above all, the metaphysical concerns that arise once the movement is carried beyond its early phase of subversive acts. As such, a mind that is roused by unrestrained anger will experience in time the absurdity of its attitude, which leads to the submission of this ethical truth: "[...] the general existence of a good which is *worth all the problems of revolt.*"⁴ But, again, the recognition of the "good" signifies that the movement is thereupon capable of only going insofar as it attains its "will to exist in a sovereign way."⁵

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In Camus's revolt, a rebel cannot truly triumph if the circumstance demands that he

¹ Bataille. *The Absence of Myth*, p. 159.

² Breton: "[...] I believe in the pure Surrealist joy of the man who, forewarned that all others before him have failed, refuses to admit defeat, sets off from whatever point he chooses, along any other path save a reasonable one, and arrives wherever he can." Breton, André. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen H. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), p. 46. For Breton's criticism of *The Rebel*, see Patri, Aimé, "Dialogue entre André Breton et Aimé Patri à propos de l'Homme révolté d'Albert Camus", *Arts*, 16 November 1951, pp. 1-3.

³ Bataille. *The Absence of Myth*, p. 160

⁴ Bataille. *The Absence of Myth*, p. 161.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

must ultimately *fill the void* of the authority that he negates. But this is the destiny that every rebel must bow to in the circumstance of seeing through the movement - to retain that illusion of the sovereign, a rebel inevitably fails in his mission. The self-defeating structure is inherent in any power relation of the social hierarchy, and has arguably its most exhaustive investigation in Hegel's master-slave dialectic. Hegel considers the fates of master and slave to be one of voluntary and conscious choice: the master, at a pinch, invariably chooses death over conformity, whilst it is typically the other way around with the slave. This seemingly immutable rule is liable to be reversed when the master, secured in the knowledge of his yet unchallenged supremacy, becomes unknowingly and increasingly dependent on the help of the slave. The master, whose authority is, of course, solidified on the grounds of his co-existence with the slave, is therefore unable to attain to the state of the sovereign proper (in Hegel, the term is "absolute knowledge", although, with self-consciousness as its basis, it differs in kind from Bataille's sovereignty), which might come within the grasp of a slave in revolt. For Bataille, the sovereignty of the master is essentially an "inconsequential" one, since "retribution is paid despite it and by whoever contradictorily *uses his sovereignty* as a thing which he possesses."¹ Likewise, the slave, in the victory of the revolt, is bound to repeat the mistake and the fate of the dethroned master, if he does so much as merely acknowledging his new-found power.

It is essential to Bataille's conception of sovereignty that its representation, or the attempt to represent it, though ultimately futile, should not be reduced to, or centralised in, an individual agent. "Sovereignty has many forms," Bataille declares, "it is only rarely condensed into a person and even then it is diffuse."² A sovereign act is characterised by its dogged contestation of authority, but not in the same manner as that of a revolt, wherein the power of control merely changes hands. In definition, sovereignty is NOTHING; to explicate this NOTHING, as Bataille has been hard put to resist in his work, means, according to Paul Hegarty, turning sovereignty into a "form of process."³ In this case, Bataille's conceptualisation responds somewhat to the central syllogism of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) - but whereas Hegel posits Spirit, also known as absolute knowledge or absolute Being, as

¹ Ibid., p. 172.

² Bataille. *The Accursed Share: Vols. II & III*, p. 221.

³ Hegarty, Paul. *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist* (London: SAGE Publications, 2000), p. 72.

the ultimate end of the process, Bataille parodies such process, only for its substance to “fall away, becoming nothing instead of something.”¹

Despite being ostensibly antipodal in their philosophical methodologies and foundations, Hegel, perhaps second to Nietzsche, had assumed one of the substantial roles in shaping the development of Bataille’s thought. Bataille’s writings, from the point when he was initiated, rather frustratingly, into the philosophy of Hegel, through Alexandre Kojève’s lectures on the *Phenomenology*, which Bataille attended desultorily from 1934-39, had been, in the main, a sustained and violent response to “Hegel’s closed system.”² As Benjamin Noys observes, Bataille’s arguments are inclined to take the form of “an expression of irruptive forces against Hegel’s desire to control these forces.”³ In *Inner Experience*, Bataille writes of Hegel’s fear of going to the extreme: “Hegel, I imagine, touched the extremity [...] I even imagine that he elaborated the system to escape (each kind of conquest, undoubtedly, is made by a man fleeing a threat). In the end, Hegel arrives at *satisfaction*, turns his back on extremity.”⁴ The writer *par excellence* of sovereignty in this case would be Nietzsche, whose talent, Bataille holds, is “the gift that nothing limits; it is the sovereign gift, that of subjectivity.”⁵ And yet, this gift of sovereignty – the putting at stake of one’s subjectivity – must also, especially when it occurs in a writing, be affirmed as such before it dissolves into NOTHING. In other words, the writing of the sovereign inexorably generates the presence – or the non-presence – of NOTHING, insofar as this NOTHING is appropriated into a “something”, which, in turn, presumes a contradictory means of reaffirming NOTHING. This convoluted premise is characteristic of Bataille’s attempt to delineate the meaning of NOTHING: “I no longer anticipated the moment when I would be rewarded for my effort, *when I would know at last*, but rather the moment *when I would no longer know, when my initial anticipation would dissolve into NOTHING.*”⁶

An utterance like that presents yet another paradoxical solution to the insoluble

¹ Ibid.

² Bataille, Georges. *The Bataille Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p. 296.

³ Noys, Benjamin. *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 7.

⁴ Bataille. *Inner Experience*, p. 48.

⁵ *The Accursed Share: Vols. II & III*, p. 370.

⁶ Bataille. *The Accursed Share: Vols. II & III*, p. 208.

problem, for to anticipate the result wherein the “initial anticipation would dissolve into NOTHING” is rather a circuitous way of admitting that sovereignty is both an actual experience and an end of a process (the “something” instead of NOTHING). It is necessary therefore that a “hatred of all guarantees” must precede the pursuit of sovereignty, since true sovereignty, in essence, “serves no purpose” and is at the same time the “coming apart and the completion of human being.”¹ For Bataille, the “completion of human being” is necessarily predicated on the “coming-apart”, the dissolve of human consciousness; hence the impossibility of giving the concept any legitimacy: “Death quenches my thirst for non-knowledge. But absence is not rest. Absence and death are without reply within me and, without fail, absorb me cruelly.”² It is in light of this irreversible double bind that Bataille examines Hegel’s “completed man”:

Completed man was for him [Hegel] necessarily “work”. Hegel, himself, could be it, being “knowledge”. For knowledge “works”, which does neither poetry, laughter, nor ecstasy. But poetry, laughter, ecstasy are not completed man - does not provide any “satisfaction”. Short of dying of them, one leaves them like a thief (or as one leaves a girl after love), dazed, thrown back stupidly into the absence of death: into distinct consciousness, activity, work.³

Derrida centred his famous essay, “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve” (1967), on this elementary difference of theoretical approaches: Hegel’s insistence on meaning and rigor *vis-à-vis* Bataille’s ready submission to non-meaning and the tumult of thoughts. In Hegel’s formulation, the risking of life is to the master a “constitution of meaning”, an “obligatory stage of self-consciousness and phenomenality”; the victory of the master thereby consists in the imperative of staying alive enough to *experience* and to reap the profit (absolute knowledge) of his close brush with death.⁴ In his essay, Derrida regards the supremacy of the master as primarily an empty, specious attainment: “To stay alive, to maintain oneself in life, to work, to defer pleasure, to limit the stakes, to have

¹ Bataille, Georges. *Oeuvres Complètes, VIII* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p. 651.

² *Inner Experience*, p. 111.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Hegel: “[...] trial by death, however, cancels both the truth which was the result from it and therewith the certainty of self altogether.” (Hegel, G. W. F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 233).

respect for death at the very moment when one looks *directly* at it – such is the servile condition of mastery and of the entire history it makes possible.”¹ The consciousness of the master, which, Hegel contends, will culminate in a “real and true independence” is, Derrida remarks, only constituted as such in a movement of recognition and through the mediation of a servile consciousness.²

For Hegel, a headlong plunge into death, such as that in a sacrifice, can only occur at the expense of the precious meaning – it is an instance of “abstract negativity”; a negativity that neither takes place nor manifests itself. Human consciousness is thus an indispensable element in the quest for absolute knowledge, as contrary to what is required for Bataille’s sovereignty.³ Given that death is inadmissible in Hegel’s formula, Derrida nonetheless discerns in it an intent of making “the seriousness of meaning appear as an abstraction inscribed in play.”⁴ Play, as opposed to work, being in a way a form of incalculable, capricious communication, constitutes both the precarious basis and the dominant spirit of Bataille’s philosophy (“The person who recognises the powerlessness of work, on the contrary, is dazzled and fascinated by the *play* which serves no purpose.”)⁵ At the very least, a meaning that is inscribed in play succeeds in betraying an inclination towards non-meaning, but not to the extent where it is ready to throw its life into jeopardy for the intended result. With Bataille’s reading of Hegel, on the other hand, the agenda is reversed, in the manner wherein, Derrida observes, the writing takes the form of a “simulated repetition of Hegelian discourse.”⁶

As far as theoretical assurance is concerned, Bataille’s thesis, with its focus on an abstraction that defies the possibility of conceptualisation, is comparatively short of substantial certitudes. It is therefore unavoidable that, in attempting to read *against* Hegel, Bataille ends up being absorbed into the very system he opposes. His theory of sovereignty should thereby be considered in a new light: that knowledge or self-

¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 322.

² *Ibid.*, p. 322. Hegel, p. 237.

³ Simone de Beauvoir’s description of Hegelianism is apt: “According to his system, the instant is conserved in the development of time.” De Beauvoir, Simone. *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons with Marybeth Timmerman and Mary Beth Mader (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 290.

⁴ Derrida, p. 324.

⁵ Bataille. *The Absence of Myth*, p. 135.

⁶ Derrida, p. 329.

consciousness is the underlying principle of NOTHING; the non-meaning of sovereignty, Derrida suggests, accordingly “takes its responsibilities from the completion of history and from the closure of absolute knowledge, having first taken them seriously and having then betrayed them by exceeding them or by simulating them in play.”¹ Sovereignty’s defiance against any form of dialectic “in the manner of a founding basis or a principle of responsibility” will only amount to its disintegration; unable to govern itself, the notion is likewise unable to generate its non-meaning.²

In the final analysis, neither Bataille nor Hegel managed to access, in their respective theories and methodologies, the heart of the sovereign proper. As Derrida concludes: “[...] the one by giving it meaning through subjugation to the mediation of the slave – which is also to fail for having lost failure – and the other by failing absolutely, which is simultaneously to lose the very meaning of failure by gaining nonservility.”³ In such a view, both philosophers managed at most to *signal* a viable process – viable only on the impossible condition that human consciousness must concomitantly dissolve.

II. The Thematisation of the Sovereign

In Nabokov’s writing, the idea of the sovereign is usually associated with and/or connotative of the following themes: God, a source of metaphysical force resembling the Bataillean sovereignty (an unnamable, indefinable index of the heterogeneous), power, authorial omnipotence (these last two are often perceived as a single trope).

In this section, specifications of each of these categories will be examined, with an accent on how the author interprets the concept and the nuances of each example.

To start with what, arguably, warranted mostly an ambiguous notice in Nabokov’s fiction – God and His spiritual teaching are not rated as paramount in their impacts on the author’s creative orientation. This relative indifference may be attributed to

¹ Ibid., p. 341.

² Ibid., p. 334.

³ Ibid., p. 335.

Nabokov's alleged agnosticism, in which case the protagonist's thoughtful contemplation on God in *Despair* should serve as a testimony of sort: "The nonexistence of God is simple to prove... [but] impossible to concede..."¹

If Nabokov somehow possessed any vague misgivings, or even personal aversion, to the concept of God *per se*, it is largely an impression that one has of reading into the subtext of the author's certain remarks. It is telling, for instance, when Nabokov hazards an explanation for the deep religiosity that suffuses the later life and works of Nikolai Gogol:

He was [...] acutely aware of the power his artistic genius had over man and of the – loathsome to him – responsibility that went with such power. Something in him wanted a still greater sway (without the responsibility) like the fisherman's wife in Pushkin's tale who wanted a still bigger castle. Gogol became a preacher because he needed a pulpit to explain the ethics of his books and because a direct contact with readers seemed to him to be the natural development of his own magnetic force. Religion gave him the necessary intonation and method.²

The perspective here evidently differs from the contemporary scholastic consensus that, as Dmitry Merezhkovsky contends in his article, "Gogol and the Devil" (1976), Gogol embodied an "inevitable transition of Russian Literature and the Russian mind from art to religion..."³ Omitting from his monograph this crucial passage in the literary history of Russia, Nabokov, himself an ardent advocate of the artist's inviolable prerogative, instead relegates the efficacy of faith in Gogol to the convenience of a leverage for the author to exercise a greater, more justifiable

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Despair* (New York: Vintage International), p. 101. According to Boyd, Nabokov himself avowed that the religious symbols or allusions in his books should be treated as merely incidental for he was not interested in the orthodoxy. Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 153. This is evidenced in a 1964 interview with *Life*, wherein Nabokov says: "[...] I supposed that my indifference to religion is of the same nature as my dislike of group activities in the domain of political or civic commitments. I have allowed some of my creatures in some of my novels to be restless freethinkers but here again I do not care one bit what kind of faith or brand of non-faith my reader may assign to their maker." Nabokov, Vladimir. *Strong Opinions* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 40.

² Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (Orlando: Harcourt Books, 1981), p. 41.

³ Robert A. Maguire ed. and trans. *Gogol from the Twentieth Century: Eleven Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 101.

dominion over the creative universe.

In Nabokov's own books, a more pronounced disdain of the Almighty can be discerned. Humbert Humbert recalls a past flirtation with a traditional Christian practice:

A couple of years before, under the guidance of an intelligent French-speaking Confessor, to whom, in a moment of metaphysical curiosity, I had turned over a Protestant's drab atheism for an old-fashioned popish cure, I had hoped to deduce from my sense of sin the existence of a Supreme Being.¹

The flippancy, not exactly atrocious in its expression but perceptible enough for it to register an affront to the religion, is also what underlies, though in a slightly tenuous degree, Van's observation of a "mad conjurer" whose obsession is the dubious conviction that "gravity had something to do with the blood circulation of a Supreme Being."²

The above is one of the rare occasions in Nabokov's work when the deity is accorded His common designation – the Supreme Being. It may be assumed, in light of the context in which the term is used and the author's avowed apathy for Christianity, that the supposed "supremacy" of a Supreme Being, in this case, is less to be relied on than to be questioned. Indeed, God and religion figure only tangentially to Nabokov's concept of supremacy, which seems in the main to be engendered from other sources or forms of authority.

In "Fame", an early Russian poem, Nabokov dreams of escaping from worldly worries through an implausible quest for the otherworld:

Without body I've spread, without echo I thrive,
And with me all along is my secret.
A book's death can't affect me since even the break
between me and my land is a trifle.

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 282.

² Nabokov, Vladimir. *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 78.

I admit that the night has been ciphered right well
but in place of the stars I put letters,
and I've read in myself how the self to transcend –
and I must not be overexplicit.

Trusting not the enticements of the thoroughfare
or such dreams as the ages have hallowed,
I prefer to stay godless, with fetterless soul
in a world that is swarming with godheads.

But one day while disrupting the strata of sense
and descending deep down to my wellspring
I saw mirrored, besides my own self and the world,
something else, something else, something else.¹

The imagery may very well be read as a poetic illustration of Bataille's sovereignty, as the resemblance between the two can be seen in the following aspects:

- a) "Without body I've spread..." – the pursuit beckons the subject to cast off his corporeality, to depart from the profane world.
- b) "A book's death can't affect me..." – death is to the liberated subject only but a trifle.
- c) "...I've read in myself how the self to transcend – and I must not be overexplicit" – to attain the object of his pursuit, the subject abstains from using clear expression.
- d) "I prefer to stay godless..." – God is not to the subject the ultimate symbol and end of his pursuit.
- e) "... disrupting the strata of sense" – further signs that knowledge and reason must be destroyed, in order to come closer to the unnamable something.
- f) "I saw mirrored, besides my own self and the world, something else, something else, something else" – a rather puzzling ending to the poem; a possible

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Collected Poems*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov (London: Penguin Books, 2013), pp. 111-12.

paraphrase: the subject is brought back to the reality that all were merely an impossible dream that he had, but he still holds onto the conviction that between him and the world lies “something else” - the unrealised, unobtainable fruit of his imaginary quest.

To reconstrue the poem without this arbitrary, Batailleian prism, its metaphysical undertone may be more likely due to a number of pointers, at once personal and, in terms of their centrality to Nabokov’s oeuvre, recurrent: the author’s exile from his homeland, mortality, the inadequacy for language as a tool of expression, the advantage for poetry to surmount the necessities of time and space and, as the title indicates, the choice of artistic independence over the appeal of public success.

But there is no mistaking the author’s intent in alluding to the contrast between the ideal and the actual, a thesis that, in Nabokov’s later works, is often thought to be subsumed under the general motif of art and life, of imagination and reality, of reality itself, in its literal as well as figurative sense. In fact, it is invariably in correlation with these more familiar subjects that the elusive concept is brought up. On the fragility of beauty, Humbert Humbert, informed by a Romanticist state of mind (which is also a style Nabokov frequently parodies in his work), remarks that “it may well be that the very attraction immaturity has for me lies not so much in the limpidity of pure young forbidden fairy child beauty as in the security of a situation where infinite perfection fills the gap between the little given and the great promised – the great rose-grey-never-to-be-had.”¹ His conflicted feelings are laid bare: however infinitely perfect Lolita appears to be, she is capable at best of filling the gap between the “little given and the great promised”; in other words, real perfection lies beyond what can reasonably be conceived by human mind, and is as such a “never-to-be-had.”

In an unknowing way perhaps, this particular instance touches on the central paradox – also the essence – of Bataille’s sovereignty: the idea is, in a narrow sense, irreversibly a product of human intelligence; therefore, the sovereign proper is never what the term suggests, and accordingly places itself in an awkward position between the known and the unknown. God, as was mentioned, is not often regarded

¹ *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 266.

as a token of the “unknown” in Nabokov’s novel. But for Mrs. Edelweiss of *Glory* (1932), who was said to be based on Nabokov’s own mother, God bespeaks the prototype of all modes of supreme power:

She firmly believed in a certain power that bore the same resemblance to God as the house of a man one has never seen, his belongings, his greenhouse and beehives, his distant voice, heard by chance in an open field, bear to their owner. It would have embarrassed her to call that power “God” [...] This power had no connection with the Church, and neither absolved nor chastised any sins.¹

The word “power” is, in this instance, referred to presumably as a generalised notion for an unnamable force, immeasurable and unrivalled, situating beyond the visible and the tangible, suggestive of the infinitude of the universe and the narrowness of the scope of human imagination. Such an interpretation is by no means groundless or extrapolated, or a projected result of a *a priori* reasoning – for the idea of power, in Nabokov’s writing, only infrequently conveys anything positive.

Since the themes of power and authorial omnipotence will be expanded on later, the following is an overview of a number of key points and examples that prefigure the coming arguments.

A lifelong advocate, if given the occasion, of freedom and elemental goodwill between men, Nabokov abhorred extreme, inhumane political measures such as those exercised by the USSR: “I have never belonged to any political party but have always loathed and despised dictatorships and police states, as well as any sort of oppression. This goes for regimentation of thought, governmental censorship, racial or religious persecution, and all the rest of it.” (*Life*, 1964)² Understandably, the characterisation of power in his novels was much coloured by this personal grievance. The word is often ascribed a drolly sinister overtone, due largely to its association with demons, when, for instance, used to describe the lethal charm of *Lolita*:

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Glory*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 11. For Nabokov’s original conception of Mrs. Edelweiss, see Boyd, p. 153.

² Nabokov. *Strong Opinions*, p. 40.

[...] the slightly feline outline of a cheekbone, the slenderness of a downy limb, and other indices which despair and shame and tears of tenderness forbid me to tabulate – the little deadly demon among the wholesome children; *she* stands unrecognised by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power.¹

It is duly noted by Thomas R. Frosch that this “quality of uncanny power possessed originally by beings, whether good or evil, midway between gods and people”, which is rather imposed on Lolita by the lovelorn Humbert Humbert, ultimately takes over the prevailing mood of the novel, insinuating itself into its plot structures, and thus rendering the central romance an “embodiment of a specific type of suspense or anxiety.”²

This nexus between power and dominance, the latter of which is, strictly speaking, a usual manifestation of the former, is even more apparent in Nabokov’s customary approach to creative activity. The ideas of the exploitation of power and its corrosive effects are given due notice in his novels. In a throwaway comment, Kinbote expresses concern about the problem of power inequality amongst men:

People who knew too much, scientists, writers, mathematicians, crystallographers [sic] and so forth, were no better than kings or priests: they all held an unfair share of power of which others were cheated. A plain decent fellow should constantly be on the watch for some piece of clever knavery on the part of nature and neighbor.³

In light of his unauthorised role as the annotator/commentator of Shade’s poem, whose license he willfully utilises to the extent of distorting meanings of the original words to cater to a narrative that he is pushing for, and which he seamlessly melds with Shade’s own; Kinbote is guilty of wielding his “unfair share of power”, a power that is, nonetheless, a proxy of the real power that is the prerogative of the author,

¹ *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 17.

² Frosch, Thomas R., “Parody and Authenticity in *Lolita*” in Ellen Pifer ed. *Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita: A Casebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 39.

³ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pale Fire* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 152.

Nabokov.

The theme of artists competing for supremacy and attempting to wrest from each other the right of having the “last word”, be it of a particular artistic project or of their parallel lives, recurs in a number of Nabokov’s novels: *Pale Fire*, *Laughter in the Dark* (Rex and Albinus), *The Luzhin Defense* (Valentinov and Luzhin), *Despair* (Hermann and Ardalion), *Invitation to a Beheading* (M. Pierre and Cincinnatus). Whoever emerges victorious in each competition matters only on a superficial level that is strictly within the context of the narrative itself, for the author always has the final say in regards to his own creative products. As we have demonstrated in the early chapters, Nabokov’s reputation as a cruel, sadistic writer had been partly his own doing. He was known and accustomed to rarely pass up the chance to make alarming claims like the following: “[...] the design of my novel is fixed in my imagination and every character follows the course I imagine for him. I am the perfect dictator in that private world insofar as I alone am responsible for its stability and truth!” (*Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 1967)¹ With what degree of certainty should those words be taken and the possible impacts that they have for the characters and the narratives involved have been the topics of popular scholarly interest and contention – amongst them is William Carroll’s essay, “Nabokov’s *Signs and Symbols*” (1974), in which Carroll points out that Nabokov’s rigid control of his creative elements consists in depriving his characters of individual thinking, or even of the confidence of possessing a “power of mind” as distinct from their comparatively purblind surroundings.² This proposition was contested by David S. Rutledge, who argues that the transition towards higher mind is to the characters an escape from their oppressive state.³ These opposing views are in the main representative of the division of perspectives with which the examination of Nabokov’s authorial role results, as subsequent arguments will soon make evident.

III. Game, Play and Authorial Omnipotence

¹ *Strong Opinions*, p. 59.

² See Carroll, William C., “Nabokov’s *Signs and Symbols*” in *A Book of Things about Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Carl R. Proffer (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1974), pp. 203-17.

³ Rutledge, David S. *Nabokov’s Permanent Mystery: The Expression of Metaphysics in His Work* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2011), pp. 88-89.

The idea was premised in the previous chapter: that Nabokov's approach to writing is comparable with the ingenious skill of chess playing (as is especially evident in his treatment of parody). In a 1948 lecture on the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Nabokov advises his students:

[...] when dealing with a work of art we must always bear in mind that art is a divine game. These two elements – the elements of the divine and that of the game – are equally important. It is divine because this is the element in which man comes nearest to God through being a true creator in his own right. And it is a game, because it remains art only as long as we are allowed to remember that, after all, it is all make believe...¹

The view here conceives an author's God-like supremacy as necessarily bound up with his art and craft, and not, according to Nabokov's comments about Gogol (in a passage cited in the prior section), as an ad hoc assumption resulting from the need to be justified of one's creative capacity. As a rule, the author is solely responsible for his creative project, only if – and this is what makes Nabokov's statement somewhat oxymoronic – the elements of game are derivative of, or inferior to, the breadth of his authority.

But such analysis may be misleading, for it is not known if the concept of game, in this context, corresponds at all to the meaning of this famous remark: "Games mean the participation of other persons; I'm interested in the lone performance – chess problems, for example, which I compose in glacial solitude."² In this, Nabokov seems to be alluding to the fictive nature of game, to its occupation of a temporary setting largely separated from everyday reality and its natural elements. In Roger Caillois's seminal work *Man, Play and Games* (1961), play is defined as an activity with these specific epithets: fun, separate, uncertain, non-productive, and fictitious.³ Caillois's thesis is, in fact, hardly original – in J. Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938), on which Caillois allegedly based his book, play is thought to be constitutive of a self-enclosedness that allows, perhaps furtively, an occasional, but largely tenuous,

¹ Nabokov. *Lectures on Russian Literature*, p. 106.

² Nabokov. *Strong Opinions*, p. 101.

³ Caillois, Roger. *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), pp. 3-11.

connection with the outside world (for play, as much as it promotes “the formation of social groupings” that tend to “stress their difference” from the society they nonetheless inhabit, is essentially a fixed feature in the sphere of human activity).¹

An author’s “divine game” may thereby be interpreted as a delimited realm of illusive affairs that is extraneous to the sphere of perceived reality, whose rules and means of operation are decreed by the Almighty – assumed by the all-powerful author - and whose players are the characters. It may also be seen as a non-game, for, as Nabokov said, everything about a novel - its substance, components, compositional structure, etc. – is after all a make-believe. On the other hand, play is in Nabokov’s art symptomatic of a certain covetousness for the advantage of creative license, a desire for an absolute authorial control, which sometimes threatens to exceed its bounds, to breach the boundary that separates the two worlds: “I think that the audience an artist imagines, when he imagines that kind of a thing, is a room filled with people wearing his own mask.”² Such hubris is, interestingly, a quality that his characters, for all their pompous pronouncements and unabashed show of self-importance, invariably fail to summon up at the sight of their own images: the “crooked mirror,” says Hermann of *Despair*, “strips its man or starts to squash him and [...] there is produced a man-bull, a man-toad, under the pressure of countless glass atmospheres; or else, one is pulled out like dough and then torn into two.”³ Mirrors surround the grotesque motel room in which Humbert Humbert spends his first night alone with Lolita: “There was a double bed, a mirror, a double bed in the mirror, a closet door with mirror, a bathroom door ditto, a blue-dark window, a reflected bed there, the same in the closet mirror, two chairs, a glass-topped table, two bedtables, a double bed...”⁴ And in another occasion, Humbert Humbert catches Lolita on a lie, and issues an ultimatum: “So that’s the dead end (the mirror you break your nose against).”⁵

The reducing of characters (and, by extension and on an implicit level, of readers) to pawns is a common trick with which the author, entitled to some degree of tyranny

¹ Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Kettering: Angelico Press, 2016), p. 32.

² Nabokov. *Strong Opinions*, pp. 15-16.

³ Nabokov. *Despair*, p. 21.

⁴ *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 119.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

within the divine game, asserts and reinforces his superiority. The characters' powerlessness to combat the invisible force that has their lives and destiny in thrall - despite them coming into full knowledge, usually too late for any chance of a turnaround, of their abject circumstances – is what frequently supplies the books their main source of pathos. An example can be seen in the “calm before the storm” moment between Luzhin and his wife:

“The only way out,” he said. “I have to drop out of the game.”

“Game? Are we going to play?” she asked tenderly, and thought simultaneously that she had to powder her face, the guests would be here any minute.

Luzhin held out his hand. She dropped her handkerchief into her lap and hastily gave him her fingers.

“It was nice,” said Luzhin and kissed one hand and then the other, the way she had taught him.

“What is it, Luzhin? You seem to be saying good-bye.”

“Yes, yes” he said, feigning absentmindedness...¹

Locking himself in a bathroom, Luzhin then jumps out of the window. The way the aftermath of this suicidal attempt pans out, Luzhin's longed-for exit from the implacable game is moot. It is, according to Leona Toker, a characteristic touch of Nabokov to end his book on an ambiguous note:

The door was burst in. “Aleksandr Ivanovich, Aleksandr Ivanovich,” roared several voices.

But there was no Aleksandr Ivanovich.²

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Luzhin Defense*, trans. Michael Scammell in collaboration with the author (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 176.

² *Ibid.*, p. 179. Toker, Leona. *The Mystery of Literary Structures* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989),

This ending may be interpreted in three different ways. A more straightforward one is that Aleksandr Ivanovich (Luzhin's full name) has already leaped to his death when the door is burst in, therefore, logically, "there was no Aleksandr Ivanovich" in the bathroom. Toker leans toward the assumption that Luzhin never actually hit the pavement, because, this is the description of Luzhin's suicide that precedes the crucial scene:

Before letting go he looked down. Some kind of hasty preparations were under way there: the window reflections gathered together and leveled themselves out, the whole chasm was seen to divide into dark and pale squares, and at the instant when Luzhin unclenched his hand, at the instant when icy air gushed into his mouth, he saw exactly what kind of eternity was obligingly and inexorably spread out before him.¹

No doubt Luzhin does jump out of the window, but instead of or in addition to meeting his own death, he is engulfed by the abyss which resembles a chessboard, and is, figuratively, inscribed back into the "game". And the final guess: the supposed death of Luzhin, apropos of the metaphysical imagery, coincides with his discovery of a sovereign truth, a "kind of eternity", which, in this sense, entails not only his departure from the game, but a reigning-over of its entire domain and influence. It needs to be noted, however, that this sovereign status is only credible within the context of the story - that is, within the "Luzhin game." (In other words, Luzhin, being of Nabokov's creation, is still trapped within the "divine game.")

As a structural device, play in Nabokov's fiction may be concerned less with the author's supremacy than with the possibilities it has as a way of challenging literary conventions. The point was raised by Thomas Karshan, in the monograph, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play* (2011), and Leland de la Durante, in a review of Karshan's book. Both Karshan and De la Durante underscored a paradoxical fact: that language, or the *play* of language, is indispensable to the removal of language's limitations. According to De la Durante, such "play" is at once symbolic of the playful

p. 77.

¹ Ibid., pp. 178-79.

and, in terms of its sophistication, of the serious. And as these two qualities about equally divide the general tone of Nabokov's novel, his game appears to "not present itself as such (as a game)": it is difficult at times to determine if the playful is to be taken at its face value, or it is meant as an indication of its opposite; the same goes for the serious elements.¹

In Bataille's theory, the dualism between the playful and the serious – often characterised as the fundamental division between play and work – is what constitutes the nucleus of human existence: "[...] work is necessary for the full affirmation of play."² Moreover, there is in work elements of play, and vice versa: in *The Tears of Eros* (1961), Bataille's final book published in his life, the birth of art was attributed to "human play, true human play", which was initially "work, work that became play."³ In short, to play is to *accede* to the seriousness of work whilst not totally submitting to it. The dynamics is analogous to that between transgression and taboo – there can be no transgression apart from the taboo, and vice versa. It is significant, Bataille points out, that play "must cease at the moment when life is threatened," if it is to assume a potent antithesis to work (but not potent enough to destroy the latter completely).⁴

Following this line of thought, play, in Bataille's later writing, comes to be identified with the sovereign: "[...] only play has a sovereign quality and play which is no longer sovereign is only a mockery of play."⁵ As was true with the exposition of the heterogeneous, the phenomenological validity was apparently what Bataille struggled to posit with the concept of play: the very act of playing, grounded in a profane setting, is bound to be allied with a servile spirit, an implied purpose, or an end in view. A solution to the puzzle, once again, is to be found in the non-soluble: "[...] the only object of my thought is play, and in play my thought, the work of my thought, is annihilated."⁶ In other words, the play of thought, in its failure to

¹ De la Durante, Leland, "Review: Vladimir Nabokov and the Play of Art by Karshan, Thomas", *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 91, No. 3 (July 2013), p. 603.

² Bataille, Georges. *Oeuvres Complètes, XVII* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p. 115.

³ Bataille, Georges. *The Tears of Eros*, trans. Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989), p. 47.

⁴ *Oeuvres Complètes, XVI*, p. 116.

⁵ Bataille. *Oeuvres Complètes, XII*, p. 118.

⁶ Bataille, Georges. *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 129.

generate a veracious *play*, is able nonetheless to release the thought from its chain to work. The definition of play is thereby amended to include this clause: that it has “as its end the indifference to every end, being only an occasion to show a soul beyond the concerns of utility.”¹ The focal point here is the latter part: play is “only an *occasion* to show a soul beyond the concerns of utility”, which suggests that it is less a monument to the sovereign proper than its presumed means or expression. As such, play is characterised by an indeterminacy that also bespeaks the concept of sovereignty (as opposed to the sovereign proper), for, at the most, it straddles the gap between the homogeneous and the heterogeneous, the condition of which, according to Edward S. Casey, “is not lasting” and is “closer to momentary leaping or spanning since it *leaves the gap intact* and must be *continually reenacted...*”² It is worth noting that Bataille used frequently the word “*jeu*”, which can be translated variously as “play”, “risk”, “game”, or “gambling”; statements like “*se mettre en jeu* (put oneself in play)” and “*met sa vie en jeu* (put one’s life at risk)” basically carry the same import. In this light, play is the risking of life up to the point where death seems possible and is yet inaccessible.

As explained by French philosopher Sarah Kofman, the notion of play “does not, however, imply that art is a frivolous activity. Play is opposed not to seriousness, but to reality, when it grants a kind of hallucinatory satisfaction, as in dreams and hallucinatory psychosis.”³ In literature, play, since it is opposed to reality, is at the very least an essential part of the author’s project and craft. Within the narrative framework, play constitutes an energy, a type of movement, of progression, a mark of human intelligence, of an incessant need for change, for excitement, for a temporary break from the prevailing rules and orders. But to what extent should these continue to be judged alongside the human scheme – for the fictional reality acquires only but a fraction of the real - is a question to which only the author has the answer. And for an author like Nabokov, to whom authorial power duplicates at least some aspects of God’s omnipotence, game and play are the common measures with which he reasserts his creative control. As a result, his characters are at best

¹ *Oeuvres Complètes*, XII, p. 106.

² Casey, Edward S., “Bataille: Discerning Edges in the Art of Lascaux” in Andrew J. Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree ed. *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication* (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), p. 171.

³ Kofman, Sarah. *The Childhood of Art: An Interpretation of Freud’s Aesthetics*, trans. Winifred Woodhull (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 113.

endowed with a “mitigated” authority, unable to find a way out of the oppressive “reality” they are forced into and be the masters of their own affairs. Death seems to signal a possible way of escape, but, as we have seen, such privilege is seldom granted these characters without some cruel twists of fate. So far, the argument is confined to the elements of play within the narrative, between the author and the narrative/characters. In regard to M. W. Rowe’s definition of a game as an “abstract object (either a sequence or a goal) which is designed to have no instrumental value; the realisation or the pursuit of which is intended to be of absorbing interest to participants or spectators,” the characters are not the sole participants of a novel’s game.¹ Given that a book is written to be read, in one way or another the readers are part of what makes up its unique world, within which language figures an unknown quantity that is liable to overturn what has hitherto been known as the relationship between an author’s “divine game” and sovereignty.

IV. The Representation of the Sovereign

In an essay on intentionality, John R. Searle regards the use of language in its varied forms - written, spoken, signed, encoded, etc. – as primarily an act, a performance, with its basis in a set of prescribed intentions by which the language user abides. The meaning of the text, the connotation of the words, the technical structure of the communication are the common intentions which dictate the way a language user presents his or her language act. Searle is especially interested in the representation intention, which posits an “intention to represent something as being the case.”² It is in short an act *within* the language act – or more precisely, an act intended to generate or to highlight a certain aspect or function of the language act.³

The characteristic style of Nabokov’s novel evinces, to some degree, an implicit

¹ This is in fact a modification of Maurice Mandelbaum’s definition of play in “Family Resemblances and Generalisation Concerning the Arts”: “An activity designed or modified to be of potentially absorbing non-practical interest to either participants or spectators.” Rowe, M. W., “The Definition of ‘Game’”, *Philosophy*, Vol. 67, No. 262 (Oct, 1992), p. 467 & 478.

² Searle, John R. *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 165.

³ Searle’s definition extends to the particular set of language tokens that is requisite for the manifestation of the representation intention as instantantiated in an event of the language use. See Searle, pp. 165-69.

adherence or assimilation to the *modus operandi* of the representation intention - that is, the text itself is invariably an act intended to inform the primary act of language. In terms of literary technique, the representation intention approximates parody, Nabokov's chief device (or, in a way, *artifice*) for undermining the elementary textuality of a given work. But it may be argued that parody, furtive and duplicitous by nature (as we know, a parody never openly acknowledges its debt to the original work), produces an even more complex language act. A case in point is the parody of doubling in *Lolita*. The personas of Humbert Humbert and Clare Quilty defy the convention of a good and evil duality in that both are equally culpable from the start of their exploitation of teenage girl, equally wry and ingenious in their turn of phrases, and, as becomes increasingly evident, the self-styled "good poet" (Humbert) and his nemesis (Quilty) are indistinguishable from one another. In the climactic showdown, "I [Humbert] rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us."¹ Apparently, for this particular contest, there is no clear winner, hence no pat conclusion, as in a traditional *doppelgänger* story, of the good triumphing over the evil (or the reverse). Appel, Jr. assumes that the scene was intended as a parody of Edgar Allan Poe's novella, "William Wilson" (1839), which marks a reversal of the Double convention by making the eponymous hero the evil one, who eventually murders his good, moral self. Nabokov pushes this formula further with a peculiar, complicated twist: in the end Humbert kills Quilty, a murder that appears unnecessary and excessive given that it occurs right after Humbert, his pledges of love to Lolita notwithstanding, decides to leave her for good (and thus at that point seemingly overmasters his obsession). The *dénouement* is therefore deprived of its significance and symbolic value, and the parody completes its double target: the thematic structure of a traditional *doppelgänger* tale and its exigency of moral lesson.²

In practice, parody arbitrarily confounds representation with self-presence. Theoretically speaking, a parody never represents, but distorts and appropriates. The subject "I", eager to sever itself from the servitude of the non-I, inexorably exceeds what, though in a slightly different context, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen describes as the "certitude of the subject assuring itself of itself in representation."³ Informed by the

¹ Nabokov. *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 299.

² Nabokov. *The Annotated Lolita*, pp. lix-lxi.

³ See Shanahan, Daniel. *Toward a Genealogy of Individualism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts

Lacanian tradition, Borch-Jacobsen bases his concept of human consciousness on the critique of the *cogito*, from which he concludes that the language of appearance entails a twofold phenomenality: the subject that is represented and the subject to which the representation appears. This may all seem purely a matter of the permutations of perspectives, but what can be inferred, in view of the respective subjectivity of self-representation and self-presence, is the tenuous thread that binds the two (ostensibly distinct from self-presence, self-representation nevertheless derives its phenomenological basis from self-presence). In a parody, representation is appropriated as a given implicit in the presence of the signified; what emerges from this reasoning is a loaded notion of consciousness which predicates on a false pretense of the *cogito*. As a matter of fact, the “I” in a parody is always itself a parody of the very concept of selfhood (a parody-within-the-parody).

As mentioned earlier, Nabokov’s art and artifice are characterised by their subversion of literary conventions. This often takes the form of the author’s (and, by proxy, the characters’) longing to transgress the limitations of language. Frosch regards Nabokov’s “verbal playfulness” as more of an indication that language ought not only to be overcome, but to also yield a sense that it is primarily “an objective presence, [and] not merely as a vehicle.”¹ Hermann Karlovich gives a lively account of how he achieves his verbal playfulness: “I liked, as I like still, to make words look self-conscious and foolish, to bind them by mock marriage of a pun, to turn them inside out, to come upon them unawares.”² Three years prior to the publication of the English version of *Despair* (1965), Nabokov claimed in an interview (*The Listener*, 1962) that his exile from Russia had almost forced him to abandon his “rich, infinitely rich and docile Russian tongue, for a second-rate brand of English.”³ As a recurring theme in Nabokov’s novel, translingualism implies the general artificiality of physical spaces, which in turn leads to the suggestions of amorphous cultural identities and, on a deeper level, the infinitude of human imagination. The skill of transitioning

Press, 1992), p. 123.

¹ Frosch, p. 51.

² Nabokov. *Despair*, p. 56.

³ *Strong Opinions*, p. 15. Nabokov was to make more of such self-deprecating statements in the coming years. In a 1967 interview with *Paris Review*, for instance, Nabokov revealed his principal flaw as a writer: “The absence of a natural vocabulary.” (*Strong Opinions*, 91) In this particular case, however, Nabokov may be expressing an earnest opinion regarding the relative facility and command that he had with Russian. Yet, according to Andrew Field, Nabokov once told him that English was in fact his first language and he only started learning Russian from the age of three. See Field, Andrew. *VN: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Crown, 1986), p. 127.

between languages, on the other hand, indicates as much the author's unsurpassed linguistic mastery as, George Steiner points out, the absence of a universal language pattern. This is especially evident in Nabokov's voluminous translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (1964), which Steiner qualifies as an example of a "monadist" approach to language. Literary monadism, in Steiner's definition, denies the importance of a dominant language and upholds the thought that "real translation is impossible."¹ Making up for this shortcoming, then, is the production of unique perspectives and insights that necessarily breach the rules of ordinary language. As in Nabokov's first English novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the linguistic switch yields a doubling of perspective, which is, on the whole, reflected in the characters' experience of exile and the psychic split whereby it is occasioned. Tamar Steinitz, in her book on language and identity, contends that Nabokov's translingualism is built on the premise that the presumed link between language and the world is growingly ruptured, if not in essence a fallacious one.² Nabokov's own approach to language is marked by a seemingly deliberate inclination towards breaking divisions: according to Boyd, Nabokov frequently and unapologetically exploited the "special conditions of written language to smudge or sharpen the line" – the line "between absence and presence, self and the world" – which consequently creates the illusion that we, the readers, "feel nothing could be simpler than to step over to the other side and back – if life could only allow us the freedom we find here in language."³

As early as 1923, Nabokov showed signs of what would be his lifelong interest in the basic intractability of words. In an unpublished story, "The Word" ("Slavo"), a dreamer finds himself in heaven, wishing vainly to articulate the beauty and the misery of his former life. An angel, sympathising with his struggle, divulges a single word which encapsulates the ultimate truth of human existence. The dreamer utters the word and wakes up to normal life – "Oh Lord – the winter dawn glows greenish in the window, and I remember not what word it was that I shouted."⁴ This groping for an all-explanatory word is at the centre of the poem "Fame". In it, Nabokov

¹ Steiner, George. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 71.

² Steinitz, Tamar. *Translingual Identities: Language and the Self in Stefan Heym and Jakov Lind* (New York: Camden House, 2013), p. 1.

³ Boyd, p. 311.

⁴ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Collected Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 652.

conjures up an ideal world where a single language – “his” language – manages to traverse all borders between countries:

[...] I kept changing countries like counterfeit money,
hurrying on and afraid to look back,
like a phantom dividing in two, like a candle
between mirrors sailing into the sun.
[...] my word, curved to form an aerial viaduct,
spans the world, and across in strobe-effect spin
of spokes I keep endlessly passing incognito
into the flame-licked night of my native land.¹

The pursuit of the Word is itself testimony to men’s fear of living without words. Such is the idea behind the paradoxical conception of Bataille’s “sovereign man” - or, by extension, and in which would be a rather blanket statement, to virtually all of the heterogeneous matters - whose essence (NOTHING or nonknowledge) lies in what it purportedly renounces (thinghood or knowledge). In *Invitation to a Beheading*, the apparent facility of language is relied on by the totalitarian government to bolster its sway over the helpless denizens. Cincinnatus C., the protagonist, is ridiculed in his youth for his habit of using obscure expressions: “Those around him understand each other at the first word, since they had no words that would end in an unexpected way, perhaps in some archaic letter, an upsilamba, becoming a bird or a catapult with wondrous consequences.”² During his imprisonment for committing the crime of a “gnostical turpitude” – an absurd condition that has no definition – Cincinnatus is perpetually handicapped by the futility for words - even poetic ones - to accurately make sense of the bizarre happenings:

[...] I feel once again that I shall really express myself, shall bring the word to bay. Alas, no one taught me this kind of chase, and the ancient inborn art of writing is long since forgotten – forgotten are the days when it needed no schooling, but ignited and blazed like a forest fire [...] I myself picture all this

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 109.

² Nabokov, Vladimir. *Invitation to a Beheading*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 26.

so clearly, but you are not I, and therein lies the irreparable calamity. Not knowing how to write, but sensing with my criminal intuition how words are combined, what one must do for a commonplace word to come alive and to share its neighbor's sheen, heat, shadow, while reflecting itself in its neighbor and renewing the neighboring word in the process, so that the whole line is live iridescence; while I sense the nature of this kind of word propinquity, I am nevertheless unable to achieve it, yet that is what is indispensable to me for my task, a task of not now and not here.¹

Thereupon the prison seems to be morphing into what Nietzsche termed the "prison-house of language." In the original epigram, Nietzsche says: "We have to cease to think if we refuse to do it in the prison-house of language; for we cannot reach further than the doubt which asks whether the limit we see is really a limit."² Were there a word ("the Word") representative of such limit – the limit beyond which further words are excessive – and how might we find it if not within the "prison-house of language" itself? Nietzsche touched on the main issue: "[...] with words it is never a question of truth, never a question of inadequate expression; otherwise, there would not be so many languages..."³ The invention of language, which was impelled by a need to facilitate and to universalise communication, provides men with an essentially inhibiting shorthand for understanding the world: it has become invariably the case that what cannot be expressed by language fails also to be grasped by human knowledge.⁴ "We obtain the concept", Nietzsche remarks, "as we do the form, by overlooking what is individual and actual; whereas nature is acquainted with no forms and no concepts, and likewise with no species, but with an X which remains inaccessible and undefinable for us."⁵

¹ Ibid., pp. 93-94.

² According to Guy Deutscher, what Nietzsche actually said was: "We cease to think if we do not want to do it under *linguistic constraints*..." The mistranslation (the "prison-house of language") is apparently meant as a catchphrase stressing the problematic aspect of human beings' taking for granted the convenience and indispensability of language. See Deutscher, Guy. *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages* (London: Arrow Books, 2011), pp. 146-47.

³ Quoted in David Wood and Jose Medina ed., *Truth: Engagements across Philosophical Traditions* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 16.

⁴ This describes an important factor of LOTH, The Language of Thought Hypothesis, variously known as Mentalese or TOME, Thought Ordered Mental Expression. Proposed by philosopher Jerry Fodor, LOTH focuses on the nature of thinking as structured in a mental language. Searle's representation intention theory may be regarded as an extensive concern of LOTH. See Fodor, Jerry A. *The Language of Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

Man's reliance on language, both as a tool and as part of what formulates their cognitive abilities, is a fraught condition which Derrida summarised as the conundrum of monolingualism: "I have but one language – yet that language is not mine." This nebulous, but logically sound, statement can be further broken down into the following terms:

1. We only speak one language – or rather one idiom only.
2. We never speak only one language – or rather there is no pure Idiom.¹

For Nabokov, this lack of a proprietary identity with language gives him a privilege for crafting a language of his own, to which he affirms, in a way, the "omniscience in him."²

As we know, this "omniscience" spells for Bataille a double negation. Art and artifice can only succeed insofar as *parodying* the sovereign truth, whose object, in this case, is dimly perceivable at the edge of rupture. Allan Stoekl writes in his introduction to *Visions of Excess*: "Bataille's text itself stands in an impossible neutral space between absolute knowledge and its implacably hostile double, sheer loss. Yet the text is neither one nor the other; it is precisely the conjoining of the two that establishes their identity as automutilation, their violent doubling."³ Sovereignty thus represented is no longer simply the supremacy of the indomitable, but, as in Bataille's and Nabokov's conceptions, an unattained summit, or abyss, whose only access is to be found in self-loss.

¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other, Or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 8.

² The original quote actually came from Derrida, who referred to his monolingualism as an "absolute habitat": "I am monolingual. My monolingualism dwells, and I call it my dwelling; it feels like one to me, and I remain in it and inhabit it. It inhabits me. The monolingualism in which I draw my very breath is, for me, my element. Not a natural element, not the transparency of the ether, but an absolute habitat. It is impassable, *indisputable*: I cannot challenge it except by testifying to its omniscience in me. It would always have preceded me. It is me." See *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³ Stoekl, Allan. "Introduction" in Bataille, Georges. *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. xiii.

Chapter Four: Death

If we talk of death, let us note that the difference between life and death, so crystal clear in man, is somewhat veiled in other fields.

- Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*¹

I. Death, Life and the Consciousness of Death

It has been established that death is the presumed end for the quest of sovereignty. To extend such a claim towards the encapsulation of the entire region of heterology may seem rather problematic, for not all discernible forms of the heterogeneous matter are so firmly rooted in death (in eroticism, for example, the enactment of the loss of consciousness is usually never more than a *semblance*). At the very least, however, death looms large on the horizon of how those concepts are generally conceived. But it is still tricky to continue the argument in this vein for the reason that true heterogeneity, in theory, coincides with death. The paradox then rears its head: that death is at once the meaning and the substance of the heterogeneous, and its only valid access. Whether such an issue – which, one might say, seems to be less peremptory in the Hegelian dialectic, wherein absolute knowledge and death (or abstract negation) are two distinct notions - has a solution, or, if not, how Bataille might resolve it with his own theory: these questions will be responded to in due course, after a brief look first into the fundamentals of death in Bataille's philosophy.

For Bataille, the respective circumstances of life and death are as diametrically opposed as they are immanent to one another. The following statements, from *Eroticism*, need to be read alongside each other to fully illustrate the point:

The death of one being is correlated with the birth of the other, heralding it and making it possible. Life is always a product of the decomposition of life [...]

¹ Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 11.

Yet life is none the less a negation of life.¹

[...] for us, discontinuous beings that we are, death means continuity of being. Reproduction leads to the discontinuity of beings, but brings into play their continuity; that is to say, it is intimately linked with death.²

The second of these quotes may be seen as a clarification of the first: theoretically, life is death negated; as far as our knowledge of death is concerned, however, this provisional negation does not necessarily presuppose its absence. Hence the fact that the reproduction of discontinuous beings “brings into play their continuity.” As we know, eroticism, which assents “to life up to the point of death,” is one such proving ground for the hypothetical fusion of discontinuity and continuity, whose alarming proximity to death symbolises the height of life.³ The concept thus indicates as much the shadowy borderline between our perception of life and death, as the conflicting objectives of human existence in general: “Humanity pursues two goals,” Bataille declares, “one, the negative, is to preserve life (to avoid death), and the other, the positive, is to increase the intensity of life.”⁴

In other words, to live an “intense” life, wherein eroticism constitutes a manifest aspect, is to acknowledge the ineradicable presence of death, if not, as in extreme cases like sacrifice, to celebrate and to hasten its arrival. Conversely, it is in virtue of this grim knowledge that life acquires its richness and intensity: “[...] the luxury of death is regarded by us in the same way as that of sexuality, first as a negation of ourselves, then – in a sudden reversal – as the profound truth of the movement of which life is the manifestation.”⁵ With excess (or heterogeneity) as its core, a life that readily comes to terms with its dissolution must surely drift from the linear course. Linearity, to Bataille’s mind, denotes a basic structure of time, which in turn commands the world of things:

¹ Bataille, Georges. *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), p. 55.

² Bataille. *Eroticism*, p. 13.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴ Bataille, Georges. *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 60.

⁵ Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share: Vol. I*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), pp. 34-35.

The world of things has duration as its foundation: no thing has a separate existence, has a meaning, unless a subsequent time is posited, in view of which it is constituted as an object [...] Future time constitutes this real world to such a degree that death no longer has a place in it.¹

This is equivalent to the perception that death, which inhabits a realm of continuity wherein duration is repudiated, is a termination of life only in the sense that the phenomenon is extraneous to the natural course of things (as excluded from the “life-course”).² William Pawlett proposes a less convoluted assumption: “Death is not the completion of the final phase of life; it is the partner of life, it is what makes life *life*.”³ This italicised “life” yields two possible referents: the individual life itself (in the sense that death makes life a discrete phenomenon), and – this is closer to what Pawlett suggests – the *intimate* life. An intimate life is much similar to the “intense life”, but is further distinguishable from the kind of life that is built on the primacy of self-survival. Jeremy Biles, in *Ecce Monstrum: Georges Bataille and the Sacrifice of Form* (2007), observes that life to Bataille always “bears a stigma of death within it”, whilst his vision of death is steeped in such fecundity and swarming life that it amounts to “not precisely a resurrection to life, but a paradoxical resurrection of death, of the dead: the birth of death.”⁴

Such was only one of a number of problems, more logical in its kind than theoretical, that stemmed from Bataille’s insistence on underlining the heterogeneous nature of death by dint of, rather bizarrely, making life, or certain aspects of life, a temporary stand-in for the yet unrealised, and presently pseudo-realistic, death. To achieve this, formal logic and science were resolutely eschewed. In *Guilty*, for instance, Bataille considers death a tangible experience because “loss presupposes action, the preliminary charge – *then* to lose.”⁵ The statement is left unexpanded, but we may

¹ Bataille, Georges. *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992), p. 46.

² Philosopher Fred Feldman, in his book *Confrontations with the Reaper* (1992), proposes a “termination thesis”, which refers to a strictly logical view that “when a person dies, he or she [...] goes out of existence; subsequently, there is no such thing as that person.” Feldman, Fred. *Confrontations with the Reaper: A Philosophical Study of the Nature and Value of Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 91.

³ Pawlett, William, “Bataille and the Left Pole of the Sacred” in *Georges Bataille and Contemporary Thought*, Will Stronge ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p. 63.

⁴ Biles, Jeremy. *Ecce Monstrum: Georges Bataille and the Sacrifice of Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 87.

⁵ Bataille, Georges. *Guilty*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), p.

assume that the “preliminary charge” probably refers to that crucial moment of transition between life and death. In other texts, such moment is identified as a moment of “anguish”, that dreaded instant preceding the irreversible loss, when men’s overpowering fear struggles to condition and to suspend the ongoing pull towards total nil. With similar function, anguish serves also a pivotal role in sexual practices and other acts of transgression which, in Bataille’s words, “makes humankind.”¹ In the later part of *Guilty*, however, Bataille appears to backtrack on his prior claim: to anticipate death or to speculate on its outcome is to enclose it within the sphere of life, thereby rendering it an obtainable, possessable article; yet it is the reality that “death cannot be possessed: it dispossesses.”² Thus any comparison between death and other death-inclined phenomena seems inadvisable as a theoretical strategy (Bataille wonders if “the need for sex is the dispossession of death?”)³ We may finally conclude that the feeling of anguish before death is all for naught (that is, the matter belongs exclusively to the world of things and is not, in a narrow sense, associated with death by any means), whereas with sexual activities for example, the sensation triggers at most a partial dispossession and is therefore liable of being transformed into desire (as a sexual stimulant).⁴

But it is also evident that to restore death to its totality, much like acknowledging the fate of sovereignty (that it is condemned to death), the premise of death’s heterogeneity, whilst indeed itself characteristic of dispossessedness, cannot be established in one way or another, except through, perhaps, sophistry. Benjamin Noys, following the line of inquiry of Pawlett, Biles and many others, raises a vital question: if death is to be seen as analogous to the extreme of life, is it then localised to a “lived experience, the end of lived experience or [...] outside of lived experience?”⁵ The question may be approached in a number of ways, depending on how one perceives this “lived experience.” Michel Surya argues that the “person who dies” is solid enough proof that death is a lived experience, because “only someone

83.

¹ Bataille. *Eroticism*, p. 86. The existentialist has a similar definition for the word: anguish “suggests a love of life and a mordant sense of pleasure.” See “Jean-Paul Sartre: Playboy Interview (1965): Interview by Madeleine Gobeil”, *Playboy*, May 1965

² Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 139.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Bataille: “The inner experience of eroticism demands from the subject a sensitiveness to the anguish at the heart of the taboo no less great than the desire which leads him to infringe it.” *Eroticism*, pp. 38-39.

⁵ Noys, Benjamin. *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 13.

subjected to expectation really dies (and has the anguished awareness of dying).”¹ What seems especially problematic with such reasoning is the suggestion that death is somehow continuous with the person’s “anguished awareness of dying.” As a rule, any events leading up to death, including “death” itself, are unequivocally *outside* of its lived experience. But what Surya might be alluding to is the self-evident but frequently overlooked fact that death is, after all, a part of human reality (to put it crudely, there is no death if the living does not duly grant it existence). The concept therefore should best be understood in relativist terms - as Barthes sums up aptly in *A Lover’s Discourse* (1977), “Absence can only exist as a consequence of the other: it is the other who leaves, it is I who remain.”²

Considering death’s roots in the world of things, which entails that any knowledge of the subject must be acquired through the prism of life, it is rather unavoidable to therefore subscribe to the Hegelian formula which posits human consciousness as more or less a currency between the two worlds. As Bataille also admitted: “What we call death is in the first place the consciousness we have of it.”³

*

As a general statement itself, the following should yield little doubt of its validity: men can be conscious of death’s existence without undergoing the actual experience. To us, the living, death constitutes primarily an abstraction made tangible by its proximity to a yet unascertained reality. But such thought, or *consciousness*, of death also indicates, above all, the *absence* of death. In *Eroticism*, Bataille, responding to a request of his friend, philosopher Jean Wahl, ponders on a hypothetical linkage between human consciousness and death, and how it may be located: “[...] sometimes on the borderline continuity and consciousness draw very close together [...] The supreme moment is indeed a silent one, and in the silence our consciousness fails us.”⁴ The key factor here is the transitory point where continuity

¹ Surya, Michel. *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 2002), p. 439.

² Barthes, Roland. *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Classics, 2002), p. 13.

³ Bataille. *Eroticism*, p. 44.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 276. French philosopher Jean Wahl (1888-1974) was known for introducing Hegel’s work to the French audience in the 1930s, prior to Kojève’s celebrated lectures (1933-39). He was one of the staff writers for Bataille’s public review, *Acéphale* (1936-39).

and consciousness converge: in actual practice, it would require the subject – in this case, the dying man - to simultaneously register such a moment and lose it to silence. To a less implausible degree, this scenario is approximated in the central event of a sacrifice. The spectators, privileged by being exposed to the horror of death without subjecting their lives to any conceivable danger, share in, in a vicarious fashion, the “excess of the instant” during which the victim finally loses himself in the succeeding continuity.¹ What results then is not, technically speaking, the salvage of the “supreme moment”, for the spectators, not undergoing the actual experience, are left with only a semblance of the “sacredness”, which, in Bataille’s lexicon, signifies the victim’s liberation from the world of things; but what the sacrifice manages to produce is a framework, and a highly evocative one at that, into which the feverish drama of death, or the “excess instant” of life bordering on death, can be brought about.²

In terms of the notion’s metaphysical nature, the “reclaimed” death of a sacrifice constitutes the paradigm of a Lacanian death drive. In Lacan’s definition, a death drive is fundamentally a destructive drive that “must stand beyond the tendency to return to an inanimate state.”³ It was conceived initially as part of a counterargument of Freud’s theory, which postulates the duality of life and death instincts; enquiring into the relationship between death drive and the Signifier, Lacan remarked that the former embodies a prototype of other physical drives, and therefore should be seen as a “Will” – a “Will for destruction. Will for a fresh start. Will for Other-Thing, inasmuch as the will itself can be questioned from the function of the signifier” – which ultimately induces the subject to go against its symbolic cause.⁴

¹ Bataille, Georges. *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, ed. and trans. Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 1994), p. 149. A similar notion to this is what Barthes called an “anterior immediacy” (“immédiateté antérieure”), which describes a paroxysm of sensation or feeling which occurs so instantaneously that even the present sight of it must always be spoken of in past tense. See Barthes, Roland. *A Lover’s Discourse*, p. 194.

² Bataille: “The principle of sacrifice is destruction, but though it sometimes goes so far as to destroy completely (as in a holocaust), the destruction that sacrifice is intended to bring about is not annihilation. The thing – only the thing – is what sacrifice means to destroy in the victim. Sacrifice destroys an object’s real ties of subordination; it draws the victim out of the world of utility.” Bataille. *Theory of Religion*, p. 43.

³ Lacan, Jacques. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 251.

⁴ Ibid.

There are obvious parallels between Lacan's unstated wish to "animate" death and Bataille's earnest struggle to *not* associate the concept with human consciousness. An illuminating example for the latter can be found in *Guilty*, wherein an ideal situation is posited: "Consciousness is the condition of the perfected death. I die to the extent that I am conscious of death."¹ What Bataille suggests here is not the impossible fusion of consciousness and death, but rather the presumption of consciousness as a *sine qua non* for exploring the unadulterated essence of death. Such consciousness would, without a doubt, also anticipate its inexorable loss: "The death of thought is the voluptuous orgy that prepares death, the festival held in the house of death."²

Hereby the theory reverts to an earlier issue: that a loss preceded by anticipation loses its symbolic value, and is therefore made "possessable," whereas the real death should be tending towards an eternal dispossession. As Surya also sees it, any reflection on the "death of thought" amounts invariably to an odd parody of the "thought of death." The phrase seemingly suggests the absurdity that human thought is able to sustain death. One can discern in Bataille's writing a strenuous resistance to such obviously questionable deduction, for, as seen in the quotes above, the emphasis is placed on the fact that death is *coterminous* with the collapse of knowledge. Surya argues, however, that in virtue of how death has been characterised in Bataille's theory (as bound up with intimate life), the "collapse of knowledge" in this case should only be taken as a theoretical limit which does not necessarily entail a physical finish.³

Accordingly, the conception of "nonknowledge" bespeaks much of an insidious attempt, so to speak, to compensate for this collapse of knowledge. By definition, the experience of nonknowledge is equivalent to "a consciousness of the absence of consciousness."⁴ But this cannot possibly be spelled out as a "consciousness of death," since it defeats the very purpose whereof nonknowledge is conceived. So what exactly sets the difference between nonknowledge and death? For Paul Hegarty, nonknowledge provided Bataille a flimsy pretext to persist in the false hope

¹ Bataille. *Guilty*, p. 5.

² Bataille, Georges. *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. 204.

³ Surya, p. 487.

⁴ Bataille. *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 129.

that a non-dialectical death is possible.¹ A dialectical death is by and large a death overcome, a death that, in Hegel, triumphantly defies the irresistible pull towards the abstract negation. This implausible premise is followed by an equally implausible mechanism: before death can be assimilated into the pattern of the living (hence becoming dialectical), it is first externalised (as per its nature, from the world of things), only to be brought back in a domesticated, and admittedly impaired, fashion.² Kojève, in one of his lectures, designates this resultant death as a “death incarnate,” to which an approximation is inevitably found amongst the living.³ Recalling Biles’s remark that death in Bataille’s theory implies the resurrection of death, this “death incarnate” was also a prime fallacy that Bataille ultimately failed to overcome when rounding out his theory.

II. Death and Afterlife

A notable factor which sets apart Bataille’s and Nabokov’s respective conceptions of death may be evinced in the question: “What is the physical (or metaphysical) reality of death?” Or more precisely: “What happens after the actual phenomenon of death is affirmed (as in that a bodily death is taken place)?” As demonstrated in the above, Bataille wavered between the reality that death implies the irretrievable loss of human consciousness and the no less plausible notion that death, as an abstraction, necessarily has its roots in life. The quandary represents the struggle to establish an access to the heterogeneous proper, which poses a point antithetical to the world of things. True heterogeneity coincides with the renunciation of *thinghood*, a state of servitude that dictates all aspects of human existence. But in the interest of theorising the heterogeneous, for all its apparent fruitlessness and implausibility, a link between the two contrary worlds – even though such a link is essentially a spurious one - must be posited. Hence the coinage of “nonknowledge” and

¹ Hegarty, Paul. *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist* (London: SAGE Publications, 2000), p. 22.

² Indirectly, this informs Hegel’s master/slave dialectic, which introduces a familiar historical situation: the battle for recognition. The victor is one who is qualified with the statement, “I am a subject”, which entails “either the death of the other, or the other’s metaphorical death and enslavement.” Death is thus the risk either party is destined to undergo, and “whatever the outcome, death is banished to the profit of life based on recognition.” See Hegel, G. W. F. *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2003), p. 114.

³ Kojève, Alexander. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, Assembled by Raymond Queneau, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 567.

“continuity”, which serve in a large part as a theoretical solution for death’s inaccessibility.

Conceptually, neither nonknowledge nor continuity has its meaning completely grounded in pure unreality. In Bataille’s writings, the possibility of life after death is rarely given more than a passing notice. A number of allusions are made to the idea of an immortal life, as in terms of the ontological cycle of death and reproduction, and the theological doctrine of incarnation.¹ As far as the *unreality* of the concept is concerned, however, it may be argued that nonknowledge was the closest that Bataille had come to suggesting a form of existence beyond death. The experience of nonknowledge constitutes, in Bataille’s words, “a consciousness of the absence of consciousness.”² What this “consciousness of the absence of consciousness” amounts to is a paradox, an impossible formulation of the impossibility to negate absence, which, in a sense, is equivalent to *affirming* the void, the nothingness of death, whereas, in theory, death is simply NOTHING.

To spell out this NOTHING – and hence to supply a linguistic form to the abstraction – the word, as demonstrated, is converted into a *something*. Bataille would only admit this much – that the notion is at bottom problematic, for it reveals the indissoluble burden of language (“If I knew nothing, I would have nothing to say, so I would keep my mouth shut.”) and the, by no means warranted, impulse to come up with an articulated response to “the demand of sovereignty.”³ Whether the afterlife is a valid subject for contemplation has not much bearing on the fundamental principles of Bataille’s philosophy, but the convenience of its tacit thesis appears to be much exploited in his general dialectic on heterology.

¹ Bataille: “Reproduction and death condition the immortal renewal of life; they condition the instant which is always new. That is why we can only have a tragic view of the enchantment of life, but that is also why tragedy is the symbol of enchantment.” Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, p. 17. For the idea of incarnation, in “The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade”, particularly, Bataille suggests that incarnation provides the model of a homogeneous totality to which Christianity is tending: “[...] in general one must take into account the fact that religions bring about a profound separation within the sacred domain, dividing it into a superior world (celestial and divine) and an inferior world (demoniacal, a world of decomposition); now such a division necessarily leads to a progressive homogeneity of the entire superior domain (only the inferior domain resists all efforts at appropriation). God rapidly and almost entirely loses his terrifying features, his appearance as a decomposing cadaver, in order to become, at the final stage of degradation, the simple (paternal) sign of universal homogeneity.” See Bataille, Georges. *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 96.

² Bataille. *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 129.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 112, 181.

On Nabokov's part, the readiness to stamp his belief in the afterlife, in his personal as well as fictional accounts, appears to be comparatively pronounced and purposive. In *Speak, Memory*, for instance, Nabokov describes a unique ability inherent in every human being:

It is certainly [...] when one is wide awake, at moments of robust joy and achievement, on the highest terrace of consciousness, that mortality has a chance to peer beyond its own limits, from the mast, from the past and its castle tower. And although nothing much can be seen through the mist, there is somehow the blissful feeling that one is looking in the right direction.¹

Bataille discovers something similar: that in absolute consciousness ("on the high terrace of consciousness") the realm of death seems perceivable - considering that an access, in the very act of "peering" beyond the limits of one's mortality, is more or less devised- but presently unobtainable.² Nabokov further enlarges on the key to locate the convergence between life and death: it is through the active recollection of the past, of the lost ones, which inexorably gives rise to the illusion that "everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die."³

Such a way of "engaging" with the dead – technically known as an "autobiographical memory" - rewrites arbitrarily the natural laws of space and time. The illusion itself derives chiefly from the fact that human knowledge and perception at any particular time is conditioned by the operation of memory. Thus, whatever is happening now is already, the instant of being registered by the human mind, a thing of the past; by the same token, since for the humans the present time is basically non-existent, the phenomenological status of an event or an object is bound to be conflicted with its epistemological status. A similar thought was advanced by David Hume, who, in *Treatise on Human Nature*, holds that reality is primarily composed of perceptual and imaginary representations.⁴ John Locke, on the other hand, appeared to have

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Speak Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 50.

² Bataille: "[...] sometimes on the borderline continuity and consciousness draw very close together." Bataille. *Eroticism*, p. 276.

³ Nabokov. *Speak Memory*, p. 77.

⁴ See Hume, David. *The Philosophical Works of David Hume: Vol. II* (Boston: Little, Brown and

rather ambivalent views on the matter: in the first edition of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), Locke conceives memory as a “storehouse” of cognitive ideas.¹ Years later, in the second edition of the book (published posthumously in 1777), the storehouse metaphor was abandoned, in whose stead was the argument that memory only acquires its ephemeral existence once it is conjured up by human knowledge. In other words, the past is just as diaphanous in essence as the future.²

In his autobiography, Nabokov deftly weaves together accounts of memory – the kind that requires near photographic recall (eidetic memory) - and of pure make-believe. To a degree, the two are equally marked in their natural tendency towards falsification. In the opening chapter, Nabokov delineates with poetic imagery the progress from life to death:

The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness. Although the two are identical twins, man, as a rule, views the prenatal abyss with more calm than the one he is heading for [...] Over and over again, my mind has made colossal efforts to distinguish the faintest of personal glimmers in the impersonal darkness on both sides of my life.³

Typically, it seems easier to discern those “personal glimmers” in the abyss before birth, whose substance Nabokov proceeds to describe as “a series of spaced flashes, with the intervals between them gradually diminishing until bright blocks of perception are formed, affording memory a slippery hold.”⁴ Here, memory represents and signifies the dawn of human consciousness, on whose strength the concept of time is generated (which in turn generates memory). In a theory proposed by experimental psychologist Endel Tulving, an unalloyed memory is believed to take the form of an “autonoetic consciousness”, which allows the subject

Company, 1854), pp. 155-57.

¹ See Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: W. Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1882), pp. 193-208.

² See Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding: Vol. II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894), pp. 325-29.

³ Nabokov. *Speak Memory*, pp. 19-20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

to mentally re-experience a certain event whilst remembering.¹ We may also say that memory entails a certain knowing and experiencing, and therefore should be seen as deriving from a person's awareness of self (as an adjunct of sort to self-knowledge).

In a 1971 interview, Nabokov says of memory as a faculty: "The act of retention is the act of art, artistic selection, artistic blending, artistic re-combination of actual events."² The theme is often taken as correlative to the problem of time, and together they figure prominently in Nabokov's work. In *Ada*, the author undertakes, through the protagonist Van Veen, a philosophical rumination on time and its rather complex interdependence with space. It was Van's definition of the nature of time that Nabokov, in a 1969 interview with *The Listener*, believed to resonate with his own view of the matter: "Physiologically the sense of Time is a sense of continuous being [...] Philosophically, on the other hand, Time is but memory in the making. In every individual life there goes on from cradle to deathbed the gradual shaping and strengthening of that backbone of consciousness, which is the Time of the strong."³ Devoting himself to a failed quest for Pure Time – a time that is naked of spatial elements – Van discovers that the problem originates from man's propensity to objectify intangible concepts like temporality in order to come to a clearer grasp of the matter.⁴ This is especially evident in the fact that time is confirmed of its presence usually by way of the physical changes it has wrought in our surroundings. The customary mode of measuring time through space reveals more than a certain habit of thinking. In the view of presentism, only present objects are said to proclaim real existence - that is, no object exists in time without being present.⁵ Abstract ideas may exist outside of time, which implies that, in this particular context, time

¹ See Tulving, Endel. "Memory and Consciousness", *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne*, 1985, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 1-12.

² Nabokov, Vladimir. *Strong Opinions* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 158.

³ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 425.

⁴ For an in-depth analysis of Van's philosophical investigation of time, see Martin Hägglund's essay, "Chronophilia: Nabokov and the Time of Desire", *New Literary History*, Vol. 37, No. 2, Critical Inquiries (Spring, 2006), pp. 469-78.

⁵ More formally known as philosophical presentism, it holds that, as opposed to eternalism, the past and the future exist primarily as figments of the mind, thus reality needs to be assessed on the basis of its actual circumstance in the present time. Famous exponents of such view included William James ("[...] [time is] the short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly sensible." *The Principles of Psychology*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1890, p. 229.), J. M. E. McTaggart (See "The Unreality of Time", *Mind: A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy*, Vol. XVII, 1908, pp. 457-92.) and A. N. Prior (See *Time and Modality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

itself comprises the temporal as well as the spatial elements. But in the interest of establishing Pure Time, would it be possible that an abstraction (time) can be further rendered to transcend itself, since only the concrete is posited in time? In other words, would human mind be capable of capturing time's indiscernible identity (as a mind-independent phenomenon)?

Of all these riddles, Van manages, in his project, to come up with at least one probable solution: to try and devote all energy of one's thought on what is happening now, on the immediate present, thereby condensing the passage of time to a single, well-nigh immobilised unit, forcing human thinking to abandon its impulse to "spatialise" temporal matters. The fulfillment of such a mental feat would be attained in the negation of the immediate present as well, so that it would not be consigned to the past; but, Van wonders, is it possible for an individual unit of time to become separated from a chain of its kind and exist on its own, and, most important, are we capable of perceiving time in its immediacy? Van writes in his notebook: "Since the present is but an imaginary point without an awareness of the immediate past, it is necessary to define that awareness. Not for the first time will Space intrude if I say that what we are aware of as 'Present' is the constant building up of the Past, its smoothly and relentlessly rising level."¹

What Van comes upon is hardly anything unprecedented: that man embodies the conflation of time and space is the central claim of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927). In this seminal text, Heidegger conceives *Dasein*, which in German means "presence" or "being-there", as a living existence to whom the question of Being is directed.² A *Dasein* is inseparable from the "historicality" of *Dasein*, for it comprises a birth and a death of the being, and is therefore subordinated to the strictures of temporality. In a word, the being of *Dasein* is time itself, or, to put it differently, *Dasein*, as mortal, is a being-in-time. Heidegger ended his book with a string of allusive queries:

¹ Nabokov. *Ada*, p. 432.

² Heidegger's definition of the word is a reference to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, wherein Being is simply a component of a unity, an "is-ness". Being, therefore, does not really specify anything (is not what is traditionally known as the "being"), and is "what determines beings as beings, that in terms of which beings are already understood." That is, the notion of being predates the actuality of its existence. See Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), p. 24.

The existential and ontological constitution of the totality of *Daesin* is grounded in temporality. Accordingly, a primordial mode of temporalising of ecstatic temporality itself must make the ecstatic project of being in general possible. How is this mode of temporalising of temporality to be interpreted? Is there a way leading from primordial *time* to the meaning of *being*? Does *time* itself reveal itself as the horizon of *being*?¹

What Heidegger seems to be suggesting is the possibility of rewriting the history of Being in a way that does without the basis of temporality, given the fact that Being and time are, theoretically speaking, not really identical to one another, but their “interdependence”, as it were, is built on the intermediate presence of *Daesin*, to whom temporality is the condition for its coming to grips with the meaning of Being. These questions were supposed to be taken up in a follow-up project, which, for some reason, was never completed in Heidegger’s life.

The extent of research that actually went into the formulating of Van’s thoughts on time is debatable. In the 1969 interview, Nabokov attempted awkwardly to disclaim any authorial identification on his part: “I have not decided yet if I agree with him [Van] in all his views on the texture of time. I suspect I don’t.”² One thing that Nabokov evidently disagreed with was the possibility of a Pure Time, for he wrote in his memoir:

I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another [...] And the highest enjoyment of timelessness – in a landscape selected at random – is when I stand among the rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain.³

The statement may be further dissected in terms of these connotative factors:

¹ Heidegger. *Being and Time*, p. 319.

² The statement came after Nabokov apparently subscribed to Van’s definition of time, thus revealing a rather ambiguous stance on the matter. See Nabokov. *Strong Opinions*, p. 121.

³ *Speak, Memory*, p. 139.

- 1) The authorial exploitation of the fact that time is, in the main, a component of the *cogito* – without mortals, the idea of time is basically non-existent.
- 2) As an artistic construct of sort, time is malleable, multifaceted and, by virtue of its abstractness, susceptible to the operation of creativity.
- 3) In playing with time, the author was impelled to forgo its linearity – different stretches or periods of time can be “folded” into patterns, and together they make up a formless whole.
- 4) The dominant concern here transcends the idea of a time “spatialised”: the spatialisation of time is a means towards breaking the boundaries not only between time and space but within time itself, as a result of which any moment of being present in time is virtually to be dissolved in the imminent timelessness.

In theory, death is located in the realm of timelessness. According to Bataille, time constitutes the bedrock of the world of things; death, to which the notion of “thinghood” is permanently lost, repudiates in addition the primacy of a temporal order.¹ Such was obviously not the death that Nabokov had in mind when, in his memoir, he compared it to the “prenatal abyss”, which presupposes a nascent form of human consciousness (“a series of spaced flashes, with the intervals between them gradually diminishing until bright blocks of perception are formed...”). In this particular instance, it appears as though Nabokov was inclined to the belief that death does not signify a total annihilation of living things. In *Bend Sinister*, the dead are thought to finally attain an “infinite consciousness”, a “perfect knowledge”, which saves them from “absolute nothingness” and enables them to identify a point in space and time with which every other point is connected.² What distinguishes this infinite consciousness from human consciousness is not clarified in the book, but it may be suggested that the author posits a consciousness which is peculiar to the world of death, a consciousness that operates in a manner similar to that of Bataille’s nonknowledge, an all-powerful cognitive faculty to register the unknown. The idea crops up in *Invitation to a Beheading*, in which the gain of new consciousness is said

¹ Bataille: “[...] the objective and in a sense transcendent (relative to the subject) positing of the world of things has duration as its foundation: no *thing* in fact has a separate existence, has a meaning, unless a subsequent time is posited, in view of which it is constituted as an object [...] Future time constitutes this real world to such a degree that death no longer has a place in it.” See Bataille. *Theory of Religion*, p. 46.

² Nabokov, Vladimir. *Bend Sinister* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), p. 192, 175.

to coincide with the inexorable loss of the individual identity, of the “tender ego.”¹ Both examples treat the worlds of life and death as theoretically antipodal, although there is also a discernible tendency to render death an approximate experience of the living. The latter fact may be due in a large part to the invariable consequence of the attempt to overcome death, to salvage it from “abstract negation”, which, as Hegel had it, engenders in turn a non-ontological “death” that is bound up with dialectics, in a manner with which the dialectical existence of the living is dictated.

These singular thoughts of the hereafter were, as Boyd claims in his biography, chiefly traced back to Nabokov’s own brush with death in his childhood. Recalling how he frequently found himself at the edge of death during his early illnesses, Nabokov believed that, as a consequence, he was endowed with a rare gift of clairvoyance, which allowed him to see beyond the limit of mortal life. Henceforth he began to see the course from life to death as an obligatory transition into a possibly higher plane of existence: “Nabokov would always suspect”, Boyd writes, “that although consciousness might appear to be cut off in death, it could well in fact undergo a metamorphosis we cannot see.”² In his work, the metamorphosis does not always signify a staggering transformation: for one thing, human consciousness appears to retain its soundness in death (thus making it a Hegelian concept). The narrator of *The Eye*, allegedly a ghost, marvels at the incredible discovery: “[...] it became clear that after death human thought lives on by momentum [...] I remembered everything – my name, life on earth – with perfect clarity [...] What a mighty thing was human thought, that it could hurtle on beyond death!”³ It is disclosed in the end that the ghost is in fact a madman convinced to have been killed - such a conclusion indicates a particular approach which Nabokov frequently adopted in regards to the theme of the afterlife: an accent on the manifest absurdity of the idea, as something invariably conceived or dreamed up by the potentially deranged or unreliable characters. Another example can be found in the story, “Lik” (1964). Lik is a Russian actor in France whose methodology for acting consists in imagining himself in the setting of the play he is performing. His obsession eventually

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Invitation to a Beheading*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 21.

² Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 71.

³ Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Eye*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author (London: Penguin Books, 2010), p. 21.

turns into a morbid divertissement of envisaging the scene of his own death: “He would not notice his death, crossing over instead into the actual world of a chance play, now blooming anew because of his arrival, while his smiling corpse lay on the boards, the toe of one foot protruding from beneath the folds of the lowered curtains.”¹

In Nabokov’s fiction, a person’s transition from life to death is usually portrayed as a mere “crossing over” into another world. Cincinnatus C., Luzhin, Martin Edelweiss and Hugh Person of *Transparent Things* all make a relatively swift exit (their supposed demise is, however, rather obscurely depicted). According to Boyd, the motif welds together two of Nabokov’s essential concepts: that human consciousness is characterised by its bondage to the present (“our inability to have immediate access to the real past we have lived through”) and/or to the self, the *ipso* (“our inability to escape our own minds or enter those of others”), and that only in death might these limitations have a chance to be surmounted.² A case in point is Adam Krug, the hapless hero of *Bend Sinister*, who is finally saved from his tragic life by way of a “metaphorical death”: at the point where Krug is assailed by a barrage of gunfire, the author intercepts in a mood of sympathy and, looking out of his window, closes the book with these cryptic words:

I could [...] distinguish the glint of a special puddle (the one Krug had somehow perceived through the layer of his own life), an oblong puddle invariably acquiring the same form after every shower because of the constant spatulate shape of a depression in the ground. Possibly, something of the kind may be said to occur in regard to the imprint we leave in the intimate texture of space...³

The said puddle, as was described, acquires the shape of an infinity symbol (∞), and makes its first appearance early in the novel, following the death of Olga, Krug’s wife. That this image “reappears” in the above closing remark suggests the centrality of its import: the infinite consciousness, whereon Krug pins his dogged belief. Were such allusive gestures to be treated in part as the author’s implied espousal of the idea of

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), p. 465.

² Boyd. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, p. 283.

³ Nabokov. *Bend Sinister*, p. 178.

the hereafter, it was, admittedly, only one in a handful of cases where the association can be made. The protagonist of *The Gift*, for instance, despite his occasional indulgence in creative imagination, asserts a decidedly realistic view of the matter: “[...] death is in no way connected with the topography of the hereafter, for a door is merely the exit from the house and not part of its surroundings.”¹ In *Pale Fire*, Shade writes of his belief of the afterlife: “There was a time in my demented youth/ When somehow I suspected that the truth/ About survival after death was known/ To every human being.”² But after a series of incidents, and most of all the death of his beloved daughter, Shade, trying vainly to spot clues of the world beyond, finally accepts the brute fact: “Alas, the dingy cygnet never turned/ Into a wood duck [...] no phantom would/ Rise gracefully to welcome you and me/ In a dark garden, near a shagbark tree.”³

It should be noted that in both of the above passages, the idea of an afterlife is not so much invalidated as accorded its logical non-entity with respect to the world of things. To wit, death signifies a physical finish; whatever lies beyond is extraneous to the actual death, which is itself, in theory, part of the phenomenology of the living. Derrida, paraphrasing Heidegger, proposes a similar view: “[...] concerning the threshold of death, we are engaged here toward a certain possibility of the impossible.”⁴ A simple question like “Is my death possible?” denotes a more radical, aporetic speculation of one’s cognitive relation to death - one may as well be asking: “Is it possible for me to die?”, “Will I meet death head-on?”, “Would death even ‘take place’ in this world, in this life, when it basically suggests the terminal negation of the very idea of death itself?” It is reasonable, therefore, that the conviction of the afterlife, or of the survival of consciousness in death, should arise in the midst, for the endeavour to unravel the mystery of death, despite its implausibility as a practice, must have as its first step a deliberate circumvention of death’s impossibility (or the NOTHING of death). The reason behind man’s curiosity – or, in a large sense, fear – of death and its aftermath is the topic of inquiry for the following section,

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Gift*, trans. Michael Scammell with the collaboration of the author (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 309.

² Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pale Fire* (London: Everyman’s Library, 1992), p. 30.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

⁴ The definition is a paraphrase of Heidegger’s in *Being and Time*: that death is a “possibility of an ontological impossibility”. See Derrida, Jacques. *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 11.

which shall be prefaced with this quote from *Transparent Things*: “It is generally assumed that if man were to establish the fact of survival after death, he would also solve, or be on the way to solving the riddle of Being. Alas, the two problems do not necessarily overlap or blend.”¹

III. Fear of Death

The above quotation from *Transparent Things* is a cryptic note an inmate of a mental institution scribbles on his notebook. It mirrors uncannily what Wittgenstein said about the riddles of immortality and the present life:

Not only is there no guarantee of the temporal immortality of the human soul, that is to say of its eternal survival after death; but, in any case, this assumption completely fails to accomplish the purpose for which it has always been intended. Or is some riddle solved by my surviving for ever? Is not this eternal life itself as much of a riddle as our present life? The solution of the riddle of life in space and time lies outside space and time.²

Both Nabokov and Wittgenstein underlined the futility of solving the problems of life by means of the postulation of an afterlife - a valid solution must be sought *outside* the context of present life (the postulated afterlife is, in this sense, merely a prolongation of the “riddle”).³ On the surface, such theory renders the thought of death as necessarily but tenuously connected to human life. In default of a definitive idea of death, our attitude or response towards the matter shall constitute at the very least a facet of death’s presumed conceptuality.

All these are at the centre of Freud’s “Thoughts for the Time on War and Death.” In it, Freud presents two types of human reactions towards death: the “cultural-

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Transparent Things* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 93.

² Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 41.

³ Nabokov himself proclaimed indifference to Wittgenstein’s works when Alfred Appel, Jr. remarked on the similarity between the Zemblan language in *Pale Fire* and Wittgenstein’s “private language” in an interview (*Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 1967). See Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 60. The comparison between the two in the aspect of literary play is explored in Thomas Karshan’s recent study, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

conventional attitude”, which is characterised by an instinctual fear of death (or of the sheer idea of death), and the attitude commonly ascribed to primeval men, who perceived death as an evil spirit, and was furtively wished for for their enemies. Both attitudes share the tendency to indulge in unreality, in the sense that death is, on the whole, a *divined* notion. The opening line of the essay makes plain its principal claim:

It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators. Hence the psycho-analytic school could venture on the assertion that at bottom no one believes in his own death, or, to put the same thing in another way, that in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality.¹

A certain measure of extrapolation seems to be at work here: man thinks of himself as an immortal because he cannot simultaneously be both the subject and the object of his own death. Maurice Blanchot, in *The Space of Literature* (1955), puts forth a more concise explanation to the problem. As far as semantics is concerned, a general statement like “He kills himself” evinces two discrete entities: the “He” and the “himself”. The “He” is the subject that kills “himself”, an object; but in a suicide, the subject and the object are, to some degree, one and the same. Blanchot considers the paradox an indication of the failed attempt to join discourse and death, for, once written or uttered, the subject that is intended to die is suddenly *immortalised*.²

But it is clear that Freud’s theory involves more than its attendant language issue. The accent is on the “unconscious”. In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud reveals that there is “a sort of Solipsism or Berkleianism” operative in the unconscious of every human being (most noticeably of children) to “make him refuse to recognize death as a fact.”³ From a psychological perspective, a subject never dies; an object, on the other hand, as its objectivity is established *subjectively*, implies limited existence. Accordingly, man’s aversion to death is derived in the main from the logical impossibility for a subject to be rid of its subjectivity, and to be subsequently

¹ Freud, Sigmund. “Thoughts for the Time on War and Death” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), Vol. 14, p. 291.

² Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), pp. 117-34.

³ Freud, Sigmund. *Totem and Taboo*, trans. Abraham A. Brill (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2009), p. 117.

consigned to the position of a (dead) object. Even if this aversion is combatted with an active imagination of death, the matter still stands that the subject, identifying itself as a dead object, remains a subject nonetheless.

In light of these psychological insights, the repeated query, “Is my death possible?”, may seem to yield more than an evident display of fear. According to Derrida, death is the “possibility of the impossible.”¹ The statement is a paraphrase of Heidegger’s principal claim in *Being and Time* – that death is the “possibility of an impossibility.” The “possibility” here denotes specifically an “existential possibility”, which is also known as the “enabling possibility”, namely the possibility that enables us to be what we are. Further on, Heidegger defines death as the “certainty of being-in-the-world”; *Dasein*, as the being-in-the-world which eventually dies, can thus be regarded as a “being-possible”: “*Dasein* is existentially that which, in its ability-to-be, it is *not yet*.”² This “possibility” appears to acquire a rather different substance and connotations in Derrida’s thesis. In *The Gift of Death* (1992), which was published a year prior to *Aporias*, Derrida states that “every relation to death is an interpretive apprehension and a representative approach to death.”³ With existential possibility, on the other hand, men are bound up phenomenologically with every live option they have made concerning and leading up to death. For Derrida, Heidegger’s theory is aporetic in its oversight of what this existential possibility also implies: that to embody the possibility of an impossibility (the relation of *Dasein* to death) is tantamount to subjecting impossibility to formal representation. In short, death bespeaks not the irreducible limit of *Dasein*, but the threshold of a new, potentially vast sphere wherein all possibilities come to grief. Derrida concludes: “If death, the most proper possibility of *Dasein*, is the possibility of its impossibility, death becomes the most improper possibility and the most expropriating, the most inauthenticating one.”⁴

Subscribing to the belief that death is not a strictly sentient experience, Derrida redefines the “impossibility” of death (the “impossibility of being dead”) as a “mortal immortality” which leads to “the final impossibility of dying, the *disaster* that I

¹ Derrida. *Aporias*, p. 11.

² Heidegger. *Being and Time*, p. 309, pp. 185-86.

³ Derrida, Jacques. *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 45.

⁴ *Aporias*, p. 77.

cannot die, the worst unhappiness.”¹ This redefinition marks a departure from Heidegger’s contention that *Dasein* is composed of its own finitude (“More original than man is the finitude of the *Dasein* within him.”) and his emphasis on the “possible” factors of the impossibility of death - the thought of death, according to Heidegger, entails a *sur-Dasein*: “Expectance implies a being-ahead-of-oneself [...] Expectance means understanding oneself from out of one’s own *ability-to-be* [...] This approaching oneself in advance, from one’s own possibility, is the primary ecstatic concept of the future.”² Moreover, the “ecstasis” of the future supplies not only a basis for *Dasein* but also, by extension, the existential possibility of death: “The being-carried-away [provides] futurity as such, i. e., possibility pure and simple. Of itself the ecstasis [...] produces the horizon of possibility in general.”³

As Derrida sees it, Heidegger’s phenomenological thesis of death discloses a “powerful and universal delimitation.”⁴ It is largely on account of this “delimitation” that *Being and Time* fails to restore the concept of death to its proper state of a possible impossibility, whereas in Derrida’s deconstructive reading death, having established at the outset as distinct from the abstract negation, is duly accorded a degree of material reality. A year after the publication of *Aporias*, Derrida gave an interview (*The New York Times Magazine*, 1994) in which he talked at length of his morbid fascination: “All my writing is on death. If I don’t reach the place where I can be reconciled with death, then I have failed. If I have one goal, it is to accept death and dying.”⁵ Any theoretical bearing of this confession on Derrida’s general thoughts on death is, indeed, slim, but it reveals an important factor in the nature of mortality: the innate humanness that heightens our anxious response to the idea of death. When Bataille lays down the premise that “our general concepts of life can always be reduced to the desire to survive,” he already affirms the fruitlessness for us to “reconcile” with death.⁶ A sovereign man is the one able to surmount this seemingly irremediable condition, for implicit in sovereignty is the “refusal to accept the limits

¹ Ibid.

² Heidegger, Martin. *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 156. Heidegger, Martin. *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. Michael Heim (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 208.

³ Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, p. 209.

⁴ Derrida. *Aporias*, p. 80.

⁵ Quoted from Irving Horowitz ed. *Culture and Civilization: Volume 3, Globalism* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 34.

⁶ Bataille. *Literature and Evil*, p. 55.

that the fear of death would have us respect in order to ensure, in a general way, the laboriously peaceful life of individuals.”¹

This definition of the sovereign is especially applicable to the description of Martin Edelweiss, whose lack of an established purpose in life is redeemed by his obdurate resolve to carry himself like a fearless man. From an early age, Martin has considered death the ultimate test of conduct:

No matter how poorly Martin might have slept, after bathing he would be permeated with a beneficent vigor. At such times the thought of death, the thought that sometime, maybe soon (who could know?), he would be compelled to surrender and go through what billions and trillions of humans had gone through before him – this thought of an inevitable death accessible to everyone troubled him but slightly. It gained strength only toward evening, and with the coming of night would sometimes swell to monstrous dimensions.²

His final victory over fear takes the slightly absurd manifestation of a potentially ill-fated expedition to Russia – an exploit that is as spontaneous as it is lacking any reasonable motive.³ In a sense, Martin embodies all the main attributes of a sovereign man: fearless, reckless, in pursuit of a meaningless, unbounded freedom at the expense of dear life. The same may be said of Cincinnatus C., who, in the end of *Invitation to a Beheading*, comes close to displaying glimpses of a sovereign character: physically and symbolically imprisoned in the cell of misarticulation, which inhibits him from making sense of the grotesque events around him, Cincinnatus concedes that “it is best to leave some things unsaid.”⁴ His growing distrust of

¹ Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share: Volumes II & III*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1993), p. 221.

² Nabokov, Vladimir. *Glory*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 182.

³ Martin’s express intention is to see the Russian autumn once more in his life. Leona Toker argues, through a parallel study of the novel with two of Nabokov’s early poems, that there is an underlying political implication to Martin’s undertaking. See Toker, Leona. *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 91.

⁴ Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, p. 205. Incidentally, Bataille once illustrated the concept of excess by dint of a prison metaphor: “The extreme is the window: fear of the extreme enters the darkness of a prison with a hollow will of the penitentiary administration.” (Quoted in Sura, p. 495.) The quote seems a fitting overview of Cincinnatus’s condition.

language, however, contributes eventually to a maturation of inner knowledge; in the final entry of his diary, Cincinnatus makes a curious observation: since language unavoidably alters the nature of the perceived object(s) in its translation, one cannot truly be fearful of death so long as human thoughts are, by and large, in close conformity with a linguistic order. An early version of such reasoning, indisputable in its sense and logic, can be found in Socrates, who was quoted by Plato saying:

To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils [...] It is perhaps on this point and in this respect, gentlemen, that I differ from the majority of men, and if I were to claim that I am wiser than anyone in anything, it would be in this, that, as I have no adequate knowledge of things in the underworld, so I do not think I have [...] I shall never fear or avoid things of which I do not know, whether they may not be good rather than things that I know to be bad.¹

But as per Heidegger and Derrida, death is essentially an impossibility predicated on the basis of the possible. To recommend desisting from anticipatory fear of future events is, in a way, to place them resolutely outside the realm of life, as well as, indeed, to absurdly cast human nature in the rigidity of absolute rationality. Epicurus warned against any such anticipatory fear, since - "He speaks idly who says that he fears death, not because it will be painful when present but because it is painful in anticipation. For if something causes no distress when present, it is fruitless to be pained by the expectation of it."² True, inasmuch as the fear of death is itself a "fruitless" distress, it is also - Epicurus did not seem to deny - inherent in human nature. For Bataille, every individual is marked by his own apparently irrational fear. It constitutes one of a number of factors for which men come to be identified with the world of things. And along with this association comes another significant one: that between the fear of death and the imperative to work, as Bataille says, "It is certain that in history the fear of failing - of suffering and dying - had generally made

¹ Plato. *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), p. 27.

² Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, trans. Robert Drew Hicks (South Carolina: CreateSpace Publishing Platform, 2006), p. 10.

work obligatory.”¹ Moreover, work leads to the servility of being: “Taking death seriously tends one towards servitude.”² Bataille suggests that fear is only a trigger for men to come to terms with their indissoluble bondage: “[...] it is not even necessary to work in order to be the *thing* of fear: man is an individual to the extent that his apprehension ties him to the results of labour.”³

As for Cincinnatus, as soon as he writes in his diary the word “death”, he crosses it out, leaving the entry unfinished, a “blank sheet with only the one solitary word on it, and that one crossed out.”⁴ When Cincinnatus is led to the site of execution, he initially begs for more time to leave a final word in his diary, but thinks better because “everything had in fact been written already.”⁵ By crossing out the word “death”, Cincinnatus negates something which is already a negation per se (thus performing a double-negation). The result, which contains both the word and its cancellation, evokes a trope of Nabokov’s fictional works: that death is less a dissolution of individual life than an ascendancy towards a more enlightened, fulfilling existence. As an emblem, it ties itself neatly to the climax of the novel – the beheading turns out to be a non-beheading. And in terms of its symbolic function, this significant episode adds another dimension to the irreconcilableness between death and language by underscoring the impossibility to achieve a concrete praxis of death while language, albeit in a decidedly ruptured, deformed state, is still extant.

That death entails the termination of discourse is a motif which Nabokov invests invariably with a profound measure of personal sensibility. It is proclaimed, in *Glory*, that all writers are in one time or another tormented by a “writer’s covetousness (so akin to the fear of death) [...] that constant state of anxiety compelling one to fix indelibly this or that evanescent trifle.”⁶ The term is evidently reflective of the author’s own impulse to “capture” every little aspect of the fleeting world – on the impermanence of beauty, Nabokov says: “Where there is beauty there is pity for the simple reason that beauty must die: beauty always dies, the manner dies with the

¹ *Georges Bataille: Essential Writings*, Michael Richardson ed. (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), p. 92.

² Bataille. *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 254.

³ Bataille. *Georges Bataille: Essential Writings*, p. 69.

⁴ Nabokov. *Invitation to a Beheading*, p. 206.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

⁶ *Glory*, p. 60.

matter, the world dies with the individual.”¹ Seeing *Lolita*’s premature fading looks moves Humbert Humbert to quote an unnamed old poet: “The moral sense in mortals is the duty/ We have to pay on mortal sense of beauty.”² As an inveterate lepidopterist, Nabokov had no doubt witnessed first-hand the moral price that beauty, in the embodiment of the butterfly, has to pay regarding its ephemerality.³ But it needs also be noted that in the actual work of butterfly study, beauty is given to be annihilated before it can be preserved. Nabokov once described, in his memoir, the sadistic joy of killing a butterfly: “[...] the satisfying crackle produced by the pin penetrating the hard crux of its [the butterfly’s] thorax; the careful insertion of the point of the pin in the cork-bottomed groove of the spreading board; the symmetrical adjustment of the thick, strong-veined wings under neatly affixed strips of semitransparent paper.”⁴ Here, the butterfly is fixed permanently on two different places: the semitransparent paper and, symbolically, the pages of the autobiography. It is thus in this particular instance that a paradoxical conclusion is drawn: the fleeting beauty of the butterfly, which constitutes the main cause of its demise, is also, in its turn, the condition of its ultimate survival.

This imperative need to preserve what is not lasting, to salvage, albeit in a crude measure, what is irretrievably lost, shares the same impetus of what triggers a writer’s covetousness. For a writer, it may be said, words are not merely a possible alleviation to the horror of death, they also assume, through authorial instrumentalisation, a means of conjuring up its unexorcised presence. The result is the paradox that death, in textual representation, is inexorably endowed with immortal qualities (which, on the whole, recalls Derrida’s “mortal immortality”). An example for this can be found in the last paragraph of Nabokov’s short story, “Cloud, Castle, Lake” (1941):

After returning to Berlin, he called on me, was much changed, sat down quietly, putting his hands on his knees, told his story; kept on repeating that he

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lectures on Literature* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1982), p. 251.

² Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Annotated Lolita* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 283.

³ When asked, in an interview with BBC, 1962, about the possible influences that his consummate study of butterflies has lent to his work, Nabokov insists that his “interest in butterflies is exclusively scientific”, although remarking also that his art inadvertently brings about a union “between the precision of poetry and the excitement of pure science.” See Nabokov. *Strong Opinions*, p. 9.

⁴ *Speak, Memory*, p. 95.

must resign his position, begged me to let him go, insisted that he could not continue, that he had not the strength to belong to mankind any longer. Of course, I let him go.¹

This unusual description of a character's departure from the story may appear to serve a twofold purpose: reinforcing the idea that death signifies the end of a narrative (or vice versa), as well as the force and the potentially malign power of a writer's covetousness, in whose service the character has to *beg* to be let go. At this point, it should be reminded that there is a difference between the death that takes place within a narrative and a symbolic death which coincides with the end of a narrative.² Within formal textualism, however, neither of these deaths are taken as possessing any significant value, for a narrative, in such a case, already cancels out the very notion of death (in which case death becomes death/less). In Nabokov's novel, a person's death does not always partake in the traditional route of expiration. At the end of *Invitation*, Cincinnatus suddenly walks down from the scaffolding whilst everything around him starts to disintegrate; he is subsequently joined by "beings akin to him."³ Van and Ada, breaking off from their interminable discussion on death, proceed to perform an experiment which results in them fading "into the finished book, into Eden or Hades, into the prose of the book or the poetry of its blurb."⁴ The narrator of *Transparent Things* finishes the final part of his story from across the line of death. And as we saw in the previous section, Adam Krug, of *Bend Sinister*, is interrupted in his dying moments by the author, who hastens to point out that the character and his tragic life are merely his own inventions.

Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian literary scholar contemporary to Nabokov, holds that the creation of a fictional character consists in the bestowal of his death:

Memory begins to act as a gathering and completing force from the very

¹ *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, p. 433.

² An overriding focus on death and/or the representation of death is believed to be specific to narrative fiction by virtue of the certainty that an actual death is, within such context, simulated but not thereby engendered. This is called an adaptive simulation mechanism, in which situations relevant to human survival and reproduction are simulated (which normally involves some degree of dramatisation) through a creative form to better prepare the readers of tackling them in real life. See Olivier Morin, Alberto Acerbi & Oleg Sobchuk, "Why people die in novels: testing the ordeal simulation hypothesis", *Palgrave Communications*, Article Number: 62 (2019), pp. 1-10.

³ Nabokov. *Invitation to a Beheading*, p. 223.

⁴ *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, p. 587.

moment of the hero's appearance; the hero is born in this memory (of his death), and the process of giving form to him is a process of commemoration (commemoration of the departed) [...] In this sense we could say that death is the form of the aesthetic consummation of an individual [...] Throughout the entire course of an embodied hero's life, one can hear the tones of a requiem.¹

The death of a character, as a rule, necessarily coincides with the termination of the fictional world, and along with it the close of a narrative. But a book per se is testament to the immortality of art, of memory, and, in a paradoxical sense, of the living things. How death functions as both a motif and a literary mechanism within and beyond the text will be given its detailed illustration in the below.

IV. The Conception of Death

Bataille, in an autobiographical writing, observes that as readers "we read certain books when, coming to the end, we have to let them [the characters and the story] go..."² As stated previously, death implies the end of a story – an actual story (as with an individual) or a fictional story (as in literature) – and vice versa. The fear of finishing a story is therefore synonymous with the fear of death, which Bataille qualified as the greatest fear in human life.³ According to Nietzsche, man has an instinctive fear of the unknown, of the unfamiliar: "To trace something unfamiliar back to something familiar, is at once a relief, a comfort and a satisfaction, while it also produces a feeling of power. The unfamiliar involves danger, anxiety and care, - the fundamental instinct is to get rid of these painful circumstances."⁴ In a strict sense, death is not wholly an unfamiliar phenomenon – it is, as Heidegger and Derrida have termed, a "possible impossibility", meaning that, at the very least, an indirect access to its objective existence is in place. Bataille gave his view on the

¹ Bakhtin, M. M. *Answer and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 42.

² Bataille. *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 212.

³ The actual word Bataille uses is "anguish" ("angoisse"): "The greatest anguish, the anguish in the face of death, is what men desire in order to transcend it beyond death and ruination." See Bataille, *Eroticism*, p. 87.

⁴ Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *Twilight of the Idols with the Antichrist and Ecce Homo*, trans. Antony M. Ludovici (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2007), p. 33.

matter: “Death presented such a contrast between an unfamiliar region and the everyday world that the only mode of thought in tune with it was bound to conflict with the mode of thought governed by work.”¹ Conversely, since men are only capable of obtaining an incomplete knowledge of death, this inadequacy attests in a way to death’s incompatibility to human consciousness; thus by virtue of our unknowing we grasp – if only for some modicums – the essence of death, which is a NOTHING.

In Nabokov’s fiction, death is commonly depicted as acquiring either a vague promise of the beyond or an impenetrable mystique of the unknown. Shade, formerly an exponent of the possibility of the afterlife, is forced to acknowledge, after the sudden death of his daughter, that death is to the living only an irremediable absence:

I learnt what to ignore in my survey
Of death’s abyss. And when we lost our child
I knew there would be nothing: no self-styled
Spirit would touch a keyboard of dry wood
To rap out her pet name; no phantom would
Rise gracefully to welcome you and me
In the dark garden, near the shagbark tree.²

Nabokov himself was no stranger to such despair.³ In a poem dedicated to the death of his father (“Easter”), Nabokov starts with the rude awareness:

You’re absent – why?
You’re dead, and on a day
the humid world is bluish. God’s sacred spring is on her way,
swelling, calling... And you’re dead.⁴

Attention is then shifted to signs of resurgence in the natural world (“[...] if every

¹ Bataille. *Eroticism*, p. 46.

² Nabokov. *Pale Fire*, p. 45.

³ It might not be a complete coincidence that the date of Shade’s death, July 21, is also the date of Nabokov’s father’s birthday.

⁴ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Collected Poems*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov (London: Penguin Books, 2013), p. 9.

stream anew the wonder sings, / [...] if every falling golden thaw-drop rings - / if these are not bedazzling lies...”), which the author duly regards as summons for the dead spirits:

“Rise again” -
a mighty ‘Blossom!’, then you are in this refrain,
you’re in this splendor, you’re alive!...¹

When his cousin and childhood best friend, Yuri Rausch von Traubenberg, died in the Civil War in 1919, Nabokov, whose father was to die a year later, asserted the belief that the parting was only temporary:

The future is nothing to us
And the past does not torment us. The black door to the final hour,
we fling open easily and boldly. I believe in the age-old tales
and naïve revelations:
we shall meet in an aerial realm
and set the stars laughing with a quip.²

In those two poems, the prevailing mood is one of delusional hopefulness evidently driven by extreme grief; two contrasting views are offered: either that death signifies an absence, a nothing, or that it intimates some form of a continued existence. Understandably, in the face of the untimely departure of loved ones, Nabokov was inclined to view death in a manifestly illusive, at times rhapsodic, light. As in his poetic evocation of his father’s death, the material world slowly fuses into that of the metaphysical:

[...] there he would be, on his last and loftiest flight, reclining as if for good,
against the cobalt blue of the summer noon, like one of those paradisiac
personages who comfortably soar, with such a wealth of folds in their
garments, on the vaulted ceiling of a church while below, one by one, the wax
tapers in mortal hands light up to make a swarm of minute flames in the mist

¹ Nabokov. *The Collected Poems*, p. 9.

² Quoted from Johnson, D. Barton, “Vladimir Nabokov and Rupert Brooke” in Julian W. Connolly ed., *Nabokov and His Fiction: New Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 187.

of incense, and the priests chant their eternal repose, and the funeral lilies conceal the face of whoever lies there, among the swimming lights, in the open coffin.¹

The passage deals with three different levels of spectacle: the reclining man in the sky, the soaring figure on the church ceiling, and the dead man in the open coffin. All these are finally blended into a single unit: one that defies time, space and death. Such an image of astonishing lyricism, which bespeaks so eloquently Nabokov's own conviction, is preceded by its reverse in *The Eye*:

[...] that vibration I shall never forget. It was immediately replaced by the warble of water, a throaty gushing noise. I inhaled, and choked on liquidity; everything within me and around me was aflow and astir. I found myself kneeling on the floor; I put out my hand to steady myself but it sank into the floor as into bottomless water.²

Considering that this dying moment of the narrator, purportedly a ghost, comes much later in the novel, the particular manner in which he dies – sinking “into the floor as into bottomless water” – is therefore symbolic in that it corresponds to the inverse order wherein the theme of resurrection is illuminated (the so-called “resurrection” – of a supposedly dead person finding himself, in his transformation into a ghost, still retaining his consciousness and old memories - is staged at the outset only to be debunked in later chapters). Such a device was adopted again in *Pale Fire*, in which Shade's lifelong fascination with death, triggered initially by a host of fortuitous signs pointing towards the probability of an afterlife, is negated later on by the death of his own daughter.

In the early section, we establish that Nabokov's interest in the hereafter resides mainly in his belief in time's plasticity and variable pattern - in his work, the passage from life to death is occasionally construed as an ultimate release from the earthly shackles, into infinitude and limitless freedom. For the narrator of *Priglasenie*, such a postulation is necessarily hinged on the dissolution of individual identity:

¹ Nabokov. *Speak, Memory*, p. 31.

² Nabokov. *The Eye*, p. 21.

I do not know if it has ever been noted before that one of the main characteristics of life is discreteness. Unless a film of flesh envelopes us, we die. Man exists only insofar as he is separated from his surroundings. The cranium is the space-traveler's helmet. Stay inside or you perish. Death is divestment, death is communion. It may be wonderful to mix with the landscape, but to do so is the end of the tender ego.¹

Krug ponders on a similar thought: “[...] death is either the instantaneous gaining of perfect knowledge [...] or absolute nothingness.”² The idea is central to Bataille's anthropology: man, being in essence discontinuous, attains continuity only in death. Reproduction generates discontinuous beings but also brings into play the promise of continuity. Hence death is at once a loss (of discontinuous existence, human consciousness) and a gain (of continuity, nonknowledge, freedom from servitude and thinghood).

But given the concurrence of loss and gain in death, what results for the dead man is always a NOTHING. As such, the death that we know of, or have a chance to witness, constitutes merely a fraction of the real thing. Despite their longstanding efforts to prove otherwise, the majority of Nabokov's death-obsessed characters eventually submit to the hard fact that the matter is truly and irrevocably beyond their ken. When reflecting on his failed project of establishing the “truth about the survival after death”, Shade, on his sixty-first birthday, laments:

How could he [a man] live without
Knowing for sure what dawn, what death, what doom
Awaited consciousness beyond the tomb?
And finally there was the sleepless night
When I decided to explore and fight
The foul, the inadmissible abyss,
Devoting all my twisted life to this
One task.³

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Prin* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 20.

² *Bend Sinister*, p. 161.

³ *Pale Fire*, p. 30.

The narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* tries to visualise the “physical process of dying”: “[...] the steps leading into darkness; action being taken in turns by the brain, the flesh, the lungs [...] the brain follows up a certain hierarchy of ideas: ideas about death”, but realises then that the “dying man knew that these were not real ideas; that only half of the notion of death can be said to really exist...”¹ And there is also Cincinnatus C., who remarks that a person’s “face in death could never pass for the face of death!”²

What unites these characters are their passion and preoccupation: in one way or another, they are all consummate writers, hopelessly susceptible to bursts of wild imagination and creativity. Death, which is itself the insoluble puzzle, the everlasting mystery, provides as much a source of fascination (which invariably turns morbid when efforts are undertaken to “engage” with the other side) as a vital stimulus for their creative work. According to Michael Wood, death in Nabokov’s novel is illustrative of the complex dynamic between the author and his work, thus the concept, on the surface, seems to be “almost always seen as a rough interruption, a violent discourtesy, a surprise” (the examples he gives are Lolita and Humbert Humbert, Adam Krug, Cincinnatus C., Luzhin).³ Structurally, however, these deaths recall what Ernest Hemingway once said about the conclusion of a story: “All stories, if continued far enough, end in death, and he is no true story-teller who would keep that from you.”⁴ A theory parallel to that was addressed by Boyd, by way of reference to a conversation between Shade and Kinbote, in which the former says: “Life is a great surprise. I do not see why death should not be an even greater one.”⁵ The meaning of this may be fairly straightforward: death, on account of its unpredictability, is, for the most part, a surprising event. Boyd suggested instead that Shade may be hinting at the reverse: that death is more than a matter of pure contingency.⁶ Such interpretation is, in fact, more in line with the underlying thesis, of both the poem and its commentary, that the body and the soul are only bound up

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 87.

² *Invitation to a Beheading*, p. 157.

³ Wood, Michael. *The Magician’s Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (London: Random House, 1995), p. 203.

⁴ Hemingway, Ernest. *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribner’s, 1932), p. 283.

⁵ Nabokov. *Pale Fire*, p. 225.

⁶ Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 663.

with one another under the law of nature. Kinbote, who occasionally disputes Shade's assumption of the afterlife, has his view unknowingly converted as he plows through the poem: of suicide, he calls it a mere "shedding of one's body"; and on the signs of God, he is moved to comment:

When the soul adores Him Who guides it through mortal life, when it distinguishes His sign at every turn of the trail, painted on the boulder and notched in the fir trunk, when every page in the book of one's personal fate bears His watermark, how can one doubt that He will also preserve us through eternity?¹

In philosophy, the perspective is of a signally dualist leaning, which holds that death only annihilates the physical part of a human totality.² As mentioned earlier, one of the recurring ideas in Nabokov's work is the survival of the human soul or consciousness in death (in more theoretical terms, the artificiality or the strict biologicality of death) – what it serves to point up is not so much death itself or the possible existence after death as mortality, the individual life *in toto*. Hence, as it establishes subsequently, the intrinsic connection between afterlife and the fear of death.

Another notable aspect with the death scenes in Nabokov's novels is how they are often testaments to the author's unique style and imagination (as in, to cite a few examples, the final moments of Luzhin, Smurov of *The Eye*, Martin Edelweiss, Cincinnatus C., Ada and Van, Hugh Person). One may argue that those implausible depictions are less the results of outlandish inventiveness than attempts at symbolic representation of what, at bottom, is a "possible impossibility." Accordingly, life is the paradigm on which the speculative image of death is based. When Humbert Humbert says that "everything presupposes something beyond it," the emphasis for it, as David S. Rutledge points out, is on the notion that death, in theory, signifies only a physical finish, and not a categorical termination to the indeterminate extent

¹ Nabokov. *Pale Fire*, p. 202, 209.

² See Perry, John. *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978); Hasker, William. *The Emergent Self* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) and Price, H. H., "Survival and the Idea of 'Another World'" (1953) in John Hick ed., *Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970), pp. 370-93, in which the author attempts to "build up" his version of an afterlife and all its components.

of human existence.¹ This is apparent especially in light of Nabokov's avowed disbelief in time's linearity, and, as such, life and death are both parts of an endless, cyclical movement. In his analysis of the final climax of *The Defense*, Boyd observes that Luzhin's death is played out in a way which suggests a "return 'home' to the past."² The past, to Luzhin, symbolises haven, comfort and *defense*; to find oneself reverted to one's past in death means, Boyd continues, to restore the fundamental goodwill on "a level beyond life that does not scant the difficulties of life at *this* level."³ In other words, the hypothesis of the continuance of life beyond death cannot be predicated on the elimination of the dividing line, however tenuous and exceedingly attenuated, between the two opposite realms.

In conclusion, death in Nabokov's fiction is generally rendered a concept of negativity whose essence is nonetheless grounded in life. On the reverse side of the matter, life acquires its richness and profundity by dint of the certainty of death – as according to Bataille, the power of death "signifies that this real world can only have a neutral image of life."⁴ That is to say, we only obtain the supreme knowledge of life the moment it gives out. For the living, therefore, the meaning of life derives in large part from its association with, and its present and provisional separation from, death. In a condolence letter to Gilberte, wife of his brother Kirill, who died suddenly from a heart attack, Nabokov closes out with this hopeful message: "It is a very meagre consolation, I know, but one truth is undeniable: the only thing the death of a beloved person cannot take away from us is the living, colored image of him which remains with us like a benediction and a promise."⁵ Here, in endorsing the power of memory, Nabokov foregrounds a looming reality: the living has absolutely no access to what lies beyond its horizon. Hence the ultimately abortive practice of bridging the gulf of the two irreconcilable worlds by conjuring up past events and remembered images of the dead. Alfred Appel, Jr. remarks in his commentary on *Lolita* that Nabokov, despite his flair for the paradoxical, the improbable, and the parodic, which frequently confers on the relationships between the subject matter

¹ Nabokov. *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 283. Rutledge, David S. *Nabokov's Permanent Mystery: The Expression of Metaphysics in His Work* (London: Mcfarland & Company, 2011), p. 80.

² Boyd. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, p. 336.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Bataille. *Theory of Religion*, p. 49.

⁵ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Selected Letters, 1940-1977*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli (San Diego: Harcourt, 1989), p. 355.

and the reader, and that between the author and the subject matter, a sense of studied remoteness, not infrequently extends gestures of sympathy towards his hapless characters; and it is often in sending them off to an untimely, convenient demise that the author betrays most markedly his sorrow and contrition. Thus Appel, Jr. supposes that Nabokov in his depiction of death invariably underscores the “real suffering” for the living - through which and for which the notion “death” possesses meaning and signification – is, in short, affirmed.¹

The conception of death, we may conclude, means little other than re-establishing the terms of the living. It is impossible to embellish the future events of death with any substantive details. In the postscript to *L'Abbé C* (1950), the narrator says in response to a question about the meaning of death: “... for the living to forget that they are alive to the same extent to which those who are dying forget that they are dying...That's impossible.”² Human consciousness unfailingly stands in the way, for between life and death there exists not a definite line of separation, but levels of conceptual difference. Bataille writes in *On Nietzsche* that the future is “not a prolonging of the self through time but the occurrence of surpassing, going further than the limits reached.”³ Thus death is the *surpassing* of human existence, of life at once denied and fulfilled - a fulfillment that takes the form of an excess that is also a *void*.

¹ Nabokov. *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 378.

² Bataille, Georges. *L'Abbé C*, trans. Philip A. Facey (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 127.

³ Bataille, Georges. *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 5.

Chapter Five: Evil and Excess

Mere parsimony is not economy...Expense, and great expense, may be an essential part of true economy.

- Edmund Burke, *A Letter to a Noble Lord*¹

I. Evil and Good

As noted throughout the thesis, Bataille's explanation for the heterogeneous involves a set of designations and terminology that, unless specified, are basically revolving on the same kernel of thought. That kernel of thought, however, cannot be encapsulated in any individual notion or expression, for to do so exposes the inadequacy of such method, through which the intended object (or abstraction) becomes mired in a farrago of its facsimiles and approximations. The epithet "impossible" seems apt enough, but, admittedly, it characterises the dominant quality, as well as the general view, rather than the essence and the actual content, of the heterogeneous. In which stead we may resort to the established facts: the world that we inhabit is a homogeneous world, to which we owe our provisional status as a *thing*, until death, the only viable access to the world of the heterogeneous, severs this thralldom in an event that fails to register much significance with the consequence, since the faculty that is needed for the purpose is irrevocably and finally engulfed by the abyss of nothingness.

In terms of evoking the heterogeneous proper, the thesis has offered a number of plausible means that suffice at most to *narrow*, but not completely bridge, the chasm between the two contrary worlds. Despite this failure, they all possess a frenzied urge to be free from their homogeneous bondage, which usually finds expression in the revolt against the prevailing order of things. By way of concluding the previous arguments, two concepts are introduced: Evil and excess, the former denoting those phenomena's opposition to the life-affirming values and ideologies, to the Good of

¹ Burke, Edmund. *A Letter to a Noble Lord and Other Writings*, ed. W. Murison, M. A. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 140.

the world; the latter their chief principle and predominant spirit.

*

In distinguishing between sexuality (a broader category that consists of the productive sexuality and the nonproductive/animalistic one) and eroticism (always unproductive), Bataille, in the second volume of *The Accursed Share*, contends that “only eroticism is evil for evil’s sake...”¹ Here, “evil” signifies not so much an immorality (the word’s original meaning) as a void of sense and purpose. A pure evil act has no end attached to its operation and existence, nor is it to be treated automatically as negative. In the case of eroticism, as we know, the unbridled pleasure transcends all moral valuations; it is mainly with regards to its function and utility, both of which are marks of a steadfastly homogeneous property, that the notion is assigned a meaning, a reason not to be prohibited *in toto*.

This is a curse that, as has been pointed out repeatedly throughout the thesis, such transgressive activities have to live with: their orientation towards the impossible is always grounded and partly fuelled (in the basic sense that the impossibility becomes a goal) by the possible. A “sovereign man” is thus in essence still a human - Bataille quotes Sade: “[...] for the complete man, who is mankind’s all in all, no evil is possible.”² Not deterred in his investigation into the continual tension between the possible and the impossible, Bataille, in consideration of the acknowledged difficulty, occasionally allowed for a more practicable one between the possible and the quasi-impossible. His later definition of Evil stresses this urge to strive for some degree of clarification: “Evil”, he writes in *Eroticism*, “is not transgression, it is transgression condemned. Evil is in fact sin.”³ In light of Bataille’s main thesis of transgression - that, in general, transgression is permitted its place in the social milieu by being made a taboo (and thus stunted of its potential for further, inconceivable growth) - there is no absolute Evil. Erotic pleasure is thought to plunge “deep into Evil” without *becoming* it; sacrifice, in its primitive form, presents Evil as a gift exclusively for the privileged one(s) (the victim(s)). And unless a wanton and indiscriminate annihilation

¹ Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share: Vols. II & III*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 68.

² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

³ Bataille, Georges. *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), p. 127.

is its intended result, violence is equally insufficient for acquiring a direct knowledge of Evil.

Until the publication of *Literature and Evil* in 1957, the notion of Evil, often construed as interchangeable with sovereignty (to a certain extent, that is), was relatively sidelined in Bataille's philosophical arguments. The book is the philosopher's most thorough and illuminating account of Evil as an individual subject of study. In its preface, the moral aspect of Evil is underlined: "I believe that the Evil - an acute form of Evil - which it expresses, has a sovereign value for us. But this concept does not exclude morality: on the contrary, it demands a hypermorality."¹ On the surface, this hypermorality seems to be merely instantiating Nietzsche's "beyond good and evil": whereas the latter stresses the perspectival nature of knowledge as necessarily transcending universal morality, Bataille aims for a moral device that caters to extreme, sovereign abstractions. It is therefore in his terms that Evil "is not only the dream of the wicked: it is to some extent the dream of Good. Death is the punishment, sought and accepted for this mad dream, but nothing can prevent the dream from having been dreamt."² This is further elaborated a few pages later: "[...] the deliberate creation of Evil – that is to say, wrong – is acceptance and recognition of Good. It pays homage to it and, by calling itself wicked, it admits that it is relative and derivative – that it could not exist without Good."³ Could Bataille be demonstrating his belief in the unity of opposites? It is worth remembering that the Good and Evil in this context refer to a set of moral rules that are subjected to periodic modifications; but, in principle, the dualism is an entrenched, historical one wherein the Good always symbolises all that is accepted by society (thus deemed morally good), and the Evil (morally bad) is what needs to be rooted out for the well-being of the mass. In this, the dynamics between Good and Evil resemble that between taboo and transgression, in the sense that neither Good nor Evil has the absolute upper-hand.

Since Evil is tied into the sovereign, the "preference for the present moment is [its] common definition."⁴ Ideally, this repudiation of duration also means that the

¹ Bataille, Georges. *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 3.

² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

concept is in no way associated with an end in view: “We cannot consider that actions performed for a material benefit express Evil [...] If a man kills for a material advantage his crime only really becomes a purely evil deed if he actually enjoys committing it, independently of the advantage to be obtained from it.”¹ Here, again, is the recurring dilemma with Bataille’s attempt to theorise heterology: if the killer enjoys too much his evil deed, his pleasure soon becomes the advantage, the unavowed incentive. A conspicuous case in point is Sade, who held that Evil lies in the root of human nature. The hyperbolisation of sexual drama in his work serves mainly in underpinning such thought, and secondly in causing a social uproar so outrageous that the author himself was made not only a cause célèbre, but also, what Bataille termed, a “foreign body.” A foreign body lives from being perpetually expelled as a form of human excrement - strictly speaking, Sade was only a foreign body to the extent that his work and person were outlawed by the public. Thanks to his detractors and worshippers alike, the foreign body that was so strenuously and consciously conceived came to be reabsorbed (a foreign body must be absorbed before it can be expelled) in the end.²

Overall, Bataille’s philosophy was too forthright with its faults and limitations to be compared to an extreme kind of applied Sadeism. We see, as in other of his writings, how Bataille submits openly to the inconvenient conclusion early on in *Literature and Evil*: “Evil is no longer as irrevocably opposed to the natural order as it exists within the limitations of reason. Since death is the condition of life, Evil, which is essentially cognate with death, is also, in a somewhat ambiguous manner, a basis of existence.”³ This way of objectifying Evil presupposes, like the conception of the sovereign man, a paradigm that enables a metaphysical breaching of men’s

¹ Bataille. *Literature and Evil*, p. 11.

² Bataille writes, in “The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade”:

The behaviour of Sade’s admirers resembles that of primitive subjects in relation to their king, whom they adore and loathe, and whom they cover with honours and narrowly confine. In the most favourable cases, the author of *Justine* is in fact thus treated as any given *foreign body*; in other words, he is only an object of transports of exaltation to the extent that these transports facilitate his excretion...

Bataille, Georges. “The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade” (1929) in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Lesley Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 92.

³ *Literature and Evil*, p. 21.

subjection to the world of things; the implicit purpose is thus to confer on the concept some degree of probability without appropriating completely its sovereign character. The context is important in coming to a better understanding of the paradox that arises from the elementary difficulty of concretising the dialectic itself; in accordance with Bataille's tendency, as shown in previous chapters, to oscillate, in a single argumentation (and not infrequently in a single *utterance*), between two obverse views, his avowal of Evil's existence "within the limitations of reason" is followed by a restatement of the primary discipline:

Though the being is not doomed to Evil, he must try to avoid becoming enclosed within the limitations of reason. He must first accept these limitations and acknowledge the necessity of calculated interest, but he also must know that an irreducible, sovereign part of himself is free from the limitations and the necessity which he acknowledges.¹

Bataille's entire program, in short, occupies itself essentially with the evocation of the "sovereign part" of every individual. It needs to be said that, for Bataille, the "summit" of human endeavours does not always amount to an indomitable supremacy (more often, the abyss is "the summation of the leap.")² For this reason, he was most critical of Hegel's embrace of "absolute knowledge", which the German philosopher posited as originating from a high plane of self-knowing, and which stands for the prime standpoint of all conceptual/epistemological systems. The quest for absolute knowledge, no more fruitful than that for nonknowledge, is even more dependent on the primacy of work; the main deficiency of Hegel's methodology, as Bataille diagnoses in *Inner Experience*, lies in his fear of "accepting evil" and in his "shrinking back from the way of ecstasy (from the only direct resolution of anguish) [...] to take refuge in a sometimes effective (when he wrote or spoke), but essentially vain attempt at equilibrium and harmony with the existing, active, official world."³

One should not suppose thence that equilibrium is dispensable in Bataille's philosophy, even though he does claim, in the preface to *Literature and Evil*, that

¹ Bataille. *Literature and Evil*, p. 29.

² Bataille, Georges. *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 25.

³ Bataille, Georges. *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 240.

“turmoil is fundamental to my entire study.”¹ On the surface, his thinking indeed presents a decisive antithesis to the Hegelian rigour or other formalist ideologies, but, on the whole, “turmoil” infects more of its temperament than of its overall structure and content. This can be observed in the central thesis of *The Trials of Gilles de Rais* (1959), which exposes a sensibility, solemn and meticulous, that appears rather incongruous for an account of violent criminality. Gilles de Rais, whose monstrous crimes included the killing and the sodomising of an incalculable number of children, was considered by Bataille one of the rare examples in history where true sovereignty is successfully summoned and practised in real life. His reprehensible deeds required no explanation or justification, for they were apparently the result of living solely “for his evil pleasure and evil delight, to no other end or with no other intention, without anyone’s counsel and only in accordance with his imagination.”² It has been widely speculated that de Rais’s murderous impulse had much to do with his involvement in occultism; Bataille, in his account, consciously evades enlarging on such possible connection. He does, however, wonder at one point if de Rais, by “living sovereignly”, had in fact found in such lifestyle a meaning, if not an established goal, which all his actions could more or less hinge on.³

Precisely to what extent, one might want to ask, can an evil act, or a person of evil disposition, be deemed as veritably and indisputably Evil? Bataille’s friend Pierre Klossowski, in the 1947 version of the “Esquisse”, contends that absolute evil is the prescribed goal of an individuated ego returning to its primordial state. Like Sade, Klossowski was of the view that every man is born with a demonic streak; subsequent contact with civilisation transforms this natural cruelty into an informed, adulterated aggressivity, which, in normal conditions, is kept in abeyance unless roused by special triggers. Were the being to “renaturalise” its cruelty, it needs to assume a *propre monde*, a realm that sets itself apart from the world, wherein the individuated ego reigns supreme. The being thus makes itself into a “foreign body”, which Klossowski, in the essay, models on the figure of a virgin; in his 1967 essay, however, the virgin is replaced by a whore, which is a more fitting metaphor for an

¹ *Literature and Evil*, p. 3.

² Bataille, Georges. *The Trial of Gilles de Rais*, trans. Richard Robinson (Los Angeles: Amok, 1991), p. 253.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

ego whose retained purity is implicit in sin.¹

Klossowski's extreme vision in the main echoes his reading of Sade. In *Sade My Neighbour* (1975), Klossowski discerns three main stages which constitute Sade's ideology: Man against God, Man against Nature, Man against his own self. The rule then follows that if Man is Evil it is due to the absence of God, and if Man revolts against Nature he has his own fundamental nature to answer for. Both of these circumstances invariably culminate in the destruction of the self in apathy.² In Bataille's formulation, there is a crucial stage that lies between the aspiration of Evil and the final outcome of apathy: the utilisation of Good (on the basis of Good's constancy and immediate availability). This signifies as much the essential difference between the foreign body and the sovereign man as it does the inexorable burden of Good that Evil must reckon with. As Denis Hollier puts it, in Bataille's philosophy "Evil does not exist independently of the interdiction which is the limit of the Good; beyond this limit reigns only another Good; not Evil. Evil never reigns..."³ This stipulation of no assertion of power, which, by definition, applies to all heterogeneous concerns, entails an eschewal also of justification and language. It seems imperative, therefore, that, so far as the particular setting of ours can call forth at the most a partial compliance of such stipulation, a sharper line needs to be drawn between the concepts of evil and Evil.

II. The Composite Forms of Evil

But a clear-cut differentiation in this case is rather problematic: for how much of evil is contained in Evil, and vice versa? The question, in relation to Bataille's entire thought of heterology, comes to bear on two important aspects: the validity of the quest for the heterogeneous and the intellectual ineptitude regarding our going beyond the homogeneous. In this, Nick Land's tribute to Bataille cannot be more revealing: "Bataille is a philosopher not of indifference, but of evil, of an evil that will always be the name for those processes that flagrantly violate all human utility, all

¹ See Gallop, Jane. *Intersections: A Reading of Sade with Bataille, Blanchot, and Klossowski* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), p. 102.

² Klossowski, Pierre. *Sade My Neighbour*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), pp. 99-102.

³ Hollier, Denis. *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), p. 130.

accumulative reason, all stability and all sense.”¹ The emphasis here is on “process” - the processes provoked by an active consciousness, and with which evil strives to attain to a more sublimated state (to Evil, that is). Sacrifice prefigures the possible success of such attempt; it is, in Bataille’s words, “on the side of evil, it is *necessary* evil...” (italics added)² For the victim, his death dissolves his tie with the world, but such a result is inevitably bound up with an interest external to the phenomenality of death itself (a death that is induced for its own sake still falls short of representing accurately the heterogeneous proper). Hence the necessity that comes with the evil, the transposition of sanctity to a secular plane.

One frequently discerns in Bataille’s thesis a struggle to make Evil, and indeed any of the heterogeneous matter, a more insular construct. This is especially evident with *Literature and Evil*, wherein the “inherently moral aspect” of Evil as a sovereign experience is implied.³ It seems then that the postulation of “hypermorality” is a kind of palimpsest to the traditional mode. Similarly, with Nietzsche’s call for a moral judgment that goes “beyond good and evil”, there seems to underlie the original aim of demolishing traditional morality, which Nietzsche assumes to be stemming mainly from personal prejudice, other tacit agendas.⁴ In her book on the philosophy of evil (*The Atrocity Paradigm*, 2002), Claudia Card rejects Nietzsche’s ambiguous moral position as liable to give rise to “ideological abuse” on account of its implicit supersession of the good. The main focus of interest here, as the title of the book indicates, is the *atrocities* brought on by culpable wrongdoing, and how Nietzsche’s theory actively downplays the legitimacy of victimhood - to Card’s mind, an evil transcended or transvaluated is an evil absolved.⁵

¹ Land, Nick. *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism (An Essay in Atheistic Religion)* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 41.

² Bataille. *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 28.

³ Mithchell, Andrew J. and Winfree, Jason Kemp, “Editors’ Preface” in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille*, ed. Andrew J. Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), p. 17.

⁴ In the work that followed, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Nietzsche characterises the prevailing morality in Europe as “herd-animal morality” which was generated from the *ressentiment* of the slave for the master. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 40.

⁵ The one angle missing in Card’s theory is the investigation of the evil motives of the perpetrators. Card, Claudia. *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 9, 15, 27-49.

As is often the case, however, the moral aspect of a given subject yields a falsified representation. With evil, morality cannot but fix it within the category of generalised vices, of the irreversibly bad. Kant, without completely forgoing the moral vantage point, contends, in *Religion Within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (1793), that evil is born out of the absence of absolute good will - that is to say, the negative quality is embedded in human nature. Acknowledging this reality does not, Kant warns, make excusable the bad behaviours and transgressions: the promotion of self-interest is rated as the worst form of evil, since it suggests a barefaced contempt of all moral laws.¹ This putative “corruption of will”, as Kant terms it, under normal conditions, hardly causes any serious disruption to the immutable inner structure of society or human history, nor will it evolve into a more radical kind which does without the imperative of selfhood.²

Despite its lack of a unitary thesis, Kant’s theory has supplied a crucial reference for future philosophical writings on the nature of evil. Most notably, Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), borrows the term “radical evil” to describe a type of political and/or ideological tyranny whose capacity rests on the idea that nothing is impossible.³ Twelve years later, as Arendt shifted her attention from the political system to the individual culpability (or, to some degree, epitomisation) of radical evil, she modified her prior view. In her scintillating report on the trial of Nazi functionary Adolf Eichmann (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 1963), Arendt attributes the criminal mind not to the inexplicableness of pure monstrous motives, but to “sheer thoughtlessness - something by no means identical with stupidity...”⁴ Banality, as the book’s subtitle (*A Report on the Banality of Evil*) implies, is the main contributing factor to an evil that manages without a teleological basis. It is not so much the thesis itself that is controversial but the marked offhandedness with which it is expounded: Arendt, shortly after the publication of her book, wrote to philosopher Gershom Scholem:

¹ The other two evils are human frailty and impurity, in which the moral laws are recognised but failed to be followed through. Kant, Immanuel. *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2009), pp. 41-43.

² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³ Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1976), pp. 437-59.

⁴ Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), pp. 287-88.

[...] I changed my opinion and do no longer speak of “radical evil” [...] It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never “radical”, that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension [...] It is “thought-defying”, as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its “banality”. Only the good has depth that can be radical.¹

These statements touch on - perhaps unintentionally - the core elements of Bataille’s Evil: that the concept defies dialectical thought and reason, that it cannot be measured against homogeneous reality, that it is, above all, NOTHING. Evil is only opposed to Good - an opposition that is also a connection of sort (in the sense that the former is thus assimilated into the world of things) - for the benefit of a perspective that fails to surmount - or it may be said as too ready to surmount - the barrier of a signifiatory system. In other words, there is no Evil without Good, a truism that explains virtually all the heterogeneous abstractions. Arendt’s conclusive remark rings true in this context: “Only the good has depth that can be radical” - Evil posits not so much a point of extreme as an abyss, a void that, indeed, derives from the concrete, the meaningful.

*

In Nabokov’s novels, the good and the evil, like other common dichotomies, are not always conceived as antipodal. An objectionable character is just as likely to succumb to paroxysms of true humane sentiments as it is for an all-around moralist indulging in some venial crimes on the sly. They are, after all, flesh and blood in essence - at least according to the author.² And yet we have also seen how their

¹ Quoted from Bernstein, Richard J., “Did Hannah Arendt Change Her Mind? From Radical Evil to the Banality of Evil” in *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, Larry May & Jerome Kohn ed. (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1997), p. 129. Until recently, however, scholars have continued to contest Arendt’s terminology for describing what may be roughly summed up as the prevalence of evil in ordinary conditions, see Card, Claudia. *Confronting Evils: Terrorism, Torture, Genocide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), and Calder, Todd. “The Apparent Banality of Evil: The Relationship between Evil Acts and Evil Character”, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Volume 34, Issue 3, Sep. 2003, and Calder, Todd. “The Prevalence of Evil” in *Evil, Political Violence and Forgiveness*, Andrea Veltman and Kathryn Norlock ed. (Lanham: Lexington Books, pp. 13-34).

² In a 1969 interview with Alden Whitman of *New York Times*, Nabokov stresses the importance of making fictional character believable: “My creatures are not more preoccupied with the past than any other novelist’s creature. Most of mine [...] must die someday one way or another. Generally speaking, the immortality of a fictional character admits of two interpretations, e.g. he is a non-mortal young

supposed well-roundedness and psychological complexity are ultimately overpowered by their maker's paternalistic control.

Arendt relates how Eichmann, during his incarceration, was given *Lolita* as reading material and returned it two days later complaining of its "unwholesome" content. Leland De la Durantaye, in citing this particular account, wonders if the book should therefore be treated as "a sort of litmus test for radical evil."¹ What he means here is not entirely clear - was Eichmann's distaste for the book an incontestable proof of the radical evil within him? Or is de la Durantaye hinting at a more intrinsic connection between the two?

This is rather a baffling speculation since what brought *Lolita* and Eichmann together in the first place might be no more than a fortuitous circumstance, or, given that the guard who gave Eichmann the book was charged with the latter's "mental and psychological well-being," the result of a temporary lapse of judgement and apprehension.² But Eichmann's squeamish response did raise intrigued questions regarding his own understanding of the severity of his crimes and, more important, the certain personality aspects that make up a villain - would not Eichmann, de la Durantaye suggests, feel at least a slight conscience tug when skimming through the "various and vile machinations of Nabokov's creation?"³

As an immoralist, Humbert Humbert is decidedly unapologetic but by no means impassive about all he has done. His wickedness is leavened by occasional flashes of introspective reflections and overwrought sentiments. He comments, with growing perspicacity as his illicit affair with *Lolita* is nearing its end:

[...] I often noticed that living as we did, she and I, in a world of total evil, we would become strangely embarrassed whenever I tried to discuss something she and an older friend, she and a parent, she and a really healthy sweetheart,

rabbi; and he represents a deathless old myth." Nabokov, Vladimir. *Think, Write, Speak: Uncollected Essays, Reviews, Interviews, and Letters to the Editors*, ed. Brian Boyd and Anastasia Tolstoy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), p. 471.

¹ De la Durantaye, Leland. *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 2.

² Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 49.

³ De la Durantaye, p. 2.

I and Annabel, Lolita and a sublime, purified, analysed, deified Harold Haze, might have discussed - an abstract idea, a painting, stippled Hopkins or shorn Baudelaire, God or Shakespeare, anything of a genuine kind.¹

In *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), evil is described as residing exclusively in “the lethal side of man.”² All human beings, according to Robert Louis Stevenson, are “commingled out of good and evil”, yet in this particular tale Edward Hyde, “alone in the ranks of mankind, was pure evil.”³ Nabokov, himself scornful of the doppelgänger tradition, attacked the characterisation of Hyde as unpersuasive and flabby.⁴ The conception of the villain was obviously founded less on his resemblance to actual human being - he *is* a fictional character after all - than on the function that he serves in relation to the thematics of the novella. Nabokov disapproved of such a practice, as he said in a lecture on Charles Dickens: “The ‘good’ ones [characters] are often victims of the ‘evil’ ones, but therein lies salvation for the former, perdition for the latter [...] Dickens was too much of an artist to make all this obtrusive or obvious. His people are alive, not merely clothed ideas or symbols.”⁵

To be sure, Hyde is a “clothed symbol” of pure evil only on a superficial level. Nabokov sums up the general readers’ impression: “If we are really being told ‘never mind what the evil was - just believe it was something really bad,’ then we might feel ourselves cheated and bullied.”⁶ But what more should the notion denote other than “something really bad”? This is a question to which even Nabokov failed to provide a straight, convincing answer. Scholars have pointed out that Nabokov, in his conscious evasion of standard moral issues, was by turns “emphatic, and ambiguous, when it came to his thoughts about the afterlife, free will, or the nature of evil.”⁷ Such vacillation was partly indicative of an unwillingness to fall into stereotypes, of

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p. 276.

² Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and Other Tales of Terror*, ed. Robert Mighall (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 58.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (San Diego: Harcourt, 1980), p. 108.

⁵ Ibid., p. 51.

⁶ Ibid., p. 193.

⁷ Rogers, Michael and Sweeney, Susan Elizabeth. “Introduction: Nabokov’s Morality Play” in *Nabokov and the Question of Morality: Aesthetics, Metaphysics, and the Ethics of Fiction*, Michael Rogers & Susan Elizabeth Sweeney ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 9.

an insufficient authority, which is natural to every man, on these abstract conceptions; it also recalled Nabokov's coyness in regards to the subject of religion.¹

Invariably, "emphasis" in Nabokov's technical repertoire meant enlarging on or parodying a given modality or template. Renowned literary scholar Gennady Barabtarlo located in Nabokov's depiction of evil a "gargoyle" principle of intentionally according the concept the "ugliest, highly artistic manifestations" whose origins are easily traceable to traditional or derivative sources.² They are mostly the embodiments of lust or uninhibited passion, of wrongdoings linked with irrepressible human urges. Only when the term is reserved for the condemnation of political oppression and/or criminality in common - most prominently evidenced in Nabokov's Russian novels, poems, autobiographical writings, personal pronouncements - does it symbolise moral depravity, "something really bad." Otherwise the dominant thematisation in Nabokov's work seems, Barabtarlo argues, "neutral toward the divide between good and evil" which, in his later novels especially, culminates in the "savoring [of] evil."³

As an ostensibly descriptive epithet, evil, in Nabokov's fiction, becomes almost a byword for the motif of dangerous, solipsistic obsession. Luzhin, having been told to abstain from playing chess after his breakdown, is unfailingly attuned to, from time to time, the "music of the chessboard's evil lure."⁴ In his analysis of the book, Vladimir E. Alexandrov perceives that the central duality between spirit and matter shades into the interplay between good and evil.⁵ But Luzhin's ability to tell between spirit and matter, it needs to be reminded, is exceedingly beclouded as he sinks ever deeper into the all-consuming psychological drama of chess-playing - in which case, what is good and what is evil appear, to Luzhin, fused as well. The "evil" is also the good, and more important, it indicates certain blind spots of human perception. Another of Nabokov's hapless odd men out, Pnin, is no stranger to such

¹ Most specifically, his memorable response about God in an interview: "I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more." Nabokov, Vladimir. *Strong Opinions* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 45.

² Barabtarlo, Gennady. "By Trial and Terror" in *Nabokov and the Question of Morality: Aesthetics, Metaphysics, and the Ethics of Fiction*, p. 98.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁴ Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Luzhin Defense*, trans. Michael Scammell in collaboration with the author (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 187.

⁵ Alexandrov, Vladimir E. "The Defense" in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, Vladimir E. Alexandrov ed. (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 80.

condition: "Vision was but oval pain with oblique stabs of light; familiar shapes became the breeding places of evil delusions."¹

De la Durantaye sums up aptly that evil "is a word that rarely helps us understand - or limit - what we bring under its dark heading."² In Nabokov's novel the concept takes on the divergent connotations of the unfathomable/dimly perceivable but fails to be registered as tenable, considered truth, and the immanent in the sense of its proximity with human conditions. As such, evil bespeaks some aspects of the heterogeneous - Bataille says of the knowledge, at once intrinsic and elusive, of the sovereign: "The animal opens before me a depth that attracts me and is familiar to me. In a sense, I know this depth: it is my own. It is also that which is farthest removed from me, that which deserves the name depth, which means precisely *that which is unfathomable to me.*"³ A certain Judge Bald in *Ada* rules that the "deliberate suppression of a possible benefit for the sake of avoiding a probable evil" - in short, the suppression of passion and lust - is an "infringement of one of humanity's main rights - that of enjoying the liberty of its evolution, a liberty no other creature had ever known."⁴ This is a view shared by, to mention a handful of notable instances, Humbert Humbert, who blames his pederosis to an overall lack of affectation and artifice in his personal acts ("I have but followed nature. I am nature's faithful hound."); by the narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, taking note of an odd-sounding but fairly logical thought: "I believe that granting 'sex' a special situation when tackling a human problem, or worse still, letting the 'sexual idea', if such a thing exists, pervade and 'explain' all the rest is a grave error of reasoning."⁵ And by Kinbote, whose adolescent sexual encounter tallies with, and reinforces, the foreknowledge of death:

Soon after the discovery of the secret passage he almost died of pneumonia. In his delirium he would strive one moment to follow a luminous disk probing an endless tunnel and try the next to clasp the melting haunches of his fair ingle. To recuperate he was sent for a couple of seasons to southern Europe.

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Prin* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 15.

² De la Durantaye, p. 21.

³ Bataille, Georges. *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 2012), p. 22.

⁴ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), p. 131.

⁵ *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 135; *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: Vintage International, 1992), p. 88.

The death of Oleg at fifteen, in a toboggan accident, helped to obliterate the reality of their adventure.¹

If evil is therefore perceived as an avatar of the themes of sex and death and their interconnectedness, its essence is identifiable with the product of heterogeneous movement - suspending between the known and the unknown, the negative and the annulling of the negative (the non-negative).² In that sense, Nabokov's evil may be said to root in the Batailleian moral ambivalence with respect not so much to its open defiance of the normative system itself, as to its unavoidable reliance on such a system to manifest, as it were, its monist leanings.

III. Excess and the Impossible Thought of Nonknowledge

As we may gather, evil, or Evil, can serve as an elemental index of the heterogeneous proper only providing that it is not to be opposed to Good. In Bataille's initial definition, Evil represents the victory of an unconsidered, disinterested transgression - not in the way that the act is finally transcended but on account of its subsequent "condemnation", which is attempted without the imperative of language and action. Hence the tacit admission that "evil does not survive to be judged", which is itself, according to Land, "utterly simple yet ungraspable" if the word is understood alongside its profane (as synonymous with homogeneous, of this world) trappings and associative senses.³

At first glance, the notion of "excess" provides, in the interest of finding an apposite symbol of the heterogeneous - the heterogeneous as inexorably refracted by the homogeneous - and Bataille's philosophy as a whole, a less confusing and misguided candidate. It also explains a condition inherent in human existence: "On the surface of the globe, for living matter in general, energy is always in excess; the question is always posed in terms of extravagance."⁴ Bataille made this the premise of the first

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pale Fire* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1992), p. 128.

² As highlighted throughout the thesis, such annulment cannot take the form of mere transcendence. Bataille writes in *Theory of Religion*: "It is only within the limits of the human that the transcendence of things in relation to consciousness (or of consciousness in relation to things) is manifested." Bataille. *Theory of Religion*, pp. 23-24.

³ Land, p. 50.

⁴ Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share: Vol. I*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 23.

volume of *The Accursed Share*, which was devoted to the study of a movement of “excess energy [...] translated into the effervescence of life.”¹ Erotic activities are the less destructive means of dispensing with such energy, whereas violence is sometimes the unavoidable outlet. Bataille issues a timely injunction in the following books:

We need to make a principle of the fact that sooner or later the sum of excess energy that is managed for us by a labor so great that it limits the share available for erotic purposes will be spent in a catastrophic war.

Of course, it would be childish to conclude right away that if we relaxed more and gave the erotic game a larger share of energy the danger of war would decrease. It would decrease only if the easing off occurred in such a way that the world did lose an already precarious equilibrium.²

And as eroticism predicated on the volatility of violence, so does any inclination towards excess. “In the domain of our life”, Bataille writes in *Eroticism*, “excess manifests itself in so far as violence wins over reason.”³ The statement may be further elaborated into the following aspects:

- 1) Once the initial paroxysms of violence evolve into a more systematic aggregate of controlled, calculated impulses, the excess is reclaimed and utilised for a new cycle of production. Theoretically speaking, no activity that (purportedly) centres on the apparent *unreason* of excess ever lives up to its unattainable objective. War, as we have learned, is the epitome of the constructive exploitation of collective aggression, whereas potlatch, on the surface a feast demonstrating unexampled largesse, is in fact, in the words of Bataille, “at once a surpassing of calculation and the height of calculation.”⁴
- 2) To expend the excess through those radical methods is to reaffirm and to

¹ Ibid., p. 10.

² Bataille. *The Accursed Share: Vols. II & III*, p. 188. Most of the later part of *The Accursed Share* were written during the last years of World War II. Bataille finished the third volume, and went back to revising the earlier part, a few years after the end of war.

³ Bataille. *Eroticism*, p. 41.

⁴ *The Accursed Share: Vols. II & III*, p. 47.

promulgate the Hegelian model of societal structure (wherein the master-slave hierarchical pattern reigns).

- 3) Our minds cannot, as a rule, grasp the essence of excess unless it renounces all cognitive faculties. At the most, the conversion of reason to *beyond* reason (an inescapable route for all men) might be approximated.¹ The matter can be treated either with reference to the metaphysical fact: “[...] excess itself is a given of the mind of man. This given is conceived by this mind, it is conceived in its limits.”² Or, allusively, in terms of the versatility of poetic language: “[...] poetry is the power of words to evoke effusion, through the excessive expenditure of its own forces: in this way, poetry adds to the determined effusion (comic, tragic...) not only the flow and rhythm of verses, but the particular faculty of disordered images to annihilate the ensemble of signs that is the sphere of activity.”³

- 4) In continuance with the previous point, language constitutes the main obstacle that lies between excess and man’s limited intellectual capacity. Bataille declares in the preface to *Madame Edwarda* that “excess is by very definition the factor that sets being beyond the limits of definition.”⁴ The notion then is comparable with death in that it entails the final dissolution of personhood and its circumscribed authority. Yet it may also be argued that one is likelier to incline towards excess than death, in much the same way that one prefers the implied danger of eroticism to death’s foregone conclusion. Bataille sums up the central paradox: “Being is also the excess of being, the upward surge towards the impossible.”⁵

In *Eroticism*, a distinction has been made regarding this affinity between excess and death: “The excess from which reproduction proceeds and the excess we call death can only be understood with the help of the other. But it is clear from the outset that the two primary taboos affect, firstly, death, and secondly, sexual functions.”⁶ No

¹ That is, from the known to the unknown, *death*.

² Bataille. *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 231.

³ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴ *Eroticism*, p. 268

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

dialectic of the excess that is death - the excess proper - can possibly commence without being automatically redirected to a readily accessible one of the excess vis-à-vis eroticism. Here, we discern a similar guiding principle to that of the sovereign man: a so-called heterogeneous conception is “essentially the embodiment of the one [it] is but is not.”¹ In his 1957 foreword to *Blue of Noon*, Bataille considers excess the “possibilities of life” that appeal rather to “moments of fury” than ordinary minds.² To fulfill such “possibilities” - to go to the extreme of the permissible, of the totality of life itself - the excess must take the form of a “superabundance” in which death is the “inevitable consequence.”³

And since death renders nil all that precedes it, the excessive part of human existence is itself *excessive* to all concerns and interest that hold off the certainty of death. “Excess energy”, Bataille says, “can only be lost without the slightest goal, in consequence without any meaning.”⁴ Philosophers have offered views on the origin and the nature of this “excess energy” through a variety of disciplines ranging from the anthropological to the economic, the naturalist, the ethical, the purely metaphysical. Baudrillard, for instance, claims that the prototype of excess energy is not to be found in nature (the sun/solar energy) but in the symbolic process of exchange that allows an infinitely higher bidding. At the source of this is the gift’s potential for eternal unredeemability - ideally, the gift should be a counter-gift.⁵ Bataille’s reading of Mauss’s work takes a decidedly less formalistic stance in its acknowledgement of the fundamental fallacy of all heterogeneous constructs. But this is not to suggest that the principle of loss, of non-productive expenditure, cannot be derived from mundanity. Material goods such as jewelry, games, art, sacrifice etc. are the typical manifestations of apparently unremunerative activity that, in terms of their operation alone, assume an overall dissonance to the general tenor of our world. But given that they remain subordinated to the margins of existence, the loss is at once premeditated (that it is meant to be brought about) and, in consequence, final.

¹ *The Accursed Share: Vols. II & III*, p. 222.

² Bataille, Georges. *Blue of Noon*, trans. Harry Mathews (London: Paladin Grafton Books, 1988), p. 153.

³ *Eroticism*, p. 101.

⁴ *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 164.

⁵ Bataille, Georges. *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 194.

Hence Bataille's gnostic coinage - the "accursed share" -, which signifies not so much the excess proper as the quantitative property that takes the conceivable form of consumption, and with which Derrida charged Bataille of subjecting the thesis to the problem of "conjectural appropriations."¹ But it needs also to be said that the very notion of the accursed share is *foredoomed* to parody itself (to parody the real, nonverbal "accursed share"); in his thesis, Bataille struggles to devise a framework to accommodate the accursed share's irreducibility to any framework - this is, however, the only viable approach to a thought (although, as a rule, it should *cease* to be a thought) whose essence emerges from the concrete (it is part of a natural phenomenon after all) but is in the main resistant to any representation. Bataille's claim that excess is the "incontestable point of departure" thus belies a frustrated resignation to the impossibility of fully evidencing this intellectual breakthrough.²

As was his wont when it came to navigating the nebulous borderline between non-action (silence) and the primacy of sense and reason, Bataille opted for media of expression that seemingly overcome both the nullification of staying silent and the tendency for language to obscure matters (by confining them to predetermined definitions/semantic groups). Poetry, with its tropism to non-literality, is one of them. Another one which Bataille frequently turned to was hyperbole. There appears no better way to describe excess than through a hermeneutic excess - Sade was a lifelong partisan of the practice, whose beauty and self-gratification he rhapsodised in an erotically charged monologue in *Juliette* (1797):

The excess of your sensibility is extreme, but you have directed its effects in a manner such that it is no longer able to carry you anywhere except into vice. [...] The essential object is therefore, for you, to extend, to aggravate... I am going to say something to you that is a good deal stronger: because having surmounted all barriers as you have, being no longer restrained by anything whatsoever, it is necessary for you to go far. What henceforth inflames your imagination, therefore, will not be anything except the excess which is

¹ Ibid., p. 135.

² Bataille, Georges. *Georges Bataille: Essential Writings*, ed. Michael Richardson (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), p. 76.

strongest, most execrable, the most contrary to divine and human law.¹

Bataille's own indulgence and experiment in the transcendental potential of excess, if somewhat less immersive than Sade's, lent his early writings on the topic a distinctly personal testimony of excess's connection to the history of mankind. In "The Notion of Expenditure" (1933), Bataille blames bourgeois culture for outdating the Sadeian sybaritism: "[...] everything that was generous, orgiastic, and excessive has disappeared [...] wealth is now displayed behind closed doors, in accordance with depressing and boring conventions."² The essay goes on to adduce proofs that the monied class had then attached less importance to prestige and opulence, allowing their hitherto amorphous, carefree existence to be increasingly structured by the concerns of social protocols, taboos, moral obligations, and, ultimately, the power of the state. Such a consequence suggests also the marked difference between surplus and excess: the former ready to be reclaimed for further use, the latter, near indefinable and unobtainable, exists solely to be squandered.

IV. Excess as an Expression of the Heterogeneous

The fundamental problem of excess and its link to the lucidity of self-consciousness find their precise capsule summations in the following quotes from Nietzsche's *Human, All Too Human* (1878):

- 1) "The mother of excess is not joy but joylessness."³
- 2) "The employment of excess as a cure is one of the more refined artifices in the art of living."⁴

To say that "joylessness" is the origin of excess would seem to contradict Bataille's general thesis, wherein the heterogeneous is chiefly thought to be consistent with

¹ Quoted in Land, p. 137.

² Bataille, Georges. "The Notion of Expenditure" (1933) in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, p. 117.

³ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Human, All Too Human*, trans. Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann (London: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 230.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

the extremity of pleasure.¹ But in Nietzsche's definition of joy, one might note, the sentiment is only acquired through certain efforts and at bottom a base achievement that men are urged against. ("Man should not strive after happiness.")² Excess is joyless because it is unpremeditated and unaligned with any particular purpose, a condition which Bataille specified as demanding an absence of emotions. In the sense that anguish reveals the yet-spuriousness of the presence of death, excess is truly a heterogeneous phenomenon when, in Bataille's words, it leaves the "supreme profligate [...] unaffected."³

The second quotation in some way picks up the implication of the first. Excess is joyless, which is to say that any excess in life is indisputably a product of human endeavours. Moreover, this homogeneous excess belies a utilitarian quality: even the apparently senseless killing in a sacrifice is calculated to bring about something beneficial to the living. The distinction between excess as a phenomenological reality (if not a sovereign one) and that as an intangible means is, in this sense, marked only by a tenuous line. Sade, as Bataille maintained frequently, epitomised the failure - or, at best, the Pyrrhic victory- of striving for the sovereign man by way of excessive living. The practice naturally led to the *production* of what were taken as the absolute limits of men's servility to the world, as the moment of self-abnegating transgression. It is without question contrived, a last resort for reconciling an unattainable, overall unrealisable abstraction with the imperative for substantiation; but it is workable in default of a better, all-purpose solution. To Bataille's mind, a blatant perversion of the known is the only key we have to gain possible access of the unknown, given that the latter is soon an unverified (for verification brings us straight back to the cycle of servility) certitude.⁴

¹ Bataille writes in the second volume of *The Accursed Share*: "[...] pleasure, unjustified by any utility, is sovereign insofar as it denies to the point of ecstasy a world that is infinitely deserving of respect." Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Vols II & III*, p. 408.

² Happiness, according to Nietzsche, "is the feeling that power increases - that resistance is being overcome." Quoted in Mencken, H. L. *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Tucson: Sharp Press, 2003), p. 60; Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophise with a Hammer*, trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 12.

³ Bataille. *The Accursed Share: Vols II & III*, p. 183. On anguish, Bataille claims: "Anguish is what makes humankind; not anguish alone, but anguish transcended and the act of transcending it." Bataille. *Eroticism*, p. 86.

⁴ In his account of Sade, Bataille concedes the point that "the cruel monstrosities of Sade have only one meaning: their excessiveness brings out this principle [the principle that sovereignty being the negation of prohibition]." *The Accursed Share: Vols II & III*, p. 254.

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Taken as a whole, Nietzsche's quote ("One can reacquire a taste for one's own talents by revering and enjoying antithetical talents for a long time to excess - the employment of excess as a cure is one of the more refined artifices in the art of living") evinces for the most part the pointer for discovering oneself by way of reversing the regular order of things ("enjoying antithetical talents"). As in Bataille's conceptions, the reverting to one's immanence (to the stage comparable to that of the animal) requires the opposing of the "reality principle with the principle of intimacy."¹ Herein lies the basis for inner experience, which Bataille conceives as in theory the "opposite of action", but which also belongs to the "realm of project" and is therefore led by "discursive reason."²

Violence, eroticism, poetry, sacrifice and excess are such vehicles of actuating the intense operative power of inner experience, insofar as the sovereign appears, for one fleeting instant, vaguely discernible. They all share an emphasis on the pursuit and assertion of power, on the sovereign character of a categorically dialectical process. In the occasions where they may seem to incline towards silence, their apparent renunciation of language does not amount to an absolute wipe-out of other cognitive faculties. The non-verbalised silence succeeds, through some other means, in making itself *known*.

As we have known, Nabokov's writing presents an even more manifest case of wrestling with the language issue - the issue, to be more precise, with language's inexorable insertion into all human contexts of movement and dialectical exchange. In light of its obsessional play with language which threatens to undermine the aesthetic value of the text, *Ada* has been considered by many to be lacking in both moral insight and artistic control. Boyd, however, objected to such a verdict on the strength of the book's challenging but rigorous narrative style which, compared to Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), displays better expertise in packing into "maximum meaning with minimum loss of readability."³ Its technical complexity, Boyd

¹ Bataille. *Theory of Religion*, pp. 96-97.

² *Inner Experience*, p. 46.

³ Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 400 & 457.

maintains, no more mocks the readers' incomprehension than inviting their detection.¹

In regard to the agent to whom the linguistic pyrotechnics are ascribed, Nabokov's character invariably displays a rather facile state of mind. The level of one's intelligence or mental lucidity is unfailingly mirrored in how one speaks. Arguably the most pronounced specimen for this, Humbert Humbert is endowed with an animated prose style that both indicates and constitutes his delusion. His arbitrary reconstruction of the perceived reality - Michael Glynn describes Humbert Humbert's exuberant language as not so much reflecting an "existing reality as construct[ing] a *recherché* counter-reality" - has fed in time into an already morbid self-identification with the Almighty.² Artistic inventiveness may not alter one's destiny or secure the unconditional love of one's inamorato ("Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!"), but it is potent enough to evolve a fairly convincing embroidery wherein a case of child abuse is sublimated into a maudlin and rapturous love affair.³ On another occasion, when confronted with the immense landscape of America, Humbert Humbert responds by way of conflating the scene with the projected ones of European idealism. Recalling his past "hauntings of public parks in Europe", Humbert Humbert, sparing no lascivious detail, tries to recast those escapades in the setting of a "near Arcadian" American wilderness:

[...] in the wilds of America the open-air lover will not find it easy to indulge in the most ancient of all crimes and pastimes. Poisonous plants burn his sweetheart's buttocks, nameless insects sting his; sharp items of the forest floor prick his knees, insects hers; and all around there abides a sustained rustle of potential snakes - *que dis-je*, of semi-extinct dragons! - while crablike seeds of ferocious flowers cling, in a hideous green crust, to gartered black sock and sloppy white sock alike.⁴

As discussed in the thesis, Humbert Humbert's narration walks the wire between style and sense. If it seems as though the concern for sense is progressively

¹ Ibid.

² Glynn, Michael. *Vladimir Nabokov: Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences in His Novels* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 100.

³ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita* (London: Everyman's Library, 1992), p. 33.

⁴ Ibid., p. 170.

undermined, a new “sense” is engendered in its place to reflect a new reality - the reality of the narrator’s own making. Thus we may conclude that language contains a double quality: it assumes the authority of inner impressions as much as distorting the hard facts, the truths. In Nabokov’s terminology, they may as well be regarded as one and the same - “Reality”, Van muses in *Ada*, “better say, lost the quotes it wore like claws - in a world where independent and original minds must cling to things or pull things apart in order to ward off madness or death (which is the master madness).”¹

Any dialectical representation of the heterogeneous would seem to also tend to such an end: that it at once exposes and brings into play (to the extent of total unconsciousness) its deficiencies. Within such deficiencies is the limit that marks the inevitable presence of death - death nullifies the primacy of language, and yet, for us, this is in some respect an *impossibility* for the time being. This paradox, Bataille explains, in fact operates on the Cartesian principle: “For to die humanly, in anguish, is to have the representation of death that enables the dividing of oneself into a present and a future: to die humanly is to have of the future being, of the one who matters most in our eyes, the senseless idea that he is not.”² That is to say that human thoughts and language fail to operate in continuity with the existential plane of a given totality, and for this reason, Bataille questions the technical validity of complete self-knowledge:

In itself science limits consciousness to objects; it does not lead to *self-consciousness* (it can know the subject only by taking it for an object, for a *thing*); but it contributes to the wakefulness by accustoming us to precision and by *disappointing* us: For it acknowledges its limits, it admits its powerlessness to arrive at *self-consciousness*.³

On the surface, Nabokov, with his evident sensitivity towards devices that employ “manifold self-awareness,” appears to hold a different view with regards to what constitutes one’s cognition of individual self-consciousness.⁴ Given, on the other

¹ *Ada*, pp. 219-220.

² Bataille. *The Accursed Share: Vols II & III*, p. 219.

³ *The Accursed Share: Vol. I*, p. 134.

⁴ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 219.

hand, the habitual application in his novel of a parodic design that targets the genre of biography, diary and other confessional modes (*Lolita*, *Despair*, *An Invitation to a Beheading*, *The Gift*, *Transparent Things*, *The Eye*), one senses Nabokov's skepticism for the actual effects and strengths of personal introspection - the so-called "honesty" of self-analysis is ineluctably bound up with the cumulative factors of egotism, which suggests, indeed, nothing less than a subterfuge of "knowing thyself." The failure to transcend solipsism occasions a split within Humbert Humbert's account between blatant fictionalisation and, as it is rendered exceedingly palpable, a strenuous grasp at failing clarity. As shown in the previous chapters, the solipsists of Nabokov's novels are predominantly identified with their fear of mirrors, yet such fear can be easily mastered by way of assimilating the mirror into their established artifice. The resultant reflection is no longer an objective, nonbiased, unadulterated reality, but "reality", wearing its indispensable claws, distorted by the prism of mind, refracted by the "monstrous concavity."¹ The motif also takes on the morbid connotation of no escape, of denial of freedom from abiding obsessions and neuroses - the protagonist of *The Gift* subscribes to the philosophy that our bodily existence compels us to an "earthly house" whose "windows are replaced by mirrors."²

To Bataille's mind, any formal knowledge, such as philosophy, that concerns itself narrowly with objective facts and rigorous systematisation is bound to be enslaved to sterile scholasticism and empty verbiage. "Generally speaking, philosophy is at fault in being divorced from life," writes Bataille in the preface of *Eroticism*.³ But here he runs up against a dilemma: were philosophy and life perceived as a whole, the philosopher cannot assert his stance without contradicting himself. The state of immanence demands that philosophy must be studied in a "vacuum", because, Bataille admits, "it is difficult to live and to philosophise simultaneously."⁴ Language is itself testament to this insuperable difficulty - if we then reach the conclusion that philosophy signifies the death of language, we are able, Bataille concedes, to at most pay a rather "clumsy homage" to such silence.⁵ All pursuits of the sovereign, in their

¹ Nabokov. *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 457.

² Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Gift*, trans. Michael Scammell with the collaboration of the author (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 282.

³ Bataille. *Eroticism*, p. 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

varying degrees of success, achieve at some point a deliberate “silencing” of lucid thoughts. To abandon them altogether, however, would mean the removal of the elemental basis of our proposition - namely, of all that constitutes and defines what we are (of which we are hopeless to attain a full understanding).

Human nature, in Nabokov’s vivid but allusive depiction, is rendered rather a curious conundrum. As we have seen, the recurring theme of cruelty in Nabokov’s work is meant to establish the author as an all-powerful despot in the creative process. Cruelty between the characters being almost as frequent an occurrence as the cruelty which they receive from their “author-maker”, the dominant view that can thus be inferred seems to be one of unrelenting bleakness and of an overall loss of faith in human goodness. According to Appel, Jr., Humbert Humbert and Luzhin are Nabokov’s most “humanised” characters in terms of the degree of “realness” their characterisation possesses.¹ At the opposite pole are Lolita (and the little girl in *The Enchanter*, her precursor), Martha of *King, Queen, Knave*, the totalitarian regime in *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*, and even Pnin, Shade and Ada, whose fictional presence is either arbitrarily obscured by the narrator/author or crowded out by a more assertive one. Such a contrast does not, however, necessarily correspond to how the readers engage with the characters - a painstaking portrait does not always lend itself to ready comprehensibility. In his autobiography, Nabokov descants on this impossibility of fully “immersing” oneself in the book that one is reading; ideally, the reader should adopt a view wherein

[...] every dimension presupposes a medium within which it can act, and if, in the spiral unwinding of things, space warps into something akin to time, and time, in its turn, warps into something akin to thought, then, surely, another dimension follows - a special Space maybe, not the old one, we trust, unless spirals become vicious circles again.²

The desire to abolish the division between time and space, or more precisely, to reduce the stretch of time into a single unit of immediacy and to forthwith

¹ Nabokov. *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 60. Interestingly, Nabokov makes a point in the foreword of *The Luzhin Defense* that the name Luzhin “rhymes with ‘illusion’ if pronounced thickly enough to deepen the ‘u’ into ‘oo.’” *The Luzhin Defense*, p. vii.

² *Speak, Memory*, p. 301.

concretise the abstract property into a three-dimensional space where one might inhabit, had been within Nabokov, unavowed but abiding. We are reminded, again, of this famous assertion also in his autobiography: "I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another."¹ A "writer's covetousness", as we know, can be both a curse and a blessing. It is in the fear of life's inexorable transitoriness that one becomes profoundly attuned to the essence (and deception) of time. Lovers in the fevered grip of passion, or writers consumed by their works and crafts, are, according to Roland Barthes, adept at deploying the "anterior immediacy", a trick notion of perceiving the present as the immediate past (as in photography, to take a photograph is to turn the present moment into a memory - "[...] the photograph is not to represent but to memorialise.")² For Bataille, only animals are privy to the depth of immediacy, from which the world of labour - a world characterised by its irreversible servitude, its "inability to see beyond the useful" - consciously removes itself (even though it may not be wholly foreign to the sentiment).³ Elsewhere he remarks on the difference between our repulsion by sexuality and that by death: the latter is marked by its unhesitating impulsiveness, the former liable to be transformed into pleasure and desire, the requisites of eroticism, which is more of a learned experience.⁴ In a note to *Method of Meditation* (1945), Bataille admits that introducing the subject of the instant "into the categories of language always involves difficulties" since in speaking about it one "puts a system entirely contradictory to one's nature in play."⁵

We may then infer that the nature of immediacy is vulnerable to all contacts: death constitutes the only condition wherein the moment is shorn of its exclusivity, but it is a limited context notwithstanding. Communication, in which eroticism is a common mode, approximates the immediate in its inclination to rupture. As Bataille describes it: "Full communication is comparable to flames, to the electrical discharge of lightning. What is attractive in it is the *rupture* that it establishes, which increases its

¹ Ibid., p. 96.

² Barthes, Roland. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), p. 194.

³ Bataille. *The Accursed Share: Vols. II & III*, p. 225.

⁴ Ibid., p. 42.

⁵ *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, p. 286.

intensity in proportion to its depth.”¹ Literature, which Bataille qualifies as the “principal heir” to religion, precipitates a rupture that is by no means life-threatening but no less overpowering.² “*Literary communication - which is such in so far as it is poetic - is this sovereign process which allows communication to exist, like a solidified instant, or a series of instants, detached both from the work and from the reading of the work.*”³

Nabokov would not have concurred with the idea that reading entails a communication between the work and the reader if, unlike Bataille, he took it in its most general sense. This may be seen, for instance, in Humbert Humbert’s own contempt for the unorthodox strategy that Lolita’s school adopts in urging the students to “communicate” with the classic works they are studying, and, in one of Nabokov’s essays, readers are encouraged to “notice and fondle details.”⁴ In other occasions, however, Nabokov advocates an unusual approach: “Although we read with our minds, the seat of artistic delight is between the shoulder blades. That little shiver behind is quite certainly the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained when evolving pure art and pure science. Let us worship the spine and its tingle.”⁵ Such emphasis on the sentient response points up a parallelism with Bataille’s conception, as both associate the experience with a deep subjectivity that detaches itself from the reader and the book, and yet is primarily the immanent condition wherein the mechanism (of reading book) is propelled.⁶ The process of reading, in short, connects one to sovereignty by means of a provisional denial of the mind.

But as Bataille also warned us, a subjectivity like that can never be expressed except “in crude terms, and even though it alone has a meaning, the means used to reach

¹ Bataille, Georges. *Guilty*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), p. 129.

² *The Accursed Share: Vols. II & III*, p. 54.

³ *Literature and Evil*, p. 161.

⁴ Nabokov. *The Annotated Lolita*, pp. 259-60; “Good Readers and Good Writers”(1948) in *Lectures on Literature*, p. 28.

⁵ *Lectures on Literature*, p. 88.

⁶ Bataille’s definition of “subjectivity”: “Subjectivity is never the object of discursive knowledge, except obliquely, but it is communicated from subject to subject through a sensible, emotional contact: it is communicated in this way in laughter, in tears, in the commotion of the festival...” Bataille. *The Accursed Share: Vols II & III*, p. 242.

that meaning are crude as well: they are external means.”¹ Nabokov, despite his genius and preoccupation with words, was aware of their inadequacy: “It doesn’t matter to me in what language I write, language is just another instrument.”² His aptitude then lies not so much in fixing the inalterable as in evoking a flexible pattern within the given limitations, in letting “words play [...] gambol with each other.”³ We have seen how the characters’ agile wordplay thwarts the capacity for inner sensations (inherently without or stripped of their external forms) to acquire full will to autonomy. Nabokov himself allows in an essay that a good writing is one which does not rely on the trappings of elaborate prose, so that the reader “would really see the abstract image, perfectly limpid and totally unencumbered by humanity’s dust, enjoying an intense existence that develops, swells, displays its thousand folds, with the diaphanous liquidity of an aurora borealis.”⁴ Verbal explicitness invariably assumes a screen before the abstract image; but this groping way of approaching the elusive core of the ineffable, for all its ultimate futility, establishes unequivocally the main direction to which a special kind of aspiration tends.

Such an aspiration is implicit in sexual pleasure (or dissatisfaction), in the ongoing fight or yearning for self-autonomy, in the general eradication of the traditional boundary between the good and the evil, insofar as it sometimes leads to the complete nullification of moral valuation and/or prevailing human interest; the aspiration is also implicit in the anguish of being mortal (the transcendence of which takes the unsatisfactory form of apathy or self-negation), in a paroxysm of violent impulse, in the admission of powerlessness (which is experienced initially as an abundance of power), in the excess of words and questions and beauty and joy and suffering and life’s multifarious gifts, in the seeming possibility of the impossible, and in the quest for the sovereign. It is still in a profane context nonetheless, and as Bataille concedes, “what is sovereign must come back to life [...] it would be hard to justify looking elsewhere than in these cloudy perspectives for aspects of sovereignty that vitally affect men limited by the present time.”⁵ Impossible, yet there is - what better expression to cap it all?

¹ Ibid., p. 245.

² Nabokov. *Think, Write, Speak*, p. 399.

³ Ibid., p. 467.

⁴ “In Memory of Amalia Fondaminsky” (1937), Nabokov. *Think, Write, Speak*, p. 188.

⁵ Bataille. *The Accursed Share: Vols II & III*, p. 262.

The primary principle of excess, we may finally sum up, is that it is the opposite of established truths - so far as human existence is seen to encompass, or be continuous with, certain *unknown* aspects, its distance to excess does not imply a categorical disparateness. As one discerns readily in the works of Bataille and Nabokov, an aspiration to excess is born out of a dogged urge to break free from all subordinate activities. Unable to not deny their exhaustive projects even some minor degree of affirmation - in other words, to verbalise the silence that is their due - Bataille and Nabokov arrived at no more than the presumed externalisation (or approximation) of excess: that is, the extremity of the possible, of the known; the barefaced contestation of sense and reason. But, as we have explained incessantly throughout the thesis, this struggle to resolve the double bind figures the only practicable, and no less valid and significant, means for acceding to the unreality of the heterogeneous. At the root of the task is the conflict between representation and what we may call an immanent reality - a reality that does not add to human totality but rather constitutes it. In their efforts at making sense of such conflict, Bataille and Nabokov did not so much declare a broad judgement concerning men, as defining a way of thinking whose movement corresponds to the abstract character of the heterogeneous that is offered for reflection - in short, we might say that, overall, rather than formulating a philosophy of excess, Bataille and Nabokov constructed a philosophy *on* excess.

Conclusion

If we could learn not to be afraid, we could live forever...

- Don DeLillo, *White Noise*¹

In both theory and practice, Bataille's heterology is an unassimilable idea of pure abstraction. Exposition can manage only insofar as reducing this abstraction to an isolable operation, from which the concrete facts, however, remains underdeveloped at best. No philosophical theory is able to fully accommodate the pure abstractness of the heterogeneous. "In the world of play philosophy disintegrates," Bataille pronounces in *Eroticism*.²

The play of the heterogeneous is a mindless play, uncalculated and profitless, destined for an imminent and irrevocable self-loss. Violence, eroticism, power, evil and excess are all work, "work that became play."³ This homogeneous play, or "human play", as Bataille calls it in *The Tears of Eros*, prefigures death in its culmination, of which the negation of objective reality amounts to no more than a token gesture. In other words, a simulation of play is what we are capable at most to attempt, as long as our thralldom to work still defines us.

Human life is bound to be servile. In Bataille's philosophy, an aspiration towards extremity constitutes the basic expression of a deliverance from servitude. The idea finds its most ardent proponents in committed hedonists like Sade, for whom sovereignty is always accompanied by an untrammelled licentiousness. Sade's radical methodology, however, was much criticised by Bataille for its failure of foregoing the dictates of language, which, in Sade's fictional work, takes the invariable form of a florid, overcharged prose. Proximity distances one from the "summit", whereon reason falters. Regardless, it will not be a "summit" if the notion is not given some degree of cognition; language therefore is indispensable, as both a means of access

¹ DeLillo, Don. *White Noise* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 264.

² Bataille, Georges. *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 275.

³ Bataille, Georges. *The Tears of Eros*, trans. Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989), p. 47.

to the superficial aspects of the abstraction (a “summit” that cannot be affirmed as such), and the medium through which the abstraction is concretised - the “what should be” standing in for the “what is.”

Faced with the quandary of succumbing to the primacy of language and maintaining a simulated absence of language, Bataille ultimately made do with a proposition that failed to accede to the rigorous analytic quality of a dialectical thought. But it is a sound proposition all the same in terms of philosophical subjectivity: the heterogeneous as at once theoretically opposed to and necessarily rooted in the homogeneous. Violence and eroticism are two of the common phenomena that conflate elements of the homogeneous and the heterogeneous. At the “summit”, death bespeaks the final truth - but the very destructiveness of violence and eroticism entails, paradoxically, a promotion of life over death.

By the same token, a communication that foregoes the imperative of language - a “sovereign process” as Bataille had termed it¹ - is a “nothingness...[that] does not exist.”² A total negation is in theory the presumed end and sole object of the pursuit of the heterogeneous proper, but without “being”, writes Bataille in *Guilty*, nothingness “could not attract us,” nor could it signify a relativity wherein such negation is presupposed. If sovereignty is in an elementary sense seen as equivalent to supreme power, it is a power that is naked of force, of action, and of the impulse to transcend. What is sovereign, in short, cannot be predominance if the notion is understood as setting up a hierarchy of things.

In Nabokov’s fiction, physical power is generally considered to go hand in hand with the characters’ weakness of will. Violence hardly guarantees dominance or, as a last resort for the characters to fulfill their sexual needs, presents an apt solution for the problem of neuroses. As leitmotifs, sex and violence are underlined of their paradoxical qualities: embodying life and vigour they are nonetheless signposts of our final severance from personhood. This marked connection with death sometimes

¹ Bataille, Georges. *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 161.

² Bataille, Georges. *Guilty*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), p. 143.

lends the depictions a tone of unremitting desolateness, and diminishes the individual dignity of some of the characters, on most of whom, curiously, the actuation of sex and violence are concentrated. Their emotional insipidity is also attributable to Nabokov's insistence on absolute authorial control, whose principal task is to ruthlessly deprive the fictional characters of their free will. Here, a demonstrable contrast is discerned: the omnipotence of the Author-God and the impotence of his hapless creation.

It is only too convenient to suggest that the thematic structure of a majority of Nabokov's works predicated on the question of authorship. The author-centric power dynamic is indeed telescoped in *Laughter in the Dark*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *The Enchanter*, *Bend Sinister*, *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, but such hegemony cannot extend beyond the delimited framework of a narrative. In other words, an author's creative control is necessarily circumscribed. Nabokov was well aware of this insuperable limitation, and had many of his characters voice what he called the "writer's covetousness." As in the short story "The Word", the narrator gropes vainly for an all-explanatory word that encapsulates the wonders of human existence, a covetousness with word's immortality is infallibly superseded by the understanding that all language is, at bottom, manmade, and cannot finally combat the ever-present fear of death. A recurring trope in Nabokov's fiction is the Nietzschean "prison-house of language", which sums up accurately a level of consciousness indistinguishable from verbosity. The simple act of writing is, in a sense, a defiance against human fate. With Nabokov's brand of solipsism, however, all writers attain to a state of secular immortality. *Lolita* is as much a book drenched in the sombre hue of death foretold (the foreword) as it is a testimony to the eternal spirits of the characters (the main text/Humbert Humbert's account). In most of his other books, Nabokov is inclined to underline the tenuousness that belies a writer's seemingly unchallenged prerogatives. His writers are not immune to creative blocks, often occurring at an inopportune moment (awakening from a dream ("The Word"), before execution (*Invitation to a Beheading*)), or to the risks of having their credibility contested (*The Eye*, *Despair*) or altogether dismissed and subverted (*Pale Fire*).

As Nabokov had stated incessantly in his interviews and lectures, a contrast between the writer and his works is difficult to overstate. Nabokov the writer is all-powerful and imperious, a reminder which he sometimes issued by way of authorial intrusion.

One such example, *Bend Sinister*, finds Nabokov intervening in the tragic end of Krug and writing off the whole thing as mere fiction. This rare gesture of magnanimity is yet another proof of the author's impersonal powers, to which lives of members of his creation are dictated and bound. Freedom is an idea that is ridiculed, parodied and consequently invalidated in Nabokov's implacable universe.

In Bataille, an author is an archetypal "sovereign man", embodying the one "he is but is not"¹ Dominance in the creative realm may come close to sublimity in a sense, but so long as it is exerted, or, in the case of Nabokov, resoundingly pronounced and reaffirmed, it simulates sovereignty without getting at its core (which would require non-action). To be sure, literature serves as a viable avenue for the distillation of the sacred into present-day society: Bataille writes in *Guilty* that poetry, which he qualifies as the most emblematic of such practice, is a "drawn arrow" whose object is "neither the arrow nor the goal but the moment when the arrow is lost, dissolves in the night air; to the point that even the memory of the arrow vanishes."² A poem that aspires to the sovereign must, we might deduce, seek to divest itself of the imperative to *speak* - it must pledge itself to the silence of night.

In his writing, Bataille frequently opts for a style that oscillates between two antithetical impulses: to succumb to order and meaning and to resist them. What emerges is a ruptured sort of writing wherein language is less a means of expression than that of deliberate obfuscation. Yet in the midst of this fandango of sense and semi-sense, words are allowed to play, to assume themselves as creative constructs rather than mere tools. True sovereignty cannot be attained as a consequence but whose simulated form may be evoked. The process, rather than the result, which invariably negates the premise, is thus the key. And at the heart of the process is the struggle, the agony, the avowed failure of gaining ascendancy over what Bataille described as the "discursive real,"³ which, by implication, is the consciousness that constitutes the "perfected death,"⁴ the anguish that precedes the final loss of

¹ Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share: Volumes II & III*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 2017), p. 222.

² Bataille, Georges. *Guilty*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), p. 85.

³ Bataille, Georges. *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 206.

⁴ *Guilty*, p. 5.

control.

In Bataille's theory, language inexorably reemerges as a showcase for the conjuring-up of the heterogeneous. "Speaking", writes Bataille in *Guilty*, "sinking into one's own words is necessary in the search for paths of access..."¹ As an alternative, loquacity fleshes out the groping efforts towards the conception of the access in an admittedly expressionistic, and therefore viable, manner than Bataille's conscious eschewal of the discursive real. Nabokov's characters are constitutionally at fault of such bent, which keys them to a sensibility that approximates the purely subjective. To them, words are not reaction but eruption, triggered by a chronic defeat in their battles against the mundanity of existential interests.

With sovereignty, the tortuous means do not warrant a veritable end but the action is what counts. A sovereign act suggests a forward movement, a defiant spirit that might have plunged the movement to its destruction had the need for restraint not assert itself in time. This destructive potential is implicit in acts of violence, of eroticism, of wastes, of sacrifice, of a strange magnetism towards death. All writing is more or less an ostensible repudiation of death, in the clear sense that nothing can be entirely lost that lives on in words. But the modality of words also consists in their vulnerability to changes, to subversion. Words are never stagnant in Bataille's and Nabokov's writings; they evince a rigorous will to insubordination, a sustained polemic against closure. In both authors' works, style and themes function together and apart: the attempt to generate tensions of tumult is invariably bogged down by the rigidity of a shared language. Bataille and Nabokov naturally failed in their endeavours to write sovereignly, but by making an ostentatious display of their failures, they cinched a partial deal. The state of the sovereign proper will always remain in a state of suspension.

¹ Bataille, Georges. *Guilty*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), p. 100.

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