

Unconsciously Completing the Canon: An Argument for  
*The Original of Laura*

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Perhaps the most impressive aspect of Nabokov's prolific career—spanning six decades and numerous languages—is the fact that there is surprisingly remarkable consistency to his canon. The casual Nabokov reader will certainly notice the leitmotifs of chess, light and color, lepidoptery and various word games; the more acute Nabokov scholar, however, will note a theme, at times obvious, at times latent, always pulsing beneath the surface of his stories. Operating as the life force of his literature, sometimes this particular theme becomes obvious to both readers and characters alike, for example when all of Krug's emotional anguish is lifted at the end of *Bend Sinister* thanks to the epiphany that he is merely a character. Krug's epiphany, the overriding concern of all of Nabokov's work, is the concept of consciousness.

In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov begins, "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."<sup>1</sup> It is this mystery of the relatively brief moment of consciousness that is one's life that so harasses and fascinates the author and so informs his writing. He continues, "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”<sup>1</sup> and concedes, “Initially, I was unaware that time, so boundless at first blush, was a prison.”<sup>2</sup> It was early in his own life that Nabokov came to this realization that life is a mere flickering of consciousness between the vast, dark voids at both ends of a human’s time on earth. It is through fiction that he chose to expound on this recognition. One of the main impetuses of his writing, then, was finding a way out of this prison of time; or rather, perhaps it was not a desire to escape the inexorable hand of death, but merely to comprehend the inscrutable mystery of what lies past the prison, to explore what exists at either end of human consciousness once man has shuffled off his mortal coil. In short, Nabokov and his fiction are fascinated with what lies beyond human consciousness.

It is fitting, then, that Nabokov should come the closest to answering his questions with a novel he penned as his own life was ending, a novel that would forever remain unfinished because of his permanent departure from the world of consciousness. Willing to be incinerated, salvaged by his wife, finally published by his aged son, *The Original of Laura* makes quite a story simply by existing. Readers picking it up in hopes of finding an actual story will be sorely disappointed; however, I argue that this final, unfinished work is perhaps stylistically and thematically Nabokov’s most penetrating look at what lies beyond the prison of time. This “novel in fragments” is the final testament to the true genius of one of the greatest literary minds of the 20th century. Incredibly erudite, Nabokov reveled in weaving complex puzzles into his novels, defying literary conventions, and pushing the limits of the language. In these regards coupled with its uncanny exploration of human consciousness, *The Original of Laura* is as complete as any of his works and serves as a very fitting completion to his oeuvre. Thus, not only does

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 18.

the fragmentary novel deserve to be accepted as part of his canon, it actually completes it quite fittingly.

From what can be gleaned of the plot, it is clear that human consciousness is as ever present as in any of Nabokov's previous works. Superficially, the incomplete work is about the groundbreaking experimentations of Philip Wild, a middle-aged "enormously fat creature" but a "brilliant neurologist, a renowned lecturer and a gentleman of independent means"<sup>3</sup> nonetheless. In fact, pieces of the book purport to be the unfinished "manuscript in longhand" he leaves behind after being claimed by "a fatal heart attack."<sup>4</sup> (Note the uncanny similarities between the fictitious book being described and the unfinished manuscript in longhand Nabokov leaves behind.) Preoccupied with death, Wild discovers an intense form of meditation that ultimately leads to self-deletion. On the blackboard of his inner mind, he envisions the single letter "I." Clearly, "I" is the most logical symbol to represent the self. Further, Wild notes that the image itself adequately mirrors the "three divisions of [his] physical self: legs, torso, and head."<sup>5</sup> This physical trinity brings to mind Freud's well-known cognitive trinity of id, ego, and superego, an idea further suggested when one remembers that Wild is Lecturer in Experimental Psychology. However, the theories of "Dr. Freud, a madman,"<sup>6</sup> Nabokov has always been quick to reject (and scorn, for that matter). Nabokov seems to suggest the only true division of one's self can be in a purely tangible, completely physical sense: the legs, the torso, and the head. Apart from the physical, there is only the incomprehensible notion of consciousness, which cannot be so easily reduced to three knowable parts. However, *The Original of Laura*

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<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *The Original of Laura* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 107.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

indicates that the very means of escaping the confines of individual consciousness might lie within one's own conscious mind.

In his trance-like state, Wild is able to project his whole identity into the mental image of that letter "I." This is the first step of his own consciousness beginning to transcend its limits. After he envisions the slow erasure of the letter, upon waking he has begun to literally erase himself from the toes upward. This marks the next development of his mental powers, for not only has he transmuted his identity to a single image, but now he has used the power of thought to tear down the boundaries of that very image and of his own corporeal self. At one point, he comments, "I loathe my belly, that trunkful of bowels which I have to carry around, and everything connected with it."<sup>7</sup> By allowing him to explore the vast untapped powers lying hidden within the mystery of consciousness, Nabokov grants Wild the greatest gift he can: the ability to, through the ethereal powers of intense mental focus, free himself from the limitations of his physical self. In fact, Wild describes the "process of dying by auto-dissolution [as] afford[ing] the greatest ecstasy known to man."<sup>8</sup> Thus, transcending the self and washing away the restricting bars of selfhood proves not only transcendental, but sublime. It is as

a process of self-obliteration conducted by an effort of the will. Pleasure, bordering on almost unendurable exstacy [sic], comes from feeling the will working at a new task: an act of destruction which develops paradoxically an element of creativeness in the totally new application of totally free will.<sup>9</sup>

In Wild's technique, Nabokov has created a new way for his characters to peer beyond the prison bars of consciousness; ironically, this time the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 213.

individual's consciousness itself is the very key to the prison door. *The Original of Laura*, then, not only continues but surpasses Nabokov's previous novels regarding this pervasive thematic thread.

Many Nabokov novels explicitly explore the void that begins where human consciousness ends. In *Transparent Things* he allows disembodied spirits to narrate; in *Invitation to a Beheading*, he grants the narrator a post-death sojourn; in *The Eye* Smurov must grope about in the afterlife for proof of his existence; and the list could continue. When writing on *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Brian Boyd ultimately concludes that the text suggests that "The riddle of being...is something we have to try to answer within life, but the solution can come, if at all, only on shutting life up."<sup>10</sup> *The Original of Laura*, then, is a breakthrough, for it is the first time Nabokov's character is able to completely try the nature and boundaries of consciousness while still very much alive. Wild is able to explore the riddle of being from within life; in finding a new way to use his consciousness mind, he has found a way to transcend individual consciousness, to escape from the prison of the self. Wild revels in his discovery, expressing "I hit upon the mark of thinking away my body, my being, mind itself. To think away thought—luxurious suicide, delicious dissolution."<sup>11</sup> With Wild, Nabokov expresses the sublime joy in discovering the world beyond our own; unfortunately, before his vision reaches its fruition, Nabokov himself succumbs to the "delicious dissolution" of death. Perhaps, though, even its unfinished state bares testament to the fact that no matter how close any psychologist, scholar, or author comes to unraveling the mysteries of human consciousness, death is the only true escape from its prison.

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<sup>10</sup> Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 500.

<sup>11</sup> Nabokov, *Original*, 243.

Let us now move from Wild and his clear attempts to press the very limits of consciousness to a discussion of the title character, Wild's twenty-four year old "extravagantly slender" and wildly promiscuous wife, Laura (also referred to as Flora). Even though the eponymous character is in the book, her full persona remains nebulous at best. The only information Nabokov has supplied is of a very physical nature: readers know exactly what she looks like and a good amount of detail concerning her impassive sexual life. While Nabokov provides some facts about her past, even her exact parentage remains a mystery—"Flora was *probably* Adam's daughter"<sup>12</sup> (my italics). Earlier, immediately following the list of her physical attributes, Nabokov writes, "Nobody could tell what went on in that little head."<sup>13</sup> This single line directly contrasts the easily obtained corporal information; it should remind readers that consciousness limits one's thoughts from being shared with or read by another.

Nabokov's naming his final book after a character who remains clouded in obscurity further supports the notion that *The Original of Laura* is a fitting conclusion to his exploration of consciousness. Unfinished or not, Nabokov did write "everything about her is bound to remain blurry, even her name which seems to have been made to expressly have another one modeled upon it by a fantastically lucky artist."<sup>14</sup> This suggests that the author had no intention of supplying concrete details to fill in the holes in her characterization. Right from the start the reader is forced to begin guessing about her; she is not named until the third index card and the details that do involve her come as subsidiaries to a conversation concerning her husband. Dropped into a conversation in medias res, readers are forced to wonder who the "Her" and "she" are in the first sentence. Although they will learn her name, bits of her past, and even the intimate details of her body (right down to "those pale squinty

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 85.

Comment [p1]:

nipples and firm form”<sup>15</sup>), Nabokov will never use his authorial key to open up the confines of her mind. Whether or not he intended to leave the title character “blurry,” he has succeeded, leaving any full understanding of her, and by proxy, of the work itself, incomplete. Paradoxically, this very incompleteness makes the character even more real and, in that sense, more complete. Unlike with Wild, Nabokov presents Laura, who cannot free herself from her *self*, furthermore, as in real life, outsiders cannot freely enter the mind of another. She is as limited by consciousness as are we all. Thus, our inability to fully characterize Laura mirrors our inability to ever fully and truly comprehend any other human.

Although readers are forestalled in any attempts to definitively typify the title character, Nabokov gives each reader the opportunity to become the “fantastically lucky artist” of the quotation above. Two decades before *The Original of Laura* was published, Boyd succinctly expressed Nabokov’s belief that “In art or science, in memory, in the exercise of the imagination...the mind seems almost able to peer past the prison bars of selfhood and time.”<sup>16</sup> With Laura, Nabokov allows readers to participate in the formation of a new individual, a new artistic consciousness. The creative and interpretive processes of depicting Laura—no matter how fictitious—and of exploring the novel itself, allow the reader to share somewhat in the role of artist. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov writes, “all poetry is positional: to try to express one’s position in regard to the universe embraced by consciousness, is an immemorial urge.”<sup>17</sup> With an ambiguous Laura, Nabokov invites his readers to not only deconstruct his work, but also to participate in the “immemorial urge” of creating the consciousness of the character. It should come as no surprise then that Laura’s physical appearance is even explicitly compared to a poem: “Her exquisite bone structure immediately slipped into a novel—became in fact

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Boyd, *Russian*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Nabokov, *Speak*, 169.

the secret structure of that novel, besides supporting a number of poems.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, Laura becomes the “poems” that can be reshaped with the novel to give it the structure that one sees fit. In fact, even the author capriciously reinvents his title character, calling her at alternate times “Flora,” “Laura,” and “FLaura.” It is impossible for the reader to get a true sense of her; it is as if, to quote the novel, “only by identifying her with an unwritten, half-written, rewritten difficult book could one hope to render at last what.”<sup>19</sup> And the sentence stops there. The “unwritten, half-written, rewritten difficult book” must strike readers as eerie, as it seems Nabokov is again referencing this very work. Might this novel be much more complete than is suspected? Was that very sentence meant to be left unfinished to make form mirror theme? Regardless, the reader is left to finish that fragment and, as such, is invited to “peer past the prison bars of selfhood and time.” Not only does this speak to the poetics of incompleteness, but it establishes the incomplete novel’s place alongside the rest of Nabokov’s complete works.

Let us move away from the ambiguities of the title character and on to the actual structure of the unfinished text to further explore the poetics of an unfinished work. The beauty of *The Original of Laura* lies in the truly unique way that Nabokov composed his novels. Writing on index cards allowed him to number and renumber sections of the book, to easily move, remove, or insert anything he wrote. However, this time readers can partake in this same process. The mere novelty in this writing process itself reflects Nabokov’s suspicion that something, eluding our consciousness, exists behind perceivable reality and provides structure to the seaming chaos of human existence. Boyd notes the artistic pleasure of creation coupled with the creative surprises of realigning and integrating his index cards allowed the author to experience the same joyous

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<sup>18</sup> Nabokov, *Original*, 15.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

surprises of life in a “universe replete with unexpected coherence.”<sup>20</sup> Only because it is incomplete is it published in such a way that a reader can remove and rearrange its parts and thereby experience, perhaps, the same “joyous surprises” as the author. Moreover, the cards being published in this manner serves as the final frontier for an author who had pioneered so many other literary innovations and flouted form and structure in most of his novels (*Pale Fire* most notably).

Publishing the perforated index cards of *The Original of Laura*, then, becomes the final evolution of stylistic innovation for Nabokov’s novels. Long before the book was published, Boyd praised “Nabokov’s art and its power to inspire. His novels are designed to invite their readers into adventures of personal discovery and acts of individual attention and imagination that disclose what an inexhaustible surprise the world can be.”<sup>21</sup> Now more than ever before readers are able to physically and mentally apply their “individual...imagination” to create “inexhaustible” worlds with what Nabokov has written.

Nabokov believed that there existed some ultimate artfulness behind human existence; by embedding hidden patterns throughout his books, he prompted fastidious readers to scrutinize their own world, searching for hidden patterns and perhaps a natural artistic force holding it together. With the book’s removable index cards, the reader is not only encouraged to examine and reexamine the fictitious world that Nabokov began, but also to create and recreate it. The reader can take apart and rearrange this world as he sees fit; the reader can generate and discover his own patterns in the words and the worlds they create. By taking apart the index cards, the reader can enjoy “the divine light in destroying”<sup>22</sup>; in putting them together anew, he can literally use his own imagination to

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<sup>20</sup> Boyd, *Russian*, 293.

<sup>21</sup> Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 111.

<sup>22</sup> Nabokov, *Original*, 181.

reshape the novel as he pleases. In short, the reader himself becomes the poet. Like no book before it, *The Original of Laura* allows the reader the chance to truly engage in, as Wild describes his process, “an act of destruction which develops paradoxically an element of creativeness in the totally new application of totally free will.”<sup>23</sup> All that is written on the final index card are the words “efface, expunge, erase, delete, rub out, wipe out, obliterate.”<sup>24</sup> In sheer originality, *The Original of Laura* has “effaced, expunge[d], erase[d], delete[d], rub[bed] out, wipe[d] out, obliterate[d]” all of the conventional standards and common assumptions of what a book should be. Because of this, in leaving us with something so incomplete, Nabokov has left us with something of infinitely greater depth.

In addition to marking the final thematic and stylistic evolutions of his work, *The Original of Laura* establishes its place in Nabokov’s canon for one final reason: even in its unfinished form, always evident in Nabokov’s prose is the sheer delight he finds in language. In *Speak Memory*, the author extols the brilliancy of words, placing them on a divine pedestal that even overshadows the splendor of consciousness: “How small the cosmos...how paltry and puny in comparison to human consciousness, to a single individual recollection, and its expression in words.”<sup>25</sup> Here it is not the power of the mind to recall the past that approaches the sublime; rather, it is the ability to use the power of language as a means of expression. In *The Original of Laura*, as in previous works, always evident is the simple way Nabokov has fun with the language. Take the following passage transcribed from one index card, for example:

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>25</sup> Nabokov, *Speak*, 21.

of her dancing name. The fountain took quite a time to get correctly erected after an initial series of unevenly spaced spasms. The potentate had been potent till the absurd age of eighty. It was a very hot day with its blue somewhat veiled. A few photograph[er]s moved among the crowd as indifferent to it as specters doing their spectral job. And certainly for no earthly reason does this passage resemble in r[h]ythm another novel.<sup>26</sup>

Note how every sentence seethes with sections of alliteration. The first half of the first complete sentence teems with the hard “t” sound (“fountain,” “took,” “quite,” “time,” “to,” “get,” “correctly,” “erected” and “after!”), but then smoothly switches to the soft, seductive “s” which slides off the reader’s tongue in a “series of unevenly spaced spasms.” The next sentence expands this expression by reproducing the sound of whole words: “potentate” and “potent,” “age” and “eighty.” And the subsequent sentences utilize both linguistic techniques: “very...veiled,” “few photograp[er]s,” “specters...spectral.” This one whimsical passage is exemplary of both Nabokov’s power to manipulate language and the pure pleasure he seems to derive in doing so.

Finally, there are other passages that stand out for their unmitigated beauty. One index card reads:

house. This was an old villa backed by tall trees. In the shadows of a side alley a young man with a mackintosh over his white pajamas was wringing his hands. The street lights were going out in alternate order, the odd numbers first. Along the pavement in front of the villa her obese husband, in a rumpled black suit and

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<sup>26</sup> Nabokov, *Original*, 101.

tartan booties with clasps, was walking a striped cat on an overlong leash. She made for the front door.<sup>27</sup>

Precision has always been a staple of Nabokov's writing, and here he is able, on a single index card, to conjure a scene as vivid as reality. No minor detail is left to the imagination—every reader is presented with an exact depiction of this moment, which makes it all the easier to mentally slip into this fictitious world. However, it should be noted that this scene can also be completely autonomous; there is nothing that propels the plot here. Because the reader can rearrange the writing, this single, beautifully detailed scene can be placed anywhere in the novel. The poetics of Nabokov's language and the incompleteness of this work complement each other so perfectly that they transform a potentially discordant piece into a symphony of language.

In the introduction, Dmitri asks whether he should be “Damned or thanked” for defying his father's wishes and publishing the fragments of the novel. From a strictly literary point of view, the answer is undeniably thanked. Even in its sparseness, the book continues exploring the majesty of human consciousness and the absurd limitations placed on it by time and selfhood. However, in part because of its sparseness, this book comes the closest to escaping these boundaries. The book becomes not just a product of one author's imagination, but a product of reader and author, two consciousnesses working to create meaning. Even on the relatively few index cards that exist, there are numerous passages, some of which I have mentioned, that seem specifically to refer to the book itself (the description of Wild's unfinished book, the description of Laura). This might in fact indicate that Nabokov consciously planned to leave much of the book up to the imagination of his readers, or this could be

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 33.

further evidence of the hidden patterns that shape one's life, patterns that do not become evident until after one has died. In the book, when Wild finally reads the novel *My Laura*, which details the sexual exploits of his wife, he "discovered it to be a maddening masterpiece." Certainly *The Original of Laura* will stand as one of Nabokov's most "maddening masterpiece[s],"<sup>28</sup> and one of his greatest puzzles, further substantiating my claim that because it exists only in fragments it is arguably the most fitting culmination to the impressive literary legacy of Vladimir Nabokov.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

*Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice*

Spring/Summer 2010 (3:3/4)

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