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Caning of Modernist Profaners: Parody in *Despair*

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Numerous critics have often noted that *Despair* is the first major work of Nabokov in which the writer resorted to intertextual strategies and stratagems — to literary parody, disguised polemic, cunning play with several superimposed subtexts, and so on. “Behind *Despair* stands a nexus of allusions so dense, so rich, that progressing through their labyrinth would require another Holmes,” wrote William C. Carroll¹ in his pioneering article that pinpointed some very important routes inside this labyrinth leading to Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Oscar Wilde, and Conan Doyle.

Though Hermann Karlovich, the well-read hero-narrator of *Despair*, either names or quotes all the above mentioned authors, in the consensus of critical opinion the most important among them is Dostoevsky or, in the narrator’s spiteful parlance, Dusty-and-Dusky, “our national expert in soul ague and the aberrations of human self-respect.”² A lot has been written about Dostoevsky as a main parodic target of *Despair* that does abound in echoes from *The Double*, *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from the Underground*.³

However, in my opinion, such intertextual readings centered on Dostoevsky are valid only for Nabokov’s 1964 English version of *Despair* but not for the Russian text of 1932-33. The point I will argue in this paper is that originally Nabokov intended *Despair* as a lampoon on the Russian modernist fiction and that Hermann as a writer in fact parodies a number of Nabokov’s contemporaries — minor Dusties and Duskyes of the 1910s and 1920s.

In his angry letter to Hermann written after the murder of Felix, Ardalion, a victorious rival of the protagonist, scornfully calls his crazy lies and inventions “mrachnaia dostoevshchina” (or, in the English version, “the dark Dostoevskian stuff” [215]). The same pejorative was used by Nabokov himself in the title of his paper “Dostoevsky bez dostoevshchiny” [“Dostoevsky without Dostoevskian Stuff”] read in Berlin on March 20, 1931.⁴ Unfortunately, the only source of information on this paper is a brief note in the newspaper *Rul’*, but even such a meager account emphasizes that Nabokov opposed his own understanding of “Dostoevsky without habitual attributes” to “stereotypes, clichés, banalities and dogmas” of “dostoevshchina.”⁵ What aroused Nabokov’s wrath in the 1930s evidently was not Dostoevsky but a strong Dostoevskian strain in the contemporary Russian literature from Symbolists to the post-revolutionary modernists — shopworn criminal plots, threadbare themes and images, self-conscious psychopathic characters modeled on Raskol’nikov or the Man from the Underground, trite moral and psychological paradoxes, hackneyed “landscapes of ideas,” etc. If in the English version of *Despair* Hermann notices with horror that his

¹ See William C. Carroll. “The Cartesian Nightmare of *Despair*,” *Nabokov’s Fifth Arc: Nabokov and Others on His Life’s Work*, ed. by J. E. Rivers and Charles Nicol (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), pp. 82-104.

² Vladimir Nabokov. *Despair*. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1966, p. 98; cf. the original Russian text in Vladimir Nabokov. “Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrech tomach. Moskva,” *Pravda* (1990), T. 3, S. 386. (Henceforth all the references to above mentioned editions of *Despair* will be given in brackets, with the page numbers of the Russian edition preceded by R).

³ See: Ellen Pifer. *Nabokov and the Novel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 102-104; Sergej Davydov. “Dostoevsky and Nabokov: The Morality of Structure in *Crime and Punishment* and *Despair*.” *Dostoevsky Studies*, 3 (1982), 157-70; Julian W. Connolly. “The Function of Literary Allusion in Nabokov’s *Despair*.” *Slavic and East European Journal*, 26, n° 3 (1982), 310; Julian W. Connolly. “Dostoevski and Vladimir Nabokov: The Case of *Despair*,” in *Dostoevski and the Human Condition after a Century*, ed. by Alexej Ugrinsky, Frank Lambasa and Valija Ozolins (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 155-62; John Burt Foster, Jr. *Nabokov’s Art of Memory and European Modernism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 91-109.

⁴ See Brian Boyd. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press), p. 363.

⁵ A.B.V. “Literaturnyi vecher zhurnalistov.” *Rul’* (24 marta 1931), s. 6.

writing becomes “too literary [...] smacking of thumb-screw conversations in those stage taverns where Dostoevski is at home” (98), the Russian original defines the setting in a slightly different way: “butaforskie kabaki imeni Dostoevskogo” (R. 386) that is “taverns named after Dostoevsky”. I think that this discrepancy is significant as it reflects a very important shift in parodic targeting of *Despair* in the English version — the reorientation from the progeny to the progenitor, from the modernist “dostoevshchina” to Dostoevsky proper.

In fact, the original text of *Despair* is permeated by veiled parodic allusions to contemporary Russian literature, either eliminated or almost unrecognizable in the translation. Nabokov’s double-edged lampoon aims at two tiers of subtexts: first, decadent Nietzschean writings of Russian Silver Age period with their concepts of an artist as an immoral godlike demiurge projecting his “creative dreams”⁶ upon malleable reality, and, second, brazen, dynamic, formally flashy Soviet novels of the 1920s. Correspondingly, Hermann’s ideas of murder as art and art as a retouched recording of experience parody the stance of the decadents while his self-reflective mode of writing that lays bare its devices as well as his leftist political sympathies mimic the pose and the prose of Soviet modernists.

Among the most obvious symbolist subtexts of *Despair* one should mention several Valerii Briusov’s stories, especially two first-person narratives “Teper’, kogda ia prosnulsia [...] Zapiski psikhopata” [“Now that I have awakened [...] A Psychopath’s Notes”] in which the hero blurs the demarcation line between his illusions and reality, and kills his wife thinking that he is dreaming⁷ and “V zerkale. Iz arkhiva psikhopata” [“In the mirror. From a Psychopath’s Archives”] — a story of a paranoid woman who takes her mirror reflection for her double and tries to change places with it.⁸ An artist-murderer Modest who commits a crime in cold blood and then explains it away as “a whim of his artistic soul” is the hero of Briusov’s *Poslednie stranitsy iz dnevnika zhenshchiny* [*Last Pages of A Woman’s Diary*]. The story’s narrator, Modest’s lover, admires his genius and his tenacity; for her he is a real “übermensch” — “a great artist” persecuted by the rabble of mediocrities who are unable to understand his genius.⁹

Briusov’s heroine absolves and vindicates the murderer with the help of the same argument Hermann uses to justify and vindicate himself: a great artist stands above ordinary people, “the rabble,” and therefore has a license to kill if a crime satisfies his “innate disposition toward the constant exercise of the creative faculty” (13); “the rabble,” for their part, “due to the inertia, pigheadedness, prejudice of humans” (204) fails to recognize the greatness of the genius and persecutes him with “drivel and dirt” of their incompetent “criticism.” This cheap aestheticised modification of Rascolnikov’s “Napoleon theory” based on denying the distinction between art and life became such a commonplace in Russian literature of the Silver Age,¹⁰ that it would be impossible to pinpoint all the objects of Nabokov’s parody. In

⁶ “Tiazhelye tvorcheskije sny minovali... Æ (R. 453... Æbad creative dreams have passed”) — that is how Hermann metaphorically describes the completion of his book. The phrase telescopes two Symbolist subtexts: the title of Fyodor Sologub’s first novel *Tiazhelye sny* [*Bad Dreams*] and Aleksander Blok’s line “I vidit tvorcheskije sny Æ” [“And has creative dreams”] — the ending of his poem “Sredi poklonnikov Karmen..., Æ a part of the *Carmen* cycle.

⁷ V. Briusov. “Zemnaia os’,” *Rasskazy i dramaticheskie stzeny. (1901-1906)* (Moskva: Skorpion, 1907), pp. 83-91.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 95-106.

⁹ V. Briusov. “Nochi i dni,” *Vtoraia kniga rasskazov i dramaticheskikh stzen. 1908-1912.* (Moskva: Skorpion, 1913), p. 58.

¹⁰ See for example a paradigmatic period piece — an autobiographical novel by a notorious terrorist Boris Savinkov *Kon’ bled* [*Pale Horse*] praised to the skies by Zinaida Gippius and other Symbolists. It is written in the form of a diary (with trite allusions to Dostoevsky, of course) in which the hero — a narcissistic revolutionary and murderer — justifies his “spilling blood” by condemning “the rabble” and claiming that there is no difference between life and theater: “Now I have killed for my own sake. I wished and I killed. Who is my

fact, Hermann, an inept impostor, travesties the general stereotyped idea rather than its specific manifestations. Yet there is one text that is especially worth mentioning since it seems to have provided Nabokov with a model for both the central character of *Despair* and parts of its imagery and plot. It is Leonid Andreev's story *Mysl'* [*The Thought*], another first-person account of a murder committed by a conceited narcissistic narrator and a good example of "dostoevshchina" popular at the turn of the century.

Anton Kerzhentsev, the narrator-protagonist of *The Thought*, like Hermann, plans and executes a "perfect crime" (he kills his closest friend Alexis out of sheer spite and jealousy toward his happy marriage¹¹), and afterwards revels in writing a memoir where he relates the circumstances of the murder, extols his own numerous virtues and talents — "the precise, powerful workings of [his] thought," extraordinary imagination, "supple, exceedingly cultivated mind" (43) "the strength of his will," even the chess genius of a potential world champion,¹² and at the same time gives vent to his fears that he is a lunatic, not a superman. Striking parallels to Andreev's story can be found on various levels of *Despair*. Both texts, for example, reproduce the narrative structure and intonations of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* — a soliloquy that, in Nabokov's words, "presupposes the presence of a phantom audience" jeering at the narrator who tries "to thwart their mockery and denunciations by the shifts, the doubling back, and various other tricks of his supposedly remarkable intellect."¹³ Both actualize and play upon the contrasts between the present of writing a memoir and the past retold in it.

Despair evidently develops upon a number of themes and motifs originated in *The Thought*. Hermann's assertion that "God does not exist, as neither does our hereafter" (112) connected with his recurrent dream of something "unimaginably terrible; to wit, a perfectly empty, newly whitewashed room" (56 cf. also 58) correspond to Anton's paraphrase of the Nietzschean famous *Gott ist tot*:

In one of the dark chambers of your humble house dwells someone very useful to you, but in my house that room is vacant ["ta komnata pusta"]. He who lived there died long ago, and I have erected a sumptuous monument on his grave. He is dead, [...] and shall not be resurrected.¹⁴

When he is boasting of his ability to lie "as a nightingale sings, ecstatically, self-obliviously" (55) and of his "thirst for falsehood, that addiction to painstaking lying" (58) Hermann echoes Anton's confessions:

judge? Who is to convict me? Who is to acquit? I laugh at my judges and at their severe sentences. Who has the right to tell me: "Thou shall not kill!" [...] There is no border, there is no difference. [...] A slapstick comedy or a drama? Cranberry juice or blood? Farce or life? I don't know! Nobody knows. Æ (Boris Savinkov [V. Ropshin]. *To, chego ne bylo* (Moskva: Sovremennik, 1992), s. 207, 211).

¹¹ Cf. the name of the victim in *Despair* (Lat. *felix* — happy, fortunate, lucky) that in the Russian original is connected with Hermann's unpardonable metaliterary sin — his sacrilegiously twisting the plot of Pushkin's short story "The Shot". A duelist Silvio in this story delays his shot at a rich and handsome Count who is characterised as "the constant favorite of fortune" ["vechnyi liubimetz schast'ia"] until the latter learns to appreciate his life; six years later Silvio comes to require his due at the moment of his adversary greatest happiness but after humiliating and provoking him lets the Count off without shooting. In his paraphrase of the story Hermann tampers with Pushkin's sacred text and makes Silvio kill his adversary (R. 359), which parallels his own killing Felix — another "happy/lucky man", and it is for these transgressions that he is punished. In the English translation Nabokov traded "The Shot" for *Othello*: when rendering the plot of the tragedy Hermann "made the Moor skeptical and Desdemona unfaithful" (56) thereby foreshadowing his own cuckolding.

¹² See Leonid Andreev. *Visions: Stories and Photographs*, ed. and with an Introduction by Olga Andreyev Carlisle (San Diego-NewYork-London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), pp. 58, 42, 39, 59.

¹³ Vladimir Nabokov. *Lectures on Russian Literature*, edited and with an Introduction by Fredson Bowers (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), pp. 115-16.

¹⁴ Leonid Andreev. *Visions*, p. 70. Both images of the other world as an empty room, of course, echo Svidrigailov's image of eternity as a bath-house "black with soot, with spiders in every corner" in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.

An inclination toward dissimulation [“prityvorstvo”] has always been part of my character and was one of the forms whereby I strove for inner freedom. [...] I maintained my apartness from other people: for them I had a special smile, special conversations and confidences. I perceived that people do much that is stupid, harmful to themselves, and futile. It seemed to me that if I would tell the truth about myself, I would become like everyone else, and I would become possessed by all this stupidity and futility. [...] And the more I lied to people, the more mercilessly truthful I became with myself — a merit that few could claim.¹⁵

Throughout *Despair* the protagonist persistently compares his plotting, preparing and committing the murder to a creative act and himself both to the author, the builder of “wonderful edifice” (131) who attained “a limit of artistic skill” (204) and to an actor who “in real life, always carried about with [him] a small folding theater and have appeared in more than one part, and [whose] acting has always been superfine” (100). In this, too, he copies Andreev’s murderer who, like Hermann, represents himself as a refined aesthete, “far from lacking in artistic intuition and fantasy,” a lonely genius surrounded by the rabble:

Altogether it seemed to me that an exceptional actor was hidden within me, one capable of combining a naturalness of performance [...] with a relentless, cold control of the mind. [...] As to the quality of my own act, you may judge it by the fact that many fools consider me even now to be the most sincere and truthful of men. [...] All in all there was nothing accidental about any of this. On the contrary, every detail, no matter how small, had been carefully thought through. [...] At home alone I laughed and rejoiced in what an astounding, magnificent actor I was. [...] A great talent is measured by the fact that while it builds structures for itself, it knows how to change as circumstances change [...] Like a true artist I went too far in my role.¹⁶

After committing the murder Anton feels like an actor who has just performed his role brilliantly:

Fragments of lines from my role passed through my head; in my mind I repeated some of the gestures I had made, and occasionally a criticism drifted by: at this or that point it could have been done better. However, I was very pleased by my improvised command, “Wait!”¹⁷

Yet a little later a terrible suspicion crushes his narcissistic self-image; he suddenly realizes that there is no way for him to know who he really is, a master-artist in control of his world, a demonic plotter and manipulator, or an insane degenerate, a “wretched and powerless slave” of his delusions. The breakdown he suffers is the result of this definitional incompatibility; his personality splits and, unable to confront his other “I,” Anton smashes a mirror. “By the way, let me give you a piece of advice,” he writes in his memoir:

Should one of you ever have to live through what I did that night, make sure to cover the mirrors in the room where you will be thrashing around. Do cover them! [...] I came up to the mirror — Cover the mirrors! Cover them!¹⁸

Anton’s frenzy will be repeated by Hermann in a similar situation when after the murder he tries to hide from his new identity and therefore is unable “to put up with mirrors” (187). In

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 42-43.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 43, 46, 48, 57, 69. Another self-indulgent parallel both murderers draw is to contemporary Polar explorers. Anton exclaims: “You would not dare call Nansen, that great man of the past century, mad. Moral life, too, has its poles, and I wanted to reach one of them. You are dismayed by the lack of jealousy, vengefulness, greed, and other truly stupid motives [...]. But then, you men of science will condemn Nansen, along with the fools and ignoramuses who regard his enterprise as madness” (*ibidem*, p. 69). Cf. in *Despair*: “Somebody told me once that I looked like Amundsen, the Polar explorer. Well, Felix, too, looked like Amundsen. But it is not every person that can recall Amundsen’s face. I myself recall it but faintly, nor am I sure whether there had not been some mix-up with Nansen” (26) And again: “People have told me I reminded them of Amundsen” (51).

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 63. Anton alludes to his command “Wait!” “Pogodi!” addressed to the victim a moment before the murder. It is hardly a coincidence that Hermann uses the same command in a similar situation, just before shooting Felix: “Wait, let me have a thorough [...]” (181; in Russian: “Pogodi, dai mne khoroshen’ko...Æ” (R., 437’).

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 64, 66.

his own words, he “gets into the devils of a state about such trifles as a reflection in a dark looking glass” (187) and shouts at his presumed readers-cum-judges-cum-tormentors:

...mirror. Now that is a word I loathe, the ghastly thing! I have had none of the article ever since I stopped shaving. Anyway, the mere mention of it has just given me a nasty shock, broken the flow of my story [...] Enough, it is not all so simple as you seem to think, you swine, you! Oh, yes, I am going to curse at you, none can forbid me to curse. And not to have a looking glass in my room — that is also my right! (31)¹⁹

But even driven to the wall and wallowing in despair, both murderers remain unrepentant to the very end. Anton asks himself:

Do I feel remorse now, regret for what I have done? None at all. I feel weighed down [mne tiazhelo]. I feel dreadfully weighed down, more than anyone else on earth; and my hair is turning gray, but that is something else [“eto drugoe”].
*Something else.*²⁰

Hermann also arrogantly refuses to cast off his phony mask of “a poet misunderstood” and to repent the evil of his crime:

Any remorse on my part is absolutely out of the question: an artist feels no remorse, even when his work is not understood, not accepted (177).

The recognizable affinities between *The Thought* and *Despair* are far too numerous and compelling to be dismissed as a mere coincidence. It is not improbable that Nabokov obliquely alludes to Andreev’s story in the first chapter of the Russian version when Hermann not quite accurately uses the very word “mysl’” [“the thought”] in quotation marks as a Church Slavonic name of letter M²¹:

U menia na lbu naduvaetsia zhila, kak nedocherchennaia “mysl’,” no kogda ia spliu, u menia lob takzhe gladok, kak u moego publikata (R, 342) [On my forehead a vein stands out like a capital M imperfectly drawn, but when I sleep my brow is as smooth as that of my double (27)].

“Nedocherchennaia mysl’,” or, to add quotation marks, *The Thought* imperfectly drawn, is a witty and apt description of the story that, like everything Andreev wrote, combines trendy “dostoevshchina,” vulgar sensationalism, lack of taste, and florid style with flashes of psychological insights and original imagery. Nabokov, so to say, tries to redraw the imperfect design of his predecessor and at the same time parodies the paradigmatic set of literary conventions underlying fallacies of *The Thought*.

Yuri Tynianov’s elegant suggestion that comedy can be seen as a parody of tragedy in this case seems especially appropriate since Nabokov mocks Andreev’s (and, for that matter, overall decadent) treatment of egomaniac transgressors as neo-Byronic tragic heroes. If Andreev or Briusov never doubt their murderers’ claims to intellectual superiority or outstanding artistic talents and dissociate from them only on strictly moral grounds, Nabokov adheres to the century-old Pushkin’s aesthetic principle: “genius and villainy are things

¹⁹ The recurrent mirror motif is more prominent and elaborated in *Despair* than in “The Thought” insofar as Hermann from the very beginning perceives Felix as his mirror reflexion. Among other things, Hermann’s futile attempt to appropriate the image of a shattered mirror as an omen of death (34) through using it to ensnare and deceive his presumed readers can be decoded as an indirect allusion to Andreev’s story and hence just another ensnarement of the ensnarer: Hermann is not aware of a literary allusion he makes that defines him as a lunatic. Cf. also Nabokov’s remark in his essay “The Art of Literature and Commonsense” concerning an essential difference between a real artist and a lunatic: “a madman is reluctant to look at himself in a mirror because the face he sees is not his own: his personality is beheaded; that of the artist is increased” (Vladimir Nabokov. *Lectures on Literature*, ed. by Fredson Bowers (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 377).

²⁰ Andreev, *Visions*, p. 40. In *Despair* there are several phrases intonationally close to Anton’s hysterical exclamations. Cf.: “No, these are not the throes of creation... but something quite different [eto — sovsem drugoe]” (15; R. 335). “My restlessness grows... [Mne tiagostno...]” (53; R.358). “But how tired I am, how deadly tired [No kak ia ustal, kak ia smertel’no ustal]” (205; R.453). “That mortal inextricable pain...[Kakaia smertel’naia, nevlaznaia muka...]” (220; R.461).

²¹ In fact a capital M in Church Slavonic is named “myslete” rather than “mysl’”.

incompatible.” In spite of all his pretensions to literary greatness as well as to the other excellencies of intellect and character, Hermann now and then betrays his utter lack of understanding, judgment, imagination, originality and talent. The tension between the narrator’s self-praise and the implied reality produces a strong comic effect; from under the mask of a self-proclaimed genius there slowly appears the deformed mug of a malicious buffoon, a mad impostor and imitator whose gaudy pretentious style lacks alleged originality and inventiveness. In this context his oversights become more revealing than his overt statements. Thus he is not aware that thematically his book parrots not Dostoevsky but the second-rate “dostoevshchina” of *The Thought* and thereby becomes a lampoon of those modernist writers of the first Soviet decade (Pil’niak, Erenburg, Serapion brothers, Lidin, and others) whom Nabokov in a letter to Edmund Wilson defined as “*descendants of Savinkov and Andreyev*.”²² Similarly Hermann is not able to notice that stylistically he, like many of his Soviet contemporaries, often imitates Andrey Bely, another founding father of the Russian Modernism, whose influence in the Russian literature of the 1920s was pervasive. In the beginning of Chapter Three Hermann demonstrates his literary versatility and Proteanism by offering “several variations” of chapter openings. All of them burlesque certain stylish narrative devices, common for the prose of Russian modernists, but one aims directly at Andrey Bely’s autobiographical writings of the 1920s with their cinema-like montage “dodges,” cadenced periods, and rich alliterations:

In the meantime... (the inviting gesture of dots, dots, dots). [...] In the meantime... A new paragraph, please.
 ...Plodding along the sun-parched road and trying to keep in the shade of the apple trees, whenever their crooked whitewashed trunks came marching by its side... (54).²³

Nabokov refers to a chapter of Bely’s novel *Kotik Letaev* ostentatiously entitled “Mezhdu tem [In the meantime]” and begun much like Hermann’s “variation”: the truncated first line repeats the chapter title and is followed by a sudden dash in the end (“In the meantime...”); another dash opens a new paragraph that, in its turn, is broken in the end.²⁴ Not only have the two passages comparable beginnings and rhythmical structures (Nabokov’s dactyl against Bely’s anapest); even more important is their containing similar tongue-in-cheek references to white color (cf. “whitewashed trunks” in *Despair* and “belyi blesk” [white glitter] in *Kotik Letaev*) and hence to Andrey Bely’s name (in Russian “bely” means “white”). Due to this parody the expression “Mezhdu tem” [In the meantime] becomes a signal to Bely’s presence; therefore its conspicuous reappearance at the beginning of the pivotal restaurant scene in Tarnitz (the very scene in which, as I mentioned before, Hermann recognizes a shadow of Dostoevsky’s “thumb-screw conversations” in “stage taverns”) — makes one remember that it was Andrey Bely who in his *Petersburg* initiated the canonization of a Dostoevskian tavern dialogue as an indispensable topos of Russian modernist novel. In his review of *Petersburg* Nikolai Berdiaev insightfully remarked that several scenes in the novel,

for example the one in the tavern and the one with the detective, are direct copies of Dostoevsky’s manner. And precisely in these places Bely goes off into another style, which is certainly not his, thus breaking the rhythm of his novel-symphony. He is internally tied to Dostoevsky, and cannot be blamed for this.²⁵

²² *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters: Correspondence between Vladimir Nabokov and Edmund Wilson 1940-1971*, Edited, annotated and with an Introductory Essay by Simon Karlinsky (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 177.

²³ Cf.: ÆMezhdu tem... (priglasitel’nyi zhest mnogotochiia). [...] Mezhdu tem... Novyi abtatz: ...po raskalennoi doroge, staraias’ derzhat’sia v teni iablon’, kogda popadalis’ po kraiu ikh krivye iarko belenye stvoly...” (R. 358).

²⁴ See: Andrei Belyi. *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh* (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990), T. 2, p. 425.

²⁵ Nikolai Berdiaev. “An Astral Novel: Some Thoughts on Andrei Bely’s *Petersburg*,” *The Noise of Change: Russian Literature and the Critics (1891-1917)*, ed. by Stanley Rabinowitz (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis, 1986), p. 201.

Berdiaev alludes to Chapter Five of *Petersburg* in which Pavel Morkovin/Voronkov, a double agent, taunts Nikolai Ableukhov, a protagonist of the book, into a seedy “stage tavern” and there, like Dostoevsky’s Porfiry in *Crime and Punishment*, teases him by his perverse hints and suggestions. Among other things, Morkovin claims that he and Nikolai are bound by ties of kinship, or blood ties that, as he puns, have nothing to do “with the shedding of blood.” He declares himself to be Nikolai’s illegitimate brother, “the fruit of your father’s affair with a seamstress,” and then says that he was just having his little joke:

That was probing, to see how you would react. I must both vindicate you and cause you pain. All that’s left to point out is that we are brothers... but by different fathers.”²⁶

In the Tarnitz scenes of *Despair* Hermann and Felix also discuss possibility/impossibility of their kinship. “Mightn’t one suppose my father had sinned with your mother” — banters Felix but Hermann takes his joke quite seriously and answers:

Our blood, Felix, is not the same. No, my good chap, not the same. I was born a thousand miles from your cradle and the honor of my parents — as of yours, I hope — is unstained. You are an only son: So am I. Consequently neither to me nor to you can there come that mysterious creature: a long-lost brother once stolen by the gypsies (87).

Yet in the tavern Hermann thinks that he and Felix look like “the fortunate brother and the luckless brother [...] facing each other, both sitting alike; elbows on the table and fists at the cheekbones” (99). It is curious that identical poses of Hermann and Felix mimic those of Bely’s fake brothers — in the tavern Nikolai Ableukhov and his tormentor “sat and placed their elbows on the table.”²⁷

Of course, similarities between the tavern scenes in *Despair* and *Petersburg* are not limited by settings, subjects of conversation or details. Bely connects this episode of his novel with the theme of Bronze Horseman — the essential element of St. Petersburg’s cultural mythology which symbolizes the demonics of the doomed “artificial” city. On their way to the tavern Ableukhov and Morkovin pass by the monument to Peter the Great:

Here was the square. In the square [there] loomed [the same] crag; the [same] steed flung out its hooves [but what a strange sight]. A shadow covered the Horseman: [and it seemed that] there was no Horseman.”²⁸

On his way back Nikolai, shattered by the talk with the double agent, comes up to the Bronze Horseman again:

Nikolai Apollonovich raised curious eyes toward the immense outline of the Horseman. Not long before it had seemed that there was no Horseman (a shadow had covered him); but now the metal lips were parted in an enigmatic smile.”²⁹

Nabokov’s characters may be said to repeat the Petersburg circular route of Ableukhov, as Hermann discovers or fantasizes in Tarnitz an uncanny reincarnation of the Bronze Horseman, a statue of some duke that “might have passed for that of Peter the Great in the town he founded” (78). It is the starting point of this route that is marked by the Bely-esque introductory “in the meantime”:

In the meantime night was approaching; the sparrows had long disappeared; *the monument loomed darker and seemed to have grown in size*. From behind a black tree there came out noiselessly a gloomy and fleshful moon. A cloud slipped a mask over it in passing, which left visible only its chubby chin (88).

After their conversation in the tavern Hermann and Felix are pacing the streets of the town and finally find themselves at the same point as before — on the bewitched square with the monument mirroring the mythologized cityscape of *Petersburg*:

²⁶ Andrei Bely. *Petersburg*. Translated, annotated and introduced by Robert A. Maguire and John E. Malmstad (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 145.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 144.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 141.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 149.

It was a sharp bleak night. Among small clouds curled like astrakhan, a shiny flat moon kept sliding in and out. [...] *We again walked past the duplicate of the Bronze Rider* (101-102).

The entrapment of Hermann in Bely's stock images and situations, in their turn derivative, reflects and comments upon depravities of his insane creative mind. Unable to set itself free from secondhand *clichés*, stale fancies and solipsistic platitudes, Hermann's artistic imagination generates only an eclectic mixture of incongruous imitations, counterfeits, fake "doubles" — the pseudo-innovative hodgepodge in which Leonid Andreev's "dostoevshchina" commingles with Andrey Bely's self-conscious fictions and Briusov's or Savinkov's trite narcissism merges with plots of Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and tabloid journalism.

In this self-important and epigonic eclecticism or, as Hermann himself puts it, in the "twenty-five kinds of handwriting" he sports (90) the Russian readers of the 1920s would easily recognize a generic parody of the contemporary modernist literature that was notorious for its omnivorousness. As Yuri Tynianov wrote in his essay *Literature Today*, unscrupulous imitations of several models at once became quite symptomatic for the contemporary fiction: "Boundary lines between writers have been erased; writers are getting fluid. There are such mixtures in which Pil'niak's intonations would come together with Zamiatin's images, Vsevolod Ivanov's dialectalisms and even Andrey Bely's rhythms."³⁰

The sharp edge of Nabokov's literary polemic points to this sin of indiscriminate parroting and slashes at a number of Soviet writers guilty of unscrupulous imitations. In *Despair* one can discern lampoons of all the authors mentioned by Tynianov with the addition of Aleksey Tolstoy, Viktor Shklovskii, Mikhail Kozakov and others. But the chief target of Nabokov's parodic ire seems to have been Ilia Erenburg, at that time a very popular and tricky novelist whose imitative writings Tynianov called "Dostoevsky not quite chewed up" ["ne do kontza szhevannyi Dostoevsky"] and a mirror reflection of the genuine literature. In a sense *Despair* can be read as a travesty of Erenburg long-forgotten novel *Leto 1925 goda* [*The Summer of 1925*] — a quasi-confessional book in which the writer under his own name takes the role of the narrator and main character, a down-and-out in corrupt capitalist Paris. "Maybe murderers should write books rather than writers,"³¹ states he and asserts that he prefers the profession of an assassin to writing stories for journals.³² The rambling plot of the novel involves a murder the narrator after all fails to commit, another murder committed by the narrator's demon — his "false brother" or double, the "real" Erenburg's metaphorical change of identities with a phantom of his imagination, long conversations in Dostoevsky-like "stage taverns," a trite love triangle, an aborted attempt to escape into "a remote abode of delight" and, in the finale, the return of the prodigal son back home, to the paradise of socialism. The very mode and tone of discourse chosen by Erenburg bear a close resemblance to Hermann's self-conscious memoir: both narrators interweave their stories with similar meta-literary digressions, auto-commentary, direct appeals to the readers, anticipations of their reactions, shifts from the narrated past to the present of writing, and other "defamiliarizing" devices. It seems that the very title of Nabokov's novel and its theme of despair stem from the introductory part of *The Summer of 1925* where Erenburg whines about his creative and existential troubles and promises to use his "still fresh and warm *despair*" as his literary material.³³

³⁰ Iu. N. Tynianov. *Poetika, istoriia literatury, kino* (Moskva: Nauka, 1977), p. 294.

³¹ Ilia Erenburg. *Leto 1925 goda* (Moskva: Artel' pisatelei "Krug", 1926), p. 95.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 122.

³³ Erenburg claims that he is writing not a novel but a truthful account of real events and says that it is extremely difficult for him to do that. His frustrations are associated with the stormy wind outside (*Ibidem*, pp. 7-8) — a trite image that can be met in scores of Soviet books (usually encoded as the wind of revolution, the wind of history, and so on). Cf. Hermann's complaints in the beginning of the book: "It may look as though I do not know how to start" (13); "My hands tremble, I want to shriek or to smash something with a bang..." (14); "I have been sitting in a queer state of exhaustion, now listening to the rushing and crashing of the wind, now drawing

“Despair” [otchaianie] is a key word of Erenburg’s story; it characterizes the state of the narrator’s mind after he has plunged into the horrible reality of the corrupt West and lost all his moral bearings. For him, this despair is a remedy and a purge as it forces him to repudiate his voluntary exile and to go back home — to Moscow. In the end of the book he once more emphasizes the word “otchaianie,” playing upon its phonic likeness to the verb “othalit” [cast off a boat, depart].³⁴ It is hardly a coincidence that in the Russian version of *Despair* Hermann uses exactly the same word play in his “juvenile experiments in the senseless sounds”:

[...] ot otchianiia [...] ty otchalila (R.360).

I think that this wordplay in the nonsensical poem can be interpreted as a clue leading the Russian reader to Erenburg’s novel and its implied debunking.

Throughout *Despair* the elaborate system of concealed intertextual allusions and parodic parallels which remain beyond Hermann’s grasp exposes his real literary lineage: not a parade of classics but a succession of the most famous madmen and lunatics in Russian literature — Pushkin’s Herman (*The Queen of Spades*) and Evgenii (*The Bronze Horseman*), Gogol’s Poprishchin, Dostoevsky’s Goliadkin, Sologub’s Peredonov, Bely’s Dudkin. Punished by figurative caning in the end of the novel, he could have cried together with Poprishchin, the protagonist of Gogol’s *Notes of a Madman* indirectly alluded to in *Despair* more than once: “Chrezvychaino bol’no b’etsia prokliataia palka” (“This damn stick hurts really bad”). But by implication this system also punishes Erenburg and Hermann’s other modernist literary models. Through parodic associations with the mad narrator they all are found guilty in imitateness and banality, in “dostoevshchina” and sensationalism, in aesthetic blindness and political correctness. Together with Hermann, they are denounced for defiling and desecrating Russian classical tradition and sent to caning chamber by the defender of this tradition — Vladimir Nabokov. The stick of his parody “b’et chrezvychaino bol’no” — it really hurts bad.

noses in the margin of the page...” (15). Cf. also the ironic comment on such a kind of the literary openings in Chapter Three (53) and the repetition of the wind motif in Chapter Ten.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 204.