JOANNA TRZECIAK

Viennese Waltz: Freud in Nabokov's *Despair*

> Let the credulous and the vulgar continue to believe that all mental woes can be cured by a daily application of old Greek myths to their private parts. I really do not care.
>
> —Vladimir Nabokov[1]

ALTHOUGH NABOKOV DISMISSED FREUD as a trivial and vulgar thinker and derided him at every turn, the presence of Freud and Freudianism is quite conspicuous in his works. From *Mary* to *Lolita* to *Ada* the reader encounters the "Viennese witch doctor" and his delegation time and again. The bearded psychiatrist in *The Defense* who counsels Luzhin after his breakdown, John Ray Jr., Ph.D. (Humbert's editor in *Lolita*), analyst Dr. Rosetta Stone from *Pnin*, and the chief psychiatrist at the "Psykitsch" asylum in *Ada* (Dr. Sig Heiler)—these are some of the costumes in which Nabokov cloaks his "favorite figure of fun." Not only did Nabokov deny any Freudian influence on his novels, but he also adamantly rejected the Freudian interpretive framework as such. His edict that his own works be spared a Freudian reading is enforced by a surfeit of interpretive traps set for Freudians within the pages of his novels. With great vigilance, Nabokov anticipates and short-circuits potential Freudian interpretations of his work through parody, travesty, and psychoanalytic pastiche. Indeed, a complex relationship obtains between Nabokov and the object of his parody: a one-sided partnership in which Freud becomes "Freud," a Nabokovian construction that is part caricature and part straw man.

Despite Nabokov's attempts to deny legitimacy to any connection between his work and Freud's, scholars have endeavored to understand the Freudian presence in his writing.[2] Phyllis Roth was a pioneer in the effort to come to terms

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[1] *Strong Opinions* 66. The interview was conducted by Alfred Appel Jr. in Montreux in 1966 and published in 1967 in *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*.

[2] A full survey of scholarly work on Nabokov and Freud is beyond the scope of this essay. In addition to the studies cited here, see, as representative examples, Rowe and Green. More recently Couturier has used Lacanian psychoanalysis to deconstruct desire in Nabokov's works. For psychobiographical works on Nabokov see Bruhm, Ingham, and de la Durantaye. Studies in anthologies devoted to psychoanalysis and literature include Mouchard, Berman, and Elms.

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with Nabokov's antipathy for psychoanalysis. Seeking to avoid the sort of straightforward Freudian interpretation against which Nabokov had inoculated his fiction, Roth treats *Speak, Memory* as Nabokov's version of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, addressing (somewhat gingerly) Nabokov's obsession with artistic control. Yet what Roth tiptoes around is central to Jenefer Shute's work on Nabokov and Freud. Shute frames Nabokov's conflict with Freud as an attempt to ensure hermeneutic control over his own texts by retaking territory colonized by Freud. Although Shute's analysis goes a long way toward explaining why Nabokov granted such an inordinate amount of attention to someone he claimed was utterly ridiculous, her focus on Nabokov's novels written in English and the 1966 English translation of *Despair* highlights primarily discourses present in Anglophone rather than Russian culture. In contrast, Stephen Blackwell closely examines Freudianism within the Russian cultural context, while analyzing the mythic elements of *Despair* that function as a means of entrapping the Freudian reader.[3]

Taking as points of departure the hermeneutic half-nelson anatomized by Shute and the cultural fields within which Nabokov's works were written and read, I analyze in the present essay a literary mechanism within the 1966 text of *Despair* that both relies on and undermines a Freudian reading.[4] I identify a set of objects whose Freudian valence could easily mislead the unwary reader into taking them symbolically, thus overlooking their function as important clues to events in the novel, physical traces so to speak. In my analysis, I posit that prevailing discourses, coupled with what might be called the "cultural competence" of the reader or scholar, are co-determinants of literary devices, semantic structures, and textual patterning in Nabokov's texts. In the case of the 1966 version of *Despair*, the resulting text is a palimpsest, as Nabokov adds, deletes, and reconfigures passages in translation, and the text itself is overwritten by discourses in the target culture. Moreover, by attending to cultural debates extant in mid-1930s émigré Berlin, where the Russian original was composed, it is possible to see within the canonical 1966 version vestiges of this originary text. While I do not tackle the larger question of the nature of Nabokov's reliance on Freud head on, I believe that the present analysis provides some purchase on this fraught relationship, its literary manifestations, and what may be learned by pursuing a line of questioning that Nabokov himself sought to stymie.

Even though Nabokov's English translations of his Russian works show him to be an ardent anti-Freudian, this animosity was not broadcast as loudly during his "Russian years" as he would have us believe. While it is true that Nabokov distanced himself from Freud from the outset, he does not appear to have perceived Freudianism as a threat to his art when writing for the Russian émigré

[3] Although Blackwell rightly identifies anti-Freudian elements in Nabokov's Russian works, by no means were they shot through with the obsessive anti-Freudianism symptomatic of the works Nabokov published after moving to the United States.

[4] Nabokov first published *Despair*, his English translation of *Otchayanie*, in 1937; a second, and heavily revised, version appeared in 1966. Throughout this essay, *Despair* designates the 1966 translation unless otherwise noted. One of the strategies Nabokov used to claim legitimacy for additions he made when translating his own novels was to insist that the additions were in fact part of the original text, but had not been included in the original publication. See his foreword to *Despair* 1966, xii.

audience.[5] Many of the Freudian allusions in the Russian novels were added by Nabokov in English translation in the 1960s. The paucity of Freudian references in the Russian originals may reflect a simple cultural fact: although Freud did rise to prominence in the 1920s, Nabokov's pre-Revolutionary generation was far more strongly influenced by such psychological thinkers as Otto Weininger, Havelock Ellis, William James, and Richard Von Krafft-Ebing than by Freud.[6] Freud's limited penetration may also have been due to the incumbency of Russian Symbolism, a movement whose obsessions occupied a sphere similar to that of psychoanalytic discourse.[7] Furthermore, after sustained, but ultimately abortive, attempts to wed Freudianism and Marxism, the Soviets adopted an anti-Freudian position in the late 1920s that softened only in the 1960s.[8] As a consequence, anti-Freudianism became a politically charged stance, such that many Russian émigrés tended to ignore Freud rather than join the Soviets in their criticism of him. Finally, during his Russian years Nabokov was himself primarily engaged with another set of discourses: émigré debates over the future of Russian literature in exile, the legacy of Symbolism, and the place of Dostoevsky and Pushkin in the Russian literary canon (see Hagglund, Gibson, and Brintlinger). Anticipating a different cultural literacy on the part of the American reader and trying to construct a new authorial persona, Nabokov had to choose to make explicit, recast, attenuate, or eliminate many of the overtones of these earlier Russian discourses in English translation.

Once he crossed the Atlantic, leaving Europe behind, Nabokov sensed that a psychoanalytic hermeneutics was encroaching upon his texts, re-inscribing them in Freudian terms. Thus it is not surprising that he felt the need to blunt the edge of Freudianism by co-opting it in his novels and translations, bringing it under his own artistic control. Beginning with his second English novel, *Bend Sinister*, in which Freud's face is prominently featured at the bottom of a toilet bowl (85), Nabokov chooses to invoke Freud frequently. Likewise his translations of his Russian works become a venue for castigating the Viennese master and his delegation.

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[5] The documentary evidence of Nabokov's extra-literary engagement with Freud during his Russian years is rather scant. Blackwell playfully suggests that Nabokov could have been the author of "Quacks in Our Midst" (*Cambridge Review*, November 28, 1919), which pokes fun at Freud, although there is only stylistic evidence to support such a conjecture. The best documented example of Nabokov's disdain for Freud comes much later. "What Should Everyone Know?" ("Chto vsiakii dolzhen znat'?"), a spoof written in 1931 for the émigré paper *Novaia Gazeta*, offers a rather coarse critique of Freudian theory, which he sums up in the simple formulation: "Sex governs life." In this piece, Nabokov describes a series of complexes, including "the happy marriage complex," and parodies the Freudian method of verbal association (397–99). For further discussion see Field 263, and Blackwell 132–33.

[6] See Naiman 47n.91. Soviet attitudes toward Freud were mixed, if not uneasy. In the mid-1920s psychoanalytic studies of Pushkin and Gogol appeared (see Ermakov). Iolan Neufeld's psychoanalytic examination of Dostoevsky, edited by Freud himself, was translated into Russian in 1925.

[7] For example, the unconscious, a preoccupation with decoding symbols, and a world view meticulously constructed by systematic mythologizing were features shared by Freudian psychoanalytic thought and Russian Symbolism, but not prominent in the work of other psychologists and sexual theorists of the time (Etkind, *Eros nevozmozhnogo*; cited in Naiman 47n.91).

[8] In the early 1920s anti-Freudian themes began to appear in both literature and literary criticism—the former epitomized by Marietta Sergeevna Shaginyan's 1923 novel *One's Own Fate* (*Svoya sud'ba*) and the latter evident in criticisms of Gladkov's *Cement* (1925) for its "unnatural blend of Marxism and Freudianism." Indeed, due to its focus on individual drives, Freudianism became off limits among Soviet theorists of the late 1920s (Oulanoff 160).

much so that his novels and self-translations do indeed come to rely on the very Freudian notions being discredited. That is to say, beyond their polemical and pre-emptive role, Freudian symbols and allusions serve literary functions that fundamentally reconfigure these novels.

My case study in Nabokov's literary engagement with Freud will be *Otchayanie* (1934) and its second English translation, *Despair*, published in 1966. Nabokov undertook this re-translation of *Despair* as part of the larger project of presenting his entire Russian corpus to the American reader. Aware that cultural context and the cultural competence of the reader reinscribe the translated text, superimposing a new layer of meaning, he added both tacit and overt allusions to Freud to foil such a reinscription. Realizing that the Freudian *modus operandi* is to regard the explicit surface level of the text as a manifestation of implicit unconscious elements, Nabokov in his 1966 *Despair* preempts the exercise by anticipating it and situating its would-be fruits on the surface level of the text. Nabokov's liberal, humorous, and—above all—*conscious* positioning of snow-capped yellow signposts, bulging cacti, and bitten sausages throughout the text frustrates a psychoanalytic hermeneutics that relies on such images as windows into the unconscious. One particular technique for subverting Freudian hermeneutics stands out: Nabokov conceals plot traces (clues in the tradition of detective fiction) beneath a veil of Freudian symbols. A walking stick, lipstick, wilted tulips, cigarettes—these and other objects together comprise a false system of coordinates meant to lead the Freudian reader down a blind alley. Their symbolic allure distracts attention from their function as physical traces of adultery, insurance fraud, murder, and identity theft. In essence, Nabokov adopts a strategy of silencing Freudian discourse by subsuming it under his own, or rather under one co-opted from detective fiction.[12]

A Case Study: *Despair*

Despair plays with the genre of detective fiction in altering the generic triad of criminal, victim and detective.[13] In *Despair*, there is no detective; rather, the role of the detective falls to the reader, whether a Freudian reader searching for symbols or Nabokov's implied "good reader," who pays close attention to physical objects and their involvement in the plot and is also able to appreciate the aesthetic import of Nabokov's exercise in Freudus interruptus.

At the heart of the novel lies an insurance scam gone awry. Hermann, the novel's protagonist cum narrator, is a failing chocolate manufacturer. While on a business trip he stumbles upon a tramp, Felix, whom he sees as his perfect

[12] A full-blown examination of Nabokov's engagement with Freud in *Despair* is beyond the scope of this essay. Besides symbolism and mythos, among the other Freudian elements on display in the novel are narcissism, homoeroticism, dissociative disorder, and hysteria. For a face-value Freudian interpretation of imagery in *Despair,* see Suagee. Shute ("The Play of Power" 35–63) deconstructs Hermann as written by a number of discourses. For an analysis of the anti-Freudian poetics of *Despair*, see Blackwell; for a Lacanian reading, see Couturier.

[13] The modest body of scholarship on *Despair* in relation to detective fiction includes Oakley, Sweeney, and Mel'nikov. For a classic analysis of the narrative structure of detective fiction see Todorov.

Foucault's and Barthes's pronouncements on the death of the author notwithstanding, Nabokov is an author who refuses to die. Anticipating how his works would be read, he did everything in his power to subvert readings (and discourses) he did not favor. Indeed, few writers can match Nabokov's determination to exert control over the reception of his texts and over his readers. With Freud the dominant hermeneutic force of his times, Nabokov had little choice but to engage him. Arm in arm with his Viennese partner, he sought to waltz him off of the ballroom floor and into the thorny bushes.

Kent State University

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