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THE SHADOW AND THE LAW: STEVENSON, NABOKOV, AND DOSTOESVSKY

Rose France

When Vladimir Nabokov was teaching at Cornell, in the early 1950s, at the time he was working on *Lolita*, the texts for his course on European literature included Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.¹ Nabokov's interest in *Jekyll and Hyde* is no surprise, considering the prominence of the theme of doubles in his own work since the 1930 publication of *The Eye*.² In his Cornell lectures, Nabokov champions Stevenson against those who view him as no more than a writer of lower genres, commanding his students to "consign to oblivion any notion you may have had that *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is a mystery story, a detective story or a movie." It is, rather, " 'a fable that lies nearer to poetry than to ordinary prose fiction' and therefore belongs to the same order as *Madame Bovary* and *Dead Souls*."³

The "double" theme is also an important point of intersection between Nabokov and Fyodor Dostoevsky, who, besides *The Double*, wrote a number of works, for example *A Raw Youth* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, featuring the split personality motif. Nabokov was famously disparaging of Dostoevsky's work. In his lectures, he directs the same criticism from which he had absolved Stevenson at Dostoevsky, characterising him as little more than a glorified crime writer, dismissing *The Brothers Karamazo*, for instance, as "a typical detective story, a riotous whodunit—

¹ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (London: Vintage, 1992), 226.

² Julian Connolly, "Nabokov's Re(Visions) of Dostoevsky," in *Nabokov and his Fiction: New Perspectives*, ed. Julian Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 141-157.

³ Vladimir Nabokov, "The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde," in *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/ Bruccoli Clark, 1980), 179-204 (pp. 179, 180); in the second sentence, Nabokov quotes from Stephen Gwynn, *Robert Louis Stevenson* (1939)..

in slow motion.”⁴ Nabokov claims to elevate Stevenson and demote Dostoevsky on purely artistic grounds. However, an assessment of the structural and thematic correspondences between *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and two other works containing the double motif, Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and Nabokov’s *Lolita*, suggests that Nabokov’s judgement may be based as much on moral as on aesthetic considerations.

In a recent analysis, Gry Faurholt identifies Stevenson’s *Jekyll and Hyde* as the canonical example of a particular type of literary double narrative involving a split personality. In this type of story, a protagonist unwilling to disown some socially unacceptable aspect of himself is haunted by a persecutory figure (not a doppelgänger) who represents a physical manifestation of the dissociated part of the hero’s self.⁵

Taking this model as a starting point in comparing our three texts, we can see that they share a clear structural pattern:

- a) all involve a protagonist who believes he is better than others, and thus above the law;
- b) the plot centres on a transgression arising from the hero’s deluded view of himself;
- c) a second character initially understood within the narrative as a separate entity, is “called to life” or enters the orbit of the hero at the time of his transgression;
- d) this shadow double character is aware of the secret of the hero’s crime, which is hidden from the world;
- e) the dynamic between the two characters changes, and a final confrontation results in the destruction of one or both of the pair.

In all three works, the shadow double acts as a threat to the hero’s hubristic picture of himself, a mirror held up to the hero’s vices. Stevenson’s *Jekyll*, as Nabokov comments in his lecture, is a “hypocritical creature, carefully concealing his little sins” (Nabokov, “*Jekyll and Hyde*,” 182). His hubris takes the form of moral pride: “it was,” he claims, “rather the exacting nature of my aspiration ... that made me what I was.”⁶ Though he harbours illicit desires, he cannot indulge them without damage to his reputation. He engineers the split in his personality so that he may, as he puts it, “walk steadfastly and securely on his upward path” (Stevenson,

⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace/Bruccoli Clark Layman, 1981), 133.

⁵ Gry Faurholt, “Self as Other: The Doppelgänger,” *Double Dialogues*, 10 (Summer 2009), online only: <http://www.doubledialogues.com/article/self-as-other-the-doppelganger/>

⁶ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, ed. Martin Danahay (London: Broadview Press, 2015), 76.

77). However, Jekyll's association with Hyde puts this respectability in jeopardy.

While for Jekyll, it is the opinion of the world that matters, in Dostoevsky's and Nabokov's novels, it is the integrity of the hero's own view of himself that is threatened by the shadow double. Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov suffers from an excessive desire for power, which comes to light in the article he writes before the murder, expressing the idea that the "extraordinary man" may be permitted to "wade through blood" in order to fulfil his aims. The role of the "shadow" in the novel is played by Svidrigailov, who represents the *reductio ad absurdum* of Raskolnikov's own moral position. He, too, believes he is a law unto himself, but to Raskolnikov, he appears no more than a base scoundrel, whose crimes and misdemeanours spring from his wilful egoism.

The hubris of the hero of *Lolita* is primarily aesthetic. Humbert believes he is unique in his romantic sensibility and his appreciation of female beauty. This opinion is bolstered by comparisons of himself to Dante and Petrarch, and by his private mythology of the "nymphet" that renders his own experience incomparably more "poignant and dazzling" than that of "normal big males consorting with their normal big mates in that routine rhythm that shakes the world."⁷ In the figure of Quilty, Humbert's own crime, and the appetites that provoked it, are reflected back in a form that is unbearable to him. Quilty is not only amoral, but crass – a "*poshliak*" – a vulgarian. While Humbert embellishes his sexual abuse with references to Baudelaire, Quilty commodifies it, peddling pornography (as we learn from Lo's account of life at "Duk Duk Ranch").

Whereas Hyde constitutes a challenge to Jekyll's respectable public face, the doubles in *Lolita* and *Crime and Punishment* challenge the central protagonist's own delusory integrity by speaking of his crime using the most unvarnished terms. When Raskolnikov expresses outrage at Svidrigailov's eavesdropping, Svidrigailov comments that such scruples are hardly in keeping with the view that "any old woman you like can be knocked on the head."⁸ Quilty rejects Humbert's performance as spurned lover, declaring that he saved Dolores Haze "from a beastly pervert" (Nabokov, *Lolita*, 290).

The genre of gothic fantasy enables Stevenson to show two separate consciousnesses in possession of a single body, thus presenting the reader with a graphic depiction of moral duplicity and psychological fissure. Only a trace of this Stevensonian fantasy is found in *Crime and Punishment* and *Lolita*, which generally observe the generic constraints of realist narrative.

⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1959), 20.

⁸ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Jessie Coulson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 495.

However, both employ uncanny elements (dream, coincidence, telepathy) to hint simultaneously at a supernatural plane of existence and at the psychological disintegration of the hero when confronted by the double. When Raskolnikov encounters Svidrigailov for the first time, he has been having a dream in which he returns to the scene of the murder, and is beckoned by a stranger and follows him. When he wakes, Svidrigailov is standing in the room staring at him and appears to inhabit both dimensions, dream and reality, at once: Raskolnikov “drew a deep breath, but the dream seemed strangely to be continuing; the door was wide open and on the threshold stood a complete stranger, looking fixedly at him” (Dostoevsky, 268). Svidrigailov’s references to ghosts, “Apparitions are, so to speak, shreds and fragments of other worlds” (*ibid.*, 277), maintain the otherworldly atmosphere within the scene. At the first meeting between Humbert and Quilty at the Enchanted Hunters, Quilty’s face is shrouded in darkness and his voice appears disembodied. His uncanny status is also signalled by his apparent ability to read the hero’s mind: “Where the devil did you get her?” “I beg your pardon?” “I said, the weather is getting better” (Nabokov, *Lolita*, 25). Here, as in *Jekyll and Hyde*, the double seems to be summoned by the hero’s transgression: Quilty appears on the very night that Humbert plans to carry out his abuse of Lo.

There are elements of the fantastic, too, in the confrontation between hero and shadow double that constitutes the climax of each novel. Near the end of *Crime and Punishment* Raskolnikov goes to find Svidrigailov, takes a wrong turning and finds him accidentally:

“I was going to your place to look for you ... but why did I suddenly turn into Obukhovsky Prospekt just now from the Haymarket? I never come this way. I always turn right from the Haymarket. But I turned along here and here you are! Strange!” (Dostoevsky, 447).

Suggestions of telepathy and compulsion hint here at a permeable boundary between the hero and his double, lending the relationship a vaguely supernatural, premonitory aura. There is also an ambiguous dynamic between persecuted and persecutor, plausibly motivated by the “double’s” intention to blackmail: “I am afraid, am I? Afraid of you? You ought rather to be afraid of me, *cher ami*” (*ibid.*, 459).

What is only hinted at in Dostoevsky is more fully explored by Nabokov. The trail of pseudonyms left by Quilty in motel guestbooks suggests that Humbert is about to meet his nemesis. In the final confrontation between Humbert and Quilty, the roles of “hunter” and “hunted” are reversed, and yet it is unclear who is in fact in control: the victim or the killer. In this scene, besides several uncanny details, there are a number of playful references to fantastic literature, such as Quilty’s

address, "Grimm Street," and the description of Humbert's entry: "The elaborate and decrepit house seemed to stand in a sort of daze ... The door swung open as if in a medieval fairy tale" (Nabokov, *Lolita*, 286).⁹ Inside Quilty's house, the dreamlike atmosphere continues. The owner in his drugged state is apparently unaware of the intruder, causing Humbert to doubt his own solidity: "He either did not notice me, or else dismissed me as some familiar and innocuous hallucination" (*ibid.*, 287). Quilty's behaviour during the lengthy murder scene is akin to that of a spirit: he proves almost indestructible. As Humbert and Quilty wrestle on the floor, the physical boundaries between them dissolve: "I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us" (*ibid.*, 291).

This dissolution of the bounds of identity is linked to Nabokov's observation in the *Jekyll and Hyde* lecture that "In a sense Hyde is Jekyll's parasite" ("Jekyll and Hyde," 182). The choice of words is telling, given Nabokov's interest in entomology, and the common strand of parasitic imagery, especially fly imagery, that features so prominently in Nabokov's "double" plots, including *Despair* and *Pale Fire*.¹⁰ Flies appear in the murder scene in *Lolita*: "half his face gone, and two flies beside themselves with a dawning feeling of unbelievable luck" (Nabokov, *Lolita*, 296), and the scene in Svidrigailov's hotel in *Crime and Punishment*: "Newly awakened flies clustered on the untouched veal" (Dostoevsky, 490). Flies also feature at the points in both novels when the hero and double meet: "Only a large fly buzzed and bumped against the pane" (*ibid.*, 267); "She settled down beside me, slapped a prompt fly on her lovely knee" (*Lolita*, 111). While Dostoevsky almost certainly uses the fly for its associations with the devil and corruption, it is doubly attractive for Nabokov's purposes due to its invocation of Hyde-like parasitism.¹¹

⁹ The name of Quilty's house, "Pavor Manor," yields the single anagram "Vapor" (in its US Spelling). The word not only suggests phantasmagorical phenomena but provides an intertextual allusion to Stevenson's novella: clouds in the story are described as "embattled vapours" (Stevenson, 49), and the crystals used for Jekyll's transformation are said to give off "vapour" (*ibid.*, 74).

¹⁰ On fly imagery in *Pale Fire*, with reference to Nabokov's Stevenson lecture, see Tiffany DeRenewal and Matthew Roth, "John Shade's Duplicate Selves: An Alternative Shadean Theory of *Pale Fire*," *Nabokov Online Journal*, 3 (2009): http://www.nabokovonline.com/uploads/2/3/7/7/23779748/v3_06_roth.pdf

¹¹ In addition, there are several parallels in the depiction of Svidrigailov and Quilty that cannot be discussed here in detail: both characters are over-familiar, affect sophistication through the use of French, and implicate the hero in his own depravity, "offering" him a child for abuse. Both also have a tendency towards chaotic and incoherent speech.

However, when viewed through a Stevensonian lens, the denouements of Dostoevsky's and Nabokov's "double" narratives can be seen to diverge significantly. Double narratives in Gothic literature conventionally end in "madness, despair and death" (Faurholt); both *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Lolita* observe this pattern. In Stevenson's tale, Hyde takes over Jekyll entirely and poisons himself to save himself from the gallows, thus destroying both. In *Lolita*, Humbert initially believes that he has been successful in annihilating his shadow double, thus keeping his own romantic view of himself intact, which, importantly, enables him to complete his testament: "And do not pity C. Q. One had to choose between him and H.H., and one wanted H. H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations" (Nabokov, *Lolita*, 300). However, a corrective to Humbert's view is supplied by "John Ray Jr.'s" framing narrative: we learn that Humbert has died of coronary thrombosis before the trial, and that "Mrs Richard Schiller" has died giving birth to a stillborn daughter. Thus, the "death and despair" appropriate to the split personality narrative is asserted, contrary to the hero's own optimistic hopes.

Dostoevsky, on the other hand, while doling out madness, death and despair to the "double" Svidrigailov, allows Raskolnikov to escape. Following their confrontation, Svidrigailov takes on the role of Raskolnikov's rescuer, declaring to Dunya: "He [Raskolnikov] can still be saved" (Dostoevsky, 473). Svidrigailov's suicide appears to be a contributing factor in Raskolnikov's confession: the "double" is sacrificed so that the hero might live. Dostoevsky's handling of the double theme departs significantly from the pattern represented by *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. His conclusion embodies the Christian idea of redemption, thus overturning the ethically satisfying conventional denouement of the double narrative, which, as Faurholt argues, has a normative function, "provoking unease and 'terrorizing' the reader in order to ultimately re-establish and confirm the necessity of [society's] values and boundaries."

Nabokov's lectures on Dostoevsky suggest that he objects to this redemptive ending. His comments on the scene in *Crime and Punishment* in which Raskolnikov and Sonya read the Lazarus story together—which Dostoevsky describes using a phrase Nabokov abhors for its poor taste: "The murderer and the harlot reading the eternal book"—are revealing:

The inhuman and idiotic crime of Raskolnikov cannot be even remotely compared to the plight of a girl who impairs human dignity by selling her body. The murderer and the harlot reading the eternal book—what nonsense. There is no rhetorical link between a filthy murderer and this unfortunate girl (*Russian Literature*, 110).

While he clearly finds Dostoevsky's morality distasteful, Nabokov's praise of Stevenson's novella also has a moral dimension, his emphasis on the comforting conservatism of Stevenson's world with its "delightful winery taste":

In fact, a good deal of old mellow wine is drunk in the story: one recalls the wine that Utterson so comfortably sips. This sparkling and comforting draught is very different from the icy pangs caused by the chameleon liquor, the magic reagent that Jekyll brews in his dusty laboratory. Everything is very appetisingly put ("Jekyll and Hyde," 180).

Nabokov's moral alignment with Stevenson also leads him to overlook "lapses" in Stevenson's novella that he refuses to pass by in Dostoevsky. Nabokov entirely ignores the melodramatic characterisation in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, in such sentences as when Hyde "shrank back with a hissing intake of breath;" "The other snarled aloud into a savage laugh;" "The large, handsome face of Dr Jekyll grew pale to the very lips;" or "A flash of odious joy appeared on the woman's face" (Stevenson, 42, 196, 46, 50). Dostoevsky, on the other hand, is rebuked for similarly melodramatic expressions elsewhere in his *oeuvre*: "The characters [in *The Idiot*] never say anything without either paling, or flushing, or staggering on their feet" (Nabokov, *Russian Literature*, 128). Stevenson is only mildly criticised for not being more specific about the crimes Jekyll wants to commit: "The good reader cannot be quite satisfied with the mist surrounding Jekyll's adventures" (Nabokov, "Jekyll and Hyde," 194). Dostoevsky, where guilty of a similar oversight in *Notes from Underground*, is more roundly condemned:

Here, as elsewhere in his writing, the writer's art lags behind the writer's purpose, since the sin committed is seldom specified, and art is always specific. The act, the sin, is taken for granted. Sin here is a literary convention similar to the devices in the sentimental and Gothic novels Dostoevski had imbibed (Nabokov, *Russian Literature*, 116-117).

To conclude, there are traces of both Stevensonian fantasy and Dostoevskian characterisation and imagery in Nabokov's treatment of the split personality motif in *Lolita*. A number of undeniably Dostoevskian touches in the handling of the dynamic between the hero and the "shadow double" in the novel lend credence to Cornwell's argument that "Nabokov's megaphoned distaste [for Dostoevsky] is at least partly attributable to (a Bloomian) anxiety of influence."¹² However, in his handling of the *fabula*, Nabokov departs from Dostoevsky significantly,

¹² Neil Cornwell, "Intimations of Lo: Sirens, Joyce and Nabokov's *Lolita*," *Zembla* (September 2006): <https://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/cornwell.htm>.

asserting his own moral authority over the artistic universe, and ensuring that the shadow double does, in fact, bring about the transgressive protagonist's destruction, albeit in a roundabout way. In this sense, Nabokov's novel perpetuates the tradition exemplified by Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

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