BECI CARVER

NABOKOV AND METAPSYCHOLOGY

Bearing in mind that, as Geoffrey Green writes in *Freud and Nabokov*, Nabokov "sustained the grandest and most extravagant contempt for psychoanalysis known in modern literature" (Green 1988, 1), it is striking that the Freudian interpretation of Hugh Person's "erotic dream" in *Transparent Things* should be impossible to contradict. The scenario that his Freudian psychiatrist finds to be "much too direct" unfolds as follows:

> [H]e was offered a sleeping beauty on a great platter garnished with flowers, and a choice of tools on a cushion. These differed in length and breadth, and their number and assortment varied from dream to dream. They lay in a row, neatly aligned: a yard-long one of vulcanized rubber with a violet head, then a thick short burnished bar, then again a thinnish skewerlike affair, with rings of raw meat and translucent lard alternating, and so on – these are random samples. There was not much sense in selecting one rather than another – the coral or the bronze or the terrible rubber – since whatever he took changed in size, and could not be properly fitted to his own anatomical system, breaking off at the burning point or snapping in two between the legs or bones of the more or less disarticulated lady. He desired to stress the following point with the fullest, fiercest, anti-Freudian force. Those oneiric torments had nothing to do, either directly or in a "symbolic" sense, with anything he had experienced in conscious life. (Nabokov 2011: 4, 57)

Person's "anti-Freudianness" is helpless against his dream's catalogue of malfunctioning phallic objects, whose individual oddity belies an essential continuity. Even the "sleeping beauty" for whom he attempts to equip himself for functional sex is the image of an unarousable member, linear and drooping. The roundabout formulation: "He desired to stress the following point with the fullest, fiercest, anti-Freudian force" inserts a gap between his desire and its performance, as if his very anti-Freudianness were a form of impotence. There is a sense in which his own language knowingly acts against him.

In suggesting that Nabokov sides with Person's Freudian psychiatrist in this passage, I am not proposing that he approves of Freud or Freudianism. Jeremy Berman's trawl through Nabokov's writing in *The Talking Cure: Literary Representations of Psychoanalysis* shows the novelist to have been consistent in his scorn for Freudian "quackery" since he published his first parody of psychoanalytic dogma in 1931, in which he gleefully explains (and invents) the "Tantalus complex", "the penal servitude complex" and "the happy marriage complex" (Berman 1885, 316). Nabokov was proud of having been among the first Europeans to see through Freud. On the other hand, the argument of this essay is that when Nabokov moved from France to America in 1940, he encountered a version of psychoanalysis that seemed vaguely palatable. From Freud's own perspective in 1909, the seemingly unquestioning enthusiasm of Americans for psychoanalysis pointed to "the absence of any deep-rooted scientific tradition" in the the nation's academic culture (Kaye 1995, 122), but this absence of foundation and the lack of attentiveness to precedent that it suggests may also be viewed in positive terms, as a freedom for invention. In *The Freudian Ethic*, the Stanford sociologist Richard LaPierre traces a tendency towards "metapsychological speculation" in America in the 1950s (LaPierre 1959, vii) – a mode of enquiry that compares to Freud's in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) in its license for conjecture about subjects whose specific nature is unknown (e.g. Freud introduces his analysis of the so-called "illusions" on which society is based with the disclaimer that "any such venture is invalidated from the outset" by its lack of information (Freud 2008, 1), but which also departs from Freud's example in its disregard for scientific criteria of probability. The function of the prefix "meta-" in LaPierre's "metapsychology" is to propel "psychology" away from its basis in fact, turning it into philosophy or pseudopsychology. Nabokov's closest American friend in the 1940s and 1950s, Edmund Wilson, was a prime instance of a " metapsychologist", For Stanley Edgar Hyman in *The Armed Vision*, the main problem with Wilson's work was precisely his tendency to apply hotchpotches of Freudian theory to literary texts "on no more solid basis than… eclecticism" (Hyman 1952, 45). However, read from a more forgiving angle, Wilson echoes the Nabokov of *Transparent Things* in his use of psychoanalysis as a platform for fancy.

Nabokov was ill-disposed to humour Hyman, whose sloppiness in characterising his father as a "tsarist liberal" seems almost to have led to a brawl between them in 1948 (Boyd 1991, 146). Yet Wilson's penchant for what Hyman calls "superficial" psychologising must have been apparent to him as he worked his way through his friend's work (Hyman 1952, 45). The triple-decker diagnosis of Paul Valéry as "introverted, narcissistic and manic depressive" in *Axel's Castle* (Wilson 2004, 74), the conception of Dickens's Scrooge as "the victim of a manic-depressive cycle' in "The Two Scrooges" (Hyman 1952, 26), and the assessment of Ben Jonson's "sadism" in *The Triple Thinkers* (Wilson 1963, 219), were sure to have engaged Nabokov's attention, both because he was inclined to be meticulous in finding fault with Wilson (it was part

of their dynamic) and because Wilson tended to be his first port of call when he was in the mood to mock psychoanalytic silliness. He could rely on Wilson to remember the context of "the solemn Freudian contention that children like playing ball because balls remind boys of their mothers' breasts and girls of their fathers' balls" (Nabokov & Wilson 1970, 26), or when reading Freud's *Letters to Willhelm Fliess*, he could rely on Wilson to summon to mind the moment when the "Viennese Sage mentions a young patient who masturbated in the w.c. of an Interlaken hotel in a special contracted position to be able to glimpse (now comes the Viennese Sage's curative explanation) the Jungfrau" (Nabokov & Wilson 1970, 300). However, far from being turned off by Wilson's "metapsychological speculation" in his critical work, Nabokov found himself able to enthuse over his friend's most conspicuously psychological readings. The essay on Hemingway in *The Wound and the Bow* seemed exceptionally "excellent" to him (Nabokov & Wilson 1970, 188), although Wilson's project in this piece is to trace an "undruggable" anixety into the "membrane" of Hemingway's prose style (Wilson 1980, 229). Anxiety was a major focus of psychoanalytic concern in America at mid-century, when the American-based Auden wrote *The Age of Anxiety*. It was because of what Louis Menand calls the "discourse of anxiety" that the American pharmaceutical industry was launched in the 1950s to treat the multitudes of the anxious (Menand 2012, 201). Humbert Humbert may be said to invoke this popular preoccupation in *Lolita* in arming himself with sedatives against Lolita's pluck. For Americans in the 1940s and 1950s, the consciousness of anxiety as a phenomenon was a stimulus to as well as a product of metapsychology. And yet, Nabokov was happy to indulge Wilson's contribution to this form of Freudianism.

The only issue that Nabokov had with Wilson's psychologising in *To the Finland Station* seems to be its slight earnestness – a quality that sat uneasily with what Nabokov would later call his "pseudo-scholarship" (Myers 1994, 393). The context in which Nabokov prompts his friend to remember Freud's comment on "balls" is a response to Wilson's reading of Hegel's "triad" – a theory of the interdependence of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis – as a re-imagining of the "male sexual organs" (Wilson 2004, 188). Instead of taking issue with the attribution of a penis fixation to Hegel, Nabokov pirhouettes off into whimsicality with the suggestion that the "triad" is not a "triangle" at all, and that Hegel's concept is more likely to suggest the magnetism of "balls". He writes:

> you are quite wrong about Hegel's triad being based upon the triangle (with a phallic implication which reminds me of a solemn Freudian contention that children like playing ball because balls remind boys of their mothers' breasts and girls of their fathers' balls.) The triad (for what it is worth) is really the idea of a circle; to give a rough example: you come back (synthesis) to your starting point (thesis) after visiting the antipodes (antithesis) with the accumulated impressions

> of the globe enlarging your initial conception of your home town. (Nabokov & Wilson 1970, 32)

The argument here is deliberately coy of committing itself to a view, as if its object were to shake Wilson out of his scholarly "solemn[ity]". It begins with the nonsensical claim that the triad is not a triangle, moves on to ironise Freud's "contention" that balls symbolise breasts or testacles, and finally either flattens this irony or redirects it towards its own discourse with the hypothesis that Hegel's triad "really" suggests the circumnavigationof a "globe" (or ball), the mental image of which "enlarg[es]" (or swells) as it is associated with one's "home town" – the site of one's "original conception". Nabokov carries Wilson's metapsychology to a new level in the act of accusing him of taking metapsychology too seriously.

Potentially, to present oneself as a metapsychologist is to secure a license for whimsicality. LaPierre refers in *The Freudian Ethic* to "the devious thought ways of metapsychological speculation" (LaPierre 1959, vii), as if deviousness were to be expected in metapsychology. But another way of approaching the necessary precariousness of psychological analyses that lacks evidential support is as a sign of creativity. Depending on the earnestness of the writer, a specimen of metapsychology may either be read as bad science or ingenious fiction. When Nabokov published his account of the life of a world-famous psychologist in 1969 in *Ada or Ardor*, he surely intended to remind his readers of another world-famous psychologist whose bogusness seemed to have been clinched by the posthumous appearance in 1967 of *Woodrow Wilson: A Psychological Study* – of which Nabokov wrote in a letter to the editor of *Encounter* that "[it] must be the last rusty nail in the Viennese quack's coffin" (Berman 1985, 213). However, the fundamental difference between Freud and Van is that Freud purported to be writing in his capacity as a scientist, while Van's science is a species of fiction. In the passage below, from an account of Ada and Van's memory of a picnic, Van's authority as a psychologist is reinforced at the same moment that it is undermined on a logical basis:

> For the big picnic on Ada's twelfth birthday and Ida's forty-second *jour de fête*, the child was permitted to wear her lolita (thus dubbed after the little Andalusian gipsy of that name in Osberg's novel and pronounced, incidentally, with a Spanish "t", not a thick English one), a rather long, but hairy and ample, black skirt, with red poppies or peonies, "deficient in botanical reality", as she grandly expressed it, not yet knowing that reality and natural science are synonymous in terms of this, and only this, dream. (Nor did you wise Van. Her note). (Nabokov 2000: 1, 64-65)

Van's criticism of Ada's query with the stipulation that "reality and natural science are synonymous in terms of this, and only this, dream" is at once partially deflated by Ada's "Nor did you wise Van", and vindicated by it: the argument seems to stand that

"this dream" is unique in its botanical realism. And yet, the knowledge Van requires of *all dreams* in order to identify "only this, dream" as a departure from the norm is impossible even in retrospect. That Van might have a particular insight into the anomalousness of Ada's dreams is undercut by the fact that the poppy and/or peony images may not belong to Ada's memory at all but to the "dream" recreated as a pattern on her "lolita" – *if* this garment does belong to her. The invocation of Lolita, combined with Osberg's "little Andalusian gypsy", within whom a ghost of Carmen also lurks, risks dragging the skirt off into the memory system of the earlier novel. At the same time, the hairiness, amplitude, and blackness of the "lolita" makes its floral illustration incongruous, while the spectacle of red flowers straining through a mesh of hair inevitably suggests genitalia. Van's analysis is thus both overambitious and too tame. Yet he retains his credibility.

Wilson wrote of *Ada* in 1973: "I could not get through it… This is a brilliance which aims to dazzle but cannot be anything but dull" (Wilson 1973, 237). There is a shallowness to *Ada*'s preoccupation with the idea of itself as a performance, to which Van's self-consciously playful metapsychology may be understood to contribute. However, from another perspective, the deflective quality of *Ada*'s "brilliance" may be read as part of its refusal to pry, which manifests itself most obviously through the continual, oblique allusion to biographical information that is inaccessible to the reader. Aqua Kaluga is "afflicted with her *usual* [my italics] vernal migraine" (Nabokov 2000: 1, 10), or Walter Demon Veen has "tea at his *favorite* [my italics] hotel" (Nabokov 2000: 1, 17), or Ada asks Van suddenly about one of their formative frolics: "Remember?" and he replies: "Yes, of course, I remember: you kissed me here, on the inside –" (Nabokov 2000: 1, 77-78). *Ada* is full of interiors that we can only vicariously imagine, and in this respect it reinforces the centrality of questions of privacy to Nabokov's late novels. Sebastian Knight in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is too mysterious to be at risk of being known intimately by anyone. Yet by the time Nabokov wrote *Lolita* in the mid-1950s, the endeavour to know another person had become criminal. Humbert's account of his raided writing desk as a "raped little table with [an] open drawer" is the only unambivalently negative representation of physical assault in the novel about paedophilia (Nabokov 2000: 2, 96). In *Pnin*, Nabokov's protagonist frames "psychiatry" as a kind of theft in asking: "Why not leave their private sorrows to people? Is sorrow not, one asks, the only thing in the world people really possess?" (Nabokov 2000: 3, 41).

In *Pale Fire*, Nabokov uses the tension between this Pninian idealisation of privacy and the "psychiatric" impulse to intrude as the basis of the relationship between the poet John Shade and his posthumous editor Charles Kinbote. Kinbote's interpretation of one of Shade's couplets as a reference to Disa, for whom the King of Zembla's "dream-love […] exceeded in emotional tone, in spiritual passion and depth, anything he had experienced in his surface existence" (Nabokov 2011: 2, 167), is rendered

absurd by the meagreness of his proof – Shade writes of a Spring visit to Nice with his wife:

> A host narrator took us through the fog
> Of a March night, where headlights from afar
> Approached and grew like a dilating star,
> To the green, indigo and tawny sea
> Which we had visited in thirty-three.
> (Nabokov 2011: 2, 41)

Kinbote informs us that "thirty-three" was the year of Disa's eighth birthday and goes on to read the couplet to which the date belongs as an allusion to the resemblance between Disa and Mrs Shade, although the scene is drenched in fog, and although Shade's formulation of his meaning foregrounds the text in its capacity as material construct – *as against* a medium of self-expression. The figure of "thirty-three" simultaneously recalls a sea visit undertaken in 1933 and the sea visit of line 433 of the poem, so that '33 neatly emerges as a site of déjà vu. Shade's emphasis on the surface of his poem not only disables Kinbote's specific readings but disturbs the logic and justification of his interest in the "underside" of the poet's meaning (Nabokov 2011: 2, 167). If, as Pnin argues, "private sorrows" are "the only thing in the world people really possess", the subject of the novel is the poet's posthumous insistence that he continues to own himself.

Nabokov's last four novels, *Ada*, *Transparent Things*, *Look at the Harlequins!*, and *The Original of Laura*, may be read (in part) as critiques of the Freudian practice of attempting to unearth secrets. *Ada* is made up of conspicuously incomplete fragments of information, *Transparent Things* defines the activity of reading the past into the present as a form of blindness to the present – Nabokov writes, with a play on the temporal sense of "tense": "[W]hoever wishes to remain in the now, with the now, on the now, should please not break its tension film" (Nabokov 2011: 1, 2); *Look at the Harlequins!* afflicts Vadim Vladimovich N. with the inability to turn back, either literally or in his memory; and *The Original of Laura* dismisses "Dr Freud's' analysis of children's dreams as the work of a 'madman'" (Nabokov 2009, 91). However, Nabokov remains active as a metapsychologist in these novels, and justifies his continued investment in this bastard form of psychology by defining his analytic riffs precisely as an eschewel of the profundities of the psyche. Nabokovian metapsychology is an embrace of the surface. Accordingly, the phrase "probably pathological" in the passage below, from *Ada*, is not designed to expose the workings of a particular mind but to generate a set of improbable, amusing hermeneutic possibilities:

> [Van] was out [...] *na progulke* (promenading) in the gloomy firwood with Aksakov, his tutor, and Bagrov's grandson, a neighbor's boy, whom he teased and

> pinched and made horrible fun of, a nice quiet little fellow who quietly massacred moles and anything else with fur on, probably pathological. (Nabokov 2000: 1, 125)

The grammatical extraneousness of "probably pathological" gives it a scattershot capacity to refer to anything in the sentence that seems medically odd: whether Bagrov's grandson's habit of killing furry animals, or the habit of acquiring fur, or Van's aggression, which may be directed at the mole killer because his fetishisation of "anything with… fur on" inverts Van's own predilection for prepubscent girls – Bagrov's grandson is a pervert by Van's standards. That any of these phenomena might be "pathological" deprives the term of scientific value, but without denting its believability in the context. The phrase suggests a misleadingly vague style of annotation rather than quackery. Not only does the attribution of pathology maintain its hold on our credibility, then, it is also justified on an ethical basis by its open-endedness: its imprecision functions like discretion.

Where in *Ada*, Van's metapsychological conjectures are reliable in spite of their irrationality, in *Transparent Things*, the Freudian explanation of Person's dream about impotent tools is self-evident, as is the subtext of the analogy Nabokov draws between Person's "innocent curiosity" in entering a new era of his emotional life – marked by the prospect of sex with the air hostess, Armande – and that of "a child playing with wriggly refractions in brook water, [or] an African nun in an arctic convent touching with delight the fragile clock of her first dandelion" (Nabokov 2011: 1, 98). That these images are intended to suggest masturbation is confirmed by the original association of the word "wriggling" with snakes, and by the archaic use of the word "clock" to mean "bell", which by 1961 had started to imply "bell end". The sound of "cock" conspires with "bell" to transform the dandelion into genitalia. Moreover, one might argue on the basis of these examples that the psychological reasoning in *Transparent Things* lacks the hypothetical quality that makes metapsychology non-intrusive. Person's sexual temperament is exposed to a degree that recalls Humbert's confessional openness in *Lolita*. On the other hand, just as Humbert is protected against psychoanalytic intruders by the novel's mockery of Freud and booby traps against simplistic analyses, Person is impossible to see through or into in a meaningful way because his entire substance is a surface. His "transparency" is not a window into anything beyond itself; it is a way of remaining opaque, if opacity is understood as the inability to reveal depth. In the sense that his privacy is impossible to encroach upon because it does not exist, Person is not a person.

The ironic impersonality of Person paves the way for the redirection of metapsychology away from the analysis of human subjects and towards language in *Look at the Harlequins!*, where Vadim's useless consultation with a pair of psychoanalysts called Mr and Mrs Junker – who fail to enjoy his joking comparison of their establishment to a paedophilic brothel – is counterposed to the productive train of thought set in motion by the analysis of their "analy[sis] of each other", "every Sunday,

in a secluded, though consequently rather dirty, corner of the beach [...]" (Nabokov 2011: 3, 22). To read the etymological implications of "unloose, release, or dissolve" into "analysis", and so to interpret this beach encounter as sexual, is to explain – albeit whimsically – the novel's preoccupation with miscellaneous sand. The Junkers' energetic holiday may be held responsible for the "*n* like a grain in a cavity" that disrupts Mr Molnar the dentist's dental name (Nabokov 2011: 3, 22), the sudden contact between Vadim's "knee" and "blessed sand" when he almost drowns (Nabokov 2011: 3, 48), the "few grains of wet gravel" that adhere to Iris's "rose-brown ankles" (Nabokov 2011: 3, 50), the reduction of Vadim's first novel to "a pinch of colored dust in my mind" (Nabokov 2011: 3, 72), and the transmutation of his sentences into a "handful of grain" as he reads them aloud (Nabokov 2011: 3, 102). Moreover, part of the point of this trail of references is to turn analysis in on itself. The analysis of analysis leads to an involuted sequence rather than an exploratory exercise; and this might be understood as another kind of Nabokovian sabotage of Freudian method. But if this is the case, in the process of undermining psychoanalysis, Nabokov also reinvents it as an engine for linguistic play, which is the book's main occupation. The polarity between a form of psychology that sets out to intrude and one that limits itself to speculation is perhaps most vividly snapshotted in *Laura*, where Nabokov writes of Flora:

> Only some very expensive, super-Oriental doctor with long gentle fingers could have analyzed her nightly dreams of erotic torture in so called "labs", major and minor laboratories with red curtains. (Nabokov 2009, 57)

The hypothetical doctor who "analyze[s]" Flora is rendered repulsive both by his explicit interest in her sexual fantasies and by his implicit fascination with her labia, while the analysis that reveals the pun in "labs" and the vulval flesh in "red curtains" playfully unveils his crime. Play has an ethical as well as an imaginative purpose. Moreover, there is a claustrophobic over-intimacy to the representation of solitary bodies here and throughout Nabokov's last novel from which such metapsychological punning offers relief.

In working their way through Nabokov's *Letters to Véra*, readers with no prior knowledge of the author's aversion to Freud will be surprised to find after the apparently positive comment in a letter of June 5th 1926: "Mlle Ioffe – pleasant name – is giving a talk about Freud – pleasant topic" (Nabokov 2014, 58), the annotation: "VN would become famous for his dislike of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and baiting of Freudians" (Nabokov 2014, 566). The ability to notice irony in Nabokov's comment depends on a willingness not only to read it against the grain but to do so in the absence of any local cue for suspicion. If the Russian physicist Abram Ioffe had established his reputation for socialist extremism by this point our task would be easier. As it stands, the specific meaning of the utterance is ground out by the majority view of the discourse of Nabokov's oeuvre to which it belongs. Moreover, in reading Nabokov's "

dislike of Sigmund Freud … and baiting of Freudians' into all the psychological aspects of his corpus, we both, in principle, subordinate our understanding of particular moments in his writing to an overview of them – an approach he would have hated – and run the risk of failing to spot the mellower shades in his attitude towards psychoanalysis. These mellower shades are the locus of his metapsychology – a kind of psychology lite that succeeds in dissociating itself from Freud's ambition to see all the way from "the details of neurosis to the conditioning of consciousness" (Freud 1954, 129). Metapsychology offered Nabokov a mode of psychoanalytic thinking that accommodated his flights of fancy, and may have seemed to him to cure the larger discourse to which it belonged of the arrogance he diagnosed as its disease.

REFERENCES

BERMAN, Jeremy. 1985. *The Talking Cure: Literary Representations of Psychoanalysis*. New York: New York University Press.
BOYD, Brian. 1991. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
FREUD, Sigmund. 1954. *The Origins of Psycho-analysis: Letters to Willhelm Fliess, Drafts and Notes, 1887-1902*. Translated by James Strachey & Eric Mosbacher. London: Imago.
—. 2008. *The Future of an Illusion*. Translated by J. A. Underwood. London: Penguin.
—. 2012. *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. Translated by G. Stanley Hall. Ware: Wordsworth.
— and William Bullit. 1967. *Woodrow Wilson: A Psychological Study*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
GREEN, Geoffrey. 1988. *Freud and Nabokov*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska.
HYMAN, Stanley Edgar. 1952. *The Armed Vision*. New York: Alfred Knopf.
KAYE, Howard L. 1993. "Why Freud Hated America". *The Wilson Quarterly* 17. 2: 118-25.
LAPIERRE, Richard. 1959. *The Freudian Ethic*. London: Unwin.
MENAND, Louis. 2012. "Freud, Anxiety and the Cold War". In *After Freud Left: A Century of Psychoanalysis in America*, edited by John Burnham. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
MEYERS, Jeffrey. 1994. "The Bulldog and the Butterfly: The Friendship of Edmund Wilson and Vladimir Nabokov". *The American Scholar* 63. 3: 379-99.
—. 2003. *Edmund Wilson: A Biography*. New York: Cooper Square.
NABOKOV, Vladimir. 1970. The *Nabokov-Wilson Letters: Correspondence Between Vladimir and Edmund Wilson, 1940-1970*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
—. 2000. *Ada or Ardor*. London: Penguin.
—. 2000. *The Annotated Lolita*. London: Penguin.
—. 2000. *Lolita*. London: Penguin.
—. 2000. *Pnin*. London: Penguin.
—. 2009. *The Original of Laura*. London: Penguin.
—. 2011. *Pale Fire*. London: Penguin.
—. 2011. *Look at the Harlequins*! London: Penguin.

—. 2011. *Strong Opinions*. London: Penguin.
—. 2011. *Transparent Things*. London: Penguin.
—. 2014. *Letters to Véra*. Translated by Olga Voronina. London: Penguin.
WILSON, Edmund, 1963. *The Triple Thinkers*. New York: Octagon Books.
—. 1973. *A Window on Russia*. London: Macmillan.
—. 1980. *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature*. London: Martin Secker & Warburg.
—. 2004. *Axel's Castle*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
—. 2004. *To the Finland Station*. New York: Phoenix.