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HISTORY'S HARD SIGN

Vladimir Nabokov's 'The Visit to the Museum'

The characteristic of the real is the fact that it sticks to the soles of one's shoes.

Jacques Lacan¹

All of the constructs of museology – identification, possession, inheritance, display – breed the perfect conditions in Vladimir Nabokov's short story "The Visit to the Museum" for the dissolution of the idea of history as the record of past experience.² Originally composed in Russian, this "disconcertingly resistant text," as Will Norman aptly describes it, reveals the archive as an aporetic structure.³ The Nabokovian Museum fails to record anything, it no longer seems to preserve memory or offer instruction as would befit its definition as a place of learning but instead ushers in a sort of a cinematic parallax view of the real. Parallax, as Slavoj Žižek reminds us in *The Parallax View*, is defined as the seeming change in an object's location, brought about by a shift in observational perspective.⁴ This change, moreover, effects not only the subjective view of the object but, as he puts it, "always reflects an 'ontological' shift in the object itself."⁵ To expose the object of history to a parallax view, as Nabokov does in this tale, is to re-set the perceptual and cognitive programmes giving rise to a certain understanding of Being. What Nabokov uncovers is a startlingly Lacanian point, which is that our sense of ourselves as wholes is itself the effect of a parallax. Rather than being the 'natural' viewpoint, it is a parallax that coheres the infant's disparate parts into the appearance of a One, giving us the illusion of being a totality. Parallax would seal, as it were, the representational contract that permits the flowers, in Henri Bouasse's famous optical trick that Lacan refers to several times, to be perceived as sitting upright in the reflected vase, which is in fact upside down.⁶ The lesson Lacan draws from this is that our apprehension of our body is in a strong sense virtual, our sensorial unity no more 'real' than the sun that appears to emerge, crowning the streetlamp in the reflected pond in Image 1.

In “The Visit to the Museum” – to visit, from *videre*, “to see, notice, observe” – ordinary perception becomes progressively distorted until the entire premise of experience, as what happens to a body occupying a particular location in space and possessing a continuity over time, is rescinded. The story, whose twist turns on a missing Russian alphabetical sign, mysteriously transports the narrator from a Museum in an unspecified, sun-dappled moment in the south of France to the stark present-day of Soviet Russia. But the tale’s apparent premise, namely, of history’s separation from the linguistic material that composes it, becomes increasingly questionable following the cinematic distortion of vision that Nabokov’s Museum inflicts.



Image 1: By Brocken Inaglory <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index>

We take our start from the story’s narrator who, we learn, has been asked to help in the recovery of his friend’s inheritance. This takes the form of a portrait of his friend’s grandfather painted by the famous painter Leroy which ended up in the museum of Leroy’s birth place, the French town of Montisert. From the outset of the tale, then, “The Visit to the Museum” puts into play the idea of representation and of its proxies, even as it questions the status of possession and inheritance, identification and knowledge. For, having located the painting – to his great surprise, given his friend’s frequent failure “to remain this side of fantasy,” – when the narrator tries to buy it from the museum’s director, M. Godard, he finds himself strangely rebuffed. The director tells him that the only Leroy painting they have in the collection is not a portrait but, rather, a cattle-dotted landscape titled “The Return of the Herd.” To an increasingly mystified narrator, M. Godard insists,

I have been curator of our museum for almost twenty years now and know this catalogue as well as I know the Lord’s Prayer. It says here *Return of the Herd* and that means the herd is returning, and, unless perhaps your friend’s grandfather is depicted as a shepherd, I cannot conceive of his portrait’s existence in our museum.⁷

Countering its promise of completion and accuracy, the Montisert Museum’s catalogue is an unstable record in which the past is encountered as a textual impasse that goes on to saturate the rest of the tale: letters go unanswered – “When I asked why he did not get in touch with the museum, he replied that he had written several times, but had never received an answer,”⁸ – paper and pen supplies are scarce:

“while wandering about Montisert’s empty streets in search of a stationery store...”⁹ With fatal errors in its record leading to spotty gaps in the precincts of history and memory, the Montisert Museum seems riddled with the literary analogue of silver lice (well-known “bathroom pest on the Riviera”¹⁰). Nabokov’s archive disarticulates history’s linear assumptions, which become overwritten by the silvery traces of other technologies for constructing time. Tunnelling orthogonally through the leaves of the archive, these other technologies take different forms but their association with cinematics is a constant as one soon discovers as we shadow the narrator with our own “felted steps” to survey the Montisert Museum’s collection.

First up, and presided over by two stuffed owls – stealth predators whose acute nocturnal vision implicitly cites a certain noir aesthetic continually shadowing Minerva’s flight, – is a case of old coins, the vestiges of ancient economies harbouring different orders or models of representational exchange. Swimming next into view is a display of “venerable minerals.”¹¹ Formed through the process of “twinning,” the diffracted, mirror image pattern of crystal growth registers a potential rupturing of Euclidean space, posing the cinematic challenge to organic models elaborated by Gilles Deleuze in the suggestive terms of a virtual regime.¹² As they lie like dormant cinematic projectiles awaiting their moment of firing in “open graves of dusty papier mache” (the favoured material not only for masks and theatrical backdrops but also for sabots, the small disks or rings in a firearm that guide a bullet through the driving band of a gun), the crystal hints at the Museum’s stealth assassination of linear models of Time that the idea of History seems to institute.

As it roves further over the Museum’s attractions, the narrator’s eye pauses at a display of “black lumps of various sizes,” which he likens to “frass,” the fine powdery material that cellulose-digesting insects extrude as their waste. The custodian explains that this black *Stoff* was the discovery of a certain “Louis Pradier, Municipal Councillor and Knight of the Legion of Honour,” whose surname recalls that of a certain 19th-century Swiss copyist, giving us a first clue (indeed, it is always advisable to pay attention to names in Nabokov).¹³ In anticipation of our encounter with the Leroy portrait, mimetic representation is already put into question here at multiple levels. For a quick search reveals that Charles-Simon, the ‘real’ Pradier of the “Knight of the Legion of Honor,” received his citation for his engraving of “Virgil Reading the Aeneid to Augustus,” which was first painted in 1812 by the history painter Ingres. Charles-Simon’s “Virgil Reading” would thus be an etched copy of a painting that preceded it. But there’s a Nabokovian twist – readily visible if one is on the lookout for it given the painting’s implicit references to both a double and a ghost,¹⁴ not to mention the drama of the scene itself, which depicts a blocked scene of reading. Pradier’s imitation, it seems, served as the ‘original’ for Ingres’ 1864 recreation of his painting. Ingres evidently reworked his original by tracing over Pradier’s engraving, whose lines are partially left visible in the finished canvas.

In these inversions of the expected order of succession, Virgil’s hypostasized scene of instruction ricochets the viewer into a mysterious site where the mimetic premise of original and copy, of the real and its representation are suspended – as if lit-

erally blocked by Augustus's upraised hand that interrupts Virgil's recitation of his text (see Image 2). Out of the swoon that replaces or perhaps now becomes the act of "reading," an alternate, 'cinematic' history of representation unfolds, which is set forth in the Museum's ensuing exhibits A "Chinese vase," like the omphalous of some other reproductive process, "probably brought back by a naval officer,"¹⁵ highlights ideographic and phonosemantic rather than alphabetic writing systems, shrugging off what Saussure calls the "linear nature of the signifier" in favour of a more visual simultaneity.¹⁶ In the "group of porous fossils" that follow it, we encounter moulded images cast directly through the Earth's own, material, printing techniques – inscriptions by a representational 'agent' that is utterly removed from human hands and human time. "A pale worm in clouded alcohol" is similarly suggestive, not

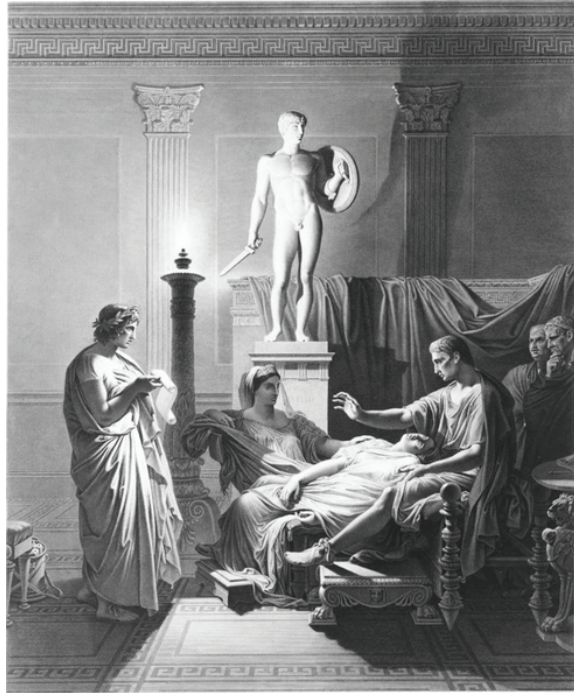


Image 2: By Charles-Simon Pradier - Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=31178176>

only of aborted branches of other evolutionary lifeforms but also of other, perhaps only temporarily suspended poetic traditions for, as Nabokov in a later text reminds us, the French *vers* (verse) is aurally identical to *ver* (worm).¹⁷ Conjuring up the idea of secret messages inscribed in invisible ink as in Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Gold Bug,"¹⁸ the seventeenth-century map of Montisert printed in "red-and-green ink" might provide directions to these other, pre-Enlightenment traditions. Indeed, the "trio of rusted tools" immediately following this seems to support this Poe connection as does the Museum's name itself: Montisert echoes Poe's Montresor in "The Cast of Amontillado," imposing the idea of some kind of literary "Fortunato" being unsuccessfully contained.¹⁹ Thus the tools – rusty with disuse – could be for digging into *textual* riddles. Each of these visual and aural cryptonymic figures point back to the counter-anachronization of the Pradier image that appeared to spawn them: purporting merely to imitate, a copyist etches inscriptions which the official historical record paints over but the off-cuts and shavings remain discernible as the detritus of a different representational agency that eats through the books of History, leaving its waste in "black lumps of various sizes" – *letters*.



Image 3: By Nadar| (a.k.a. Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, 1820–1910): Photographer Adam Cuerden - Restoration - Gallica Digital Library digital ID btv1b530922314, Public Domain

It is in the dim glow of this other, counter-historical light, in a room dominated by a “large sarcophagus” (perhaps one of the same Saturnine tombs from whose hypogrammatic inscriptions Saussure fled in terror²⁰), the narrator chances upon “the very object whose existence had hitherto seemed to me but the figment of an unstable mind.” The Leroy painting hanging between “two abominable landscapes (with cattle and ‘atmosphere’)” is described thus:

The man, depicted in wretched oils, wore a frock coat, whiskers, and a large pince-nez on a cord; he bore a likeness to Offenbach, but, in spite of the work’s vile conventionality, I had the feeling one could make out in his features the horizon of a resemblance, as it were, to my friend. In one corner, meticulously traced in carmine against a black background, was the signature *Leroy* in a hand as commonplace as the work itself.²¹

As it emerges from the status of fantasy into the apparent field of reference, the grandfather’s portrait takes shape as a cinematic figure par excellence. The “likeness,” which the narrator casually observes it possesses with the Parisian composer of comic operettas, initially seems to connect it with the famous 1860’s photograph of Jacques Offenbach by Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon).²²

In this studio portrait (Image 3), one of numerous photographs of well-known artists made by the Nadar brothers, Offenbach peers through oval lenses at something out of frame to his right, his enormous fur collar seeming to blend with his dappled “whiskers” like an extension of his body. The fur’s viscous textures initially seem to recall the brushstrokes of oil paints, but another complication of the technological history of representation enters into play once one recalls that painting’s “wretched oils” have also long harbored the chemicals also used in film processing such as silver halide’s iodine.

If the Leroy painting, like the previous Museum objects, is already allied with the cinematic challenge to the mimetic order, what is also striking is the way cinema itself seems split between an allegiance to photography’s ‘punctum’ and to something that appears to lead back to older representational instruments such as the hand, albeit only *after* its initial dispossession by the non-human agency of the camera. The narrator’s mention of a “horizon of a resemblance” calls forth the im-

age of a line and, with this reference, a different “likeness” to Offenbach emerges, leading this time back to the hand-drawn sketch of him, also made by Nadar in collaboration with Edouard Riou (Image 4). In this caricature, a cartoon version of the photograph, Offenbach again peers out through his circular glasses, bewhiskered, and with a suddenly accentuated nose. However his collar has been replaced with his cello, which wraps his neck and upper body almost as effectively as the furred ruff in the photograph. The photograph’s textured riches alluding to oil paint’s depth and interiority have been replaced with a musical instrument’s two-dimensional strings.

Photography’s “likeness,” a mimetic concept tied to the idea of a pre-existing real, finds itself over-written with quivering, proto-animated lines drawn perhaps by the “ghost” hand secreted in the custodian’s pocket as some sort of manual dex-

terity that seems to have become separated from its seat in any body. This hand, another prototypical cinematic figure, introduces the idea of the cut as what severs the museological notion of inheritance as a process of continuity and succession. Hence to speak of “resemblance” in this context would mean beginning from a different model than the reflection implied by photography. Called up by figures of plucking, scratching, stippling, the facsimile – from *facere*, to make – suggests the furrowing of the representational manifold with sharpened tools such as the “spade, a mattock, and a pick” that the narrator absent-mindedly passed over in his tour of the Museum’s first room.²³

The upshot is that while the narrator and the Museum director tussle over the epistemological status of the object of perception, as authorized either by Imaginary apprehension or the Symbolic’s written record, both are equally inattentive to the appearance of an order that has already turned against both registers. If a ghost of the comic French composer presides over this story of a failed commission, then, it is the Offenbach of *Les deux aveugles* (*Two Blind Men*) rather than the composer of *Orphée aux enfers*.²⁴ What is this other order? At this point writing re-enters as a doubled topos: it is simultaneously the instrument of law, authority and memory, that is, of what would be transmitted by the blue end of the pencil Godard offers the narrator to seal their agreement in writing: “‘All right,’ he said. ‘Here, take this red-and-blue pencil and using the red – the red, please – put it in writing for me,’”²⁵



Image 4: By Nadar after Édouard Riou - Bibliothèque nationale de France, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11543458>

– and a carnivalesque, “festive” overturning of all such constructs, which becomes incarnated in the colour red.

Red has already made an advance appearance in the “carmine” lettering of Leroy’s signature (perhaps also indirectly citing the flamboyant Nadar’s own signature flashing letters lighting up the outside of his studio in illuminated red gas lamps). It now begins a flooding of the Museum’s visual topos. A red bus “packed with singing youths” nearly runs the narrator over before disgorging its boisterous load at the museum. Wearing “some kind of festive emblems in their lapels” and “very purple-faced, and full of pep,” the youths cause a commotion with their “rowdy cries.”²⁶ Like throwbacks to some counter-Athenian tradition (recall the Spartans’ own famous red cloaks), these members of “some rural athletic organization” fire shots at Minerva – “another was taking aim at an owl with his fist and forefinger” – in a comic spectral war. These would be avatars of a counter-historical tradition, a Benjaminian “materialist historiography,” that vests the Museum’s trademark silence with Homeric mirth: a “lewd laughter” mocks the Museum’s iconography of death – “some at the worm in alcohol, others at the skull.”²⁷

Like the glow of a darkroom light, red redounds here with the realization that, never “natural,” the real has always been a hothouse for experiment, a “deserted laboratory with dusty alembics on its tables,” sans maker or designer. And in the wake of this discovery, a full-scale cinematic derealization of the world begins, as if started by the phantom flame that a youth pretends to ignite with a borrowed light from the portrait’s “glowing cigar.” Causal logic collapses: above the “din,” and with increasingly Carrollian reasoning, the museum director shouts, “I must first discuss the matter with the mayor, who has just died and has not yet been elected.”²⁸ Teleological histories slide into reverse “‘Who’s the old ape?’ asked an individual” gesturing to the Leroy painting. Nothing can be decided because “[d]ecisiveness is a good thing only when supported by law” and the law of the archive as authorized by the signature “fell like snowflakes into a massive spittoon,” having been torn into pieces by “fingers, moving as it were on their own.”²⁹

The immediate consequence is the refragmentation of the body. The body is sliced back up, limbs amputated, the head disassociated from the trunk. We enter into cinematic zones of magnification:

I lost my way for a moment among some enormous marble legs, and twice ran around a giant knee before I again caught sight of M. Godard, who was looking for me behind the white ankle of a neighboring giantess.³⁰

“Ancient Sculpture” elicits another experience of the body, prior to its integration by mirror logics. Alan Cholodenko observes of cinema that “it violently opened a wound – a wound in a sense never closed, a posthumous wound – in ‘reality,’ as well as in the ‘self,’ the ‘subject,’ a wound no amount of suturing (and its system) could close.”³¹ Nabokov, too, renders the cinematic encounter as an uncontrollable opening. For once the body has been cut up by the camera, the Imaginary frame is

no longer containing. As the body's form expands, the Museum amplifies in tandem.

The angle of vision then takes another fantastic turn. We pass through a succession of *entr'actes*, each presiding over a diminishing human perspective. A whale skeleton, implicitly citing Herman Melville's description of Leviathan as the "unspeakable foundations, ribs and very pelvis of the world,"³² obtrudes as a figure of sheer exteriority, a series of curved bars encasing the void. Moving into "still other halls, with the oblique sheen of large paintings, full of storm clouds, among which floated the delicate idols of religious art in blue and pink vestments,"³³ an aterrestrial viewpoint unfolds. When our gaze returns earthwards, it is to a deserted *oikos*. An "abrupt turbulence of misty draperies," ushered in from a fallen 'house' vacated of the human viewpoint, transports us to a scene where the lines of rectilinear perspective bulge into hemispheric globes of fish-eye lenses: "chandeliers came aglitter and fish with translucent frills meandered through illuminated aquariums."³⁴ Prismatic, iridescent with reflections, this is the "perspective of the inside" to recall Jean Epstein's suggestive phrase, "a multiple perspective, shimmering, sinuous, variable and contractile" perspective through which the world "becomes its own image, and not an image which becomes world" in Deleuze's phrasing.³⁵

These ocular displacements then introduce another order of dimensionality: "Racing up a staircase, we saw, from the gallery above, a crowd of gray-haired people with umbrellas examining a gigantic mock-up of the universe."³⁶ An entire system of the world, which the Museum synecdochically fronted for, has always been a "mock-up," suggests Nabokov, as another model, now self-consciously cinematic, overruns it. When the narrator is found lingering among "models of railroad stations,"³⁷ one is reminded that such 'mere' toys are nevertheless what engineer the catastrophic derailings of models of knowledge that the cinema exults in. Yet if film is revealed to be fakery at its core, its circular loopings on comically shaky miniature trestles end up being unexpectedly operational. In a quarter turn, the doors of the arriving train swing open to become the cascading drawers of filing systems: "in front of me stretched an infinitely long passage, containing numerous office cabinets and elusive, scurrying people."³⁸ A strange loop, whose content upends into becoming its own formal principle, the self-citational, cinematic 'train' auto-archives itself.

It is at this juncture that the logos of the Museum transposes aurally back to its "ancient" source in *music*. Like hands criss-crossing one another on piano keys, music takes us to a scene of reflective models in a mise-en-abyme of self-cancellation:

Taking a sharp turn, I found myself amid a thousand musical instruments; the walls, all mirror, reflected an enfilade of grand pianos, while in the center there was a pool with a bronze Orpheus atop a green rock.³⁹

Resonating from a khoratic pool, music should be understood not just as the Apollonian allusion, Orpheus' worship of the sun-god, but as the Greek name for something that auto-theorizes itself. For as Penelope Murray and Peter Wilson observe,

mousikē in fact names the totality of instrumental sound, poetic word and movement embraced by the Muses. The first of the “tekhnai” nouns formed in the form -ική, *mousikē* is thus intimately connected with *theory*, representing, as they surmise “the first area of Greek cultural practice that produced more or less systematic descriptive and explanatory accounts of itself.”⁴⁰ What chiefly interests is the way such self-theorization entails a different – performative – relation to the past than that represented by memory. As Murray and Wilson describe it, *mousikē* “betokens a total and privileged access to the past.” As such, *mousikē* would entail the originary fashioning of the structures of spatial and temporal difference itself.

And with this recomposing, a whole other program of knowledge and understanding – *exposition*: “the act of expounding, setting forth, or explaining” – seems in the process of being constructed, Metropolis-like, in the catacombs honeycombing the Museum’s foundations as the narrator threads precariously down staircases of stone steps resounding with “whistles, the rattle of dishes, the clatter of typewriters, the ring of hammers, and many other sounds,” coming from “exposition halls of some kind or other, already closing or not yet completed.”⁴¹ Here, consciousness, perhaps even ‘Being’ itself, harks back to its primordial structuring by technics: “whistles,” “rattles,” “clatter” “hammers.” What these sounds call up are the alternations of rhythmic beats and patterned serial repetitions. They sequence what Bernard Stiegler has theorized as the body’s originary grammatization, namely, the processes, John Tinnell explains, “by which a material, sensory, or symbolic flux becomes a gramme, which – broadly conceived – can include all manners of technical gestures that maintain their iterability and citationality apart from an origin or any one particular context.”⁴²

Suddenly sightless from cinema’s winding back of existing perceptual and cognitive paradigms, the narrator gropes about the “unknown furniture” of a different epistemological regime. But it is just at this point that the vector of the narrative changes and the tale embarks on its final fantastic turn. A qualitative shift, like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon, seems to take place and the narrator finds himself “with a joyous and unmistakable sensation,” metamorphically egressing from the museum’s cinematic vortex and back out into “reality.”⁴³ He marvels at the new solidity of the ground, “The stone beneath my feet was real sidewalk, powdered with wonderfully fragrant, newly fallen snow, in which the infrequent pedestrians had already left fresh black tracks.” Contrasting with his previous chaotic “feverish wanderings” comes a “pleasant feeling” of peace. The quiet of a snowy streetscape “replaced all the unreal trash amid which I had just been dashing to and fro.”⁴⁴

As he “trustfully” starts to “conjecture” what has occurred – “why the snow, and what were those lights exaggeratedly but indistinctly beaming here and there in the brown darkness”⁴⁵ – the narrator is suddenly struck by a missing letter, the absent Russian “hard sign” on an advertisement. Unspoken, manifesting only in written form to mark a separation between certain consonants and vowels (non-palatized and iotated), the Russian “hard sign” – “ѣ” – was abolished in the orthographic reform following the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, as Nabokov informs us in a footnote.⁴⁶

It is this hard sign's omission from the cobbler's placard "... INKA SAPOG' (... OE REPAIR)" that clues the narrator in to what has happened. A wormhole in space-time, the Montisert Museum has somehow tossed its visitor out into "the factual Russia of today, forbidden to me, hopelessly slavish, and hopelessly my own native land."⁴⁷ And with this realization, we, too, seem to have exited from this confusing, whirling, cinematic vortex into a more readily comprehended narrative space. As if materializing from the frescoes of the Museum's pediment, the golden figure of allegory swoops down to proffer the solution to the tale's riddle, prompting the established, "Orphic," interpretation of the story: as a satire of the USSR, "The Visit to the Museum" would be Nabokov's testament to the sovereign power of the imagination to retrieve and resurrect the past. It is only memory, and specifically literary memory, that can protect our narrators's "fragile, illegal life" from the unspeakable ordeals of History embodied by the Russian Red Guards.⁴⁸

And yet. It seems that whatever is elicited by the "real" here has already been undercut by the hypostasized scenes of shredded writing and arrested reading that preceded it. If the 'nightmare' of history would be the sole dream from which one cannot awake – if History is "what hurts," as Fredric Jameson famously puts it⁴⁹ – what is curious is how a strange symmetry, a certain visual echo, suffuses this putative 'real':

Oh, how many times in my sleep I had experienced a similar sensation! Now, though, it was reality. Everything was real – the air that seemed to mingle with scattered snowflakes, the still unfrozen canal, the floating fish house, and that peculiar squareness of the darkened and the yellow windows.⁵⁰

The scattered snowflakes, re-materializations of the "snowflakes" of M. Godard's torn-up contract, suggest metonymic fragments of the reader's and author's contractual "agreement" to adhere to a certain representational order of origin and copy, the firm boundaries separating text from interpretation dissolving in the "unfrozen canal." As one pauses at the "peculiar squareness of the darkened and the yellow windows," why should the panels of a comic strip suddenly come to mind? Looking back, the description of the Museum's mottled facade of "many colored stones" suddenly becomes recognisable as the marbled sides of a leather-bound book whose ornate columns and "gilt inscription" recall the gold-leaf ornamentation of early book covers. Its "bronze door" doubles as a clasp, blocking our exit. Is allegory's "real" merely one more cover, a final flailing gesture of History's order of the book as it goes under in a cinematic parallax of all of its tropes and figures? If so, with them too must go the humanist armature and model of reading through which a certain figure of Nabokov, Redeemer of the Past, has been traditionally cast.

For training one's eye back over the text in a more "leisurely" way this time, something else also leaps out:

Continuing my leisurely examination, I looked up at the house beside which I was standing and was immediately struck by the sight of iron steps and railings that descended into the snow on their way to the cellar. There was a

twinge in my heart, and it was with a new, alarmed curiosity that I glanced at the pavement, at its white cover along which stretched black lines, at the brown sky across which there kept sweeping a mysterious light, and at the massive parapet some distance away.⁵¹

Iron steps, railings, a chiaroscuro sketch of light and dark bands. An expanding series of lines leads away from every promise of a return to substantial reality. It is into a cartoon world that we have been summarily disgorged. The “factual” world, it transpires, is no less insubstantial than the Museum’s cinematic one. Both tend towards a “drop,” a black pit into which language as sense or meaning descends.

I sensed that there was a drop beyond it; something was creaking and gurgling down there. Further on, beyond the murky cavity, stretched a chain of fuzzy lights. Scuffling along the snow in my soaked shoes, I walked a few paces.⁵²

What creaks, gurgles, fuzzes and scuffles is *The Return of the Heard*: language unleashed by its internal phonics.



First published in Russian in 1939, “The Visit to the Museum” was written just before the outbreak of the Second World War yet it reads strangely presciently as we emerge from our Covid-19 cocoons into a world whose anchor in a certain “real” has shifted. One may think of Trump’s cartoon-like suspension of the Symbolic law in favour of a gravity-defying market for jouissance as the symptom of one’s exit from the world formerly known as History. Dumped out into this new, “factual” reality – the ‘hard sign’ of a world becoming uninhabitable for human life – we find that it is facts themselves that have become elusive as a catastrophic illogic reigns and the historical record is either wiped clean or written over.

Thus if climate change inaugurates a decisive rupture with humanity’s past, it is emerging just as much as a rift in older models of the social relation. Where, in a previous era, the neurotic’s access to enjoyment was mediated by the Name-of-the-Father, whose instituting cut placed a prohibition on jouissance thereby opening the subject onto the exigencies of desire, in the contemporary “post-truth” world, the paternal prohibition seems largely absent, giving rise to increased anxiety, depression and the new epistemic category that Jacques-Alain Miller and others identify as “ordinary psychosis.”⁵³ It is as if, taking advantage of the opening in time cinema inaugurated, what Lacan called the “ghost” of the subject released in the founding Cartesian gesture that gave birth to the world of reason, has in the meantime taken control of the knobs and levers of perception and, with it, the instruments of identity and memory that previously framed it. Unknotting itself Houdini-like from its hold in the three psychic registers – the “old cases” and “displays” of the Enlightenment fantasy that, by parenthesizing it, maintained the

object of desire at the correct (“safe”) distance from the subject, – jouissance has swarmed into every gap.

If the 21st century is increasingly being defined by the retreat of desire, I suspect few would argue for a return to the paternal signifier – even if this were possible: the strutting Symbolic Father is precisely the comic figure most keenly performed by today’s new masters of jouissance. These fake or Make-Believe Names-of-the-Father would be the symptoms of a “hole” in a Symbolic system gone psychotically awry. Lacan, speaking of psychosis, comments, “At the point at which the Name-of-the-Father is summoned a pure and simple hole may thus answer in the Other; due to the lack of metaphoric effect, this hole will give rise to a corresponding hole in the place of phallic signification.”⁵⁴ How, then, to repair the Symbolic’s hole in the ravaged days of the late Anthropocene? Here Nabokov re-enters – ironically, of course, given his legendary antipathy towards psychoanalysis – as a writer uniquely equipped for this moment (out) of Time.

Recall how in the story the narrator is only able to orientate himself in space and time because he notices the absence of the Russian hard sign on the shoe shop’s insignia.

And by the light of a streetlamp whose shape had long been shouting to me its impossible message, I made out the ending of a sign – “... INKA SAPOG” (“... OE REPAIR”) but no, it was not the snow that had obliterated the “hard sign” at the end. “No, no, in a minute I shall wake up,” I said aloud, and, trembling, my heart pounding, I turned, walked on, stopped again. From somewhere came the receding sound of hooves, the snow sat like a skullcap on a slightly leaning spur stone and indistinctly showed white on the wood-pile on the other side of the fence, and already I knew, irrevocably, where I was.⁵⁵

Abolished by the Bolsheviks, the hard sign was officially erased from the Russian alphabet. Yet as one can see in Image 5, the hard sign merely went underground or, rather, overground. A reversed-out letter ъ, the shape of the St Petersburg street-lamp (on the Angliyskaya [English] Embankment no less) “has long been shouting its impossible message” to all in plain sight, in stark defiance of the representational regime that sought to eliminate it.⁵⁶

And if one does a little more sleuthing, one discovers that what has been truncated in the signboard is the phoneme поч [POCH]. The corrected sign should read починка сапог. “POCHINKA SAPOG” (SHOE REPAIR). Poche, French for pocket. With a breath-taking insouciance for Enlightenment models of phenomenality, an oil lamp pockets the missing hard sign from the Real’s inky bog. Poch, poche, poach, pocket, – as if seanced by this bubbling stream of open phonemes, *Offenbach* returns. He comes into focus not as the Orphic avatar of the lyrical tradition – always a sweltering costume for the composer of *opéra bouffon* (whose own Orphée, incidentally, is only too delighted to lose Eurydice⁵⁷) – but as one of the cinematic O-shapes that have been cycling, like the woman “in besplattered stockings [...]

spinning along on a silver-shining bicycle,” scarcely noticed until now throughout the tale: the October night, the Owls, the Oriental vase, Orpheus of course, the Obvodny canal, the narrator’s exclamation “Oh!” and, finally, the truncated sign: “OE REPAIR.” If the soles of language’s metrical ‘feet,’ the connecting legs of the Symbolic’s transport system, can be patched, Nabokov suggests, it will be by way of another operation of seeing and hearing secreted within History’s rectilinear perceptual order. Nabokov’s cinematic parallax forces it into the open.



Image 5: By YKatrina, Английская набережная [English Embankment], St Petersburg, 12 June 2009 <https://commons.wikimedia.org>

Notes

1. Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire 4: la Relation d'objet*, texte établi par Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris, Seuil, 1998). English translation, Cormac Gallagher (unpublished).
2. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 277-285.
3. Will Norman, “Nabokov and Benjamin: A Late Modernist Response to History,” *Urbandus Review* 10, *My Nabokov* (2007): 79-100, 19.
4. Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2009), 17.
5. Žižek, *Parallax*, 17.
6. Henri Bouasse, *Optique géométrique élémentaire: focométrie, optométrie* (Paris: Delagrave, 1917). Available at <http://www.archive.org/details/optiquegomtriqu00bouagoog>. See

also Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink in collaboration with Heloise Fink and Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 2006), 565.

7. Nabokov, 280.

8. Nabokov, 277.

9. Nabokov, 277.

10. Vladimir Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins*. In *Vladimir Nabokov, Novels 1969-1974* (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 563-747, 591.

11. Nabokov, 278.

12. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 70.

13. Nabokov, 278.

14. The painting depicts Octavia fainting at the hearing the name of her dead son Marcellus whom Aeneas meets as a ghost in Book 6 of *The Aeneid*. There were, moreover, two historical figures named Marcus Claudius Marcellus.

15. Nabokov, 279.

16. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally with Albert Sechehaye and Albert Riedlinger, trans. and notes Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw Hill, 1915), 70.

17. "I let my index finger stray at random over a map of northern France; the point of its nail stopped at the town of Petiver or Petit Ver, a small worm or verse, which sounded idyllic." Nabokov, *Harlequins*, 620.

18. In Poe's "The Gold Bug," a hieroglyphic signature appears "rudely traced, in a red tint." Edgar Allan Poe, "The Gold Bug." In *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, Vol. 1, Project Gutenberg, 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2147/2147-h/2147-h.htm> <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2147/2147-h/2147-h.htm>

19. For a brilliant reading of Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," see Tom Cohen, "Poe's *Foot d'Or*: ruinous rhyme and Nietzschean recurrence (sound)." In *Anti-Mimesis from Plato to Hitchcock* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1994), 105-126. My debt to Cohen's reading practice is comically obvious but it also proves what he discovered in Hitchcock is indeed Real.

20. Paul de Man, "Hypogram and Inscription: Michael Riffaterre's Poetics of Reading," *Diacritics* 11.4 (1981): 17-35, 24.

21. Nabokov, 279.

22. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Offenbach.

23. Nabokov, 279.

24. Performed in a former magician's theatre, Salle Lacaze, "a little theatre of magic," in 1865, *Two Blind Men* was Offenbach's first foray into comic opera. It was made into a film in 1900 by George Méliès.

25. Nabokov, 281.

26. Nabokov, 281.
27. See Walter Benjamin's description of messianic universal history as a "festively enacted history." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 4: 1938-1940*, Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 404.
28. Nabokov, 282.
29. Nabokov, 281.
30. Nabokov, 282.
31. Alan Cholodenko, "The Crypt, the Haunted House, of Cinema," *Cultural Studies Review* 10.2 (2004): 99-103 (108).
32. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or the Whale*, Project Gutenberg 2008. Retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2701/2701-h/2701-h.htm>
33. Nabokov, 283.
34. Nabokov, 283.
35. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 23, 57.
36. Nabokov, 283.
37. Nabokov, 283.
38. Nabokov, 283.
39. Nabokov, 283.
40. Penelope Murray and Peter Wilson, *Music and the Muses: The Culture of Mousikē in the Classical Athenian City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2.
41. Nabokov, 283.
42. See John Tinnell, "Grammatization: Bernard Stiegler's Theory of Writing and Technology," *Computers and Composition* 37 (2015): 132-146.
43. Nabokov, 284.
44. Nabokov, 284.
45. Nabokov, 284.
46. Nabokov, 673.
47. Nabokov, 285.
48. See Irene Masing-Delic, "Replication of Recreation? The Eurydice Motif in Nabokov's Russian Oeuvre," *Russian Literature* LXX (2011): 391-414 (395). See also Norman, 95.
49. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 102.
50. Nabokov, 285.
51. Nabokov, 284.

52. Nabokov, 284.

53. Jacques-Alain Miller, "Ordinary psychosis revisited," *Psychoanalytical Notebooks* 26 (2008): 139-167.

54. Jacques Lacan, "On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis." In *Écrits*, 465-6.

55. Nabokov, 284.

56. My profound thanks to David Ottina who drew this to my attention.

57. This operetta is also famous for its "Duo de la mouche" where Jupiter's part in the love song consists of a fly's buzzing sound.