

A Portrait of the Artist as a Dying Man:
Vladimir Nabokov and the Scandal of Posthumous Publication

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In November of 2009, over thirty years after Vladimir Nabokov's death, *The Original of Laura* finally appeared in print, amid much controversy. The famously fastidious author had instructed his wife, Véra, to burn his manuscript should the novel remain unfinished at the time of his death; however, Véra hesitated, in her son Dmitri's words, "due to age, weakness, and immeasurable love" (*Laura* xvii). After her own death in 1991, the manuscript passed to Dmitri Nabokov, who, after years of vacillation, finally agreed to publish the text in order to "alleviate [the] sufferings" of critics and journalists (xviii). However, rather than alleviating any suffering, the shrink-wrapped book that arrived in stores—an imposing black 280-page hardcover volume—sparked an intense and bitter debate, in part because it concealed within its pages not a "novel" in any traditional sense, but rather the barest skeleton of a narrative spread across 138 index cards.¹

In total, the existing fragments of the would-be novel, approximately 9,000 words in all, could hardly constitute even the slimmest of novellas. In what some would cynically deem a shallow attempt to justify lavish (and, at \$35, relatively expensive) edition, Dmitri Nabokov chose to publish his father's final novel not as an ordinary transcription of the existing draft, but as a full-color facsimile of the existing manuscript, made up of 138 index cards of indeterminate order.² More bizarrely, these cards were perforated for removal from the book, in order to allow

¹ For a more detailed account of *Laura*'s publication history, see Boyd and Leving, "Chronology of a Novel in Fragments" in Leving, *Shades of Laura*, 17-26.

² In references to particular cards, I will refer to the card by its page number. *The Original of Laura*, as published in 2009 by Knopf in the United States and republished in 2013 by Vintage, is made up of 138 index cards, although critics have questioned the inclusion of some cards within the manuscript set (particularly, the final card [275], and card 179, which reproduces material found elsewhere in the draft). Additionally, Nabokov scholar and biographer Bryan

the reader to shuffle and rearrange the fragments of text into alternative configurations, in an apparent acknowledgement of the uncertain narrative structure of Nabokov's intended text. Although many reviewers responded skeptically to the text's invitation to readers to rearrange the index cards "as the author likely did when he was writing the novel" (xxi)—Irish novelist John Banville, for example, praises the volume itself as "a triumph of the book-maker's art" but objects to alternative arrangements of the text on the basis that many of the cards (particularly those from more fully-developed episodes) have "run-over text," and further doubts any reader "would be so wanton as to remove the very vitals of the book" (in Leving 171-172), while Nathaniel Rich more suspiciously notes that the unusual format necessitates the use of relatively expensive heavyweight paper (in Leving 183)—the decision to publish *Laura* as a disjointed manuscript rather than a traditional codex foregrounds the fundamentally unfinished nature of the text, hence the volume's curious subtitle, "A Novel in Fragments."

Given *Laura*'s history, its fragmentary form, the stature of its author, and the fervor of his *devoteés*, the controversy incited by its publication, in direct violation of the wishes of its late author, may seem inevitable in retrospect. Curiously, however, reviewers' objections to *Laura*'s publication, in spite of high-minded pronouncements about filial duty and respect for the dead, ultimately to seem hinge on aesthetic rather than ethical concerns. While *Laura* did have its defenders, most prominently Nabokov biographer Bryan Boyd, the general consensus among reviewers seemed to be that the text reveals an unflattering image of its late author in his final years, his once formidable artistic powers finally failing—in the words of reviewer Alexander Theroux, "the writer's version of a great athlete in decline: not so, to speak, the glorious Lou

Boyd has argued that 21 more recently discovered cards should be considered part of *Laura*. See Leving 26.

Gehrig of 1927, but the feeble shadow of the same man, retiring at midseason in 1939” (in Leving 174).

Although it is difficult to determine from the existing fragments of the narrative what sort of structure the finished version of *The Original of Laura* would have had, the manuscript (in its default arrangement) seems to follow three narrative threads. The manuscript begins in medias res as Flora, *Laura*'s heroine, leaves a party with an unknown man, presumably a writer (“Her husband, she answered, was a writer, too” [1]), with whom she engages in a brief, emotionless tryst—apparently one of a near-constant string of infidelities. The narrative then shifts to Flora's upbringing and sexual history. Notably, when Flora is twelve, her mother takes a lover by the all-too-familiar sounding name of Hubert H. Hubert, who seemingly attempts to sexually molest the young Flora (53-75). Flora's narrative thread primarily focuses on her numerous affairs and her unhappy marriage to a much older man, neurologist Philip Wild, and breaks off rather abruptly as the text transitions into Wild's diary. Wild, the novel's apparent protagonist, suffers from a number of physical ailments, and, as a result, becomes obsessed with his own corporeality. Wild attempts to efface his grotesque body through a series of bizarre mental experiments, which I will later describe in greater detail. The third narrative thread concerns one of Flora's lovers, most likely the unknown man from the opening episode, who writes a book about their affair. His novel, *My Laura*, describes a man's attempt to “[destroy] his mistress in the act of portraying her” (121). Flora is then the apparent “original of Laura,” the actual woman over-written and obscured by her fictional counterpart.

In this paper, I will attempt to address the controversy surrounding the publication of *The Original of Laura*; I will not, however, offer any judgments on either the ethical questions or aesthetic concerns that so deeply troubled the novel's perhaps disproportionately angered

reviewers. Rather, I will examine the form and content of the novel itself as a means of exploring the posthumous text's memorial function. The posthumous novel generally, and *Laura* particularly, cannot be read or understood as an ordinary text, given that every aspect of the novel's publication and the reader's experience are inextricably linked to and structured by the fact of the author's death. With this in mind, I will argue that the posthumous text effectively serves as a kind of death portrait, which both represents and effaces the late author. Rather than treating *Laura* as a "novel," I will turn to photographic theory as a means of reading the text as a *memento mori*. The trouble with posthumous text, I will argue, is that, as an image of death, the text simultaneously presents and performs the erasure of its author by reducing both his subjectivity and corporeality to his last words. As I will further elaborate in the final section of this paper, *Laura* itself paradoxically uses the reader's desire for the late author as a means of artificially constructing him within the text and effacing *Laura*'s actual content.

In treating *Laura* as a portrait, I do not mean to discount existing readings of the narrative fragments as narrative, or to argue that the text "succeeds" or "fails" as either novel or image. Rather, I want to suggest that the reader's impression of and desire for the late author always informs receptions of the posthumous text. The controversy surrounding *Laura* results not simply from the particular circumstances of its publication or its aesthetic success or failure, but from the sort of *image* of the author created by the text. As I will attempt to demonstrate in my discussion of the controversy, *Laura* is problematic for reviewers not as an individual flawed text, but as a problematic addition to Nabokov's *oeuvre*—ultimately, the controversy reflects reader's concerns for Nabokov's legacy as a whole and objections to the text's presentation of the author's failing body. Finally, by reading *Laura* not as a novel but as portrait of the author, I hope to highlight the text's own preoccupation with originality and the image. *Laura* becomes

problematic in relation to our existing image of the author, but this image is itself always a problematic construction. Like the photographic portrait, the book assumes an auratic quality through its relationship to an imagined “original” of *Laura*, which seems to variously take the form of the actual body of the author, the textual body of the author, or the non-existent ideal novel that the fragments of *Laura* might have become.

“Exposure” and the Scandal of Posthumous Publication

Martin Amis’s (in)famous response to *Laura*, “The Problem with Nabokov,” attempts to address (or, perhaps more accurately, diagnose) not only the failings of the posthumously published fragments, but of Nabokov’s *oeuvre* as a whole, focusing particularly on *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* and *Look at the Harlequins!*³ In her analysis of the controversy, Marijeta Bozovic notes that, according to Amis’s framing, “[t]he real dilemma from hell is not whether Dmitri should have burned this particular book, but whether we shouldn’t chuck the previous three or four as well” (Leving 213). While few other reviewers would adopt such an extreme position as Amis’s, critics—even those who responded to the book more favorably—almost unanimously voiced concerns over *Laura*’s potential impact on Nabokov’s legacy and its

³ The most damning of Amis’s criticisms concerns Nabokov’s persistent returns to the nymphet in his later work, specifically in *Ada*, *LATH!*, and *Laura*. Although he stops short of actually calling Nabokov a pedophile, Amis levels a serious accusation against the late author: “[T]o put it at its sternest, Nabokov’s mind, during his last period, insufficiently honoured the innocence – insufficiently honoured the honour – of twelve-year-old girls” (in Leving 167). Although the nymphet appears at all stages of Nabokov’s *oeuvre* and raises very legitimate questions for critics, Amis’s charge that “writers like to write about the things they like to think about” seems like a drastic oversimplification. Critics have also variously read and interrogated the scene from *Laura* that so deeply offended Amis, in which Hubert apparently attempts to sexually molest the twelve year-old Flora. Boyd treats Hubert’s name as a misnomer deliberately intended to mislead readers and understands Hubert’s seeming advances as innocent fatherly affection misinterpreted by Flora (in Leving 249-250). Ellen Pifer offers a similar (though highly problematic) reading of the episode—she claims Flora misinterprets Hubert’s intentions as a result of her own sublimated sexual desires (in Leving 91). Paul Ardoin subscribes to the more conventional position that the episode is referencing *Lolita*, but argues that, rather than simply repeating or recasting older themes, *Laura* offers a metacommentary on the Nabokov *oeuvre* (in Leving 152-153).

relationship to his earlier work. Michael Dirda of *The Washington Post* praises some passages in *Laura* but concludes his review by cautioning that the text is “for Nabokov completists only” (in Leving 186); Michael Antman, likewise, praises Dmitri Nabokov’s decision to publish *Laura*, but nonetheless asserts that “it would take a heroic effort of rationalization and cognitive dissonance to represent [*Laura*] as... a satisfying culmination of Nabokov’s incredible career” (in Leving 197). Jonathan Bate of the *Telegraph* suggests *Laura* should have been published in an academic journal and sternly claims that “[b]y seeking to turn it into a moneyspinner, [Dmitri Nabokov] may have inflicted some sever damage on his father’s reputation” (“*The Original of Laura* by Vladimir Nabokov: review”).

These concerns undoubtedly reflect, to a certain extent, readers’ investments in the continuity across an entire *oeuvre*.⁴ However, Bozovic suggests that objections to publication predicated on *Laura*’s impact on Nabokov’s legacy ultimately stem from an objection to “exposure,” blending aesthetic and ethical concerns (in Leving 208-210). In Bozovic’s reading of the controversy, critics cast *Laura*’s publication as a violation precisely because of the text’s supposed aesthetic shortcomings—Dmitri Nabokov’s decision to publish *Laura* becomes problematic not because it violated his father’s wishes, but because the text jeopardizes the elder Nabokov’s legacy by giving readers access to a text written by a man not at the height of his artistic powers. Implicitly, reviewers making such arguments may also rescue Nabokov from criticism by shifting blame for the texts imperfections onto Dmitri, who choose to publish the

⁴ Foucault notes such a demand in Saint Jerome’s criteria for determining a text’s authenticity, in which the author emerges as “a constant level of value.” In his formulation of the modern author-function, Foucault suggests that the author-function itself provides the desired unity and consistency of the *oeuvre* through the unity of the author’s subjectivity: “The author [...] serves to neutralize the contradictions that may emerge in a series of texts: there must be – at a certain level of his thought or desire, of his consciousness or unconscious – a point where contradictions are resolved, where incompatible elements are at last tied together or organized around a fundamental or originating contradiction” (895).

flawed text when his father “would have known – and did know – not to publish *Laura* because it simply was not good enough yet” (in Leving 209).

However, criticisms of Dmitri’s decision to publish *Laura* also tacitly imply that an author’s work should not decline in aesthetic quality over the course of a long career. In his discussion of “late style,” Edward Said observes an expectation of a certain level of artistic maturity or “ripeness” in late works, exemplified in texts like *Oedipus at Colonus*; late works trouble expected conceptions of aging and artistic development when, instead of the expected wisdom and serenity of old age, they evince “intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction” (6-7). *Laura* troubles the accepted narrative of artistic development and graceful aging both through its perceived aesthetic failures and its depiction of failing corporeality. Notably, Nabokov’s alleged “exposure” is depicted in strikingly physical terms—aging, in the narrative implied by *Laura* and taken up by critics, is not the desired accumulation of wisdom and the abandonment of artistic preoccupations perceived as youthful and worldly, but the slow and painful process of bodily decay.

In addition to the previously cited comparison of Nabokov to the ailing Lou Gehrig, reviewers have, almost without exception, seized upon Dmitri Nabokov’s reference to the “incessant inflammations under and around his toenails” that plagued his father in his final days (xvi).⁵ Although this simultaneously heartbreaking and grotesque detail clearly links the dying author to his protagonist, Philip Wild—Wild complains of the smell of his own feet (169) and

⁵ Sam Anderson writes in the *New York Magazine Book Review* notes that protagonist Philip Wild “is a famous lecturer whose body—like Nabokov’s—is failing him: He has chronically painful feet”; in his introduction of Wild, William Skidelsky of the *Observer* likewise notes that “Nabokov, at this time, also suffered from recurring foot pains” (“*The Original of Laura* by Vladimir Nabokov”), while James Marcus of the *LA Times* somewhat more vaguely comments that, throughout the text, “there are glimpses, here and there, of [Nabokov’s] own physical trials, all the more moving for being unvarnished” (in Leving 200).

suffers from “[a]n ingrown nail on one foot and a corn on the other” (157)—providing almost irresistible critical fodder, John Banville nonetheless rebukes the younger Nabokov for exposing his father in such a fragile condition, and somewhat brusquely comments that “[i]t is a piece of information we probably could have done without” (in Leving 173). Aleksander Hemon, in *Slate*, renders the image of the ailing Nabokov cruelly subjected to public view even more literally: “Too sick to destroy the notecards that contain *The Original of Laura*, the master is now eternally exposed to a gloating, greedy world of academic, publishers, and all the other card-shuffling mediocrities titillated by the sight of a helpless genius” (“Hands Off Nabokov”). Paradoxically, the very critics who issued withering reviews of the novel adopt what Bozovic recognizes as an almost filial relationship to the aging author (207-208) and rail against the indecency of exposing a frail old man to the very sort of ruthless public critique they practice. In such reviews, a clear consensus emerges, first, that *Laura*’s fractured state and questionable content is directly related to its author’s physical state, and second, that physical and artistic decline should not be made visible to the public.

In light of Said’s observation of the apparent expectation of artistic “progress,” it is perhaps unsurprising that reviewers most consistently find fault in *Laura*’s tendency to recycle older images, themes, and techniques employed by Nabokov throughout his lengthy career, with the harshest reproaches reserved for the Flora/Hubert episode in chapter two (53-75).⁶ While some reviewers (most notably Martin Amis; see note 3) read this episode most uncharitably as the sublimation of Nabokov’s own thinly veiled desire for pre-pubescent girls, most treat the

⁶ Boyd, who would eventually come to defend the Flora/Hubert episode, himself initially balked at the scene as simply “a *fourth* reprise of *Lolita*” (italics in original) (246). Theroux finds Hubert’s appearance “hard to comprehend artistically, even parodically” and more mutedly (if bafflingly) seems to echo Amis’s accusation in his assertion that “[i]t is charming, up to a point, that a great novelist in his last years remains so beguiled by nubile females [...] but it is not a cause for literary celebration” (in Leving 175).

scene as evidence of Nabokov's failing creative capacities—again, the author appears as the aging man who must be sheltered, who, unable to formulate a fresh narrative, instead endlessly returns to his past successes. The Flora/Hubert episode aside, reviewers seem to be unable to reach any clear consensus on which of *Laura*'s passages are “good” and which are “bad”; curiously, however, resemblance to Nabokov's previous work seems to constitute the criteria for both aesthetic success and failure. Skidelsky finds the description of Flora's morocco slippers “foetally folded in their zippered pouch” (11) to be, while not “vintage Nabokov,” “both sweet and faintly obscene,” while Bate approvingly notes that “[c]lever alliteration is a Nabokov hallmark,” yet considers the phrase “too self-congratulatory by half.” Likewise, Theroux praises Flora's parenthetical dismissal of unwanted flowers—“(hateful blooms, regalized bananas, really)” (39)—as vaguely reminiscent of Humbert Humbert's famously abrupt description of his mother's death—“(picnic, lightning)” (*Lolita* 10) (in Leving 175)—while Bate compares the same infamous parenthesis from *Lolita* to *Laura*'s parenthetical reduction of a “three-year separation” to “(distant war, regular exchange of tender letters)” (239), but finds the device to be “merely tired” in the posthumous text.

The chief complaints against *Laura*, then, seem to be that the text is simultaneously *un-*Nabokovian and *too* Nabokovian. Notoriously, the *Nabokovian* sponsored a Vladimir Nabokov “write-alike” contest in 1999, prior to *Laura*'s publication, in which selections from the unpublished text were placed alongside imitations and readers were asked to identify the authentic Nabokov passages—shockingly, no one identified the passages from *Laura* as Nabokov's work (Boyd, in Leving 252). This infamous incident seemingly would provide support for reviewers arguing for *Laura*'s incongruity with the rest of the Nabokov *oeuvre*, were it not for the additional complaints that *Laura* too closely resembles or rehashes Nabokov's

previous work. The “problem,” so to speak, seems to be that *Laura* is neither totally distinct from or of a piece with the existing *oeuvre*—the text instead falls into a sort of uncanny valley, neither truly like or unlike the Nabokov readers recognize. However, both charges—that *Laura* fails to live up to vintage Nabokovian style and that in *Laura* Nabokov has slipped into almost self-parodic territory—are predicated on aging and physical deterioration. The criticisms frame the aging author alternately as a man whose creative capacities have failed him, unable to repeat the triumphs of his youth and as an aging genius desperately repeating and recombining elements of his former works, trying to recreate his previous success.

Admittedly, Vladimir Nabokov’s own framing of *Laura* somewhat encourages these readings of the text. Prior to his death, Nabokov described his mental labors on *Laura*, which he described as “completed in [his] mind,” in a brief interview with the *New York Times*:

“I must have gone through it some 50 times and in my diurnal delirium kept reading it aloud to a small dream audience in a walled garden. My audience consisted of peacocks, pigeons, my long dead parents, two cypresses, several young nurses crouching around, and a family doctor so old as to be almost invisible. Perhaps because of my stumblings and fits of coughing the story of my poor Laura had less success with my listeners than it will have, I hope, with intelligent reviewers when properly published.” (“Author’s Authors”)

The image of the aging, half-delirious Nabokov, delivering his story amidst coughing fits to an inattentive audience of birds and specters is heartbreaking—and, in many respects, entirely in line with the image implied by *Laura*’s critical yet protective reviewers. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that these same reviewers should want to shield Nabokov and should save their harshest critiques for the son who published an incomplete (and deeply flawed) text against his father’s final wishes. However, this description of apparent senility is itself highly literary—although Nabokov represents himself as a man deteriorating both physically and mentally, his precisely worded, evocative account of this deterioration undermines the image itself. The

Nabokov who spoke to the *New York Times* is not the frail man of the reviews in need of shielding, but rather the still-sharp master manipulator, carefully controlling his own image and subtly publicizing his work in progress.⁷

In her analysis of the publication controversy, Bozovic returns to the image of Nabokov and his “dream audience” in the garden at Lausanne and suggests that the critical backlash against *Laura* results, in part, from the effacement of this image and the over-visibility of the mechanics of publication—because, she argues, *Laura* “calls attention to itself as a material object and consumer product,” the old man in the garden is obscured by “Dmitri, Penguin, designer Chip Kidd, the scholars and journalists who fought for *Laura*’s preservation, [and] the reviewers who reviled Dmitri’s decision” (in Leving 215). Although *Laura* does explicitly foreground its own materiality, which I will discuss in greater detail to in the next section of this paper, based on the content of the reviews and the particular criticisms mounted against *Laura*, it seems that the image of the ailing Nabokov is *too* visible. As I will argue below, however, this troubling portrait is deliberately made visible through the material structure and editorial framing of the text. In presenting the rapidly deteriorating Nabokov of Lausanne, *Laura* effaces the man who spoke to *The New York Times*, the skillful master of his own public image.

Reading a “Novel in Fragments”

I would now like to turn from the publication controversy to *Laura* itself, both as a text and a material object. As I have attempted to demonstrate in the previous section, *Laura*, as a posthumous text, is always read in the context of its author’s death. However, *Laura* is unusual insofar as the book— not the hypothetical novel Nabokov would have written had he lived to

⁷ On this last count, we might also note the context in which Nabokov described his recitation of *Laura*. *The New York Times* had asked him to describe “the three books [he had] most enjoyed” in 1976 (“Author’s Authors”); in classic Nabokovian fashion, he included his own incomplete work in his response.

complete his work, or even the fragments of the novel preserved in his manuscript, but, very specifically, the material book published from these fragments—posits a sort of equivalency between the author and the book itself. To this extent, the extreme fragmentation of the text acts as a textual depiction of Nabokov's death. Although *Laura* becomes problematic for reviewers in its presentation of its author, as I have argued above, the text also foregrounds his absence. Strangely, *Laura* simultaneously emphasizes its author's corporeality and effaces his body—that is, the text obliquely represents the author's bodily deterioration and eventual disappearance through its constant gestures towards absence and erasure.

To begin, I want to consider *Laura*'s bizarre form as a means of simultaneously gesturing towards an imagined totality and representing authorial deterioration. As previously noted, *Laura* was published as a "Novel in Fragments"; although these are fragments *for* a novel—that is, pieces of narrative that ostensibly can be put into some kind of logical order to form a coherent whole—fragmentation also signifies discontinuity, rupture, and dissolution. *Laura* encourages the active reader to create a narrative from the existing pieces of text (much as I myself attempted to construct three distinct narrative threads in the introduction of this paper) and thereby implicitly treats the existing text as, to borrow a phrase from Paul Ardoin's essay on *Laura*, "productive fragments"; nonetheless, the established order of the index cards, preserved even after their removal from the book in the transcriptions at the bottom of the pages, offers a counter-narrative of fragmentation as deterioration. That is, while the book facilitates a form of active reading in which fragments function almost as puzzle pieces, the fractured state of the existing text and the default arrangement of the index cards act as evidence of the author's bodily decline and eventual death.

In one of the few unequivocally positive reviews of *Laura*, Heller McAlpin of *The Christian Science Monitor* argues for just such a reading of textual fragmentation as a reflection of its author's rapidly deteriorating health—on the basis of the increasingly fractured narrative structure, she claims that “[*Laura*] becomes, fainter, sketchier, and more sparse as [Nabokov] races against time and illness in a Lausanne hospital, trying to net ideas and pin down a draft, a goal as elusive as some of the butterflies he chased and collected around the globe” (in Leving 179). Although the image of the dying author struggling to finish his draft in his final days may be poignant, McAlpin's reading remains problematic, given that her argument depends upon the assumption that the publisher's established order of the index cards accurately represents not the order in which they would have eventually appeared in the completed text, but the order in which Nabokov *composed* the cards. Although this assumption is unlikely to be true, given the equally damning facts that the cards are undated and that Nabokov composed his novels non-linearly, the design and structure of *Laura* actively encourage this reading, particularly through the inclusion of the final index card (card 275). Card 275 consists only of a list of synonyms for loss and disappearance—“efface, expunge, erase, delete, rub out, [indecipherable scratched out line], wipe out, obliterate”—and thus cannot properly be understood as fitting anywhere within *Laura*'s larger narrative structure. Furthermore, as Ardoin notes, this card is printed on graph paper rather than an ordinary lined index card and therefore may not belong to the set (in Leving 145; see also note 2). Nonetheless, card 275 is reproduced *three times* in particularly prominent positions, as the volume's cloth front cover, frontispiece, and final page.

Presumably, the words on the card refer to Philip Wild's quest to erase his body. Of course, it is Nabokov's disappearance, not Wild's that brackets *The Original of Laura* and accounts for its incomplete state. As such, the card implicitly ties the disappearance of the

author's body to the erasure of his protagonist. Simultaneously, and perhaps more importantly, the card encourages McAlpin's fallacious reading of the *Laura*'s progression as progression towards death and marks the text's abrupt conclusion as the moment of the author's inevitable disappearance. Derrida, in a reading of Percy Shelley's unfinished poem "The Triumph of Life," poses a curious question for the posthumous text—where, in our reading, do we situate the (literal) death of the author ("Living On" 85)? Derrida treats the death of the author as the implicit textual border, dividing the existing fragment of text from its hypothetical and inaccessible ideal form, always implicitly present with the text but impossible to locate; *The Original of Laura* creates the illusion that we *can* actually locate the author's death within the text, placing his erasure at the conclusion of his final novel, as though he had promptly disappeared the moment he stopped writing.

Ardoin argues that the placement of the final card at the beginning and end of the text provides the uncompleted draft of *Laura* with a "deceptive 'beginning' and 'ending' that moves toward a kind of closure that obscures the truly unfinished nature of the book"; still, if we read the "erasure" in question as Nabokov's, rather than Wild's, the card's finality ultimately *reinforces* not only the "unfinished nature of the book," but the impossibility of any sort of narrative closure (in Leving 146). Although the unfinished and fragmentary nature of the text accounts, in part, for readers' dissatisfaction, this very incompleteness also rescues the text from "lateness," as articulated by Said and Adorno. In his reading of Beethoven's late style, Adorno understands "lateness" as "the idea of surviving beyond what is acceptable and normal" (Said 13). Although *Laura* could be considered an example of Nabokov's "late style," insofar as it has been treated as a problematic text written well after the zenith of the author's career, *Laura*'s more troubling aspects, particularly its extreme formal irregularities, can be ascribed to the very

fact that its author *did not survive* its composition.⁸ While Said and Adorno note the unusual fragmentation and “apparent disregard for its own continuity” of Beethoven’s later work as an example of lateness (Said 10), *Laura*’s fragmentation is read not as a fundamental feature of the text, but as a regrettable result of its author’s decline and death. To return to Derrida’s treatment of death as an imperceptible textual border, *Laura*’s unfinished nature allows readers to treat it as a fragment of the larger “ideal” text, rather than a whole but fragmentary text. This seemingly innocuous distinction facilitates readings of the fragments as a unified whole.

Still, even as the existing fragments of the novel gesture toward its ideal form and phenomenologically represent the author’s decline and ultimate erasure, the book’s unconventional material form promotes a certain readerly identification with the author and foregrounds physicality, evincing a certain fetishization of the corporeality. *Laura* is a text in which presence and absence, and the material and ideal, are constantly in tension (and, a text that fully exploits these tensions). Arguably, by facilitating a kind of alternative mode of narrative construction, *Laura* seems to locate meaning in an active, quasi-Barthesian reader; however, by reproducing the author’s handwritten manuscript, the text actually subtly reasserts the importance of authorial intention and ascribes a certain cult value to the physical traces of the late author.

In perhaps the most generous reading of the novel’s unusual format, Jeffrey R. Di Leo argues in that the design of *Laura* actively facilitates the effacement of the physical book in favor of the ideal text: “...as you begin to punch out the index cards and rearrange them [...] you gradually work to destroy [...] the (physical) book in your efforts to create the (ideal) book”

⁸ In drawing this distinction between *Laura* and the late work, I do not mean to imply that Nabokov’s final works cannot be considered examples of “late style.” *Ada* and *LATH!* particularly have been treated as problematic texts. See note 3 for Martin Amis’s objections to Nabokov’s late works, *Transparent Things* excepted.

(25). The key question—for both Di Leo and *Laura*'s readers—seems to be what constitutes the “ideal” book. Although *Laura*'s format places readers in a position of greater agency by allowing them the freedom to re-arrange the index cards in search of alternative narrative configurations, the text's invitation to the reader to re-arrange the index cards “as the author likely did” encourages the reader's identification with the late author (xxi). The reader then assumes a sort of bizarre Nabokov's-eye-view of the text as she searches for the “ideal” configuration—implicitly, that which would most closely correspond to the text as Nabokov would have written it, had he lived long enough to complete his novel. Additionally, as Ardoin notes, the transcription of the notecards implies an authoritative order and “dissuades readers from challenging the work the editors have already done” (in Leving 147).⁹ *Laura* thus offers the illusion of unusually heightened readerly control, even as it reasserts the primacy of authorial intention and advances a particular reading of the existing manuscript—notably, a narrative fundamentally shaped by Nabokov's own deterioration.¹⁰ To this extent, the fragments that should be productive building blocks toward a larger unified whole become remnants of the irremediably lost ideal narrative.

⁹ Di Leo avoids addressing the authoritative status of the transcription by privileging the notecards over the codex, which he seems to think readers will ultimately discard—“Like the sticker book after its stickers are removed, Nabokov's final book is rendered disposable through use” (25). However, by removing the cards, readers actually separate *Laura* into *two* distinct texts: the “productive” manuscript, which renders the author present through its reproduction of his handwriting, and the destructive codex, which foregrounds its author's absence through its increasing fragmentation and through the permanent cavity created in the book by the removal of the index cards.

¹⁰ In light of Ardoin's claim for the authority of the transcription, we might also note the overwhelming homogeneity of plot summaries in reviews of *Laura*. Although it is difficult to determine the text's narrative structure from the existing manuscript, reviewers by and large seem to have reached a consensus on *Laura*'s three main narrative threads, arguably further entrenching the authority of the established order of the notecards and limiting the agency of the reader.

Although *Laura* does seem to privilege this ideal narrative, I want to raise two objections to Di Leo's reading of the book's unusual form: first, by reproducing the author's handwriting, erasures, and effacements, and by encouraging an alternative means of reading which emphasizes the physical act of moving the cards, *Laura* actively foregrounds its own materiality, counter-intuitively providing the reader access to the "ideal" text through a heightened engagement with the material book; second, at the risk of stating the obvious, in its embrace of a non-traditional format and inclusion of stray notes and errors in spelling, *Laura* actually resembles the hypothetical form the finished novel would have taken *less closely* than a straightforward transcription of the notes might. With these objections in mind, I want to call attention to the importance of the mass-production of the author's handwritten manuscript. While access to Nabokov's handwritten notes arguably might grant readers greater understanding (or, more cynically, the illusion of greater understanding) of his process, thereby facilitating access to the ideal text, it is also important to note that the manuscript itself possesses a certain cult value, as evinced by Nabokov bibliographer Michael Juliar's insistence upon the singularity of the manuscript and fetishization of the material object: "There is information of real value buried in the original: the paper, the graphite in the pencil, the red and blue lines, the smudge of the eraser" (in Leving 44). Crucially, the manuscript does not possess this "value" in and of itself, however, but through its status as a material trace of its author. In her discussion of Walter Benjamin's concept of aura, Miriam Hansen writes that "[t]he aura of objects such as clothing or furniture stands in a metonymic relation to the person who uses them or has been using them," such that their aura derives from participation in "a long-term material relationship" with the physical body of a particular person (106-107).

Arguably, following Benjamin's claims about the detrimental effect of infinite reproducibility on the aura of the singular artifact, mass production of the manuscript should diminish the cult value of the original; however, in a somewhat singular passage from "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin critically makes an exception to his general thesis for early photography. Although Benjamin comments upon photography as a medium in which no original exists, he claims that early photography maintained its cult value through its association with memorializing the dead:

"It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty." (1111)¹¹

Benjamin's reading of early photographs on one level is suggestive of a means of reading the mass-produced manuscript as traces of the late author—in spite of their infinite reproducibility, the pencil traces, the erasures, even the occasional misspelled words, assume a certain dignity through their status as remainders (or, if you would pardon the macabre pun, remains) of the deceased. The aura of the photograph is based not on its relationship to an "original" work of art, but on its indexical relationship to the past (Hansen 107). However, in the final section of this paper, I want to push this reading slightly further, by treating the mass-produced manuscript not simply as traces of the author's body, but as a portrait, an image of the author's body, in this case, the author's failing body.

¹¹ Although any number of positives can be produced from the photographic negative, such that it becomes meaningless to speak of an "original" photograph, the earliest photographic portraits—including those Benjamin refers to in his discussion of the cult value of the photographic death portrait—would have been daguerreotypes, singular and unreproducible positive images produced on metal plates. However, in this case, the "original" responsible for the aura of the portrait is the *subject*, as opposed to an "original" image. I am thankful to my supervisor, Jennifer Fay, for calling my attention to this distinction.

Copies, Erasures, Originals: The Turn to Photographic Theory

Although my treatment of *Laura* as a portrait of the dying artist rather than a novel in any traditional sense may seem somewhat counter-intuitive, the mass-produced manuscript positions itself at the intersection of the text and the image by reproducing not simply the text but the handwritten manuscript, that is, the traces of its author's corporeal existence. However, both *Laura* itself and photographic theory destabilize the apparent relationships between the original and the copy, and the subject and the image. Although *Laura* mirrors the photographic image most obviously in its reproduction of the manuscript itself, its content fortuitously evinces an obsession with imitation, reproduction, and originality, the same issues that have long preoccupied photographic theorists. Although critics have unsurprisingly seized on physical similarities between Wild and the ailing Nabokov in order to read *Laura* as a kind of self-portrait of dissolution, an autobiographical sketch as seen through a glass darkly, Flora's textual representation as Laura and apparent relationship to Nabokov's earlier heroine, twelve year-old Dolores Haze likewise serves as a portrait of the author through the implicit representation of his textual body, that is, his corpus. While Nabokov's harshest critics have strenuously objected to *Laura*'s references to *Lolita*, these references actually work to destabilize the apparently self-evident relationship between the original and the simulacrum implied in Flora's depiction as Laura.

While the title *The Original of Laura* apparently refers to Flora, the presumed model for the heroine of the fictional novel *My Laura*, the young Dolores could easily be taken for the "original of Flora." Like Flora, Dolores has her own "fictionalized" counterpart—*Lolita*.¹²

¹² Strangely, *Laura* mirrors *Lolita* even in its publication history—Nabokov famously attempted to burn the manuscript that would become *Lolita*, only to be stopped by Véra, the same woman

Although Humbert Humbert declines to give Dolores a proper pseudonym (in his introduction, Humbert's lawyer notes that "Haze" rhymes with the "real" Dolores's surnames and claims that "her first name is too closely interwound with the inmost fiber of the book to allow one to alter it" [3-4]), he nonetheless seems to construct a fictional persona for the young girl, in order to transform his twelve year-old victim into a cruel and knowing mistress.¹³ Of course, the "Lolita" Humbert constructs is herself a replacement for Humbert's first lost love, Annabel Leigh, whose name clearly alludes to Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabel Lee," written in commemoration of his own deceased child bride, Virginia Clemm; Annabel, in turn, reappears in *Laura* as Wild's lost Aurora Lee (201-207). With this complex intertextual network of relationships between real, fictional, "real," and "fictional" women in mind, it becomes unclear who, precisely, is the "original" of *Laura*, or what, for that matter, it might mean to be the "original."

Laura seems to treat representation as a kind of violence, a means of effacing or replacing the original—or, so we might surmise through the brief description of *My Laura* as a text in which the protagonist "destroys his mistress in the act of portraying her" (121).¹⁴

However, the apparent return to *Lolita* complicates this treatment of artistic representation. In rewriting previous texts, Nabokov subjects not only his previous work to the apparent violence

who would unintentionally rescue *Laura* through her hesitancy to destroy her husband's final work.

¹³ In the first half of *Lolita*, Humbert himself acknowledges, to some degree, that "his" Lolita is a construction, when he fantasizes a consummation of his desires: "What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed no life of her own" (62).

¹⁴ Gennedy Barbtarlo notes Flora's passing comparison of her husband's secret "Poisonous Opus" to an unknown movie referred to only as "that film" (*Laura 2*), and suggests "that film" may refer to a 1972 cinematic adaptation of Poe's short story "The Oval Portrait" (in Leving 81). "The Oval Portrait," originally published as "Life in Death," mirrors *My Laura*—in the story, an artist fails to notice his wife's deteriorating health as he paints her portrait and discovers she has died only after completing his eerily lifelike painting.

of imitation (or re-presentation), but also his authorial person itself—that is, not the distinct persona Nabokov adopted in interviews or a characteristic literary voice, but the authorial identity that unites the Nabokov *oeuvre*.¹⁵ As an author, “Vladimir Nabokov” becomes inseparable from his body of work, such that an imitation or revision of the Nabokov *oeuvre* becomes a revision of the entire established authorial voice. To this extent, reviewers’ concerns for Nabokov’s posthumous legacy is perhaps justified—the “author” being represented (or re-presented) in *Laura* is not simply the embodied man speaking to peacocks in a Lausanne garden, but the Nabokov of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, the Nabokov who establishes a continuity between *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. The real question at stake, then, seems to be not who is the original of *Laura*, but what is the original of *Laura*? Although *Laura*, like the photographic image, seems to be read indexically, in terms of Nabokov’s existing corpus, the text simultaneously redefines and becomes inseparable from the corpus it apparently copies or imitates, such that no clear distinction can be made between the original and the copy.

To continue the parallel between literary representation and the photographic image, Nabokov’s language in describing the plot of *My Laura* almost uncannily resembles Siegfried Kracauer’s claims about the effect of photographing a particular subject—while Nabokov writes that *My Laura* presents a man’s attempt to “[destroy] his mistress in the act of portraying her” (121), Kracauer argues that the photograph “annihilates [its] subject by portraying him or her” (57). In his essay on photography, Kracauer argues that the photographic image fragments the original subject by reducing it to single configuration of graphic signifiers (56-57), using the

¹⁵ In “What is an Author?”, Foucault argues that the author function does not only assign legal or creative responsibility for a text to the particular person who wrote it, but actively works to establish relationships between the texts that constitute a particular *oeuvre*: “[An author’s name] permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. In addition, it establishes a relationship among the texts” (893).

example of a young woman rendered unrecognizable through temporal distance whose portrait becomes, essentially, an image of outdated fashion (55). Although, in Kracauer's reading, this kind of fragmentation becomes most obvious in older images, in which the subjects have become unfamiliar, even the most recognizable subjects appear only as a configuration of particular signifiers. Kracauer argues that the "memory image" of the familiar subject "breaks through the wall of likeness into the photography" (54); however, he somewhat counter-intuitively cites as his example of the familiar subject an actress (the "demonic diva") known to the viewer through her *cinematic* likeness, such that the memory image of the "original" is always already a photographic image (47). Curiously, then the "original" actress as the viewer remembers her is always already a collection a signifiers from which the "memory image" itself can be constructed. Like both *Laura's* plot and the oblique image of the author implicit in the text, the subject of the photograph is assembled from a set of fragments, such that a coherent image begins to emerge; however, the apparent unity of this image is always unstable, to the extent that it may at any moment dissolve into fragments, particularly as the viewer becomes increasingly estranged from the "original."

In my treatment of the mass-produced manuscript and my discussion of *Laura's* relationship to Nabokov's previous works, particularly *Lolita*, I have attempted to make a case for *Laura* as a representation of *both* Nabokov's physical body and his body of work. However, in making this claim, I want to stress that *Laura* posits a kind of equivalency between the author's physical and textual bodies, as demonstrated by McAlpin's reading of textual fragmentation as physical decline. In light of this equivalency, I want to offer an alternative reading of Wild's mental experiments. Although Wild's attempts at self-erasure seemingly

reflect the author's barely-sublimated desire for the erasure of his own failing body, Wild simultaneously represents the "body" he wishes to annihilate linguistically and graphically:

The student who desires to die should learn first of all to project a mental image of himself upon his inner blackboard... Now comes the mental image. In preparing for my own experiments—a long fumble which these notes shall help to avoid—I toyed with the idea of drawing a fairly detailed, fairly recognizable portrait of myself on my private blackboard... Or would the letters of my name do? Its recurrent 'i' coinciding with our favorite pronoun suggested an elegant solution a simple vertical line across my field of inner vision could be chalked in an instant, and what is more I could mark lightly by transverse marks the three divisions of my physical self: legs, torso, and head.

Wild imagines himself as the letter I, which forms a representation of both his body (through its graphic representation) and his subjectivity (through its denotation of the first person pronoun). Before mentally erasing this image, however, Wild imagines the "I" as fractured, breaking his body and its image into its constitutive parts. The body becomes inseparable from subjectivity and its linguistic representation, before the all-signifying "I" can be broken down into constituent marks and ultimately erased. Like Wild's "I," *Laura* functions as both a graphic and linguistic portrait, such that its fragmentation represents its author's physical and *artistic* deterioration.

Of course, the reader's response to this image of self-annihilation is fundamentally structured by her knowledge of Nabokov's death. *Laura* concludes not with Wild's self-annihilation, but with Nabokov's death from bronchitis on 2 July 1977. Although Benjamin observes a similar phenomenon in his reading of photographer Karl Dauthendey's self-portrait with his fiancé, who would later commit suicide ("Little History of Photography" 276-277), the photograph's relationship to futurity and death is most fully articulated in Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*. Barthes argues that the passage of time and the knowledge of the subject's impending (and, sometimes, already past) death structure the spectator's experience of the photographic portrait. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes famously reads the photographic image in

terms of the *studium*, the consciously constructed composition of the image (27-28), and the *punctum*, the particular unintended and poignant detail within the image, often the subjective or personal detail, which “pricks” or “bruises” the viewer (27). In his reading of an image of a young man in prison, Barthes suggests time itself is the *punctum* in the photograph (96-97). As a preserved image of the past, the photograph implicitly contains an image of the future, in his words, “an anterior future of which death is the stake” (96). Of course, the same is true for every photographic portrait—whatever the intentions of the photographer or the circumstances of the creation of the image, the subject is always condemned to the inevitability of death, such that all photographic portraits become images of death in the future anterior. This revelation, which fills Barthes with horror as he reflects that the man in the photograph is not only going to die but in fact has already died, also actively shapes the reader’s response to the posthumous text generally, and to *Laura* particularly. Each card reproduces the hand of a dying man, a man who has died before the reader ever opens the book.

Barthes somewhat casually dismisses the *studium* only provoking minimal interest in the literal content of the image, as opposed to the kind of intense, quasi-erotic desire awakened in the spectator by the *punctum*, which moves “beyond” the image itself and “takes the spectator outside [the] frame” (59). However, by pushing the spectator’s view “beyond” the image, the *punctum* may actually efface the image itself, an effect Shawn Michelle Smith notes in her reading of Barthes’s own highly problematic and racially charged analysis of James VanDerZee’s portrait of his family. Barthes actually *misremembers* the content of the photo—the necklace he treats as the *punctum* does not actually appear in the image—such that his desired

image overwrites the actual one (100).¹⁶ The question, then, for *Laura*, seems to be what is effaced in reading the text explicitly as an image of its author's death. While it is problematic and perhaps impossible to speak in any coherent way to talk about the "original" *Original of Laura*—not the original manuscript, but the ideal and nonexistent text the author would have written—the reader's search for this desired "original" seems to have been, in some way, thwarted by his or her own desire for the late author. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes argues that the reader reconstitutes the author within the text *through* the mechanism of desire (27). Although *Laura* facilitates this reconstitution of the author, the textual image constructed by the reader is again, only an image, an artificially imposed totality. In this image, both author and text ultimately disappear.

Postscript on the (Literal) Death of the Author

In arguing for a photographic reading of *Laura*, I have attempted to reframe the discussion of the text and the controversy surrounding it in terms of the reader's desire and experience. As a mass-produced manuscript, *Laura* is as much (or perhaps more) image as novel; its aura derives not from its relationship to the "ideal" text, but from its status as a trace of the late author. Ultimately, then, the desire driving the reader's construction of a unified narrative is not a desire for the "original" and inaccessible *Original of Laura*, but a desire for the author.

In conclusion, I would like to briefly turn to a text that has been implicitly (or, perhaps the better word would be "spectrally") present throughout my entire discussion of the

¹⁶ By returning to Barthes's problematic cursory discussion of the *studium* of the VanDerZee photograph, Smith's reading also suggests the distinction between *studium* and *punctum* is never actually as clear cut as Barthes imagines—Barthes's own reading of the *studium* is deeply fraught with his own racial prejudices, such that it becomes problematic to assert, as Barthes does, that the *studium* is "a contract arrived at between creators and consumers" which allows the viewer to inhabit and understand the photographer's intentions (*Camera Lucida* 28). See Smith 99.

posthumous text: Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author." On one level, *Laura* seems to represent the extreme literalization of Barthes's pronouncement that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148)—in the absence of the author, *Laura*'s readers seemingly assume total control over the text. However, though the author may have disappeared, his image remains spectrally present in the final text, permeating every word such that apparent "flaws" become, under the eyes of the desiring reader, a reflection of his own bodily condition. In the fragments of *Laura*, the image of the dying author appears, even as the original retreats irretrievably into the past.

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