"A madman is reluctant to look at himself in a mirror because the face he sees is not his own: his personality is beheaded; that of the artist increased" (Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* 377).

Rudolf Sárdi:

Crooked mirrors and false doubles in Nabokov's *Despair*

In spite of Nabokov's "consistent emphasis on the individual nature of reality" (Pifer 97) and his avowed aversion to the notion of duality, the *Doppelgänger* motif appears to be a key organizing principle in the main body of his oeuvre.[1] "Nabokov's art grows out of Romanticism in the Platonic tradition; because he sees this world as a pale reflection of another, his novels abound in doublings, mirrorings and inversions" (Meyer 197).[2] The mysterious recurrence of this traditional literary topos in Nabokov's fiction has given rise to innumerable speculations as to the identities and the portrayal of his fictional characters. In the prefatory chapter to his fathers plays,[3] Dmitri Nabokov commented that "[c]losely related to the aura of double reality is the double character, the so-called Nabokovian *doppelgänger*" (4–5), assuming a multiplicity of shapes and roles from the earliest Russian fictions to the more advanced postmodernist novels written in the New World. The first and most conspicuously relevant fictional writing with respect to

[1] In an interview given to Alfred Appel, Jr. Nabokov snappishly commented that "[t]he *Doppelgänger* subject is a frightful bore" (*Strong Opinions* 83) and that "Felix in *Despair is* really a *false* double" (*SO* 84, italics added).

[2] In discussing the Nabokovian *Doppelgänger*, it is vital to recognize in Nabokov's novels what D. Barton Johnson calls "two-worlds" cosmology in his pioneering book, *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*. While it is widely believed that the "two worlds" theme is purely a product of biographical circumstances – closely related to the author's loss his "infinitely rich and docile Russian tongue" (*SO* 15) and the many displacements he had endured throughout his life – Jane Grayson points out that this is an already known literary and philosophical topos "having its origins in Classical philosophy, in Platonism and Gnosticism, and development in the poetry and thought of European Romanticism and French and Russian Symbolism. … In the 1980s and 1990s the academic focus of interest in the *tut/tam*, 'here/there' theme shifted from the biographical and the aesthetic to the metaphysical" (12). Johnson is right in claiming that Nabokov's aesthetic and philosophical views owe much to the Symbolist movement in that that "there exists, beyond the scope of the intellect another, more real world, and that what man sees before him is but a shadow and echo of that true reality" (3). However, Brian Boyd questions the pertinence of Johnson's "two-world" terminology, insisting that its application to the Nabokovian oeuvre is in a way too restrictive, hence unsatisfactory: It is more advisable to speak of the plurality of levels and fictional planes and not merely of the binary division or dichotomy of Nabokov's worlds. Grayson points out that "[u]nlike [other émigré writers] Nabokov was not trapped in knowing just Russian. By moving over to English he could transform the clichéd émigré topos of the lost homeland, the *tut/tam*, the 'here' and 'there', into something dynamic: not a see-saw, but a spiral … He had an enviable ability to turn negatives into positives" (8). The discussion of a major thematic dominant of Nabokov's works, the oft-discussed "potustoronnost'," or the "otherworld," is intimately related to the author's theme of the *Doppelgänger*, and has been extensively debated in literary circles since the 1980s. (The recent studies that concern themselves with Nabokov's otherworldly theme in his novels are Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld*; Tammi, *The Problems of Nabokov's Poetics: A Narratological Analysis*; Boyd, *Nabokov: The Russian Years* and *Nabokov: The American Years*; D.B. Johnson, *Worlds in Regression*, 1–4., Sisson; "Cosmic Synchronization and 'Something Else'"; Shrayer, *The World of Nabokov's Stories*).

[3] Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Man from the USSR and Other Plays*. Tr. Dmitri Nabokov. Hartcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers. London, 1984.

character duplication is *Despair*, but as opposed to the traditional manifestations of the topos, Nabokov was more inclined to select a "stand-in" or "false double" whose resemblance to the main character exists merely in the latter's manic imagination.[4] In this essay, my aim is twofold: first, I shall try to proffer an answer to the question why Nabokov established the seminal notion of "false doubling" and in what ways it is brought into play throughout *Despair*, while my second objective is to attempt to explicate the central role that Nabokov's "crooked" mirrors play as a structure generating and degenerating device.

1. Setting the scene

Andrew Field's laudatory article in the *New York Times Book Review* goes far beyond the simple appraisal of Nabokov's 1966 novel, the revised and translated version of *Otchayanie*. Field notes that "[w]ith each re-reading the simplicity of 'Despair' becomes more and more puzzling … If he had written only this novel, Nabokov would deserve a significant place in world literature; no other author in half a century can claim a work of this magnitude as one of his 'secondary' novels" (4). *Despair* was originally written in Russian in 1932, serially published in 1934, and as a book in 1936. In the foreword Nabokov acquaints his readers with the complicated history of the novel and describes how he came to "revamp [his] thirty-year-old translation" (*D* 9)[5] where "an important passage had been stupidly omitted in more timid times" (*D* 10) but is now included in the English version.[6] The importance of *Despair* in literary criticism has been adumbrated by the spotlight being focused on the intertextual subtleties, intricate plots, and "hypertrophied language"[7] of *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and *Ada* which eventually earned world fame to their writer. Certainly not comparable to the critical scrutiny to which Nabokov's three other *tours de force* have been subjected, *Despair* still makes compelling reading, and, as Field also claims: "in spite of its narrative simplicity, *Despair* completely flits out of our grasp" (4).

In the foreword of the novel Nabokov graciously warns that "[p]lain readers … will welcome its plain structure and pleasing plot – which, however, is not quite as familiar as the writer of the rude letter in Chapter Eleven assumes it to be" (*D* 10). Laurie Clancy's disparaging claim that "[a] great deal of 'Despair' is not very complex at all but merely confused and

[4] For an excellent discussion of traditional fictional doubles see Nicole Fernandez Bravo, "Doubles and Counterparts." See also Chapter One of my M.A. thesis, "The Questions of Identity in Nabokov's Fiction" (SEAS Library, Budapest).
[5] Note that *Despair* is hereinafter abbreviated *D* in parenthetical citations.
[6] In *Mary*, Nabokov notes that "[t]he English *Despair* contains many suggestively erotic … descriptions and allusions which are not to be found in the prim Russian version" (quoted in Clancy 58).
[7] Hyde uses the term to refer to "an over-literary language, one that is fed by literature rather than by life" (114).

overloaded in its effort to spread a mass of intricacy and speculation over too slight a frame" (60) is rightfully counterbalanced by Dolinin's critical judgment according to which Nabokov "resorts to intertextual strategies and stratagems – to literary parody, disguised polemic, [and] cunning play with several superimposed subtexts."[8]

The bones of the action can be summarized in a nutshell: The protagonist-narrator, Hermann Karlovich, meets a poor vagrant, Felix whom he *believes* to be his double. He cajoles Felix, the tramp, into exchanging clothes with him on a relatively plausible pretext, and then murders him so that he and his "widowed" wife, Lydia, can collect a nice sum of insurance money. Hermann flees abroad and is taken aback when he learns that the murdered Felix in no way resembled him. On the face of it, *Despair* is but a run-of-the-mill suspense story with only one slight exception (and this is where the crux of the plot lies): the murdered Felix is the (alleged) alter ego of Hermann the murderer, and therefore, "it is the story of a man who murdered himself" (Peterson 190). In Brian Boyd's view "[i]f there is little apparent motive in any ordinary sense, Hermann advances what for Nabokov was the highest motive of all, the incentive of art" (*The Russian Years* 383). Hermann passes himself for an artist and is exclusively concerned with the sheer design of his perfect crime (or is it rather a perfect failure?).

The Hermann-Felix doubling, which already emerges in the beginning of Chapter One, distinctly figures through the entire body of the novel (the theme lending itself to further artistic and psychological duplications), and this is part of the reason why Pifer and other critics have considered this novel as the "most obvious" (98) case of the *Doppelgänger* motif in Nabokov's oeuvre. "There are few Nabokov works in which the double motif does not at least poke its way into the narrative fabric, and there are many, such as 'Despair,' in which it constitutes the narrative axis" (Field[9]). However, it is only Hermann's fascination with resemblance that generates doubles in the novel, more accurately, "false doubles" (*SO* 84), which is a mere delusion and an obsession with human doubling.

2. Obsessive dualism

Obsession and dualism are keywords in almost any novel by Nabokov. Obsession with chess (*The Defense*); obsession with downy-skinned Dolores Haze (*Lolita*); obsession with the poet John Shade (*Pale Fire*); and even obsession with dualism, or rather, obsessive dualism is a

[8] See Works Cited page for URL.
[9] See Works Cited page for URL.

plausible variation on the theme. Ardent seekers of these two notions, reverberating concomitantly in this early novel, are most unlikely to be left in despair. *Despair* is built on Nabokov's frightfully boring theme, revivified to the effect that doubling should no longer convey an air of conventionality (as nothing really does in Nabokov's work). Field points out appositely that

> Nabokov makes of the double not so much a device as an artistic principle which may be used to examine and portray psychological, esthetic, and formal artistic problems, such as the relationship of the author to what he is writing. The doubles may stand in for author or character, and – fittingly enough – they are sometimes even double agents.[10]

In fact, the author was right in saying that "Felix in *Despair* is really a false double" (*SO* 84) because, as Pifer argues, "[t]he experience of duality is shown in so much of Nabokov's fiction, to be an aberration of consciousness or the symptom of a psyche in distress. There are "no 'real' doubles" in Nabokov's novels because "seeing double" is only, as in Hermann's case, the reflection of one man's obsession with resemblance […] As it turns out, the resemblance between Hermann and his victim is only the projection of a mind obsessed with 'sameness'." (106).

Hermann's fantasizing about his physical sameness with Felix is purely the product of a neurotic, deranged mind, and no one else in the story "acknowledges the resemblance between Hermann and his alleged double" (Clancy 61). Being so desperately preoccupied with human duplication and due to his insistence on artificial details, Hermann does not encounter his double by chance, but is "unconsciously tracking" him (*D* 18). In an attempt to make their resemblance more striking and, first and foremost, convincing enough, he adds that "it was he and not I who first perceived the masonic bond in our resemblance" (*D* 20) and that "what interested him was mainly my wishing to see any resemblance at all" (*D* 21). And yet, their strange encounter in the city of Prague reveals that only Hermann perceives and insists on their corporal identicalness:

> 'Look here, you,' I blurted. 'Don't you really *see* anything?'
> He rolled over and sat up.
> 'What's the idea?' he asked, a frown of suspicion darkening his face.
> I said: 'You must be blind.'

[10] See Works Cited page for URL.

> For some ten seconds we kept looking into each other's eyes. Slowly I raised my right arm, but his left did not rise, as I had almost expected it to do. I closed my left eye, but both his eyes remained open. I showed him my tongue. He muttered again:
> 'What's up? What's up?'
> I produced a pocket mirror. Even as he took it, he pawed at his face, then glanced at his palm, but found neither blood nor bird spat. He looked at himself in the sky-blue glass. Gave it back to me with a shrug.
> 'You fool,' I cried. 'Don't you see that we two – don't you see, you fool, that we are – Now listen – take a good look at me . . .' (*D* 20)

Although Hermann himself observes certain facial differences – in particular, the eyes, the teeth, and the ears (*D* 24) and later the hands and feet (*D* 140, 142) – he keeps insisting that Felix and he are "[t]wo, but with a single face" (*D* 24). Hermann's perception of the physical sameness between him and his double noticeably alters through the novel. It seems to rock between obsession and skepticism: Hermann is either outraged at how their resemblance passes entirely unnoticed, or, as the plot unfolds, he seems to be less persuaded by what he believes to be the perfect likeness. In Chapter Five, for example, Hermann notes:

> It interested me hugely how our remarkable likeness got broken by the working of his face. If he were to attain old age, I reflected, his grins and grimaces would end by eroding completely our resemblance which is not so perfect when his face freezes. (*D* 69–70)

As the same chapter draws to an end, Hermann begins to query their likeness afresh: "And, who knows maybe he was not the least like me after all, I could see only the crown of his head, he was fast asleep, with his back to me" (*D* 88).

It is not only the resemblance between Hermann and Felix that appears misleading but also a whole gamut of other textual examples help to demonstrate the presence of "false" doublings. Grishakova convincingly maintains that "[a]nother metaphor for Hermann's behavior is 'screen-writing': he tries to press upon his screenplay, which is, nevertheless, corrected by the auctorial hand. Hermann's obsessive attention to repetitions and resemblances is based on a belief in his 'memory of the camera type'".[11] Inexact, asymmetric or false concordances cause Hermann's "memory of the camera type" (*D* 59) to shift in space and establish mnemonic connections between them. Chapter Four alone abounds in different scenes where the narrator glimpses people or objects, which seem familiar in his eye but are just as false as poor Felix. To Hermann the "bronze equestrian statue at the end of the boulevard […] at Tarnitz" (*D* 59) has its

[11] See Works Cited page for URL.

identical counterpart in St. Petersburg, and the fishmonger Carl Spiess reminds him of "one Carl Spiess whom I used to know in that Volga village of my past" (*D* 64). Upon entering a tobacco shop in Tarnitz, Hermann catches sight of a picture, which he fancies was painted by Lydia's cousin, Ardalion. Later he learns that there are two peaches and a glass ashtray on Ardalion's still-life picture.

> Just above it was one of Ardalion's still-life pictures: a tobacco pipe, on green cloth, and two roses.
> 'How on earth did you – ?' I asked with a laugh. She did not understand at first, and then answered:
> 'My niece painted it – my niece who died recently.'
> Well, I'm damned! (thought I). For had I not seen something very similar if not identical, among Ardalion's pictures? Well, I'm damned. (*D* 65)

Nabokov manages to keep the suspense alive through the entire novel by making his readers hesitant whether to trust Hermann (a solipsistic madman and a self-styled liar) or have misgivings of all the particulars he records in the novel. The art of deception derives not only from the odd fact that besides Hermann nobody else in the novel is conscious of their "absolute sameness" (*D* 21) but is also reinforced by the narrator's true confession of one of "my essential traits: my light-hearted inspired lying" (*D* 14). In fact, lying comprises a large part of Hermann's narration. At one point, he asserts that "speaking of literature, there is not a thing about it that I do not know" (*D* 47). He then goes on to add that "when rendering 'in my own words' the plot of *Othello* (which was, mind you, perfectly familiar to me) I made the Moor sceptical and Desdemona unfaithful" (*D* 47). It is his admission of lying "ecstatically" (*D* 47) that further raises the reader's doubts as to the alleged identicalness between Hermann and Felix, and is only dissolved in the penultimate chapter when Hermann begins to ponder on the pedantically planned details of his perfect murder, which eventually goes awry:

> Not only taking for granted, with strange prejudication, that the dead man could not be I; not only failing to observe our resemblance, but, as it were, *a priori*, excluding its possibility (for people do not see what they are loath to see), the police gave a brilliant example of logic when they expressed their surprise at my having hoped to deceive the world simply by dressing up in my clothes an individual who was not in the least like me. (*D* 159)

"Significantly, the subjective nature of Hermann's perception is stated at the outset. In Hermann's words, Felix 'appeared to *my eyes* as my double, that is as a creature bodily identical with me. It was this absolute sameness which gave me so piercing a thrill.' Hermann's fascination

with 'sameness' may have contributed to the delusion itself" (Pifer 98, italics added). His mental confusion is also disclosed in the style of his opening paragraph and throughout his whole narration. He takes pride in the "grace" and "vividness" of his narrative style while trying hard to devise a suitable beginning for his story. In the absence of an "ordinary" beginning, Hermann uses rump sentences, an incomplete conditional clause, expletives, such as "et cetera" and "more or less," and various colloquial ploys to set his readers on the narrative track. The reader's doubts about Hermann's sincerity are further raised when the narrator states that the "real author is not I, but my impatient memory" (*D* 41). *Despair* is not only the story of a mentally confused man but also of a narrator, who reconstructs the events of the past year by relying entirely on his memory, which has "its own whims and rules" (*D* 52). Hermann's apostrophizing of the reader and his hesitant tone as to how to proceed with the story can be partly attributed to his mental condition and partly to his dogged dependence on memory. Nabokov's "mouthpiece is Hermann, who as a neophyte author keeps interrupting the narrative to insist that he is inventing nothing" (Foster 92).[12]

In the foreword of the novel, Nabokov explains that both Hermann and Humbert are to be taken as "neurotic scoundrels" (*D* 11), thus one should at least have reservations about their veracity. All the more so because Hermann's introductory paragraph in Chapter One significantly challenges the narrator's mental competence. His assertion that "the breaker of the law which makes such a fuss over a little spilled blood" (*D* 13) can only come from the mouth of a dangerous, neurotic murderer. One's suspicion only gains justification in the end when Hermann shoots Felix for whatever his real motive is.

Comparing *Despair*'s Hermann to *Lolita*'s Humbert on any other grounds than their neuroses and the brutal acts they commit is an obvious fallacy, and yet many readers are prone to detect more similarities between the two characters than what in reality exists. Of course, certain correspondences (for example, they both are artists-manqué with an erudite and eloquent writing style, and would like to dispose of their opponents – Humbert of Quilty and Hermann of Ardalion) establish a silent link between them, but as for their technical function of their characters in the respective novels, it is only their fixations – although entirely different in nature – and the homicidal acts they perpetrate that more or less keep them on an equal footing. Nabokov tries to spare his interpreters any misguided efforts to uncover any other kinship

[12] John Burt Foster's essay "From Personal to the Intertextual: Dostoevsky and the Two-Tiered Mnemonic System in *Despair*" emphasizes Nabokov's concern with memory. He asserts that *Despair* is "Nabokov's first deployment of a two-tiered mnemonic system, in which a character's recollections of a personal past coexist with intertextual reminiscences directed at the reader" (91).

between the two characters: "Hermann and Humbert are alike only in the sense that two dragons painted by the same artist at different periods of his life resemble each other. Both are neurotic scoundrels, yet there is a green lane in Paradise where Humbert is permitted to wander at dusk once a year; but Hell shall never parole Hermann" (*D* 11).

An essential difference lies in the fact that Hermann's mental condition prevents him from being able to distinguish between reality and fantasy. Humbert, on the other hand, does not own up to be a dangerous madman and a murderer, and, by never losing his sense of reality, succeeds in living up to the expectations of his credulous readers. He tries to "present nympholepsy in the best possible light" (Proffer 57) and, unlike Hermann, never really betrays his mental confusion. However, Hermann cries out in despair in the last chapter (and this is the "sonorous howl" Nabokov starts out with in the foreword): "What on earth have I done?" (*D* 175). Now that the Hermann-Humbert liaison has proved unfeasible, it would be more pertinent to claim that

> [t]he more relevant comparison is with Charles Kinbote because for all his depravity Humbert always manages to retain his hold on the outside world but both Hermann and Kinbote are types of that frequent Nabokovian character, the man whose egotism and solipsistic preoccupations with the workings of his own personality have engulfed him to the point where he is no longer capable of perceiving any outside reality at all. Hermann is the most narcissistic of all of Nabokov's characters. (Clancy 62)

Hermann, until the moment of his arrest, resides in his imaginary world, in a cinematic universe[13] where Hermann and Felix are actors (or rather, actor and understudy). "Thank you. I'm coming out now" (*D* 176) says Hermann and he "comes 'out' of his fantasy world to meet death: the cue of his fiction is the end of his life" (Hyde 115).

G. M. Hyde is correct in saying that "coming out" equals Hermann's annihilation, his final departure from the world he had invented and resided in, but the critic's treatment of the subject of death is somewhat cursory and may require some further qualification. In the best part of Nabokov's novels, the characters never really die an ordinary death. To Nabokov's mind, death frequently appears as a sort of transformation, the transcendence of the self. Carl R. Proffer believes that Nabokov "repeatedly refuses to let characters 'die' completely but instead has them shift to some other plane or mode of existence, from which they are able to observe

[13] Cinematic allusions often appear in Nabokov's novels. The fanciful movie-sequence concluding *Despair* bears striking resemblance to the "footage" in *Lolita*, concerning the Western-style description of Humbert and Quilty's tussle at Pavor Manor. Another novel astir with such cinematic allusions is *Laughter in the Dark* (*Camera Obscura* in the Russian original). A particularly illuminating discussion on role of cinema in Nabokov's fiction see Appel, *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*.

and gently bear on the fates of the living" (59). If one agrees with Proffer, one should not see anything tragic in the untimely death of, say, Humbert's childhood love, Annabel Leigh, because she only transcends our perception of average reality. It is outside the confines of the novels that both Annabel and Felix move to a new plane of existence: Annabel continues her otherworldly existence in Lolita,[14] and, as Boyd puts it, "Hermann tries to create a masterpiece within life that will allow him to sneak beyond the boundaries of death, killing 'himself' but living on in another guise. […] *Despair* can be seen as a fantasy about surviving after death and 'transcending' the self" (*RY* 389). Seconds before he is captured by the police Hermann contemplates that "[m]aybe it is all mock existence, an evil dream; and presently I shall wake up somewhere; on a patch of ground near Prague" (*D* 176), where he and Felix met for the first time.[15]

3. Art and doubling

Nabokov's target readers, as he once said in an interview, are "mainly … artists, fellow-artists and follow artists" (*SO* 41). In one way or another, his characters too have artistic blood running through their veins, yet claiming that Hermann, Humbert, Kinbote, Luzhin, or Van Veen are artists in the ordinary sense of the word would make too sweeping a statement. Hermann dubs himself as the consummate artist with the perfectly devised crime as his masterpiece. "Hermann suggests an analogy between the activities of art and crime, as well as putting forward the Freudian hypothesis that artistic expression is frequently a sublimation of the criminal instinct. Humbert in *Lolita* will specifically reject the idea of resemblance between the artistic and criminal acts" (Clancy 64). The question of art is essential to our understanding of Nabokov's notion of the double. Priscilla Meyer and Jeff Hoffman point out in their essay on infinite reflections in *Pale Fire* that:

> Double tales illustrating German Romantic philosophy depict the dilemma of the impossibility of embodying the ideal in the real world; characters go mad attempting to reconcile the irreconcilable […] In Shelling's view, the one place that the ideal could be brought into the real and reconciled with it is art […] The question of literary doubles was crucial to Nabokov's Romantic idealist aesthetic philosophy because it

[14] I will give a thorough treatment to the theme in Chapter Four when discussing the Lolita-Annabel doubling in *Lolita*.
[15] Sisson also asserts that "[n]one of Nabokov's other worlds … is the conventional 'hereafter,' about which he frequently speculates jocularly, but … his other worlds cannot be demonstrated empirically, and Nabokov is always obscure about the nature of the various other worlds, many of which do involve some form of survival of consciousness after death"" (quoted in Shrayer, 54).

> located madness as an aesthetic rather than a psychological phenomenon; Nabokov's vigorous rejection of Freudian theories of personality was a corollary of his view. His failed "artists" […] are often given mock psychological motivations, but their true problem is the unattainability of an ideal (usually misconstrued) in reality. (198)

The question of art occupies a central role in *Despair*. Hermann identifies himself as the true artist by conjuring up a literary childhood when he "composed abstruse verse and elaborate stories … but did not write down those stories neither did [he] talk about them" (*D* 47). No true artist, in fact, would ever fail to notice the difference between written and unwritten work. In Chapter Ten the protagonist compares his "masterpiece" to "a beautiful book … not the least impaired by a misprint or a slip of the pen" (*D* 160). It seems that only Hermann's pretensions to artistry make him appear as the perfect artist whose masterpiece eventually turns out to be just as unfulfilling as the outcome of his crime. Ardalion, "a cheery soul, but a rotten painter" (*D* 36), is the "real" artist of the novel whose creative faculty Hermann harshly dismisses. Of the portrait painted by Ardalion, Hermann remarks: "We had guests that evening, Orlovius among others, and we all stood and gaped; at what? At the ruddy horror of my face. I do not know why he had lent my cheeks that fruity hue; they are really as pale as death" (*D* 55). Hermann's repugnance for Ardalion is two-fold: not only does he subconsciously know about Lydia and his cousin's relationship but he also wants to outshine him as an artist. Field is right in saying that "Hermann is trying to achieve not merely the perfect crime, but rather the pride, deliverance, bliss of artistic triumph".[16] In Boyd's view Hermann's real motive in perpetrating the murder is both to "rid himself and Lydia of the shadow of Ardalion" (*RY* 386) and "to prove himself to her by outperforming Ardalion as an artist" (*RY* 388). Careful readers (and re-readers) of *Despair* can easily discern the parallel between a number of scenes, which also indicate that it is perhaps Ardalion whom Hermann would have liked to destroy and not the poor vagrant, who finally fell victim to his lunatic act. If Hermann resolved to do away with his rival – both because of his artistic qualities and as vengeance for Lydia's seduction – it would prove him more of a rancorous psychopath than an artist. Boyd notes that the parallels include such minute details as "sleep and trumpets, bumpy conversation, object left behind at the murder site" (*RY* 388), all of which are brought into play in the case of either character. Of especial importance is the scene where Hermann is driving to the future crime scene, first in the company of Ardalion and Lydia, then, a hundred pages later, with Felix:

[16] See Works Cited page for URL.

> The jolts made me jump in my seat, beside me Lydia jumped, behind us Ardalion jumped and kept speaking: 'We shall soon (bump) get into the wood (bump) and them (bump-bump) the heather will make it easier." (*D* 40)
> 'I'll manage this car without any trouble (bump). Lord, what a ride I'll take (bump). Never fear (bump-bump) I won't do it any harm!' (*D* 138)

While Hermann sees himself as the consummate artist and his crime as a work of art, in reality it is no more than a pointless display of self-extolment and narcissism, and this is what makes him "the antithesis of the artist" (*RY* 385), whom Nabokov vehemently rejects. Boyd adduces that for Nabokov "art is not an occasion for self-display, but a chance to reach beyond the self, not an indulgent pastime but a moral positive, a means of defining human existence and an intimation of something beyond" (*RY* 384); thus he repudiates Hermann as an artist.

Hermann's obsession with resemblance is somewhat contradictory with his perception of uniqueness. On the one hand, he is obsessed with the ghostly likeness between him and Felix, while, on the other, he is reluctant to notice the uniqueness in anyone or anything else. When Ardalion notes that "[e]very face is unique. […] what the artist perceives is, primarily, the *difference* between things," Hermann dismisses the subject as "going too far" (*D* 43) and says:

> Take for instance the definite types of human faces that exist in the world; say zoological types. There are people with the features of apes; there is also the rat type, the swine type. Then take the resemblance to celebrities – Napoleons among men, Queen Victorias among women. People have told me I reminded them of Amundsen. I have frequently come across noses *à la* Leo Tolstoy. Then, too, there is the type of face that makes you think of some particular picture. Ikon-like faces, madonnas! And what about the kind of resemblance due to some fashion of life or profession? … (*D* 43)

He is adamant about his own uniqueness when trying to coerce Ardalion to answer in the affirmative whether or not "[s]uch faces [as his] occur seldom" (*D* 43). "Hermann insists that he alone counts, he alone has the kind of brilliance needed to devise the perfect crime. And how does the crackpot set out to prove how unique he is? By trying to convince the world that someone else is exactly like him" (*RY* 389). There seems to be no other egress for Hermann than to "transcend" the self and continue to live on with the identity he has come to appropriate from Felix. Fowler discusses that "[i]t is only in art … that transcendence can be achieved. Nabokov's characters … cannot stop trying to find a means out of time – madness, suicide, nympholepsy, art are the expression of that overmastering impulse to escape" (16–17). No other solution is

presented for Hermann than to imprint his own face on Felix's and arrange his exit from the stage so as to abscond with his recently obtained identity.

4. Objective world vs. mirror world

One fictionalizing device that has been overlooked so far in this discussion but is fully exploited in *Despair* and in many other novels by Nabokov is the semiotic potential of the mirror. "As a literal image and overriding metaphor, the mirror is central to the form and content of Nabokov's novels" (Appel 378). The plot of *Despair* is centered on Hermann's headstrong interpretation of his mirror image and, consequently, his erroneous belief that his face resembles Felix's. In "The Semiotic Validity of the Mirror Image in Nabokov's *Despair*" Kanevskaya adduces that the mirror image in Nabokov's novel ought to be read as a text rather than an icon, therefore "Hermann thinks that the mirror image is subject to interpretation" (22). This is what causes the protagonist to develop a limited and warped perception of himself, Felix, and the people around him. In her essay "On Some Semiotic Models in Nabokov's Fiction" Grishankova provides an in-depth analysis of the role of mirrors, mimicry, and the models of polarized vision. "In *Despair*," she claims, "the mirror serves also as a metaphor for mimetic illusion. The mirror is to confirm the perfect identity, but instead betrays a difference".[17] Levin regards the mirror as a model of the dialogue, which contains the semiotic potential for doubleness.

> The dialogue is open for further interpretations as either a model of self-reflection and self-consciousness or that of pure copying and reproduction of one's own appearance. In the first case, the mirror symbolizes the uniqueness of the self, in the second case, on the contrary, means a loss of identity. (quoted in Grishankova[18])

He then goes on to identify the various functions of the mirror in *Despair*: "(1) confusion of the original and the copy, exchange of roles; (2) the original acquires the properties of the copy; (3) merging of the original and the reflection; (4) the reflection as the 'minus-original'; and (5) a distorted image".[19]

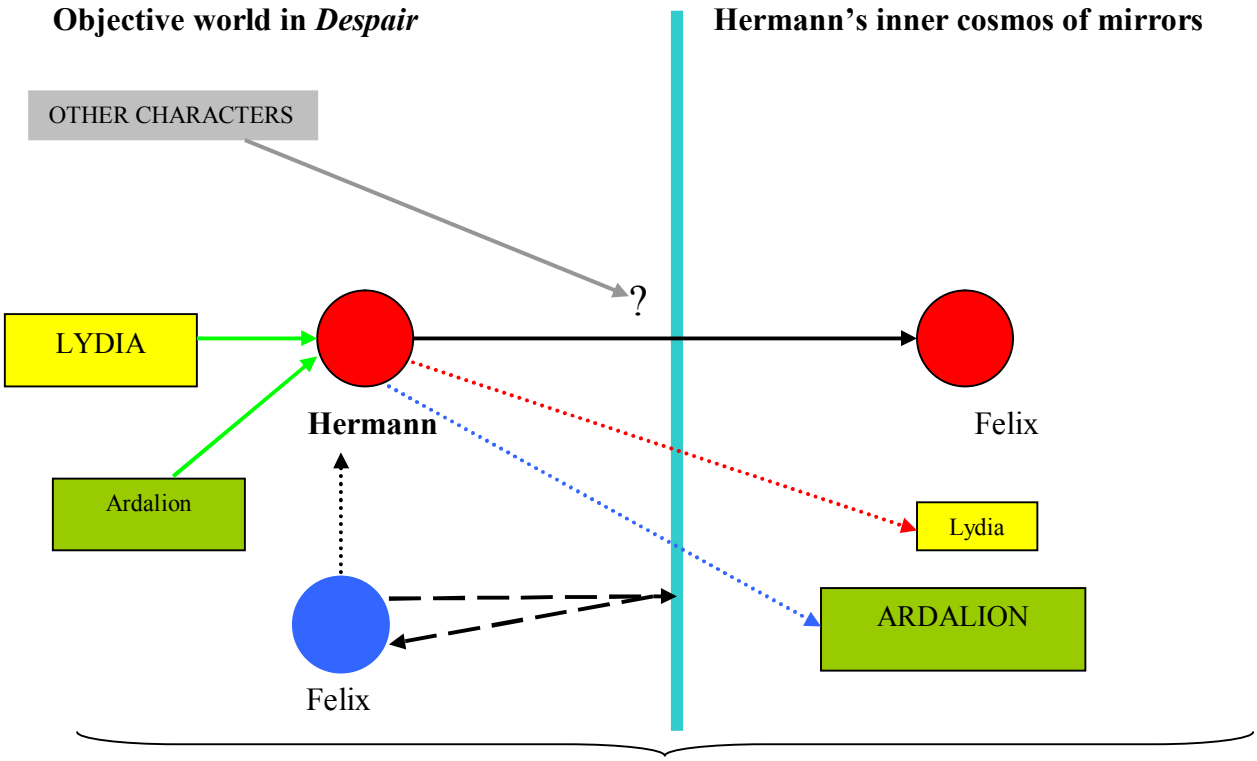
Warren Motte, who has been collecting mirror scenes in literature for over twenty-five years, considers *Despair* to be "the mother of all mirror scenes" (11). The crooked and shattered

[17] See Works Cited page for URL.
[18] See Works Cited page for URL.
[19] See Works Cited page for URL.

mirrors, which Hermann discusses, are used to intensify the theme of "false" resemblances or quasi-doubling. Hermann stamps his face on Felix's, who eventually becomes the occupant of his mirror-world and – in Hermann's perception – is completely bereft of his unique identity. An abominator of mirrors, Hermann says that "the mere mention of it has just given me a nasty shock, broken the flow of my story" (*D* 27). Appel convincingly claims that "Nabokov has placed these crooked reflections everywhere in his fiction," which are responsible for generating "Doubles and mock-Doubles, parodies and self-parodies […], works within works, worlds refracting worlds …" (378).[20] In *Despair*, Felix acts as the unclean, distorting mirror, responsible for the protagonist's optical illusion in seeing his exact replica when looking into it; Lydia, the passive and simple-minded wife, "acts as an enlarging mirror for [Hermann's] own pride" (*RY* 385); and, Ardalion appears as a diminishing mirror for Hermann's artistic faculty – whenever he gazes in it, the speculum reflects the image of an artist inferior to Ardalion, his rival (both in art and in his marriage). The other characters in the novel (including Lydia and Ardalion too) do not discern any resemblance at all between the alleged look-alikes. When Felix looks into the pocket mirror Hermann produces in Chapter One, he nonchalantly shrugs his shoulder ("'A rich man never quite resembles a poor one, but I dare say you know better'" [*D* 20]) and does not see the ghost of a likeness. It is only Hermann in his invented *inner* cosmos of mirrors, who perceives the other characters through a lens, which causes him to see the world as a projection of himself. Kanevskaya points out that "[i]n several studies, Hermann's eyes have been compared to a mirror's inverted surface, which does not allow light or impressions from the outside – to penetrate; it merely reflects the character's inner world" (25).

The drawing that follows sets out to illustrate how mirroring (and doubling) is at work in *Despair*. It also aims to recapitulate what we have seen so far in terms of false character duplication and the projections of the self:

[20] In Appel's view *Pale Fire* should be observed spatially with "John Shade's poem on the 'left' and Charles Kinbote's Commentary on the 'right' … and the Commentary becomes the world seen through the distorting prism of a mind – a monstrous concave mirror held up to an objective 'reality'" (378). Andrew Field illustrates this relationship with a drawing – similar to mine on the next page – in his major work, *Nabokov, His Life in Art*.



Hermann's vision of Felix ("false" resemblance, distortion)

Felix's vision of Hermann (no distortion, no resemblance)

Hermann's vision of Lydia (enlarging mirror)

Hermann's vision of Ardalion (diminishing mirror)

Felix's vision of himself (self-reflection, no distortion)

Lydia and Ardalion's vision of Hermann (no distortion)

Other characters' vision of the Hermann-Felix doubling (no resemblance discovered)

5. Summing up

The foregoing discussion has fittingly demonstrated that the false or inexact concordances within *Despair* stretch beyond the simple notion of human duplication. So far I have claimed that the main reason for false resemblances (or quasi-doubling) is the protagonist's dementia, his obsession with mirrors and duplication, as well as his aspiration to achieve immortality and artistic triumph by doing away with Felix. However, the most essential of all reasons is Nabokov's control over his novel and every one of its components. It is widely argued that Nabokov's characters are devoid of any autonomy and guided by an omnipotent author, who would never let his creations slip through his fingers to take on an independent life of their own.[21] If Felix is an understudy to Hermann, then Hermann is but an understudy to Nabokov. Hermann's "only true literary status derives from his function as the narrating persona of *Despair*, the 'substitute' author of the novel" (Pifer 102). He is allowed to enjoy a certain amount of freedom as the narrator of his tale until Chapter Eleven when the author unexpectedly withdraws his *carte blanche* and does away with the mirror-like symmetry of Hermann's creation.[22] In the opening paragraph of Chapter Six, when Hermann dismisses the existence of God, and, by extension, that of a superior force too, he is implicitly launching an assault on the supremacy of the author over his creation: "All this divine business is, I presume, a huge hoax for which priests are certainly not to blame; priests themselves are its victims. […] I cannot, nor wish to, believe in god: the fairy tale about him is not really mine, it belongs to strangers, to all men" (*D* 90). Hermann's rejection of the omnipotent author is really what causes his fall and shatters the symmetry of his tale, because he "has forgotten that he himself is a creature in somebody else's creation, and that above his word and world there exist another word and world: that of his author" (Davydov 166). However meticulously prearranged Hermann's scheme appears to be at

[21] Nabokov's fictional characters lack the psychological and moral qualities one has come to experience in the novel's great tradition. In earlier fiction the creator's hand was not always visible in the process of the creation, yet Henry Fielding boldly assumed the role of the Nabokovian *auctor ex machina*: *The Author's Farce* (1730) is a play-within-a-play "puppet show," where the actors are playing puppets. However, John Fowles, the twentieth-century existentialist, developed a philosophy according to which the universe has been abandoned by a deity (*deus absconditus*, or disappearing god), who had left humankind to overcome its own problems without the intervention of a superior force. In keeping aloof from Fowles' philosophy, Nabokov always intrudes upon the characters of his literary universe; the centrality of an *auctor ex machina* is present in all of Nabokov's fiction to a great degree. In one of his "strong opinions," Nabokov even claimed that "[his] characters are galley slaves," and he is a master to them all.

[22] See Davydov's essay, "*Despair*," on structural doubling in the novel, in which the two halves of the novel (from Chapters One to Five and from Six to Ten) reflect one another (scenes, events, and objects are "repeated" in the corresponding chapters, i.e., II–IX, IV–VII, etc.). Some correspondences have been schematized in a table in my M.A. thesis to illustrate the "text's symmetrical topography" (Davydov 165), or rather, mirror-like structure, which is finally dismembered by the auctorial hand (as the result of the insertion of an additional, eleventh chapter), bringing about asymmetry, and thus enhancing the effect of the author's perennial theme of false and inexact duplication.

first sight, he is ensnared and controlled by a god-like author, who alone is invested with the power to plan the fates and the course of action of his novel.

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