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I. Introduction

Daniel Paul Schreber, the paranoid-schizophrenic author of *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (first published in 1903), writes in that work: “*everything that happens is in reference to me*” (Schreber 233; author’s italics). This almost shockingly brash, matter-of-fact statement¹ can be said to reflect upon the attitude of many of Russian-American author Vladimir Nabokov’s mentally unstable, egocentric narrators, for whom the world entire seems to revolve around one point only: themselves. This is by no means where the similarities between the real-life schizophrenic Schreber and Nabokov’s fictional narrators end, however; it is, rather, where they begin.

In this essay, I will look at three of Nabokov’s narrators: Gospodin Smurov of *The Eye* (Russian: *Soglyadatay*), Hermann Karlovich of *Despair* (Russian: *Otchayanie*), and Charles Kinbote/V. Botkin of *Pale Fire*, and show how each of them in turn exhibits signs of schizophrenia, specifically in the following categories: 1. solipsism, and 2. dissociation/doubling. To aid in my task, I will be noting parallels between passages from Schreber’s *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* and Nabokov’s novels; additionally, I shall be referring to

1 The statement is in reference to Schreber’s relationship with God, as well as God’s relationship with other human beings (Schreber insists that God does not understand humans “as an organism”). He states that: “Since God entered into nerve-contact with me exclusively, I became in a way for God the only human being, or simply the human being around whom everything turns, to whom everything that happens must be related and who therefore, from his own point of view, must also relate all things to himself.” See *Memoirs*, p. 233.

sections of Louis A. Sass's *Modernism and Madness* and F. González-Crussi's *On Seeing: Things Seen, Unseen, and Obscene* for further insights into the schizoid personality and the phenomenon of doubling.

II. The Artist as "Madperson"

Daniel Paul Schreber (1842-1911) wrote the body of his *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* between February and September of 1900, during his nine-year stay at Sonnenstein public asylum in Germany, and the lengthy postscripts to the text from October of 1900 to the end of 1902 (Schreber 3). According to Rosemary Dinnage's introduction to *Memoirs*, Schreber had three major mental breakdowns: the first came when he was 42 years old, the second when he was 51, and the third and final mental collapse occurred after his wife fell ill and lasted until 1911, when he died, alone, in an asylum (Schreber xiii). The image of Schreber composing his memoirs in his empty cell, with nothing to focus on save himself and his "inner world," vividly recalls to mind Cincinnatus C.'s scribbling down of his quasi-philosophical musings on life and death in his cell—populated by a ghostly cast of characters that are eerily reminiscent of Schreber's *flüchtige hingemacht*, or "fleeting-improvised," people—in *Invitation to a Beheading* (Russian: *Priglasenie na kazn'*). But let us forget poor Cincinnatus for the time being and turn to the problem of madness and art in more general terms.

The idea that writers and artists tend to be in some way "mad," or somehow closer to madness than the rest of us, is almost a tired cliché. In the 1950s the persistent image of the artist as madperson was still so prevalent that critic Lionel Trilling wrote an essay on the subject² in which he claimed that

2 Trilling, Lionel. "Art and Neurosis." In *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and*

everyone is in some way “ill” and that the “artist” is rather one who is recognized as having the “power to shape the material of pain we all have” (Trilling 170). But, even if Trilling was correct, it is nearly impossible to ignore the fact that so many of the great artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were, if not “insane,” then at least in some way highly neurotic: We know, for instance, that Gerard de Nerval had visual hallucinations, that Vincent Van Gogh lopped off his own ear and sent it to his lover, that Virginia Woolf heard voices before she drowned herself by filling her overcoat pockets with stones, and so on. One could easily fill an entire book with the names and special psychological problems of writers and artists if one tried, whether or not the “myths” about them are true.

Schreber himself seemed to have some opinion on this matter, for he claims that artists may be “inspired” much in the way that he had been inspired through “nerve-contact.”³ He writes, for instance, in a footnote, that: “One finds...almost prophetic visions in our poets which confirms my belief that they had received divine inspiration by way of nerve-contact (especially in dreams)” (Schreber 28). Further, Schreber makes frequent allusion to artists throughout his memoirs: Wagner, Byron, Goethe,⁴ Shakespeare, Schiller and

Society. NY: Doubleday, 1957. That the idea that artists are mentally ill still has a hold on our collective psyches can be seen in a *New York Times* health blog article on the work of the schizophrenic artist Martin Ramirez, in which a 2007 study conducted by Stanford University is cited. The study, published in *The Journal of Affective Disorders*, found that “graduate students in creative disciplines shared more personality traits with the bipolar patients than with their healthy but less creative peers.” See: Parker-Pope, Tara. “Art and Mental Illness.” *New York Times Blog*. The New York Times. 11 December, 2008. Web. 13 January, 2008.

3 The “nerves of intellect,” that is, which “receive and retain mental impressions” as well as messages from “the rays,” or the nerves of God. See Schreber 20.

4 Schreber notably writes that “the soul of a Goethe, a Bismarck, etc., is likely to have retained its self-consciousness (knowledge of its own identity) for centuries, while the soul of a child which died young, might only have preserved it for the same number of years it had lived.” See Schreber 29.

others are variously invoked. He reproduces a poem brought to him one day by his wife—who, it is worth mentioning here, he believed at that time to be a “fleeting-improvised” person that would “dissolve” after leaving the asylum, much as a few of the characters in Nabokov’s novels and short stories do, in fact, dissolve⁵—and at one point even claims that men may sometimes be contacted by divine rays (i.e. the “nerves of God”) for “only a short time, perhaps...to stimulate poetic imagination” (Schreber 136). Taking some of Vladimir Nabokov’s primary concerns in his fiction into account (i.e. the writer/artist’s role in creating his reality, God and the afterlife), is it any surprise that he endowed so many of his artist-protagonists with some form of mental illness, no less something so strongly resembling the schizoid or schizophrenic condition?

III. The Solipsistic Universe

Louis A. Sass, in his study *Modernism and Madness*, describes the “schizoid” personality, in part, as follows:

Often they [i.e. the schizoid person] will seem detached[...]and others are liable to sense something not entirely genuine in their behavior and emotional expression. In fact, many schizoids convey an “as-if” quality, giving the impression that they are only role-playing—perhaps to caricature themselves, to mock those around them, or simply to give an appearance of seamless normality. But beneath an apparent coldness, these people can be excessively sensitive, thin-skinned, and self-deprecatory, highly vulnerable to slights and criticism. Sometimes they will seem docile, submissive, and awkward, at other times arrogant, superi-

5 Such as the jailers at the end of *Invitation to a Beheading*, as previously mentioned.

or, or rebellious. They have, in any case, an aloof, vaguely mysterious air, suggestive of a realm of experience hidden away from others. Though they may seem circumspect and inordinately controlled, perhaps overly formal or mannered, this can be interrupted by occasional bouts of impulsive or pseudo-impulsive extroversion that smacks of overcompensation... (Sass 77-8)

The protagonist of Nabokov's fourth novel (a novella), *The Eye*, Gopodin Smurov, by all indicators a spy and poet,⁶ exhibits personality traits that conform to many aspects of the above description. One thing that marks Smurov—who is at one and the same time the “unnamed” narrator of the tale and a character, namely “Smurov,” within the narrator's narrative (I will return to this theme in the section on “Dissociation and Doubling”)—as a schizoid-type personality is not so much his temper,⁷ or his propensity for lying,⁸ though these personality traits are certainly relevant, but his utter self-absorption and seemingly complete lack of caring about others.

When Evgenia, the nearly identical sister of Varvara, or Vanya, the woman Smurov most desires, is asked by the “narrator” about Smurov, she cites his essential traits as shyness, sensitivity, and lack of experience with

6 After the maid, Gretchen or Hilda—Smurov cannot remember, despite having had an affair with her, one of many such proofs of his solipsism in the short novel—leaves the household at 5 Peacock street, Evgenia (sister of Vanya; see following paragraph) learns that she had been seeing “a foreign poet,” which the reader may assume to be Smurov, a Russian spy living in Germany. Other hints that Smurov is a spy come in the sections on Weinstein's dabbling in the occult, where the voices evoked during his séances all point to Smurov. See *Eye* pp. 42-3, 52-3, 73-4.

7 For instance, when the narrator discovers a photograph in Vanya's room from which “Smurov” has been excised with a pair of scissors, he punches Vanya's pillow, leaving “the violent imprint of my fist” there. See *Eye* 58-9.

8 A defining trait he shares with both Hermann K. and Charles Kinbote, whom I will discuss later.

people (Eye 55-6). Smurov, as his actions in the novella betray, is neither shy nor sensitive, but rather insecure and uncaring about—even downright rude to, frequently—everyone else, and while he may have some experience with people, he is certainly not “good” with them. Another example of the narrator’s obsession with learning others’ opinions of him (which also suggests how “highly vulnerable to slights and criticism,” as in Sass’s description of the schizoid, he is; see, also, footnote 6, above), is the scene in which he intercepts Roman Bogdanovich’s letter solely to find information about Smurov—which he does, only to discover that Bogdanovich thinks him a kleptomaniac and a homosexual (the latter for reasons that are later revealed to be less-than-genuine). So uninterested is he in anything not having to do with himself that he skips past the rest of the contents of the letter, so that we, too, never get to see it (cf. Eye 82-6).

It might be said that Smurov/the narrator is so wrapped up in himself that he cannot “see the forest for the trees”; the only person “the narrator” describes with a sense of kindness, though we don’t readily believe him, is Smurov, and he does his best to deceive the reader into thinking for a time that this “Smurov,” a spy (rhymes with “eye”), is in fact a separate character, though it becomes increasingly apparent as the narrative progresses that he is one and the same person, the narrator’s “double.” For instance, when he comes to 5 Peacock Street and encounters the Russian family that now lives above him, he describes Evgenia as having a “squarish face” like that of a “quite handsome bulldog” (despite the fact that she is said to greatly resemble his “love,” Vanya, in whose case this same aspect, he claims, lends her beauty “significance and originality”); Evgenia’s husband is “burly” and cannot pronounce German properly, and so forth (Eye 29).

The narrator's outward attitude toward himself (i.e. Smurov) runs hot and cold; it veers between grossly exaggerated confidence and self-deprecating hatred. The first time we see Smurov as a separate character in the text he is described as "well proportioned and dapper," his manners "excellent," his comments "intelligent and appropriate," yet at an earlier moment in the novella, i.e. before the narrator has "split" into self/Smurov (after his supposed suicide, which takes place on page 20 in the Vintage edition), he describes his own reflection in the mirror as conveying a "wretched, shivering, vulgar little man" (Eye 33, 17). Later, when Smurov is exposed as a liar for having made up a story about being shot by a soldier in Yalta in order to impress Vanya (who appears indifferent, in any case, despite the narrator's ejaculations claiming that she must certainly fall for our "superior" Smurov!), the narrator's description of Smurov grows considerably more humble than the first: "[H]is black suit was shabby and stained, his cheap tie [...] tonight exhibited that pitiful tear, and a pimple glowed unpleasantly [...] on his chin" (Eye 51). Here Smurov is seen in his deflated incarnation; he loses his composure and speaks to Mukhin (who has exposed his lie) in a weak, hoarse voice, begging him not to tell Vanya.

This reminds us of the fact that the schizoid-type personality will sometimes "seem docile, submissive, and awkward, at other times arrogant, superior, or rebellious." Much as Schreber sees himself in his *Memoirs* as both a superior human specimen, because of his high level of education (more on this in my discussion of Hermann, below) and his special access to insider knowledge from God Himself, and at the same time a sad, estranged individual who has lost both family or job, living out his days in an asylum,⁹ here the narrator

9 In his postscript entitled "Considerations About the Future: Miscellaneous," Schreber writes that he hopes "the knowledge I have gained [i.e. through 'continuous contact with

paints himself in different colors according to his mood/the circumstances. He is at once superior and inferior, both “dapper” and “vulgar.” And yet, through it all, though he watches the world like “a big, slightly vitreous, somewhat bloodshot, unblinking eye” (Eye 103), he is foremost “happy that I can gaze at myself, for any man is absorbing—yes, really absorbing!” (Eye 104) Or so he would have us believe, though if we read between the lines we can plainly detect his wretchedness.

Another of Nabokov’s characters to exhibit signs of great solipsism, superiority, and indeed full-blown schizophrenic madness, is Hermann Karlovich in Nabokov’s parody of the detective novel (and of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*¹⁰), *Despair*. Hermann is a writer, or at least an aspiring one, and not-so-subtle hints about his insanity—as we will also see in the case of Charles Kinbote in *Pale Fire*—are strewn throughout the novel, things that immediately bring to mind the schizoid patient: illusions of grandeur, hallucinations, a strong conviction of one’s own rightness and sanity despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, and, as Sass suggests of some schizoids, the feigning of the feigning of symptoms.¹¹ The similari-

divine rays’] will spread fruitfully far and wide, and that in this way it will be granted me to help mankind to correct views about the relationship between God and the world, and the revelation of religious truths and salvation, even long after my death.” And in the very next paragraph he states that he also harbors “the wish that when my last hour finally strikes I will no longer find myself in an Asylum, but in orderly domestic life surrounded by near relatives, as I may need more loving care than I could get in an Asylum.” See Schreber 292.

10 There are various references both to Dostoevsky, and to *Crime and Punishment* in particular, throughout the novel. For instance, Hermann asks “But what are they—Doyle, Dostoevsky, Leblanc, Wallace—what are all the great novelists who wrote of nimble criminals ...in comparison to me? Blundering fools!” Later, he compares his “double,” Felix, to a “murderer and a mystic,” which might describe Raskolnikov and Dostoevsky, respectively. Hermann also refers to “Dusty’s great book, *Crime and Slime*,” and when trying to come up with a title for the book he’s writing suggests “Crime and Pun” (also, “The Double”). These are just a few of the references that may be found by the perceptive reader. See *Despair* 132, 151, 187, 211.

11 Sass writes that some patients may “*feign the feigning* of symptoms, as a way of pre-

ties between Hermann's sickness and that of the schizophrenic personality in the popular mind were apparently so strong that in 1966 it led *Time Magazine* to assign *Despair* the following ratings in its review: "As a general novel by Nabokov: so-so. As crime literature: better than average. As the study of a schizophrenic mind: completely valid, fascinating, and successful."¹² Let us now turn our attention to Hermann's solipsism.

As with his predecessor Smurov, Hermann is temperamental and a compulsive liar: One of his "essential traits," he brags, is his "light-hearted, inspired lying" (*Despair* 4), and while belittling his lover, Lydia ("She is little educated and little observant"; *Despair* 23), as he belittles pretty much everyone else in the novel he is writing—the novel we are reading—to make himself feel superior, he notes that he "told her such a heap of lies about myself, my past, my adventures, that it would have been beyond my powers to hold it all in my head" (*Despair* 26). He is also obsessive-compulsive, stating matter-of-factly that he has read "exactly one thousand and eighteen books...kept count of them" (i.e. between 1914 and 1918; *Despair* 4), and complaining that Lydia would often allow some of her belongings to "dribble in to the cosmos of my beautifully arranged things" (*Despair* 25). As for his temper and violent urges—Hermann is a more violent character than either Smurov or Kinbote, at least toward others—he tells us, and here is where we understand him *to be lying*, that he wrote elaborate stories when he was young, although, despite what he wrote in them, he "never buried cats alive" or "twisted the arms of playmates weaker than myself" (*Despair* 45). In vari-

tending (to themselves as well as to others) that they are really much more sane or in control than is truly the case." This seems a wonderful description of Shakespeare's Hamlet, and is equally applicable to our *Despair*'s Hermann. See Sass 111-12.

12 "Face Value." *Time Magazine Online*. Time Magazine. 20 May, 1966. Web. 14 Jan, 2008.

ous sections of the novel he alternately slaps himself in the face with his own glove, clenches his teeth, throws fits (one example is given below), and in the penultimate scene in Chapter Nine he will remorselessly shoot his “double,” Felix, in the name of his warped brand of “art.”

Schreber, in his memoirs, will admit to violence in the asylum, simultaneously flaunting, via his erudite language, his superiority to his fellow uneducated madmen. In Chapter 22, subtitled “Egocentricity of the rays,” he writes: “Because the patients consist mostly of madmen of low education and rough humor, vulgar words are usually uttered...” And, a bit further down,

when the lunatics come too close to me or continue their insulting behavior without paying any regard to the contempt I show them by my silence, nothing remains for me but to answer back in the same manner, if I want to avoid showing myself up as a coward. But as on such occasions one word often leads to another, it used to end in actual scenes of violence in which, incidentally, I always had the satisfaction of knocking my attacker to the ground—despite violent miracles being simultaneously enacted against my knee-cap to make fighting impossible for me. (Schreber 236)

Whereas Smurov tries to flee from his attacker, his first mistress Matilda’s stronger husband Kashmarin, and then refuses Kashmarin’s gracious apology at the end of the novella (now being in a position of social “superiority” to the latter), Hermann reveals his violent nature to others more readily, perhaps because he cannot help it (though he tries to cover

this up as well as possible, to “feign the feigning of symptoms”¹³). Take, for instance, the scene at the table of a “second rate hotel” in France, where he is hiding out after killing Felix. After a doctor there talks to him about the murder in Germany as reported in the papers, describing the murderer as a “monster,” and Hermann realizes with anger that he may have made some sort of a blunder, he writes: “I do not know what came over me, but suddenly I lifted my hand and said: ‘Look here, stop,’ and, bringing it down, with my clenched fist I gave the table a bang...” (Despair 184). This propensity for childish outbursts, always when things aren’t going his way, reflects back on his self-centered universe, where nothing and nobody matters but himself and his plans for the perfect murder. Is it any wonder that Ardalion—Lydia’s cousin, whom the ever-superior Hermann describes as “a cheery soul, but a rotten painter” (Despair 32)—refers to Hermann as a “wild boar” who has used “for your mean ends the innocence of a credulous young woman” after he discovers how Hermann had implicated his unsuspecting, admittedly doltish wife Lydia in his crime? (Despair 216).

To drive the point home about Hermann’s solipsism, though there are many other examples I might cite as well, had I unlimited space, I must point out a most ridiculous (and therefore hilarious) section in which Hermann describes, for his readers, a map of the city of Berlin in the following fashion:

Let us suppose I am holding that map before me; then the city of Berlin, which is outside the picture, may be imagined somewhere in the *vicinity of my left elbow*. On the map itself, in its southwestern corner, there stretches northward, like a black and

13 Cf. “I am not getting in the least excited; my self-control is perfect.” Despair 29.

white bit of scaled tape, the railway line, which, metaphysically at least, *runs along my sleeve cuffward* from Berlin. *My wristwatch* is the small town of Koenigsdorf, beyond which the black and white ribbon turns and proceeds eastward, where there is another circle (*the lower button of my waistcoat*): Eichenberg. (Despair 52; emphasis mine)

The absurdly blatant disregard for the reader so gleefully displayed in this sequence need not be pointed out here. We know, from this passage, that Nabokov is telling us something about his Hermann, and that is that *nothing exists for him outside of himself* (recall Schreber's "everything that happens is in reference to me," quoted at the beginning of this essay). Hermann, then, would seem to fit what August Strindberg (as quoted by Sass)—who himself suffered from schizophrenia—once said of those who seek out loneliness; i.e. that they do so in order to "spin themselves into the silk of their own souls" (Sass 78; Kretchmer 152, 157).

If ever there was a Nabokov character who "spun himself into his own soul," dragging a defenseless, deceased poet along with him for good measure, that would be (King) Charles "Xavier" Kinbote, alias Professor V. Bodkin, in Nabokov's extraordinary English-language "American" novel *Pale Fire*. Here we have an example of solipsism taken to its most extravagant extremes: rather than presenting the text of the poem "Pale Fire," written by John Shade, the well-respected, recently-murdered American poet and professor from Wordsmith College, with proper commentary, Kinbote interjects his bombastic self and his schizoid fantasy-world into practically every comment to the text. "[F]or better or worse," Kinbote writes at the end of his introduction, which precedes the text of the poem, "it is the commentator who has the

last word.” (Fire 29)

So then, just what kind of commentator *is* this Charles Kinbote, as he signs his name here? If we are to believe the “certain ferocious lady” described in the introduction (and we should, for we will find plenty of further evidence of this later), he is “‘A remarkably disagreeable person.’” “‘What’s more,’” she later adds, “‘you are insane’” (Fire 25). Imagining himself the king of an imaginary, fairy-tale land called Zembla, Kinbote unreasonably expects, again and again, the poet Shade to adopt his (Kinbote’s) “Zemblan” theme for his (Shade’s) poem “Pale Fire,” the title of which Kinbote had hoped would instead be “Solus Rex,” a chess term that includes the word for “king” (Fire 296). What he exudes more than anything in the commentary to line 1000, which Kinbote claims is the missing final line,¹⁴ after Shade is brutally murdered by a man—Jack Grey, who in Kinbote’s fantasy narrative becomes Jakob Gradus—that mistakes him for someone else—the Judge, Hugh Warren Goldsworth, whom Shade resembles—is a sense of smug incredulity:

We know how firmly, how stupidly I believed that Shade was composing a poem, a kind of *romaunt*, about the King of Zembla. We have been prepared for the horrible disappointment in store for me. Oh, I did not expect him to devote himself *completely* to that theme! It might have been blended of

¹⁴ Though as readers we may choose not to believe Kinbote, who insists that line 1000 “would have been identical to line 1 and would have completed the symmetry of the structure” (Fire 15). In the Introduction, Kinbote also writes, begrudgingly, that a Prof. Hurlley, whom he despises like everyone else that doesn’t agree with him, has written that what remains of the poem may quite possibly be “only a small fraction of the composition” (Fire 14).

course with some of his own life stuff and sundry Americana—but I was sure his poem would contain the wonderful incidents I had described to him, the characters I had made alive for him and all the unique *atmosphere* of my kingdom. (Fire 296)

Note the arrogant tone when Kinbote suggests that the poet may have included “some of his own life stuff and sundry Americana,” and the self-righteous conviction that the story and even the ambience of his “kingdom” is more worthy of the poet’s (and, by extension, *our*) attention than what turns out to be an “autobiographical, eminently Appalacian, rather old-fashioned narrative” lacking in “that special rich streak of magical madness” (Fire 296). In Kinbote’s commentary to lines 47-48, we get some sense of what a nag the solipsistic, persistent loner Kinbote must have been for both Shade’s wife Sybil and for Shade himself, who is generally very gracious toward his pushy neighbor despite being a private person. When Kinbote spots Sybil—whom he refers to with a great deal of animosity in the Introduction and throughout the commentary for persistently keeping him away from her husband and his work—he accosts her and finds that her husband is working on a new poem. When he asks her why he (Shade) hasn’t shown him any of it, she looks at him with surprise and says that her husband does not show anything unfinished to anyone. As Shade himself denies him a look at the text, Kinbote assumes that it is because of Sybil’s influence, and, determining that he must “find out what he was doing with all the live, glamorous, palpitating, shimmering material I had lavished upon him,” decides to spy on the private couple through the window (Fire 87). It becomes obvious to us that his believing that Shade is writing *his* poem is itself a form of his delusional madness, and his blaming Shade’s wife a defense-mechanism against his eventual disap-

pointment.¹⁵

IV. Disassociation and Doubling

The theme of doubling, which Nabokov frequently employs in his work, is one that is common to a particular genre of literature, what might be called the “literature of madness.” Stories of doubling, of characters and their doppelgangers, can be found in much Modernist and Post-Modernist fiction from around the world, from Kobo Abe’s novella *The Crime of S. Karma* (Japanese: *S. Karuma-shi no hanzai*) to Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Repetition* (French: *La Reprise*) to José Saramago’s *The Double* (Portuguese: *O Homem Duplicado*)¹⁶ to the recently published *Atmospheric Disturbances* by Rivka Galchen. When a double is invoked in a European or an American novel or short story, such as in Poe’s “William Wilson,” the reader can be sure that it is due to a dissociative split in the protagonist’s mind, an indicator of classic schizophrenia, a syndrome that has come in psychology to be referred to as “the Golyadkin phenomenon,” after the protagonist of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novella *The Double* (González-Crussi 145).¹⁷

In *On Seeing: Things Seen, Unseen, and Obscene*, F. González-Crussi describes a case study of a young man who, at 27 years of age, “began having bi-

15 Later in the same note, he again blames Sybil for the end product, as he is convinced that she made her husband “tone down or remove from his Fair Copy everything connected with the magnificent Zemblan theme with which I kept furnishing him and which, without knowing much about the growing work, I fondly believed would become the main rich thread in its weave!” (Fire 91). Some of his hatred toward Sybil, we also learn later, may have something to do with the fact that he appears to be a misogynist and a homosexual who has molested young boys in his old hometown, alternately “Zembla.”

16 Not to be confused with Dostoevsky’s novella of the same English title (*Dvoynik* in Russian).

17 F. Gonzalez-Crussi quoting Markidis M. “Ego, my double. (The Golyadkin phenomenon).” In *Bibliotheca Psychiatrica*. Vol. 14: 1986, pp. 136-142.

zarre ideas of bodily disintegration” and was given a diagnoses of schizophrenia. After the death of his father, he began seeing his double, describing this experience as “‘not unlike looking and being in the mirror at the same time’” (González-Crussi 146). The description of his experiences continues as follows:

His double accompanied him everywhere. “It” would enter in a room with him, but would sit on a different chair. They traveled by bus together, and commonly shared the same emotions; on occasion, both would have suicidal ideas. The patient could hear himself, i.e. his double, talking. Strikingly, he saw himself, and *felt* himself in two places at the same time [...] All the while he continued having bizarre ideas about his body, which he believed was “coming apart.” He expressed fear that his testicles would fragment or “explode into many pieces,” and a milky fluid would spill into the environment. (González-Crussi 146)

Schreber, in his memoirs, discusses similar dissociative states of consciousness, as well as suicidal thoughts. Early on in his illness, before being institutionalized, he describes having attempted suicide; he writes that he was filled with “endless melancholy,” his “mind occupied almost entirely with thoughts of death” (Schreber 49-50). Schreber at one point felt that the souls of others “dripped down on my head, in a manner of speaking, in their hundreds if not thousands, as ‘little men’” (Schreber 75); he saw two suns in the sky, as if the sun itself had a double (Schreber 76); and he learnt of another former and inferior self: “In this second inferior shape [...] I was told that another Daniel Paul Schreber had existed before me who had been much better endowed intellectually than myself”; further, the souls in “nerve-con-

tact” with him are described as having “a plurality of heads” (Schreber 78). His sexuality is always in question, and changes in his genitals, what he terms “unmanning,” are frequently described, much as in the example of the fear of fragmenting testicles above. And, much as Hermann will describe in *Despair* as an enjoyable pastime of his (more on this below), Schreber had the ability to split into two and watch himself: “I can also ‘picture’ myself in a different place,” he writes, “for instance while playing the piano I see myself at the same time standing in front of a mirror in the adjoining room in female attire” (Schreber 211).

As will be recalled from the discussion of Smurov in the last section, he is in fact depicted as two separate people in the short novel *The Eye*: the narrator, who writes about Smurov with a mixture of pride and disgust, yet is in fact, at one and the same time, that very Smurov; and “Smurov,” who lives at 5 Peacock Street with the Russian family that includes among its members his object of desire, Vanya, her nearly identical sister Evgenia, Roman Bogdanovich, etc. Let us now look at when and how the split occurs. As alluded to in a parenthetical note, Smurov—and this is before we see him as a separate character or are given his family name—decides, after being beaten by his former mistress’s husband, Kashmarin, to commit suicide. The beginning of the scene finds him at a gathering where hints of his (the narrator’s) subsequent doubling are already alluded to in the title of Chekhov’s story he is reading, “The Double-Bass Romance,” and in the appearance of the two boys who show up just before his beating and keep reappearing throughout, though Smurov admits later that “[i]n reality, it seems, they were not present throughout my execution” (Eye 15).¹⁸

¹⁸ To add insult to injury, and as further proof to us that Smurov is himself a bully and a bad sport, he hurts one of them by “[hurling] him away with a blow of the elbow, and I know it hurt” (Eye 16).

The “suicide” appears as much justification for Smurov to believe in the fantasy world he constructs for himself—a way off-the-hook, as it were—as it is a device he uses to deceive his readers with his bit of verbal legerdemain.

“There was a strong jolt,” Smurov says, describing the shot, “and a delightful vibrating sound rang out behind me; that vibration I shall never forget” (Eye 20). After he comes back to life, as it were, he is comforted by the fact that there is now “nothing to worry about,” and he describes the buildings he sees as “spectral”; his neighbors he depicts as “mummies like me” (Eye 21). But the careful reader is not deceived:

I good-naturedly yielded to these *illusions*, exciting them, goading them on, until I had managed to *create* a complete, natural picture, the simple case of a light wound caused by an inaccurate bullet passing clean through the serratus; here a doctor (*whom I had created*) appeared, and hastened to confirm my carefree conjecture. Then, as I was laughingly swearing that I had been clumsily unloading the revolver, my little old lady also appeared, wearing a black straw hat trimmed with cherries. She[...]mentioned a pitcher that had been smashed by the bullet...oh, how cunningly, in what simple, everyday terms *my thought explained the ringing and the gurgling that had accompanied me into non-existence!* (Eye 22; emphasis mine)

What is hardest to parse is whether these illusions are true illusions, or whether Smurov is willfully creating them, willfully deceiving his readers into believing in his death. In either case, Smurov delights in watching himself, and others, as if from the outside and seems to exhibit two distinctive personas. As described in the previous section, the narrator’s depiction of Smur-

ov/himself varies according to his mood, and at one point he even claims that there was “a brief period when I stopped watching Smurov,” which suggests that the two are, in fact, separate beings (Eye 69). There is also the possibility that Smurov is “feigning the feigning of symptoms,” winking his big, vitreous eye at us as if to say, “We both know that I’m sane, and that’s all that matters,” while carrying on in a manner that suggests anything but how a “sane” individual normally acts. “For me, their [other people’s] entire existence has been merely a shimmer on a screen,” Smurov asserts glumly, but on the next page tries to imagine “that Vanya, like all the others, existed only in my imagination, and was a mere mirror” (Eye 90-1). When she finally rejects him, however, he has to resign himself to dreaming of her belongings “on an endless clothesline of bliss,” and to bitter self-denial. Doubling, for Smurov, seems to be a defense mechanism from the pain of rejection, and from the burden of personal responsibility.

Despair’s Hermann, as mentioned earlier, at one point in his married life enjoyed a very strange way of entertaining himself while in bed with his wife, Lydia, sex with her being a pastime he apparently did not care for very much. Here I’ll let him describe the details of his dissociation (and this is term he uses for it, surrounded by quotation marks) in his own words:

[A]ll at once I would become aware that imp Split had taken over. My face was buried in the folds of her neck, her legs had started to clamp me, the ashtray toppled off the bed table, the universe followed—but at the same time, incomprehensibly and delightfully, I was standing naked in the middle of the room, one hand resting on the back of the chair where she had left her stockings and panties. The sensation of being in two places at

once gave me an extraordinary kick; but this was nothing compared to later developments [...] The next phase came when I realized that the greater the interval between my two selves the more I was ecstasied; therefore I used to sit every night a few inches farther from the bed, and soon the back legs of my chair reached the threshold of the open door. Eventually I found myself sitting in the parlor—while making love in the bedroom. (Despair 37-8)

Compare this, then, to what Schreber described in his memoirs, as quoted earlier: “I can also ‘picture’ myself in a different place, for instance while playing the piano I see myself at the same time standing in front of a mirror in the adjoining room in female attire.” The dissociative “split” that both subjects describe is very similar, and would seem to suggest a diagnosis of schizophrenia (in the case of Schreber, of course, his diagnosis was established,¹⁹ whereas with the fictional Hermann, since Nabokov never employs any such terms for his narrators’ illnesses, we are left to extrapolate a bit).

This “game” that Hermann so enjoyed, however, at any rate, is replaced by another obsession, one that eclipses the first: that is, he discovers—or believes that he has discovered—his double in the figure of a German tramp from Zwickau named Felix Wohlfahrt. This hallucination of his is only apparent to him, we learn, for neither Felix himself nor anyone else, including the people who find Felix’s body or the investigators who try to determine who murdered him, and why the murderer would have exchanged clothes with the

¹⁹ His case was so extraordinary, and his memoirs so illustrative, that Freud apparently used to joke to Jung that Schreber should be “made a professor of psychiatry and director of an asylum.” See *Memoirs* xii.

corpse, see any resemblance between the two men. Hermann himself must sense that this is the case for others, for he does his utmost to convince the reader of the truth of their resemblance, to draw the reader into his hallucinatory world. “How I long to convince you!” he writes. “I will force you all, you rogues, to believe...though I am afraid that words alone [...] are unable to convey visually a likeness of that kind” (Despair 16). Schreber, in the introduction to his memoirs, too, insists that words cannot fully convey his experiences, which are “beyond human understanding”: “I cannot of course count upon being *fully* understood because things are dealt with which cannot be expressed in human language.” Further, “I have come infinitely closer to the truth than human beings who have not received divine revelation” (Schreber 16).

When Hermann first glances at Felix’s face, he says that he “doubted the reality of what I saw, doubted my own sanity,” and later relates how a “clever Lett” once told him that his “clouds of brooding” were a “sure sign of my ending in a madhouse” (Despair 8). He then tries to convince us (his readers) that the man was exaggerating, and that he is perfectly sane.

Frolics of the intuition, artistic vision, inspiration, all the grand things which have lent my life such beauty, may, I expect, strike the layman, clever though he be, as the preface of mild lunacy. But don’t you worry; my health is perfect, my body both clean within and without, my gait easy; I neither drink nor smoke excessively, nor do I live in riot. (Despair 8-9)

Compare, again, with Schreber, who tries to reason with himself and with the reader that what he is experiencing is “real”:

It seems psychologically impossible that *I* suffer only from hallucinations. After all, the hallucination of being in communication with God or departed souls can logically only develop in people who bring with them into their morbidly excited nervous state an already secure faith in God and the immortality of the soul. *This, however, was not so in my case, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.* (Schreber 83; author's italics)

Hermann will go so far as to suggest that it was Felix "who first perceived the Masonic bond in our resemblance" (Despair 12), though Hermann is in fact the one who brought it up, of course, and despite the fact that Felix does not see any similarity between their respective countenances. Hermann blames Felix's lack of perception, or perhaps imagination, down to his baseness, his inferiority: "It was this absolute sameness which gave me so piercing a thrill. He on his part saw in me a doubtful imitator. I wish to lay stress, however, on the dimness of those ideas of his" (Despair 13).

In *Pale Fire*, commentator Charles Kinbote (alias Prof. V. Botkin),²⁰ imagines himself the king of his "almost legendary Zembla" (Fire 255), a fairytale-like land where he is transformed into Charles the Beloved. Nina Allen, in her study *Madness, Death and Disease in the Fiction of Vladimir Nabokov*, writes:

Kinbote claims to be King of Zembla, but this would fit very well

20 Hints that Kinbote is actually a Russian by the name of Botkin can be found within the commentary, such as in the scene in which Professor Pardon says, "I was under the impression that you were born in Russia, and that your name was a kind of anagram of Botkin or Botkine?" (Fire 267). If one follows the leads under the entry for "Botkin, V." in the index, one also always comes to entries about Kinbote. See *Index to Pale Fire*, p. 306.

with his persecution complex as a delusion of grandeur and add up to a diagnosis of classic schizophrenia. On the other hand, we have to ask ourselves exactly who Kinbote is if he is not Charles the Beloved. He is obviously no ‘ordinary’ lunatic; he is cultured, knowledgeable, a polyglot, and, it seems, capable of holding down a reasonable job in a university, even if staff and students alike make him the butt of many a joke. His true identity must remain a mystery until the end. (Allan 12)

Although, granted, one with full-blown schizophrenia would most likely have a difficult time holding down a full-time job, the fact that Kinbote is “cultured, knowledgeable, a polyglot” does not directly contradict a diagnosis of schizophrenia, nor for that matter does it preclude Kinbote from being of the pre-schizophrenic schizoid personality-type. Schreber himself was quite well educated, which is apparent when one reads his memoirs; he was a lawyer and a judge before his complete mental collapse forced him to enter an asylum. Through the veneer of his mad, outlandish descriptions of people exchanging heads in the garden, of “fleeting-improvised” people who appear and then dissolve before his eyes, of talking birds, of his one-on-one “nerve-contact” with God through the divine rays and so on, one discovers a highly intelligent man, one who is knowledgeable about art, literature, and culture, but who had the great misfortune of succumbing to full-blown schizophrenia in his forties, a disease which caused him a great deal of pain and suffering.²¹

²¹ Throughout the memoirs, Schreber describes all kinds of pain; in addition to the constant voices that don’t leave him alone for one moment, he variously experienced “sciatica, cramp in the calves, states of paralysis, sudden attacks of hunger, and such-like”; also “lumbago and toothache.” What he calls “the bellowing miracle” would give him terrible headaches, and was often accompanied by “a very unpleasant concussion of the head” and the inability to eat. He bemoans the fact that all of these things must have lent him “the overall impression of madness.” See Schreber 239.

There is little doubt that Kinbote's Zembla is a fantasy-world, though, as with Smurov, we may wonder whether he plays up his insanity in order to deceive himself and his readers—i.e. might he be “playing games,” as some schizophrenics are said to do, in order to antagonize or to carve out a new, more “genuine” identity for himself?²²—or are his descriptions in fact to be taken “at face value”; that is, should we assume that he truly believes that he is, in fact, the King of Zembla, which would suggest a sort of double identity, though of a different genus from that of either Smurov or Hermann? These are the questions that remain for the reader to ponder carefully at the end of the day—and Nabokov seems to leave things intentionally vague in this respect, here as in his other work—*not* whether or not Kinbote is a schizophrenic, or of the “schizoid-type” personality, for this much is clear enough.

Further confirmation of his schizoid (if not schizophrenic) condition as it relates to his fantasy world, in which he, the King, is being persecuted (Jakob Gradus is after him, he believes, and it is also Gradus who “mistakenly” shoots John Shade in Kinbote's over-imaginative mind in the note to line 1000) and has to flee from his native land of Zembla may be suggested by something related in an interview with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, conducted by Vittorio Marchetti, in which Deleuze responds to a question about their book: *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, as follows:

Now I suppose everyone is familiar with the amazing text by that lunatic, as they call him, President Schreber, a paranoid or a schizophrenic, it doesn't matter [note: Sass refers to him as a “paranoid schizophrenic”]. His memoirs are a kind of ra-

²² As Manfred Beuler once suggested of schizophrenics. See Sass, pp. 110-15, for more on schizophrenics and mockery/games.

cial, racist, historical delirium. His delirium encompasses whole continents, cultures, and races. What takes you by surprise is the political, historical, and cultural content of his delirium[...]Well, we say that we've never seen a schizophrenic delirium that is not first and foremost racial, racist, and political, that is not running off in every direction of history, that does not invest cultures, that does not talk about continents, kingdoms, etc. (Deleuze 235)

As with Schreber, in Kinbote we find a solipsist who is also obsessed with "continents [and] kingdoms," with race and sexual orientation. Kinbote refers to the gardener, who is a Negro, as "hard up," and "awfully nice and pathetic[...]but a little too talkative"²³ and completely impotent which I found discouraging" (Fire 291). Discouraging, perhaps, because Kinbote is a homosexual, as is his precious King Charles the Beloved, who, when a girl named Garh,²⁴ who joins him at one point in his journey, begins to strip off her clothes he stops her, thanks her for her "kindness," and walks off, laughing (cf. Fire 142). Although I do not wish to take the analogy too far, it is hard to miss the fact that Hermann despises sex with his wife and therefore finds dissociating himself from the bed to be more pleasurable than being fully present with her,²⁵ and that Smurov is termed a homosexual by Roman Bogdanovich in his

23 This is, of course, extremely ironic, as Kinbote himself can be seen talking off John Shade's ear about his Zembla throughout the commentary, never once pausing to take an interest in things outside his own solipsistic world.

24 The text reads, ironically: "Although given to both sexes, the name is, strictly speaking, a masculine one, and the King expected to see emerge from the loft a bare-kneed mountain lad like a tawny angel. Instead, there appeared a disheveled young hussy wearing only a man's shirt that came down to her pink shins and an oversized pair of brogues." Fire 141.

25 Further, he fails to notice the fact that his wife is cheating on him with Ardalion, or wants us to believe that he has not noticed. Consider, for instance, the scene in which Hermann drops by Ardalion's flat to find Lydia half dressed on the former's bed, only to frenziedly preoccupy himself with trying to find one of Ardalion's paintings. See Despair 104.

(stolen) letter in what may be interpreted as a defensive, mean-spirited, homophobic passage (for we later learn that Bogdanovich himself hit on Vanya, who didn't take him seriously). While it might be tempting to here try and interpret Nabokov's three protagonists' sexuality in light of Schreber's "un-manning," or turning into a woman (though he himself was a heterosexual), as described in his memoirs, I shall avoid doing so, for I feel that the subject is much too complicated to draw such a facile conclusion. What is important to us here, rather, is more the fact that all three of these protagonists experience some sort of dissociation, or doubling,²⁶ and that this defining aspect of their respective illnesses strongly suggests schizophrenia.

V. Conclusion

While there has not been room enough in this essay to discuss all of the similarities between the "paranoid-schizophrenic" Schreber in his memoirs and Nabokov's three protagonist-narrators Gospodin Smurov, Hermann Karlovich, and Charles Kinbote,²⁷ I believe that ample parallels and/or similarities have been suggested between the classic "schizoid" or schizophrenic personality, as personified by Daniel Paul Schreber, and Nabokov's anti-heroes to make a convincing argument that the latter are, if not full-blown schizophrenics, then at least schizoid-like in their behaviors, world views, and hallucinatory flights of fancy.

Schreber writes in his memoirs that he had been denied (i.e. by the rays) "man's natural right to give the nerves of his mind their necessary rest

26 One final example of "splitting" from *Pale Fire* that I will cite here occurs when the King of Zembla sees his reflection in the water and it snaps "as his red-sweatered, red-capped doubleganger [sic] turned and vanished, whereas he, the observer, remained immobile" (*Fire* 143).

27 For instance, their respective conceptions about God and the afterlife might be a topic for further study.

from time to time by thinking nothing” (Schreber 55). Much like Schreber, Nabokov’s narrators seem to have their heads full at all times with the incessant chatter of their respective obsessions and paranoiac fears. As Smurov notes, “[I]n order to live happily, a man must know now and then a few moments of perfect blankness. Yet I was always exposed, always wide-eyed; even in sleep I did not cease to watch over myself” (Eye 7). The labyrinths of their cyclical thoughts frequently entrap them within themselves, within the maze of their own minds. “He listened,” Hermann writes. “I listened to his listening. He listened to my listening to his listening. I[...]attempted to catch my consciousness tripping, but got mazed myself” (Despair 106). And they are paranoid, because their only true enemy seems to be their very selves. Kinbote writes: “At times I thought that only by self-destruction could I hope to cheat the relentlessly advancing assassins who were in me, in my eardrums, in my pulse, in my skull...” (Fire 97).

Because they are “caught up” within themselves, there would seem to be no salvation for any of them—Hermann claims that he can prove God’s non-existence,²⁸ for instance, and Kinbote asks that God forgive him if he commits suicide²⁹; they are entrapped in an endless loop, the loop of their own madness, much like the threads that carry voices and are pulled through the inside of Schreber’s head, threads that “perform a circular movement, best compared to my head being hollowed out from inside with a drill” (Schreber 274). For them, as Nabokov writes in his short story “Signs and Symbols”

28 See Chapter Six of *Despair*. It is perhaps interesting to note that one of the six sins against the Holy Spirit in Catholicism is “Despair.” Nabokov says in his introduction to the novel that, “Hell shall never parole Hermann.” See *Despair* iii.

29 In his commentary to line 493, Kinbote writes: “We who burrow in filth every day may be forgiven perhaps the one sin that ends all sins” (Fire 222), and in the commentary to line 894, Shade suggests that kinbote means regicide in Zemblan (Fire 267).

(1948) of the “Referential Mania” patient: “His inmost thoughts are discussed at nightfall, in manual alphabet, by darkly gesticulating trees [...] Everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme” (Stories 599).

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