A MIRROR FOR THE CRITIC:  
TWO ASPECTS OF TASTE AND  
ONE TYPE OF APHASIC DISTURBANCE  
IN VLADIMIR NABOKOV’S DESPAIR

The rich intertextuality of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Despair* (*Otchaianie*, 1932) has shaped the subject matter of most critical inquiries devoted to the novel. Unraveling the work’s dense “nexus of allusions,” critics have recently turned from Dostoevskii as the major parodic target of *Despair*, designating among Nabokov’s scapegoats such writers as Andreev, Briusov, Belyi, Erenburg and Savinkov: “Intertextual readings centered on Dostoevskii are valid only for 1964 English version of *Despair* but not for the Russian text of 1932. . . . Nabokov intended *Despair* as a lampoon on Russian modernist fiction . . . and Hermann as a writer parodies a number of Nabokov’s contemporaries — minor Dusties and Duskies of the 1910s and 1920s.” However, there is no explanation for Nabokov’s decision to stigmatize these authors in 1932. Dead or alive, some of them, such as Andreev, Briusov and Savinkov, belonged to literary history, while others, such as Belyi and Erenburg, were for Nabokov despised bolchévisants who had little significance in émigré literary life.

In this article I will argue that parody in *Despair* was provoked by contemporary developments in the literary life of Russian emigration. Nabokov’s parody often had multiple targets, finding a unifying trait in diverse cultural

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phenomena and bringing them to a common denominator.\textsuperscript{4} Nabokov described his critical method in a letter to Aldanov: "I was guided not by an urge to laugh at this or that person . . . but solely by a desire to show a certain order of literary ideas, typical at a given time . . . If a style of criticism I feature corresponds to the style of particular figures and fops, that is natural and unavoidable."\textsuperscript{5} The cultural event that triggered Nabokov's parody in Despair was the debate on the future of Russian émigré literature which reached its peak in 1930-1933 with the appearance of Chisla, a periodical that aspired to be the forum of younger Russian exiles. Chisla launched an anti-Nabokovian campaign fueled by esthetic differences and personal enmity.\textsuperscript{6} Fighting off these attacks, Nabokov "resorted to purely artistic, literary means, seldom condescending to journal polemics."\textsuperscript{7} Among his better known literary rebuttals are the story "Lips to Lips," ("Usta k ustam," 1933), the novel The Gift (Dar, 1932–1938), the poem "Poets" ("Poety," 1939), and the story "Vasili Shishkov" (1940).

*Despair*, written several months prior to "Lips to Lips," opens the series of literary responses aimed at ridiculing Nabokov's foes among Russian émigré literati. In fact, as I will show, the very title of Nabokov's novel is borrowed from Chisla, serving as derisive travesty of the journal's rhetoric. Due to the generalizing tendency of Nabokov's criticism, allusions to and parodies of Russian, Western and Soviet writers appear in Despair because these writers share "the order of literary ideas" espoused by the contributors of Chisla. In order to prove these theses, I will devote the first part of my article to an analysis of the mental illness suffered by the protagonist-narrator of Despair. This analysis is instrumental for our understanding of Nabokov's stance in the esthetic debate that preoccupied exiled Russian writers for almost a decade. In the second part I will illustrate Nabokov's use of Hermann Karlovich's disorder as a parodic weapon aimed at his adversaries.

Although Nabokov clearly parodies adverse esthetics in the character of Hermann, few efforts have been made to analyze the exact nature of the psychological disorder accountable for what Nabokov would see as flaws in Hermann's taste. As it happens, many aspects of Hermann's psychological problems, taste, perception and behavior recall the Decadent and Symbolist esthetics revived by Chisla.\textsuperscript{8} By means of mental illness, Nabokov places

\textsuperscript{5} Cited in Boyd, Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years, p. 480.
\textsuperscript{6} This literary feud has been described ibid., pp. 350, 374; Davy dov, "Teksty-matreshki" Vladimir Nabokova, pp. 10–51; Dolinin, "Dve zametki o romane 'Dar','" pp. 173–80.
\textsuperscript{7} Nikolai Mel'nikov, "'Do poslednei kapli chernil . . . ' Vladimir Nabokov I 'Chisla'," Literaturnoe obozrenie 2 (1996), p. 75.
\textsuperscript{8} On Nabokov's debate with decadents and symbolists in Despair, see Dolinin, "Caning of Modernist Profaners," p. 44.