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The language(s) of exile: Conrad, Nabokov, Beckett

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The Language(s) of Exile:

Conrad, Nabokov, Beckett

By

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For Gwen and Margot and
for Connie and Elmer, my parents

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"Quoi de plus espagnol que Cervantes, de plus anglais que Shakespeare, de plus italien que Dante, de plus français que Voltaire ou Montaigne, que Descartes ou que Pascal, quoi de plus russe que Dostoevski, et quoi de plus universellement humain que ceux-la?"

Andre Gide

"The language of Shakespeare, of Montaigne, of Luther, embodies an extreme local strength, an assertion of specific, untranslatable identity. For the writer to become bi- or multi-lingual in the modern way, genuine shifts of sensibility and personal status had to occur."

George Steiner, *Extra-territorial*

I. Introduction

A. General Background

My interest in the writers Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, and Samuel Beckett evolved from my own bilingualism/biculturalism, my work as a translator, my experience writing in a language other than my mother tongue, and an abiding curiosity about what has often been expressed as the "double perspective" of the writer in exile, which Michael Seidel sums up as follows:

> Exile...possesses a double reflex; its meaning derives from *ex* (out of) and the Latin root *salire* (to leap), the same etymological root that produces the word *exult*. But to "go out" from someplace presumes arriving somewhere else, just as leaping presumes landing. The exilic leap creates a special imaginative effect, a splitting of vision that is, at the same time, a doubling of perspective. (Seidel, "Aesthetics," 224-25)

I admit to having, from the outset, approached the question of exile from a somewhat myopic point of view: I am interested in exile's consequences almost exclusively in the works of writers who write either only or also in a language other than their mother tongue, an act, it would seem, that Elizabeth Beaujour sees as compounding the sense of splitting Seidel refers to above:

> while exiled writers *may* feel that they have only a half-destiny, even if they remain loyal to their first language, most writers who change languages in midcourse *do* feel mortally split and even in danger of psychic disintegration, at least during the period immediately following their apostasy. (Beaujour, 43)

"Writing in another language...is a way of objectifying the entirely unmetaphoric experience of alienation and exile..." (Chamberlain, 265). My interest in this objectification of an unmetaphoric experience governed to a large extent my choice of corpus: thus, although entitled "The Language(s) of Exile," my study deals with Conrad, Beckett, and Nabokov--each of whom wrote in a language other than his mother tongue, rather than with, say, Gombrowicz, Mann, or even Joyce, who, even in their respective places of exile, did not adopt a new language as a means of artistic expression.

I therefore stress the linguistic facet of exile, and I simultaneously maintain a qualitative distinction between the physical condition of exile--that is, actual and, most often, irreversible, separation from homeland--and the metaphoric use of the word to refer to conditions of "alienation" or "disenfranchisement" brought about by

industrialization, "postmodernism," gender, race, class, or whatever other categories of "nonbelonging" the word has been used, umbrella-like, to cover in its most recent incarnations. The actual separation from homeland and the community of speakers (readers) of one's mother tongue, and the concomitant attempt to speak to a public in a new language, are grounds for upholding the distinction between the texts of a Barth and a Barthelme, on the one hand, who, although they present "alienated" characters, are rooted in twentieth-century middle America, and those of a Conrad, Nabokov, or Beckett, on the other, which push Bakhtinian notions of heteroglossia to their limits, and beyond.[1] I agree with George Steiner, the paradigm of the multilingual exile, when he writes:

> There is more than nationalist mystique to the notion of the writer *enracine*....The language of Shakespeare, of Montaigne, of Luther, embodies an extreme local strength, an assertion of specific, untranslatable identity. For the writer to become bi- or multi-lingual in the modern way, genuine

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[1]Bakhtin wrote that the novel "présuppose la décentralisation verbale et semantique du monde idéologique, une conscience littéraire qui n'a plus de place fixe, qui a perdu le mileu unique et indiscutable de sa pensée ideologique."

> shifts of sensibility and personal status had to occur. (*Extraterritorial*, 4).

These genuine "shifts of sensibility and personal status" occur, not only *because* of the vast technological advances and consequent social changes brought about by these advances, but in spite of them. Whereas, for example, advances in communications technology may have led to what James Clifford describes as the breakdown of the "privilege given to natural languages and, as it were, natural cultures,"[1] writers with a first-hand experience of exile, such as Cszelaw Milosz, insist that there is an important misunderstanding that accompanies this supposed breakdown, and that there is even more of a failure to communicate between people of different cultures when that

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[1]James Clifford, for example, in *The Predicament of Culture*, writes "I think we are seeing signs that the privilege given to natural languages and, as it were, natural cultures, is dissolving. These objects and epistemological grounds are now appearing as constructs, achieved fictions, containing and domesticating heteroglossia. In a world with too many voices speaking all at once, a world where syncretism and parodic invention are becoming the rule, not the exception, an urban, multinational world of institutional transicence--where American clothers made in Korea are worn by young people in Russia, where everyone's "roots" are in some degree cut--in such a world it becomes difficult to attache human identity and meaning to a coherent "culture" or "language."" (95)

alleged communication is based on false premises and false assumptions:

> It is being said that our planet is slowly but inexorably entering an era of unification brought about by technology, hygiene and literacy. And yet the opposite opinion can be advanced as well, and only in exile can its validity be fully understood....A hundred years ago average people not familiar with remote regions of the globe quietly relegated them to the realm of the legendary or at least the exotic. Today, however, they feel they are offered the means to embrace places and events of the whole earth simultaneously. But when confronted with a newcomer's first hand knowledge, news and reports on the land of his origin prove to be completely misleading. Multiplied, the sum of similar disparities between the message and the fact reaches astronomical proportions. (Milosz, 92).

This disparity between what one believes to be, and what actually is, is structurally and thematically pivotal in the writing of Conrad, Nabokov, and Beckett, and their texts, rather than closing this gap, illuminate it from within. The "disparity" is due not only to shifts in culture and language, of course, but the focus of this study is primarily on those misunderstandings and misreadings that would be "unlikely outside the exile experience with its attendant bombardment

of conflicting signals and the majority culture's expectation of differing responses," (Vasquez, 83) as well as those that are due, according to an attitude towards language which all three writers seem to share, to language's double status as faciltator of and impediment to communication. In this sense, the works of Conrad, Nabokov, and Beckett indeed participate in "multicultural" literature, in Dasenbrock's usage:

> I use the term *multicultural literature* to include both works that are explicitly about multicultural societies and those that are implicitly multicultural in the sense of inscribing readers from other cultures inside their own textual dynamics...Multicultural literature offers us above all an experience of multiculturalism, in which not everything is likely to be wholly understood by every reader. The texts often only mirror the misunderstandings and failures of intelligibility in the multicultral situation they depict.

Critics have often attempted to wish away these failures of intelligibility, or close a gap that an author has purposefully left open. For example, Zdzislaw Nadjer, in his monumental critical biography of Conrad, writes:

> Joseph Conrad was an English writer who grew up in other linguistic environments.

> His work can be seen as located in the border land of auto-translation. This fact poses peculiar problems of interpretation. Conrad's biographer has to step in as an exegete of the text: to explain certain cultural and intellectual categories to the English-speaking reader who, while understanding the language, is not always able to decipher the implicit meanings; and to Poles who are apt to see in Conrad a Polish Romantic and writer and forget about his later life, his original artistic aims, and his complex attitude towards his Polish backgrounds. (Preface, vii)

While the task of the critic that Nadjer establishes for himself here is indeed necessary and valuable in the study of writers whose work can be "seen as located on the border-land of auto-translation," such as Conrad, and for those, such as Nabokov and Beckett--who are dead-center in it--the critic must also allow these writers their space of consciously chosen epistemological uncertainty. That is, the cultural misunderstanding that *results* from bilingualism and exile as portrayed by these writers is often what generates the writing in the first place. Further, the problems of communication depicted in the texts are mirrored in the relationship between the writer and his reader. To attempt to close these gaps in communicability and knowledge *completely* is, in Beckett's terms, an endeavor which is

"doomed to fail, doomed to fail." (Watt, 62). Like translation--whose metadiscourse is also one of failure--interpretation of these authors leads to another border-land: between explication and renunciation. Critics are left with the task of explaining without *explaining away.* This study, then, examines these texts as both *products* and *producers* of cultural misunderstanding: the act of writing and that of reading as sites of exile.

"Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit."

Joseph Conrad, letter to C. Graham

"Even on the rare occasions when word and gesture happen to be valid expressions of personality, they lose their significance on their passage through the cataract of the personality that is opposed to them.

Samuel Beckett, *Proust*

"I myself picture all of this so clearly, but you are not I, and therein lies the irreparable calamity."

Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*

B. Conrad, Nabokov, Beckett: Linguistic Exiles

> The language I have learnt these forty
> years
> My native English, now I must forgo;
> And now my tongue's use is to me no more
> Than an unstringed viol or a harp,
> Or like a cunning instrument cas'd up
> Or, being open, but into his hands
> That knows no touch to tune the
> harmony...
> What is thy sentence then but speechless
> death
> Which robs my tongue from breathing
> native breath?

Like Thomas Mowbray, Vladimir Nabokov bemoaned the "tragedy" (his word) of abandoning his mother tongue[1], yet found freedom in his exile: the freedom to create a new self through the prism of a new culture, a new language. "In fact," he wrote in *Strong Opinions*, "I don't seem to belong to any clear-cut continent. I'm the shuttlecock above the Atlantic and how bright and blue it is there in my private

---

[1]"My private tragedy, which cannot, indeed should not, be anybody's concern, is that I had to abandon my natural language, my natural idiom, my rich, infinitely rich and docile Russian tongue, for a second-rate brand of English," (SO, 15). And: "My complete switch from Russian prose to English prose was exceedingly painful--like learning anew to handle things after losing seven or eight fingers in an explosion," (Ibid, 54).

sky so far from the pigeonhole and the clay pigeons." The imagery here bears no mark of tragedy, it is both joyous and arrogant, evoking a Magritte-like landscape of clouds and sky, with a happy, rotund figure flying high above a miserable flock of miniature clay pigeons. One cannot say which of these two poles of Nabokov's biography--the "tragedy" or the "bright and blue"--exert more influence on his art. It is clear, however, that in his English language fiction he has, like Conrad and Beckett, managed to transcend what Georgin has defined as "le postulat implicite que fonde tout écrivain, à savoir la relation charnelle qui l'unit à sa langue maternelle," (Georgin, cover IV, Couturier). Maurice Couturier seems to feel that Nabokov's transcendence of this "relation charnelle" has somehow led him to harbor certain illusions of perfect linguistic control wherein he mistakenly believes he can manage an identity between thought and language. According to Couturier, Nabokov's "parfaite maitrise de la langue (russe aussi bien qu'anglaise) lui donne l'illusion de pouvoir exercer un controle souverain sur le sens, le sense," (Couturier, 14). Yet nothing could be further from the truth. Despite Nabokov's claim to being a "dictator" in the matter of his absolute control over the destiny of his characters (which we can take with a grain of salt), he has

few illusions about his power *over* the word, as is clear from this statement in *Strong Opinions*:

> The design of my novel is fixed in my imagination and every character follows the course I imagine for him. I am the perfect dictator in that private world insofar as I alone am responsible for its stability and truth. *Whether I reproduce it as fully and faithfully as I wish is another question. Some of my works reveal dismal blurrings and blanks.* (SO, 69, my emphasis)

And in his fiction, he demonstrates that he does not believe in the power *of* the word to convey the immense complexity of human thought and emotion. Humbert Humbert's cry in *Lolita* is not a joyful "Aha! I have words to play with!" It is a lament: "Ah, my Lolita, I have *only* words to play with," (my emphasis). In an interview with Alvin Toffler, Nabokov confirmed this sense of the impotence of the word in regard to thought and knowledge:

> To be quite candid...I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more. (SO, 45).

Nabokov's ambivalence toward the power of the word--both despite and because of his multilingual facility--is echoed in the voice of the eponymous hero of his first English-language novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight.* Knight, like Nabokov, is a Russian writer-in-exile and, as the narrator tells us, he struggled continually with

> the bridging of the abyss lying between expression and thought; the maddening feeling that the right words, the only words are awaiting you on the opposite bank in the misty distance, and the shudderings of the still unclothed thought clamouring for them on this side of the abyss. (83-84).

For Nabokov, as for Sebastian Knight, the words exist, it is simply impossible to make them conform perfectly to what one wishes to express. This impossibility exists not only in English for Nabokov, but he becomes aware of it also as he attempts, for example, to translate his *Lolita* into Russian. In his postcript to this Russian translation, he wrote:

> I am only troubled now by the jangling of my rusty Russian strings. The history of this translation is a history of disillusion. Alas, that 'marvelous Russian' which, I always thought, constantly awaited me somewhere, blooming like true spring behind hermetically sealed gates to which I kept the key for so many years--that Russian has turned out to be non-existent.

> And behind the gates there is nothing, except charred strings and a hopeless autumn vista; the key in my hand is more like a lock-pick.[1]

There is, in a sense, nowhere to turn; the bilingual writer cannot go home again.

Clearly, however, ambivalence informed Nabokov's philosophical reflection on language's status even before he became an English-language writer. Already in 1935, that is, when he was still writing only in Russian, Cincinnatus, the main character of *Priglashenie na kazn' (Invitation to a Beheading)*, who is also a writer, articulates the predicament of the need to express even when one knows that the end result will not be communication:

> In the end the logical thing would be to give up [writing], and I would give up if I were laboring for a reader existing today, but as there is in the world not a single human who can speak my language; or, more simply, not a single human who can speak; or, even more simply, not a single human; I must think only of myself, of that

---

[1]quoted in and translated by Irwin Weil, "Odyssey of a Translation," *TriQuarterly* No. 17, Winter 1970, pp. 266-283.

force which urges me to express myself," (95).[1]

The metaphoric expressions of this sense of the impossiblity of communication deepen and expand in Nabokov's English language fiction, where, isolated from the past, it as if there is only one person with whom to communicate: the self. A bizarre, solipsistic, fantasy world becomes the world of the exiled characters he creates: Kinbote in *Pale Fire*, or Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* are paradigmatic examples of exiles who distort and manipulate through writing. *Despair*, which precedes both *Pale Fire* and *Lolita*, and which Nabokov wrote in Russian and translated/rewrote in English, is the focus of the Nabokov chapter, since it is a book in which Nabokov first presents the "comic conflict between those who are caught up...in language that purports to *be* the world and a larger world that can impinge upon these linguistic-born illusions with often catastrophic consequences." (Thiher, 98)

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[1]Compare this to Nabokov's statement from a 1962 interview: "I don't think an artist should both about his audience. His best audience is the person he sees in his mirror every morning. I think that the audience an artist imagines when he imagines that kind of thing, is a room filled with epople wearing his own mask," (SO, 18).

For Samuel Beckett, too, "the artist who puts his being on the line isn't from anywhere," [l'artiste qui joue son etre est de nulle part.] (quoted in Beaujour, 174). And Cincinnatus's words quoted above uncannily foreshadow the words of the narrator of Beckett's *Innommable*:

> il faut continuer, je ne peux pas continuer, il faut continuer, je vais donc continuer, il faut dire des mots, tant qu'il y en a, il faut les dire, jusqu'à ce qu'ils me trouvent, jusqu'à ce qu'ils me disent" (213).
>
> [you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me.]

Beckett, too, before he began writing in French, shared Nabokov's skepticism towards language's ability to convey meaning: "Even on the rare occasions when word and gesture happen to be valid expressions of personality," he wrote in his 1932 essay on Proust (in English), "they lose their significance on their passage through the cataract of the personality that is opposed to them," (47). This statement is again quite similar to words spoken by Cincinnatus: "I myself picture all of this so clearly, but you are not I, and therein lies the irreparable calamity," (ITAB, 93).

It would seem, then, that this early skepticism about the ability of language to convey meaning that Beckett and

Nabokov share was a contributing factor towards their desire to master writing in another language. Perhaps, in a sense, they resort to a second language in the same way that Nathalie Haldin, in Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*, resorts to French when she cannot find the proper word in English (already her second language): "'Their impulses--their...' she sought the proper expression and found it, but in French...'Their *mouvements d'âme*'" (73). A second language could become for them a means toward filling --with lesser or greater success, they might add--with more words, different words, a void that from both writers' philosophical and aesthetic viewpoint was, in fact, impossible to fill.

Thus Nabokov, in his vehement belief that words can never do justice to the complexity of human thought and feeling, and Beckett, in his view that the self is unknowable and therefore uncommunicable to others, "because what we know partakes in no small measure of what has so happily been called the unutterable or ineffable, so that any attempt to utter or eff it is doomed to fail, doomed to fail" (*Watt*, 62) continue, though in different ways, a line of questioning that was opened in Conrad's work. He, too, shared their ambivalence towards language:

> Words blow away like mist, and like mist they serve only to obscure, to make vague the real shape of one's feelings. (letter to W.E. Henley)
>
> Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit. (letter to Cunninghame Graham) (both quoted in Carabine, 10).
>
> The problem of life seemed too voluminous for the narrow limits of human speech. (NON, 420).

Nabokov and Beckett could seem either content with or indifferent to the exile's fate, at least at times--the former in his "bright and blue" no man's land, the latter ensconced, if I may, in his "nulle part." Conrad, on the other hand, did want desperately to assimilate, to be from "somewhere," to have an origin.[1] He expresses this longing most clearly, and with much regret, in a letter to Garnett early in his career (19 June 1896): "I have to drag it all out of myself. Other writers have some starting point. Something to catch hold

---

[1] James Clifford wrote that Conrad "reconstructed himself quite carefully in the persona of an "English author," the character who speaks in the "Author's Note" he would later add to each of his works. This construction of a self was both artificial and deadly serious," (Predicament of Culture, 106).

of....They lean on...dialect--or on tradition--or on history....while I don't," and in a letter to Pinker: "I have no charm, no flow of wit or of facetiousness...I have only a mind quite different from the gift of gab. *I have no literary tradition even which will help me to spin phrases,"* (quoted in Hawkins, 154, my emphasis). Neither a Polish writer, nor an English writer, he has no tradition on which to lean, and he must, as he eloquently stated, "work like a coal miner in his pit quarrying all [his] English sentences out of a black night" (*Life and Letters*, 2, 82).

Although each chapter in this study concentrates on one author, and primarily on one text, I have attempted to use specific works as a springboard for placing bilingual exile literature within a broader theoretical context, and to show that we, as readers of these texts, "function as wanderers, perpetually exiled by [our] desire for the order of metanarration which both obstructs and enters into [our] engagement with the narrative" (Newman, 3). Thus the first chapter focuses on language's and, by extension, narrative's failure to capture, express, and communicate experience, in particular the experience of someone who does not belong to

the dominant culture, as is the case of Yanko Goorall in Conrad's *Amy Foster*. It examines some of Conrad's sophisticated narrative techniques as they provide the structure within which to present the points of view of the "other," represented here as both a "carpathian mountaineer" and the English community to which he comes. The second chapter addresses some of the issues of the reception of texts written by bilingual writers and then concentrates on Nabokov's use of parody to both incorporate and react to the literature and literary conventions of "home" and the place of "exile". The chapter on Beckett continues to address questions of the reception of the "double text," that is, the text translated by the author himself. In this chapter, I use my own experience as a "bilingual reader" to bring to light the results of reading "original" and "translation" in tandem; in other words, I use myself to test empirically some of my theories about bilingual reading and writing. In the conclusion, I look at the appropriateness of using the labels "bilingualism" and "exile" to illuminate the fiction of three writers whose exile and bilingualism were so different from one another's. Have we, in fact, raised more questions than we answer? Is it possible, after a close reading of their fiction, to continue to place these writers under the same

rubric of "bilingual writers in exile?"

I. Joseph Conrad: Exile and the Other

[Exile] enveloppe dans le brouillard la realité qui l'entoure, et noie l'avenir dans une atmosphere plus épaisse encore que la purée de pois qu'il est pour nous dans le meilleur des cas.

Joseph Brodsky, "Cette Condition que nous appelons l'exil"

He was different; innocent of heart, and full of good will, which nobody wanted, this castaway that, like a man transplanted into another planet, was separated by an immense space from his past and by an immense ignorance from his future.

Amy Foster

A. I ntroduction

1. Language and Understanding

> Everybody shows a certain respectful deference to certain sounds that he and his fellows can make. But about feelings people really know nothing. We talk with indignation or enthusiasm; we talk about oppression, cruelty, crime, devotion, self-sacrifice, virtue, and we know nothing beyond the words.
>
> *An Outpost of Progress*

In *A Personal Record*, Conrad wrote that, had he not written in English, he would not have written at all. His remark has far less to do with the innate qualities of the English language than with the various metamorphoses Conrad-as-person and Conrad-as-writer underwent as a result of his exile and trilingualism. Christopher Miller argues, in *Blank Darkness*, that for Conrad, as an exile writing in a foreign language, "writing ...was necessarily an act of translation, a loss of one meaning in order to gain another."

Yet Conrad's act of writing in English constitutes much more than a simple substitution of one meaning for another; it calls also upon a substitution, or an exchange, of selves. And it is certainly more apt to say that it was the "shadow-line" between meanings that interested him, the opening out

of multiple hermeneutic possibilities or, just as frequently if not more so, the rendering of impossibilities, misreadings, and misunderstandings. These "misunderstandings" presented in Conrad's fiction are in part the result of misreadings of "cultural cues" that would be "unlikely outside the exile experience" and in part caused by the intrinsic double nature of language, which, in Conrad's view, is both omni- and impotent.

In *Lord Jim,* Marlow's compulsion to speak, to narrate, even as he continually claims that words fail him, seems to prefigure Beckett's narrators, with their equal compulsion to speak. Marlow, in fact, is no more and no less articulate than a Beckettian narrator, and Conrad's "exotic" locales serve much the same purpose as, say, Molloy's mother's bedroom: they offer a pretext for this compulsion to speak, a background to verbal urgency. Conrad, no more than Beckett, is not searching for an "out there" with which to fascinate/seduce his audience, but for the deep inner workings of inner consciousness. Like Beckett, he believed that "the only possible spiritual development is in the sense of depth. The artistic tendency is not expansive, but a contraction. And art is the apotheosis of solitude," (*Proust,* 46-47). While art may be the apotheosis of solitude, it is also, according to Conrad, solitude's revenge: "the artist

descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife finds the terms of his appeal," he writes in the preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus.*

If we examine *Lord Jim,* for example, we find that Marlow feels powerless in the face of the impotence of language to convey shades of feeling, and yet, at the same time, he attributes an almost mystical power to the word. Eric Gould, in *The Sin of the Book,* seems to be speaking of Conrad's experience as a writer and Marlow's experience as a narrator when he states:

> The writer who longs to seize in language the elusive object he perceives in the world, or to express in all its immediacy the image in his imagination, and the exile who yearns to return to a distant homeland both wander in search of a promised land they cannot enter. What was once so proximate has become increasingly distant; what was once so familiar, so intimate, has become exceedingly different. The exile and the writer inhabit a distance which their actions and lives sustain. (96)

There are over twenty long passages in *Lord Jim* which deal specifically with language and its power or impotence. I have selected a few which are paradigmatic of the contradictory, or at least ambiguous, views towards language that Marlow elaborates during the course of his narrative.

The first view is a quasi-mystical notion of language as omnipotent, with powers that go beyond sense and logic:

> The stupidity of the phrase appalled me while I was trying to finish it, but the power of sentences has nothing to do with their sense or the logic of their construction. (98-99)
>
> If I spoke, would that motionless and suffering youth leap into the obscurity, clutch at the straw? I found out how difficult it may be sometimes to make a sound. There is a weird power in a spoken word. And why the devil not? (170)
>
> A word carries far--very far--deals destruction through time as the bullets go flying through space. (171)

The second view, in contrast, is one in which communication is impossible, and language nothing more than an attempt at the impossible. Language, rather than being omnipotent, is impotent:

> All this happened in much less time than it takes to tell, since I am trying to interpret for you into slow speech the instantaneous effect of visual impressions. (78)
>
> ...try as I may for the success of this yarn, I am missing innumerable shades--they

> were so fine, so difficult to render in colourless words. (112)

> ...but it was I, too, who a moment ago had been so sure of the power of words, and now was afraid to speak, in the same way one dares not move for fear of losing a slippery hold. It is when we try to grapple with another man's intimate need that we perceive how incomprehensible, wavering, and misty are the beings that share with us the sight of the stars and the warmth of the sun. (175)

The oscillation Marlow shows between a belief in the power of the word to express and console and a reluctant resignation to its inability to "interpret between privacies," in George Steiner's formulation, echoes Conrad's own ambivalence towards language and the power of literature, in any language, to enter the "heart of darkness"--whether that heart be a dark continent or the unfathomable mind of man--and return to humanity with the offering of some kind of new knowledge. The fact that Conrad shares Marlow's ambivalent attitude can be made clear by comparing passages from *Lord Jim* to the opening passages of *A Personal Record,* the second volume of Conrad's autobiographical writings which, he insisted, were "sincere"

and which, he believed, were free from the "veil" that fiction imposes upon its author (3).

> You perceive the force of the word. He who wants to persuade should put his trust not in the right argument, but in the right word. The power of sound has always been greater than the power of sense. (1)
>
> ...you cannot fail to see the power of mere words; such words as Glory, for instance, or Pity. (1)
>
> Yes! Let me only find the right word. Surely it must be lying somewhere among the wreckage of all the plaints and all the exultations poured out aloud since the first day when hope, the undying, came down on earth. (2)

Thus, Conrad opens his autobiography with several declarations about language. The position of prominence he thereby confers upon language in the structuring of his "life" story indicates how deeply writing and language and "life" were associated for him. And so, he could not, he says, begin his autobiography with "the sacramental words, 'I was born on such a date in such a place,'[because] the remoteness of the locality would have robbed the statement of all interest." (9) The locality, Berdyczow in the Ukraine, is only "remote" for Conrad's English-language readers; had he written for a

Polish-speaking audience, the word "remote" would have a very different significance (merely provincial, rather than exotic). Language, therefore, must assume the role of place of birth/homeland in his autobiography. And it is through writing in another language that Conrad forged himself.

In *Amy Foster*, the story we study below, it is clear that both these attitudes towards language exist: he who has language has power, and yet, at the same time, language is what impedes power. (Of course, in so doing, it remains in a sense all powerful.) Michel Leiris formulates this thought succinctly in *La Revolution surrealiste:* "Some monstrous aberration makes men believe that language was born to facilitate their mutual relations." (April 1925) The narrator of Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* echoes this notion when he refers to "the epigrammatic saying that speech has been given to us for the purpose of concealing our thoughts..."

2. Culture and Understanding

Mikhail Bakhtin wrote that

> the chief matter of understanding is the *exotopy* of the one who does the understanding--in time, space, and culture--in relation to that which he wants to understand creatively....In the reality of culture, exotopy is the most powerful lever of understanding. It is only in the eyes of an *other* culture that the alien culture reveals itself more completely and more deeply. (*Dialogical Principle*, 109-10).

It would appear that Bakhtin conflates here the words "understand" and "reveal," for what is revealed is not necessarily understood: one can see without comprehending, without being able to interpret or give form to what one sees. Conrad's fiction demonstrates that this is so both for the person who is attempting to understand and for the person who yearns to be understood. In *Under Western Eyes*, for example, the narrator--an English translator living in Switzerland who narrates the story of the Russian Razumov--insists time and again that, rather than being "the most powerful lever of understanding," his lack of a shared heritage with Razumov and Nathalie Haldin, another Russian, are impediments, rather than aids, to his understanding. He

cannot fathom them because he is seeing them "under western eyes," and he believes that it is a "vain enterprise for sophisticated Europe to try and understand these doings" (87) and because, once again, words, and by extension, narrative itself, fails:

> Approaching this part of Mr. Razumov's story, my mind, the decent mind of an old teacher of languages, feels more and more the difficulty of the task.
>
> The task is not in truth the writing in the narrative form a *precis* of a strange human document, but the rendering--I perceive it now clearly--of the moral conditions ruling over a large portion of this earth's surface; conditions not easily understood, much less discovered in the limits of a story, till some key-word is found; a word that could stand at the back of all the words covering the pages, a word which, if not truth itself, may perchance hold truth enough to help the moral discovery which should be the object of every tale. (45)

Again the notion of the "key-word"--of the potency of language--is revealed: if the right words can be found, they have the power to unleash "moral discoveries." Alas, this word is rarely found.

In *Amy Foster*, the story studied below, we see how little, in fact, the "alien culture" reveals itself to the eyes of the "other culture." Rather, as the narrator says, "it is indeed hard upon a man to find himself a lost stranger, helpless, incomprehensible, and of a mysterious origin, in some obscure corner of the earth." (163) It is Conrad's use of the word "obscure" that is most eloquent here in expressing his point of view. England could be by no means considered "obscure" at the time of the writing of *Amy Foster*, and least of all to Conrad's audience. In fact, it could be conisdered the least obscure place on earth, at the height of its imperial powers, a land on which the sun never sets. Yet for anyone not from the world of Conrad's audience, for a "poor castaway" such as Yanko Goorall, what is perceived as obscure is entirely different. From *his* point of view, England is obscure, and home--far away in the Carpathian mountains--is clear as day.

B. Amy Foster

One important reason for treating Conrad's "Amy Foster" (1901) at length is the lack of recent critical interest in the story. The *MLA On-Line Bibliography of Periodicals*, for example, lists 3 articles written on *Amy Foster* in the last decade, as opposed to two hundred seventeen (217) on *Heart of Darkness*. Is this because *Amy Foster* is of less intrinsic interest than *Heart of Darkness?* I don't believe so. It would seem, rather, that most of the criticism of the last decade has chosen to focus on Conrad's "African fiction" because it is here that the "deconstruction" of Conrad's alleged "colonialist" or "imperialist" discourse can find its most fertile ground.[1] It appears, however, that much of this criticism does not take into account Conrad's own complex identity/positioning as an exiled Pole, that is, someone who first lived in a Poland under the political control of an "imperialist" Russia, and who later experienced "otherness" and "alienation" in his life as an exile in England.[2] And none

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[1] See, for example, Christopher Miller's *Blank Darkness* and Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism.*

[2]James Clifford's chapter, "On Ethnographic Self-Fashioning: Conrad and Malinowski" in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, does in

of Conrad's works illustrates this particular aspect of his biography--the situation of the Eastern European exile in Western Europe--more straightforwardly than *Amy Foster.* In this rather long short story, the "primitive" is Yanko Goorall, a poor mountaineer from "the eastern range of the Carpathians" (AF, 171), a "poor emigrant from Central Europe bound to America and washed ashore here [England] in a storm," for whom "England was an undiscovered country" (AF, 161). For Yanko, Western Europe (first Germany, then England) is, to use Christopher Miller's term, a "blank darkness," just as "Africa" was for Marlow in *Heart of Darkness.* Here, for example, is the way Yanko sees a train station in Berlin:

> There was a roof over him, which seemed made of glass, and was so high that the tallest mountain pine he had ever seen would have had room to grow under it. Steam machines rolled in at one end and out at the other. People swarmed more than you can see on a feast day round the miraculous Holy Image in the yard of the Carmelite Convent down in the plains... (165-66)

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fact deal with this complex positioning, but again, he uses *Heart of Darkness* as his focus. (Harvard U. Press, 1988).

And while in Berlin, Yanko is said to have found himself among men "of whom not one could understand a word that he said." (165) We are not told that he could not understand *others* here, but that *he* was not understood. Here, Conrad's focus is on Yanko's vision of both himself and his surroundings.

When he is shipwrecked off the coast of England on his way to America, everything is equally strange to him, and again, the reader sees through Yanko's eyes:

> He didn't know where he was. Somewhere very far from his mountains--somewhere over the water. Was this America, he wondered?
>
> If it hadn't been for the steel cross at Miss Swaffer's belt he would not, he confessed, have known whether he was in a Christian country at all....There was nothing here the same as in his country! The earth and the water were different; there were no images of the Redeemer by the roadside. The very grass was different, and the trees. (178-79).

Yanko must constantly compare the unknown (the station) to the known ("the tallest mountain pine") and seek the familiar (the cross) in the unfamiliar ("the very grass was different"), in order to orient himself in this new, strange world.

At the same time, the people around him are also forced to face the unknown other by Yanko's presence in their midst. And they, too, attempt to understand him based on what they already know. Thus, Conrad must present to us their vision also. Kennedy, the English doctor who tells Yanko's story to the framing narrator of *Amy Foster*, explains his own reaction to Yanko, which becomes paradigmatic of the initial reaction of the English community in general:

> I was greatly surprised. His long black hair scattered over the straw bolster contrasted with the olive pallor of his face. It occurred to me he might be a Basque. It didn't necessarily follow that he should understand Spanish; but I tried him with the few words I know, and also with some *French*. The whispered sounds I caught by bending my ear to his lips puzzled me utterly. That afternoon the young ladies from the rectory (one of them read Goethe with a dictionary, and the other had struggled with Dante for years)...tried their German and Italian on him from the doorway. They retreated, just the least bit scared by the *flood of passionate speech which*...he let out at them. They admitted that the sound was pleasant, soft, musical--but in conjunction with his looks perhaps, it was *startling*--so excitable, *so utterly unlike anything one had ever heard.* (AF, 176, emphasis mine).

Here, a comparison to Conrad's "African" fiction *is* called for, between the way in which Conrad presents how the English perceive Yanko's speech upon first encountering it and the way Kayerts and Carlier, the two "Belgians" in *An Outpost of Progress* perceive the speech of the leader of a "strange" group of African men who come to their "outpost:"

> He *gesticulated* much, and ceased very suddenly.
>
> There was something in his intonation, in the sounds of the long sentences he used, that *startled* the two whites. It was like a reminiscence of something not exactly familiar, and yet resembling the speech of civilized men. It sounded like one of those impossible languages which sometimes we hear in our dreams.
>
> "What lingo is that?" said the amazed Carlier. "In the first moment *I fancied the fellow was going to speak French.* Anyway, *it is a different kind of gibberish to what we ever heard.*" (Outpost, 470, emphasis mine).

The similarities between these two passages are too great to be coincidental. Clearly, Conrad wanted to depict the whites' incomprehension of the "negro" in Africa as similar to the British incomprehension of the Carpathian mountaineer. Both speak in a "startling" manner; both speak in a language

that is utterly unlike anything "ever heard." The common denominator here is alterity and extraneity represented by the inability of their own language to be comprehended by others: language here again impedes rather than promotes understanding. This is not to say that Conrad consciously claimed the existence of a perfect *identity* between the Pole as he is perceived on English soil by the English (that is, in their "home") and the negro as he is perceived by the Belgians in Africa (that is, in his "home"), but rather that he could make metaphoric use of his unique personal situation as insider and outsider in order to *represent* both sides as "other"--whether that "other" be Yanko or the English in *Amy Foster*, or the Russians as perceived by the English translator living in Switzerland in *Under Western Eyes*, or Jim Waits as perceived by the crew members in *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, or the Africans as described by Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*--from the point of view of someone who is both part of and not part of the dominant culture. In *Amy Foster*, Conrad's gaze is not unidirectional: we see not only though Yanko's eyes, nor through English eyes, but bidirectionally: Conrad represents for us, by means of a series of sophisticated narrative techniques and points of view, both gazes. For "European" though he might be, Conrad knew he was not necessarily viewed as such by other, more

"authentic" Europeans--the British and the French, for example. As a Pole, he understood himself to be both "inside" and "outside" Europe:

> Racially I belong to a culture derived at first from Italy and then from France; and a rather Southern temperament; an outpost of Westernism with a Roman tradition, situated between Slavo-Tatar Byzantine barbarism on the one side and the German tribes on the other; resisting both influences desperately and still remaining true to itself to this very day, (letter to Keating, in *The Portable Conrad*, 752).

Yanko, who comes out of this same tradition, and whose "foreignness had a peculiar and *indelible* stamp" (181, emphasis mine) is in fact so entirely "other" in England, that is, alien to the dominant culture and discourse, that he is not allowed to tell his own story, at least not to us anglophone readers for whom, like the English people who surround him, his language would be incomprehensible "babbling," (169); "rapid, senseless speech," (170); "jabbering in a most discomposing manner," (170); and his voice would be "insane, disturbing" (171). Although it is true that almost no one in Conrad's work is allowed to tell his or her own story--for Conrad almost always places a mediating narrator between the main character and the reader--Yanko stands at an even greater distance from the reader than ordinarily in

Conrad. He is, for example, compared on several occasions to a wild animal: "Smith caught him in the stackyard at New Barns,' said the old chap in his deliberate, unmoved manner, as if the *other* had been indeed a sort of *wild animal,*" (176, emphasis mine); "He was very good-looking, and most graceful in his bearing, with something *wild* as of a woodland *creature,*" (184, emphasis mine). The "other" is "wild" and the "creature" is "wild," therefore, the "other" is also a "creature." And whatever other qualities are attributed to animals in this text--positve or negative--the primary trait that distinguishes them from human beings is their inability to speak. When Kennedy sees Yanko for the first time, "he was lying on his back upon a straw pallet; they had given him a couple of horse blankets....He was almost speechless." (175) Yanko of course would have been able to speak at home, but in England he loses that ability, and thus is equated by those around him--who give him "horse blankets"--with beasts.

Amy, the English woman who is later to become Yanko's wife, is extremely devoted to animals:

> She had never been heard to express a dislike for a single human being, and she was tender to every living creature. She was devoted to Mrs. Smith, to Mr. Smith, to their dogs, cats canaries... (159),

and this is, in part, what leads her to be kind to Yanko. But this devotion to beasts ceases when they express themselves in "human accents" and when they cry for help: the "peculiarities" of Mrs. Smith's gray parrot, writes Conrad, "exercised upon her a positive fascination. Nevertheless, when that outlandish bird, attacked by the cat, shrieked for help in human accents, she ran out into the yard stopping her ears, and did not prevent the crime." And her devotion to Yanko will also cease when he speaks to his child in the only language that, for him, *has* human accents, and when he needs her help. (see below)

Yanko cannot speak for himself, and Kennedy reveals, to the framing narrator and to the reader, how he obtained the information he is passing on about Yanko's shipwreck. Yanko, he says,

> told me this story of adventure with many flashes of white teeth and lively glances of black eyes, [again we can almost see here Yanko as a "negro"] at first in a sort of anxious baby-talk, then, as he acquired the language, with great fluency, but always with that singing, soft, and at the same time vibrating intonation that instilled a strangely penetrating power into the sound of the most familiar words, as if they had

> been the words of an unearthly language. (167)

As Yanko "progresses" from animal, to infant, to extraterrestrial ("unearthly language"), he is never allowed to inhabit the normal position of simply "a man." And although we obtain, through Conrad's use of indirect discourse, a good intimation of how Yanko's speech appeared to Kennedy, it is nonetheless Kennedy who retains the power to speak for Yanko. Yanko must *speak through* Kennedy in order to be heard. We rely on Kennedy to give us the information we need to piece together Yanko's biography, but we can never get the whole picture. We are, after all, readers of *English*, and we stand in the same relation to Yanko as the other English speakers around him. He remains, in the end, just as foreign to us as he did to them because there must be a narrator (or two), acting as translator, interposed between us and him.

C. The Double Narrator: Discourse Twice Removed

1. What's in a name?

The narrative complexity of the majority of Conrad's stories and novels is well known, and *Amy Foster* is no exception. While the framing narrator's passages have little or no direct bearing on the story of the character named Amy Foster, they are vital to an understanding of the story *Amy Foster*. I would like to examine these passages in order to show how Conrad's use of the double narrator pushes us away from Yanko's story, rather than bringing us closer to it, and opens gaps in our understanding that cannot be filled, forcing the reader to experience a disorientation analogous to the one Yanko himself experiences. Wieslaw Krajka writes that "Yanko applies verbal and non-verbal codes of expression which are entirely misunderstood by his interlocutors." ("The Dialogue of Cultures in Joseph Conrad's *Amy Foster*," 152). For the reader, the codes of course are purely verbal, but Conrad allows the same misunderstanding that exists between Yanko and his textual interlocutor to exist between the author and his reader. Yet at the same time, he makes "about 1100 substantive alterations [to the first manuscript version], many of which focus on providing specific details and sense impressions of Yanko Goorall's

experience." (Fraser, 181). Did Conrad want us to understand Yanko or not? Is his ambiguity towards his character and his reader intentional, or is it informed by his own unconscious ambiguity and ambivalence towards the nature of "l'incompabilité des races"?

In order to attempt an answer to these last questions, I must begin with an analysis of Conrad's final choice of title for this story: Amy Foster. In calling his story by this name, Conrad from the outset denies the reader the possibility of focussing on Yanko Goorall by not conferring on him the role of eponymous hero. In fact, Conrad had originally thought of two other titles for this work: "The Husband" and "The Castaway", both, of course, referring to Yanko. According to Nadjer (who devotes only half a page to the story), Conrad "eventually decided to bring to the fore the character of Yanko's dull-witted wife, Amy Foster, and thus stress what he regarded as the keynote of the story, the "incompatibility of races," (Nadjer, 273, and note 30, 550). What is difficult to follow in Nadjer's interpretation of the title is his use of the word "thus." How does the title *Amy Foster* stress the "incompatibility of races"? Had, for example, Conrad called the story "Amy Foster and Yanko Goorall" Nadjer's choice of adverb would have been more convincing. Gail Fraser, in her

article on Conrad's revisions to *Amy Foster* offers another possible interpretation of the title, and of Amy's role:

> Although by doing so [directing our attention to Amy], he avoided indentifying himself too closely with Yanko's situation as a foreigner, Conrad may have wanted also to make Colebrook's mysterious inner life more real to the reader....By emphasizing the mystery of Amy's character, he tried to suggest...a specifically "English" temperament that remains, in the end, indecipherable and ambiguously symbolic. Amy does not 'fit' within the formal and thematic structure that opposes Yanko's perspective to the community's point of view. Characteristically, therefore Conrad refused to categorize the intangible spirit of the countryside where he was living, to some extent, as a foreigner and outsider. (191-92)

This analysis is closer to ours. Amy, although part of the Colebrook community ("She was born in the village, and had never been farther away from it than Colebrook, or perhaps Darnford," 159), is different from everyone around her. In fact, Conrad takes great peains in his descriptions of her to show that she, oke Yanko, is an outsider in the community: "She and I alone in all the land, I fancy," says Kennedy, "could see [Yanko's] very real beauty" (184); the word "alone" that links her and Kennedy in isolation from

the rest of the village sets her apart; or "Smith told the girl that she must be mad to take up with a man who was surely wrong in his head," (184).

Amy's own status as an outsider, "mad" and "alone," is what draws her to Yanko in the first place. Even the scientific Kennedy describes Yanko at one point as "Smith's lunatic," thus establishing in the reader's mind a link between Amy's "madness" and Yanko's "lunacy."(177) And when Kennedy first describes Amy to the framing narrator, he mentions that "the only peculiarity I perceived in her was a slight hesitation in her utterance, a sort of preliminary stammer which passes away at the first word," (159).[1] This "slight hesitation", this "preliminary stammer" is an impediment to communication which also links her to Yanko.[2] The various similarities between Amy and Yanko which result in their initial attraction to one another are not enough, however, to overcome the "incompabilite des races."

The name Amy Foster is itself significant. Conrad had originally thought of naming her "Amy Forsett" or "Amy Fositter." (Fraser, 191) The name "Foster" which he finally

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[1]For other examples and an analysis of infirmity/disability as a metaphor for exile, see the chapter on Beckett infra.

[2]I am grateful to Bella Brodski for pointing out this trait of Amy's which I had overlooked.

selected, however, is directly related to the role Amy plays in the story. First of all, Amy is the one who *fosters* the telling of Yanko's story by Kennedy to the framing narrator: it is when the framing narrator sees her while accompanying Kennedy on his rounds that he asks the question that prompts Kennedy to tell the story of Yanko. This is the only direct link between Amy and the framing narrator, the only place in which they have a relationship *outside* of the telling of the story between Yanko and Amy. It is, we presume, the framing narrator of *Amy Foster*--the ostensible "writer" of the tale--who chose to name his narrative after Amy. Without the narrator's frame, that is, if there had been but one narrator--Kennedy--it is much more likely that the story would have been named "Yanko Goorall," or even one of Conrad's original titles mentioned above.

On another level, the name Amy Foster points to Amy's relationship with Yanko, and it is the evolution of this relationship, from a friend, *amie-Amy*, who *fosters* ("nurse, mother, care for, tend, take in feed, nourish, nurture, support, sustain; cherish, treasure, hold dear, harbor, protect") to an enemy who refuses even to give Yanko a glass of water on his death bed, that establishes the inherent irony in Conrad's choice of name for her.

2. What's in a narrator?

Amy Foster opens with the voice of the framing narrator as he introduces us to Kennedy and frames the tale that he is about to hear. He *describes* the countryside and *names* the towns in which Kennedy practices. In other words, he has the power of the dominant language that is denied Yanko: the power to describe, the power to name.

The framing narrator, early on in the story, tosses off a cliched description of Kennedy, the "country doctor" who will tell him Yanko's story:

> ...I could hear Kennedy's laugh through the half-open door of some cottage. He had a big, hearty laugh that would have fitted a man twice his size, a brisk manner, a bronzed face, and a pair of gray, profoundly attentive eyes. He had the talent of making people talk to him freely, and an inexhaustible patience in listening to their tales. (156)

The framing narrator also informs us that Kennedy's intelligence "is of a scientific order, of an investigating habit, and of that unappeasable curiosity which believed that there is a particle of general truth in every good mystery." (156) Because of these qualities, Kennedy is posited as a

"reliable narrator" and only he "is capable of entering where others fear to tread, his detached mind allowing him the objective clarity with which to grasp the terrible unhappiness of the story." (Said, 48). Kennedy's function, in a sense, is that of a limited translator who is capable to some degree of moving from both viewpoints and presenting them to the reader. On one and the same page, for example, he articulates Yanko's experience: "He became aware of social differences, but remained for a long time surprised at the bare poverty of the churches among so much wealth. He couldn't understand either why they were kept shut up on weekdays. There was nothing to steal in them. Was it to keep people from praying too often?" (181); and the experience of the community: "...all these peculiarities were, as one may say, so many causes of scorn and offense to the inhabitants of the village. *They* wouldn't in their dinner hour lie flat on their backs on the grass to stare at the sky. Neither did they go about the fields screaming dismal tunes." (181). The juxtaposition of these two points of view allows the reader to perceive that both Yanko and the inhabitants perceive on another's customs as savage, pointing to what James Clifford refers to as a kind of "ethnographic subjectivity":

> It is not surprising to find throughout [Conrad's] work a sense of the simultaneous artifice and necessity of cultural, linguistic conventions. His life of writing, of constantly becoming an English writer, offers a paradigm for ethnographic subjectivity; it enacts a structure of feeling continuously involved in translation among languages, a consciousness deeply aware of the arbitrariness of conventions, a new secular relativism. (96)

Kennedy does not, of course, draw our attention to this "ethnographic subjectivity." He merely presents his interpretation of the facts to the framing narrator, who in turn offers them to the reader for his or her own interpretation. The two English narrators act as filtering agents to the story of Yanko, the foreigner, who is now twice removed from us by the interposing of the two narrators who, paradoxically, are from "our" (anglophone) culture.

> As though Conrad felt the very writing of his stories as a tempting but threatening anarchy, he interposed in most of them a dispassionate narrator, ironically commenting on and distancing us (and Conrad) from the fictive world. He thus defended against communicating not only with his material, but also with his readers. (Holland, 60)

This interposing of a mediating narrator has a distancing effect analogous to writing in a foreign language.

Najder perceptively analyzes this distancing effect in Conrad's work:

> ...writing in a foreign language admits a greater temerity in tackling personally sensitive problems, for it leaves uncommitted the most spontaneous, deeper reaches of the psyche, and allows a greater distance in treating matters we would hardly dare approach in the language of our childhood. As a rule it is easier both to swear and to analyze dispassionately in an acquired language. (116)

But the framing device used by Conrad has additional aims. Patrick Whitely writes, for example, that:

> the meaning of an experience, when it is related by a framing narrative, is implanted in the narrator's interpretation of it and not strictly in the experience itself....One reason Conrad employs the frame device is to dramatize that the truth of an experience is immanent not in its appearances but in the mind that is interpreting the appearances of the experience. An omniscient narrator can ordinarily be expected to get at the kernel of the experience. A narrator framed by the fiction, however, must work with the appearances and cannot, if he is a realistic character, break down the boundaries governing his perspective." (Whitely, 31; 33).

Here is the framing narrator's initial description of the village of Colebrook where Kennedy lives: "The high ground rising abruptly behind the red roofs of the little town crowds the quaint High Street against the wall which defends it from the sea," (155). The town, within the "boundaries governing [the framing narrator's] perspective" must be "defended" from the sea, and it is from the sea that Yanko--outsider, alien, Other, will come. He is born/borne by the sea onto English soil. He is, however, an unwanted child: we see from the above passage that, by metonymy, the village must be *defended* from Yanko.

Beyond the sea wall there lies, again as described by the framing narrator, a "barren beach of shingle, with the village of Brenzette standing out darkly across the water, a spire in a clump of trees," (155). There is "a dilapidated windmill nearby, lifting its shattered arms from a mound no loftier than a rubbish heap," (155). "Barren," dilapidated," "rubbish heap": this is the first image of England that the texts offers us, as if presenting to us the same first image that Yanko must have seen when arriving, shipwrecked and weary, on the coast.

The framing narrator accompanies Kennedy on his rounds one day and it is during this visit that Kennedy begins his narrative of the relationship between Yanko and

Amy. Interestingly, he tells us that the day he heard the story was "a good many years ago now," (156) and the story itself occurred several years prior to its telling to the framing narrator, although we do not know exactly how many. The passing of time adds an additional--temporal rather than spatial or linguistic this time--barrier between the reader and the narrative:

> "l'histoire principale dans ses [Conrad's] nouvelles a pour cadre une unité de temps, bien que le traitement du temps soit loin d'être simpliste: souvent chez Conrad le narrateur, depuis son présent de narration, se souvient d'un evenement passé, ce qui permet d'enrichir le récit des thèmes de la mémoire et du passage du temps. (*Magazine litteraire*, 46)

Although we are of course not implying that all narratives that recount an event which took place in an unknown or distant past are somehow related to exile, it seems logical to agree with Joseph Brodsky when he writes:

> ...une verité encore sur l'exil, c'est peut-être qu'un ecrivain en exil est dans une large mesure un être à tendance rétrospective et rétroactive. En d'autres termes, la rétrospection joue un rôle excessif dans son existence--par rapport au role qu'elle a dans la vie des autres gens. (Brodsky, 89)

In a letter to Cunninghame Graham, Conrad echoes this opinion: "Living with memories is a cruel business. I who have a double life peopled only by shadows growing more precious as the years pass--know what that is" (quoted in Carabine)

Paradoxically, the framing narrator is both a kind of first-hand witness--he sees Amy Foster, so she is not just a figure of Kennedy's imagination--who draws us closer to the tale, and a figure who, by his very interposition between the reader and Kennedy--separates us from the tale, much like the passage of time. The only sections in his voice, rather than in Kennedy's, have nothing to do with the story of Amy and Yanko. Instead, they are descriptions of the landscape, and, as *Amy Foster* continues, of the seascape.

The first description occurs after Kennedy has begun his narrative, and is a nostalgic and melancholy look at the land:

> With the sun hanging low on its western limit, the expanse of the grasslands framed in the counterscarps of the rising ground took on a gorgeous and somber aspect. A sense of penetrating sadness, like that inspired by a grave strain of music, disengaged itself from the silence of the fields. The men we met walked past, slow, unsmiling, with downcast eyes, as if the melancholy of an overburdened earth had

> weighted their feet, bowed their shoulders, borne down their glances. (160)

In this passage there is sky and earth, but no sea. The movement is entirely *downward*, from the low-hanging sun, to the words "grave," "weight," "earth," and "borne down," the "somber" sense of "sadness" is emphasized. This is the English countryside as it exists *after* Yanko's death, which preceded the arrival of the framing narrator on the scene. This downward movement is in sharp contrast to Yanko's upward movement, and this contrast is in fact pointed out by Kennedy:

> ...here on this same road you might have seen amongst these heavy mean a being lithe, supple and long-limbed, straight like a pine, with something striving upwards in his appearance as though the heart within him had been buoyant. Perhaps it was only the force of the contrast, but when he was passing one of these villagers here, the soles of his feet did not seem to me to touch the dust of the road....He was so different from the mankind around that, with his freedom of movement, his soft--a little startled--glance, his olive complexion and graceful bearing, his humanity suggested to me the nature of a woodland creature. He came from there [Kennedy points to the sea]." (161)

By contrasting these two passages, we see that it is as if once the foreign(er) has been removed from the scene, what remains is sadness and weight, just as before he came there was "rubble" and "dilapidation." Whereas he could have brought the hope and experience of a new and different culture, he is rejected because of his difference, his alterity.

Once the framing narrator has learned that Yanko, this extraordinary being, has come from the sea, his focus turns progressively away from the land and towards the sea, as if he were seeking the advent of another Yanko:

> ...from the summit of the descent seen over the rolling tops of the trees in a park by the side of the road, appeared the level sea far below us, like the floor of an immense edifice inlaid with bands of dark ripple, with still trails of glitter, ending in a belt of glassy water at the foot of the sky. The light blur of smoke, from an invisible steamer, faded on the great clearness of the horizon like the mist of a breath on a mirror... (161)

But the sea offers up nothing here, only an "invisible steamer" on a distant horizon.

The framing narrator's next description--after some two pages of Kennedy's narrative--is again of the sea: "...sitting by the open window, I saw, after the windless,

scorching day, the frigid splendor of a hazy sea lying motionless under the moon. Not a whisper, not a splash, not a stir of the shingle, not a footstep, not a sigh came up from the earth below..." (163). Again here there seems to be an *expectation* of something or someone. Conrad's use of praeteritio--"not a whisper, not a splash...not a footstep, not a sigh...." only serves to reinforce that the expectation remains unfulfilled.

We do not hear from the framing narrator again for another twenty-four pages, and here there are only four lines, and again they refer to the sea: "The doctor came to the window and looked out at the frigid splendor of the sea, immense in the haze, as if enclosing all the earth with all the hearts lost among the passions of love and fear," (187).

Twice, then, the words "frigid" and "haze" are used to refer to the sea. The sea symbolizes here not birth, not life, but a mysterious, cold death. The story ends after six additional pages without a closing frame, that is, the framing narrator draws no conclusion, makes no judgment. We are left with Kennedy's words, and they, too, give prominence to the sea: "And looking at him [Yanko's son] I seemed to see again the other one--the father, cast out mysteriously by the sea to perish in the supreme disaster of loneliness and despair," (191). The irony here is that Yanko did not die in

despondency at sea, but in what he had thought was his own, new home, lonely because abandoned by his wife, his child, and the community of men. Exiled from his first home, and his second, he was saved from drowning only to suffer an equally tragic, if not worse, fate.

The framing narrator's voice in *Amy Foster* comes to a total of barely two pages in a story which is thirty-six pages long. For the most part, then, the character to whom he have been referring as the "framing narrator" is not really a narrator at all, but a transcriber. He has no first-hand knowledge of Yanko whatsoever. Unlike Marlow in *Lord Jim*, he cannot even claim that Yanko "existed for me, and after all it is only through me that he exists for you." (LJ, 208). Yanko existed for Kennedy, (if he is in fact the reliable narrator), but for the framing narrator, as for the reader, he becomes merely a construct of the *other's* language. Is he, then, symbolic of the self Conrad fashioned in English?

If one were to eliminate the framing narrator's passages entirely, and establish another, simpler framing device, the actual *story* of Yanko and Amy would not be changed at all, only our perception of it. The passages therefore contain significance for reasons other than the advancement of the plot. As we have said, they all, except the first, deal with the sea. So much has been written about

Conrad's relation to the sea, by Conrad himself in his autobiographical writings, and by critics who offer a vast spectrum of autobiographical, psychoanalytic, and symbolic meanings to the sea in his works. The reading that is the most interesting in the context of this study, however, is one proposed by André Le Vat in an article entitled "La traversee des tenebres":

> Cet élément, la mer, étrangère à sa culture, cette langue rebelle, l'anglais, pierre de touche de sa nouvelle destinée, c'est par leur conquête qu'il [Conrad] s'affirme. Il aimait soutenir que doubler le cap Horn était plus facile que d'écrire en anglais. Dans la réalité, les deux épreuves n'en font qu'une. Les antipodes deviennent le théâtre et l'embleme de l'accession à un nouveau langage, un nouveau élément, un nouveau moi et un nouveau nom. (31)

The sea as described by the English framing narrator is in stark contrast to the sea that Yanko experienced, the sea which, like Conrad, he had to "overcome"--the force that shipwrecked him. As we have said, both Kennedy and the framing narrator--Englishmen--perceive a "level" sea; a "frigid" sea; a "motionless" sea. Yanko, on the other hand, cannot articulate his experience about what happened to him at sea, and here Kennedy projects what he imagines must have been that experience:

> ...he always would come to an end [of his story], with many emphatic shakes of his head, upon that awful sensation of his heart melting within him directly he set foot on board that ship. Afterwards there seemed to come for him a period of *blank ignorance*, at any rate as to facts. *No doubt* he must have been abominably seasick and abominably unhappy--this soft and passionate adventurer, taken thus out of his knowledge, and feeling bitterly as he lay in his emigrant bunk in his utter loneliness; for his was a highly sensitive nature. *The next thing we know of him for certain* is that he had been hiding in Hammond's pig pound by the side of the road....Of these experiences he was unwilling to speak: they *seemed* to have seared into his soul a somber sort of wonder and indignation. (167-68, my emphases)

Unfortunately, we have no proof that this was the case, and here we feel strongly how truly we are severed from Yanko's actual experience. Again, in the passage below, Kennedy *assumes* knowledge about Yanko's experience with the sea of which we have no proof:

> ...one day, from the top of Talfourd Hill, he beheld the sea lying open to his view, his eyes roamed afar, lost in an air of wild surprise, *as though he had never seen such a sight before. And probably he had not. As far as I could make out*, he had been hustled together with many others on

> board an emigrant ship at the mouth of th Elbe, too bewildered to take note of his surroundings, too weary to see anything, too anxious to care. They were driven below into the 'tween-deck and battened down from the very start. (163, my emphasis)

Because Yanko, during his time in exile, was separated by an "immense space from his past and by an immense ignorance from his future" (182), he lives in that static moment that is the beginning of all life in exile. He never is allowed to move beyond that moment. The sea, in fact, represents that "immense space" that separates him from his past, and his experience of it is, in Beckett's terms, "unutterable and ineffable."

Thus he is condemned to remain in the "tween-deck", a tragic, confined space that belongs neither to the new culture nor to the old. When one cannot overcome the hardships of exile by learning to articulate the experience one is "battened down from the very start": the game is lost before it is begun for those who cannot transcend, rise above this "tween-deck."

Yanko has no name and no language to pass along, to be inherited, to make time move forward and, by extension, to give meaning to life. In *Amy Foster* he has lost or is

stripped of anything and everything that could tie him to his homeland. Even his last name, Goorall, is given to him by the local people, "as he would repeat very often that he was a mountaineer (some word sounding in the dialect of his country like Goorall)," (183). Even Kennedy--who is supposed to be the most sympathetic and understanding of Yanko's interlocutors--refers to Yanko's language as a "dialect," as if it were impossible to conceive of the sounds that issued forth from his mouth as a language in their own right. Indeed, it is when he begins to sing and speak to his newborn son in his mother tongue that Yanko most threatens his relationship with his wife, who--even despite her status as an "outsider" in the community, was as close as Yanko could hope to come to integration or understanding. In Conrad's representation, retaining ties with one's language in a foreign place is a subversive act. Wanting to transmit that language to one's children, to allow therefore that language, and the culture carried within it, to live beyond oneself is even more subversive. In his lonely isolation, Yanko was undecipherable but relatively unthreatening, a beast who either "babbled" or was "speechless." Once he attempts to transmit his linguistic and cultural heritage to his son, the menace of a "community" of others becomes too much for his wife to bear:

> His wife had snatched the child out of his arms one day as he sat on the doorstep crooning to it a song such as the mother sing to babies in his mountains. She seemed to think he was doing it some harm....And she had objected to him praying aloud in the evening. Why? He expected the boy to repeat the prayer aloud after him by and by, as he used to do after his old father when he was a child--in his own country. And I discovered he longed for their boy to grow up so that he could have a man to talk with in that language that to our ears sounded so disturbing, so passionate, and so bizarre. (186-87).

In the end, Yanko does not return from the sea; the only proof that we have of his existence is the story Kennedy relates to the framing narrator, which the framing narrator in turn relates to us. This story, however, does not even bear his name.

The fact that Amy Foster was written in English echoes the distance Conrad has already inscribed between the reader and his character through the narrative and naming strategies we analyze in this chapter. The reader is reading a Pole writing in a language in which he believed he had no literary tradition on which to draw.

Conrad, however, never did write ine Polish, and thus it is impossible to have proof positive of what he would have made of the "Polish literary tradition" had he done so. Would he have felt less of an exile? Would Yanko's story have been different had it been told--written--in the language that he and Conrad shared?

Vladimir Nabokov, on the other hand, wrote both in English and Russian and drew on the literary traditions of both cultures and both languages. The following chapter examines the movement--accomplished through translation and rewriting--not only between two literary traditions, but between two selves.

III. Vladimir Nabokov: Transcending *Despair*

...il existe, à l'heure qu'il est, une curieuse littérature d'emigrés russes ou autres, qui sont des *déracines*. Le déracinement de M. Nabokov, comme celui d'Hermann Carlovitch, est total. Ils ne se soucient d'aucune société, fut-ce pour se révolter contre elle, parce qu'ils ne sont d'aucune société. Carlovitch [sic] en est reduit, par suite, à commettre des crimes parfaits et M. Nabokov à traiter, en langue anglaise, des sujets gratuits.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critiques litteraires (Situations, I)*

Whereas so many other language exiles clung desperately to the artifice of their native tongue or fell silent, Nabokov moved into successive languages like a traveling potentate. Banished from Fialta, he has built for himself a house of words. To be specific: the multilingual, cross-linguistic situation is both the matter and form of Nabokov's work.

George Steiner, *Extra-territorial*

A. Introduction and Background to *Despair*

> I have grown much too used to an outside view of myself, to being both painter and model, so no wonder my style is denied the blessed grace of spontaneity. Try as I may I do not succeed in getting back into my original envelope, let alone making myself comfortable in my old self, the disorder there is far too great; things have been moved, the lamp is black and dead, bits of my past litter the floor. (*Despair*, opening paragraph, Chapter II)

This is how Hermann opens the second chapter of his first person narrative, commenting on his own narrative style as it reflects the inner conflicts of his present, writing self in contrast to his previous self, his "original envelope" as it existed, in his mind at least, prior to the act that Despair sets out to narrate: the murder of Felix, a lonely tramp whom Hermann believes to be his physical double. Yet his lament may also be read metaphorically, as a plaintive commentary on Nabokov's life as an exile in Berlin, where he first wrote *Despair* as *Otchayanie* in 1932: "things have been moved, the lamp is black and dead, bits of my past litter the floor." And, in Nabokov's own English versions, the first written in 1936, and the second in 1965, his words serve as an eloquent reminder of Nabokov's position as a Russian writer who, when writing in English, was "denied the

blessed grace of spontaneity" in his style, unable to slip back into his "original envelope."

Despair is the first of Nabokov's novels that he translated into English, and it was, he claimed, his "first serious attempt...to use English for what may loosely be called an artistic purpose," (Despair, 7). The task was, therefore, an arduous one. In a comment to Zinaida Shakhovskay, to whom he wrote at the time he was translating *Otchayanie*, he expressed what might be called, with a certain amount of black humor, his "despair": "To translate oneself is a frightful business, looking over one's insides and trying them on like a glove, and discovering the best dictionary to be not a friend but the enemy camp," (quoted in Boyd, 421). In fact, six years after his first translation of *Despair*, when he was looking for a translator for *Dar* (*The Gift*), he wrote to James Laughlin:

> Without a good deal of linguistic and poetical imagination it is useless [for a translator] to tackle my stuff. I shall control the translation as to the precise meaning and nuance, but my English is not up to my Russian, so that even had I the necessary time I would not be able to do the thing alone. (quoted in Dmitri Nabokov, 42)

Nabokov's attitude towards translation as seen in the above quote is very much in the tradition of the Russian writers whom he admired, for whom translation was an art form, not merely a subservient, second-order phenomenon:

> The major Russian writers--Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Bunin, Blok, Pasternak, Akmatova--have always been translators, and did not consider themselves writers unless they translated....What American writer in the history of our literature, other than Vladimir Nabokov, personally selected and supervised his translators, or did his own translations into the languages he knew? (Leighton, ix, xii).

When one understands Nabokov's lack of confidence in his ability to transform his Russian into an English that met his high standards in the 1930s and 1940s, it is not surprising that some thirty years after having completed his first English-language translation of *Despair* he made the decision to rework that translation. This new English version, which comes after Nabokov's "succès de scandal" with Lolita, was, however, in Nabokov's view, more than simply a perfected translation. In 1965, in his preface to the new English translation he wrote: "I have done more than revamp my thirty-year-old translation: I have revised *Otchayanie* itself," (*Despair*, xii). Not only does he feel more

comfortable with his English at this time, but his attitude towards the original novel and his "original self" has also changed. In the original *Otchayanie*, Nabokov's parodies of and allusions to his Russian forbears are the acts of homage or rebellion of a "son" in relation to his literary fathers. The "father figures" here are Russian, Tolstoy, Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and it is they who provide the structure in and against which the young Sirin must play out his "anxiety of influence." But when Nabokov, some thirty years later, undertakes his second translation of *Despair* into English, he is an established writer in both Russian and English. He is, an a sense, no longer a "son," but has himself become a "father". The passage of time, compounded by the experience of exile and the separation from his mother tongue, has allowed him to stand outside of himself, and look at his past self as if it (he) were another person:

> I...know how pleased and excited I would have been in 1935 had I been able to foreread this 1965 version. The ecstatic love of a young writer for the old writer he will be some day is ambition in its most laudable form. This love is not reciprocated by the older man in his larger library, for even if he does recall with regret a naked palate and a rheumless eye, he has nothing but an impatient shrug for the bungling

> apprentice of his youth." (preface to *Despair,* xii)

In a sense, then, Nabokov here is his own "false double," just as Hermann is Felix's false double. The fact that Nabokov chose to translate a work whose thematic is false doubling reflects his preoccupation, conscious or not, with the "self" as "other." In addition, and clearly (although critical literature seems to have overlooked this) *Despair* is the "false double" of *Otchayanie*.

B. Reception, Self-Translation and Intertextual Paradigm Shifts

> True, there was among emigrés a sufficient number of good readers to warrant the publication, in Berlin, Paris, and other towns, of Russian books and periodicals on a comparatively large scale; but since none of those writings could circulate within the Soviet Union, the whole thing acquired a certain air of fragile unreality (*Speak Memory*, 280).

> Every novel is more or less generated by the language in which it was written... which makes the difficulty, the unsolvable problems, of translation. One does not write the same novels if one writes in Japanese or Hebrew. These are two languages which function differently, and it is the functioning of a language which produces a narrative standard and, consequently, the discrepancies in relation to the ruling discourse. (Robbe-Grillet, quoted in Oppenheim, 28).

The original Russian-language *Otchayanie* was addressed to the Russian emigre community.[1] The 1936

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[1]Speaking of this community, Nabokov wrote: "In Berlin and Paris, the two capitals of exile, Russians formed compact colonies, with a coefficient of culture that greatly surpassed the cultural mean of the necessarily more diluted foreign communitites among which they were placed." (Speak, Memory, 277)

English translation, published by John Long in 1937, had almost no audience whatsoever. The audience for the 1965 English edition was an American public already familiar with Nabokov's *Lolita,* but to whom his entire Russian oeuvre was as yet virtually unknown. Thus, allusions that were easily grasped by the elite audience of the emigre community would be perceived differently, if at all, by an American readership who had not been fed from the cradle on Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky. If allusions and parodic practices "s'adressent par definition a des publics fortunes," ["are by definition addressed to a privileged audience"] as Gerard Genette has suggested, that is, if they require an audience who shares the author's linguistic, cultural, and literary heritage in order to be fully grasped, a translation of a work such as *Despair,* which relies so heavily on incorporating and parodying the Russian literary tradition, into a language where this tradition is not well-known, becomes an achievement of a particular sort.[1] Nabokov

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[1]Writing about *More Pricks than Kicks,* one of the few of Beckett's English prose works that he did not translate into French, Katharine Worth notes, *"More Pricks than Kicks* could well seem a book to defy translation. Its highly self-conscious, almost agressive Anglo-Irishness is a reminder of the linguistic strains Beckett has suffered under--and profited from," (Worth, 8). The same can be said of the "Russianness" of Nabokov's *Otchayanie.*

undertook its translation in part because he hoped to introduce to his English-speaking audience a work which he believed had "less White-Russian appeal than have my other emigre novels; hence it will be less puzzling and irritating to those readers who have been brought up on the leftist propaganda of the thirties," (xiii).[1]

Yet although it is true that *Despair* alludes more indirectly to the situation of the White Russians of the 1930s than, say, *The Gift*, *King, Queen Knave*, or *Invitation to a Beheading*, it remains, like many of Nabokov's works, a book whose central character and narrator is a Russian *deracine*. And Hermann still intends, in the English versions, to forward his manuscript to a "Russian author" (80) upon its completion. In this sense it is a hybrid text, pitched somewhere between the new audience and the old, a text, as it were, without a country.

The intertextual references in the English-language novel remain primarily constituted by Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev, and Dostoevsky, yet various shifts in the text

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[1]The sarcasm of this cantankerous pronouncement was no doubt directed towards Nabokov's American intellectual peers, among whom, most obviously, Edmund Wilson.

occur which facilitate the Anglophone's access to these references. Like all writers, Nabokov is clearly aware that readers who do not share his intellectual, linguistic, and literary heritage nonetheless bring to each of his works their own intellectual, linguistic, and literary "baggage." Yet the exile writing in a second language is *not* like all writers and the sense of a lack of a shared heritage is particularly acute. One of the best passages in *Despair* illuminates the consequences of this lack of a shared heritage with one's audience. Hermann, commenting on how his work, also titled "Despair," will be received by peoples of various nationalities writes:

> Aye, let other nations, too, translate it into their respective languages, so that American readers may satisfy their craving for gory glamour; the French discern mirages of sodomy in my partiality for a vagabond; and Germans relish the skittish side of a semi-slavonic soul." (168-69)

While the passage is clearly a humorous parody that plays off national stereotypes, it brings into relief some of the more serious problems of cultural misunderstanding discussed in the chapter on Conrad, in particular regarding questions of reception of the work of the bilingual/bicultural

writer. It points, in other words, to the exiled status of the text itself.

Some of these questions are made evident by what I have chosen to term "intertextual paradigm shifts," that is, in the case of *Despair*, places in the English translation where Nabokov changes or contextualizes a literary allusion when moving from Russian to English. In one instance, for example, the Russian text alludes to Pushkin, whereas the English text alludes to Shakespeare. In another, Nabokov changes an allusion to Bal'mont to an allusion to Swinburne; or one to Pushkin to one to Conan Doyle. In other instances, Nabokov does not change the allusion, but merely attributes it to an author (most often to Pushkin) for his English-language readers, since the Russian audience would of course have recognized the allusion without attribution. (Proffer) In a bizarre way, Hermann becomes more cosmopolitan in the English versions because he now has access to a more international corpus. Whether Nabokov himself was aware of the evolution of his character caused by the changes he made in some of his allusions cannot be known, but it is interesting to note that these changes, in effect, have direct repercussions on Hermann's character. The Hermann of the English-language *Despair* is indeed "other" in relation to his Russian counterpart.

This kind of shift is not common in most translations, where more often the translator will add a footnote rather than changing the allusion or incorporating an attribution within the body of the text. Thus the ontological status of a text that is translated by the author differs from that of a translation by someone other than the author. [1] "By reserving the right to revise, Nabokov escapes the theoretical strictures which he places on translators, including himself." (Proffer, 1968, 158). "Revision and adaptation blur one's interest in faithfulness," he wrote about the process of self-translation. (*Strong Opinions*, 296). Faithfulness to the original is no longer the ostensible goal of translation here; the new aims are "revision" and "adaptation" to meet the aesthetic vision of the mature writer of double identity who Nabokov had become. Thus the re-writing of a text through

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[1] It appears, however, that writers who write in two languages and translate themselves, like Nabokov and Beckett, allow themselves, even in their translations of others, certain freedoms. Early in his career, in his 1923 translation into Russian of *Alice in Wonderland*, Nabokov trasposed the setting from England to Russia, and rendered the verse parodies by parodies from the Russian classics, from Pushkin to Lermentov. And Beckett, for example, translated Robert Pinget's *La Manivelle* into the English *The Old Tune*. In this version, the names of Pinget's characters are Anglicized and we have a keen sense of being in the presence of a Beckettian pseudocouple. (See the chapter on Beckett infra).

self-translation/ "revision and adaptation" is one means for an author to return to his "origins" while creating something entirely new. It is an attempt to create, to the extent possible, a comprehensive (in both senses of the word) space for his work in the new culture, for a new audience.[1] In the next section, we shall see how parody may be said to serve an analogous function in the literature of bilingual exiles.

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[1]In article that has not yet been published, Elizabeth Beaujour argues that the second English text in fact *replaces* the Russian text, "all the more so because Nabokov used the revised English text as canonical for translations into other languages," (personal communication).

C. Some Aspects and Functions of Parody

> The subject position of the producer of parody is that of a controlling agent whose actions account for the textual evidence: in a sense it is a hypothetical hermeneutical construct, inferred or 'postulated' by the reader from the text's inscription. But what if the reader 'misread' the intention? What if he or she misses the parody or substitutes for it an intertextual chain of echoes dervied from his or her own reading? (Hutcheon, 88)

> While I keep everything on the brink of parody, there must be on the other hand, an abyss of seriousness, and I must make my way along this narrow ridge between my own truth and the caricature of it. (*The Gift*)

> As often was the way with Sebastian Knight, he used parody as a kind of springboard for reaching into the highest region of serious emotion. *(The Real Life of Sebastian Knight)*

Parody enables Nabokov to position himself in relation to the rest of literature and to the history of ideas, while at the same time driving forward the plot of Hermann's *Despair*. In Thomas Frosch's words, parody acts in Nabokov's work as "an attempt to control literary relations, a way of telling his jury that he already knows how his book is related to prior work. More than that, it is a way of taking

posession of the literary past, of internalizing it," (137). This is quite similar to what Linda Hutcheon perceives as the underlying dynamic of parody in general:

> Although parody can bee seen to be a threatening, even anarchic force, one that puts into question the legitimacy of other texts, its transgressions ultimately remain authorized--by the very norms it seeks to subvert. In mocking, parody reinforces; it inscribes the mocked conventions onto itself. It is in this sense that I would see parody as the custodian of the artistic legacy, defining not only where art is at, but where it has come from." (Groupar, 25)

Because, then, parody is not primarily concerned with imagining the unknown, but rather, with reinventing the known, it allows the writer to express in other than thematic terms an immediate, structural relationship between the past and the present. It provides, therefore, the possibility of a creative, original use of the writer's literary and linguistic heritage, while allowing, in the case of the exiled writer such as Nabokov, a committment to the new language and literary tradition that is so necessary if creative activity is to continue.

Hermann, in his first-person narrative-cum-confession-cum-mystery story, parodies a vast range of

styles, genres, and authors and, at the same time, is himself Nabokov's parody of several figures from Russian literature, includings Dostoevsky's underground man and Raskolnikov, and Pushkin's Hermann in *Queen of Spades*. Like Nabokov, Hermann is a "writer" and an "exile," and thus seems to be a parody of Nabokov himself. The text that results from this "double" pen--Hermann's and Nabokov's--is a *mise en abime*, a parody of parody, and a self-reflexive novel *par excellence*.

The network of parodies and allusions of the second English-language edition of *Despair*[1] is indeed complex. First, there are stylistic parodies of coded discourse and jargons--Marxist, Freudian, literary theory--in which Nabokov attacks what he considers certain "idees recues" of his time. Second, we find the parodies of specific literary figures and works, which are sometimes scornful satires of, and sometimes playful homages to authors of the past. Thirdly, there are the critical parodies of literary conventions and genres: confessional literature, the literature of the double, and detective literature, among others.

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[1]Throughout the rest of this chapter, it will always be to this version that I refer, unless otherwise noted.

The first category of parody is neither specifically "Russian" nor "American"; it transcends national boundaries and is easily identified by any "educated" Western reader. Nabokov hints at some of the Freudian parodies, for example, in his 1965 preface to the novel: "The attractively shaped object or Wiener-schnitzel dream that the eager Freudian may think he distinguishes in the remoteness of my wastes will turn out to be on closer inspection a derisive mirage organized by my agents," (xii).[1]

The second type of parody initiates the reader into both Hermann's and Nabokov's literary worlds: Dostoevsky, for example, a writer whom Nabokov considered severely overrated by non-Russians, becomes "old Dusty" and *Crime and Punishment* becomes *"Crime and Slime.* Sorry: *Schuld und Suhne*, German edition."[2] Here Nabokov and Hermann

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[1]Interestingly, this "attractively shaped object" did not exist in either the Russian version or the first English version. The later addition of this scatalogical element to mock psychoanalytic theory has several implications, some of which are explored later in the body of this work.

[2]Simon Karlinsky, in his article in the Norton Critical Edition of *Crime and Punishment*, observed that "while no western critic or literate person would dare to admit publicly that he dislikes certain aspects of Dostoevsky or is bored by the, Russians themselves never felt any such compunctions," (632). Thus Nabokov's mocking stance, though highly exagerated, is not unusual. Nabokov points out himself in *Strong Opinions*: "Non-Russian readers do not realize two

share the same opinion. On the other hand, we find allusions that pay homage, through Hermann and often unbeknownst to him, to writers whom Nabokov admires: Hermann "unconsciously" doodles Gogolian noses in the margins of his manuscript, (but Nabokov is his "unconscious") and he quotes time and again a Pushkin poem which was one of Nabokov's favorites.

This section focuses on the third category--the parody of literary conventions and genres. Nabokov both exploits and explodes these conventions, using them when necessary, while at the same time allowing his narrator to point out, within the novel itself, their artificiality, their purely conventional nature:

> Here another literary device has crept in: the imitation of foreign novels, themselves imitations, which depict the ways of merry vagabonds, good hearty fellows. (My devices seem to have got mixed up a little, I am afraid.) (45).

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things: that not all Russians love Dostoevski as much as Americans do, and that most of those Russians who do, venerate him as a mystic and not as an artist," (42). These differing views of Dostoevsky by Russian and American readers again point to the problem of reception of works by authors who come from another cultural tradition than their readers.

Wendy Steiner writes in *The Colors of Rhetoric,* "all sign systems are conventional. But once a system *is* conventional, its artificiality is largely invisible," (31). It is precisely this "invisible artificiality" to which Nabokov draws our attention in this and many other passages of *Despair,* whether on the level of language (the arbitrariness of the sign) or on the level of literary convention. Pointing out the artificiality of certain narrative conventions by parodying them serves to reinforce Nabokov's aesthetic stance, in which he insists that:

> when dealing with a work of art, we must always bear in mind that art is a divine game. These two elements--the elements of the divine and that of the game--are equally important. It is divine because this is the element in which man comes nearest to God through becoming a true creator in his own right. And it is a game, because it remains art only as long as we are allowed to remember that, after all, it is all make-believe, that the people on the stage, for instance, are not actually murdered.

The notion of art Nabokov expresses above is in curious contradiction to what certain critics believe is the form and function of exile writing. J.P. Strelka, for example, in his book *Exile: The Writer's Experience*, proposes that:

> In the aftermath of the social breakdown brought about by totalitarianism, the

> survivors experienced an inner gain that, as a rule, balanced the external deprivation they endured. Among writers, this heightened sense of value took the form of a veneration of literature as art. Whether it manifested itself as an intensified ethical consciousness, social commitment, or true piety, the tendency was toward an increased explicitness and concentration on human affairs as the foremost task of art. Art as formalistic play, art for art's sake, or even art for the sake of abstract theory became unthinkable in the face of the events that had driven them to seek havens beyond the borders of their native land. (30)

Nabokov's reliance on parody and the game, in *Despair* and in his other novels as well, reflects a very different aesthetic response to exile. Hutcheon believes that "the ironic distance of modern parody might well come from a loss of that earlier humanist faith in cultural continuity and stability that ensured the sharing of codes necessary to the comprehension of such doubly coded works," (10). This "ironic detachment" and "cultural discontinuity" are clearly factors that influence the artistic creation of an exile who has given up his language and the cultural context of "home," and as such are reflected in Nabokov's work.

Strelka's notion of "social commitment," then, is far from the only possible response of the artist in exile. The exiled artist's questioning of social forms and conventions is

extended to the aesthetic realm as a questioning of literary forms and conventions, and this questioning is best achieved in Nabokov's work through parody.

In *Strong Opinions* Nabokov wrote: "Satire is a lesson, parody is a game," (75), and in *Despair* Nabokov would have us believe that he is not interested in lessons: "*Despair*, in kinship with the rest of my books, has no social comment to make, no message to bring in its teeth," (Preface, xii). He admits, however, his interest in games, as we have seen in the quotation about the "divine game" above, and as is obvious from his well-known interest in chess (not to mention the fact that he was a tennis coach during his years in Berlin!). In fact, the game, particularly chess, is an important structural and metaphorical element of much of Nabokov's work (*The Defense; King, Queen, Knave; The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, etc.). "Games like chess are distinguished from many other organized human activities by combining two apparently conflicting characteristics: they are simultaneously purposeful and purposeless," writes Roy Harris in *Language, Saussure and Wittgenstein: How to Play Games with Words.* "That is to say, such games impose upon their players certain requirements which are compulsory but at the same time arbitrary. Saussure and Wittgenstein both saw this combination of features as

profoundly typical of language," (Harris, 47). Huizinga extends this view of the game/play to say that it has "its aim in itself and [is] accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is "different" from ordinary life," (28). And, according to Gadamer, "The being of all play is always realization, sheer fulfilment, energeia which has its telos within itself. The world of the work of art, in which play expresses itself fully in the unity of its course, is in fact a wholly transformed world. By means of it everyone recognizes that that is how thing are," (101). Compare to Nabokov: "For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm," (*Annotated Lolita*, 317).[1] Fiction,

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[1]Here Nabokov joins another exiled writer, this time a Haitian, Rene Depestre. Joan Dayan, in her article "France Reads Haiti: Rene Depestre's *Hadrianas dans tous mes reves*, writes: "...for a writer like Depestre, who has now articulated his personal romanticism while celebrating what he calls a 'veritable bulimia of reading," there is only one truth, the aesthetic." She quotes Depestre as saying: "Exile is usually considered a mourning, a lack; the search for one's native land, the return are obsessional. Personally, I have a joyous idea of exile. Poetry and literature have now allowed me to synthesize the contradiction of my life." (Dayan, 156). Again we have a sense of literature's ability to *reterritorialize* the deterritorialized.

therefore, is both purposeful and purposeless, language with no ulterior end, by nature resembling play. Hermann, however, is not concerned with play, but with winning: he attempts to stack the cards.

> My accomplishment resembles a game of patience, arranged beforehand; first I put down the open cards in such a manner as to make its success a dead certainty; then I gathered them up in the opposite order and gave the prepared pack to others with the perfect assurance it would come out. (132)

The game is then compared to the work of art:

> If the deed is planned and performed correctly, then the force of creative art is such, that were the criminal to give himself up on the very next morning, none would believe him, the invention of art containing far more intrinsical truth than life's reality. (132).

Hermann, however, is not an artist, but rather, a cheater. And his use of the phrase "dead certainty" is a "dead giveaway" to the fact that his "art" does not create, but destroys.

Hermann, who represents the extreme of exilic isolation and cultural discontinuity, cannot create, and

because of this dysfunction as a creator, he may be seen as a mirror image, a parody of Nabokov.

D. Hermann as Author as a Parody of Nabokov as Author

Roland Barthes, in "The Death of the Author writes: "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God), but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash." Interestingly, while Barthes here categorically opposes the notion of the Author-God to the notion of the non-original, "multi-dimensional space," Nabokov seems to have no trouble at all wedding these two concepts in his fiction, as he continues to insist that art is a "divine game" and that the author is what he as termed an "anthropomorphic deity." At the same time, his work is clearly a "multi-dimensional" space in which all of literary history (or at least as much of literary history as Vladimir Nabokov, Author-God, has managed to assimilate) and a variety of other discourses, come into play. It is, of course, through parody that he manages to unite these elements: the choice of what to parody and in what way represent the creative moves of the author-god; but the voices in his fiction are rendered unquestionably multiple through parody. Nabokov appears, then, much closer to a Bakhtinian stance than a Barthesian one, since, according to Bakhtin:

> for the prose artist, the world is full of other people's words, among which he must orient himself and whose speech characteristics he must be able to perceive with a very keen ear. He must introduce them into the plane of his own discourse, but in such a way that this plane is not destroyed. He works with a very rich verbal palette.

Hermann stands in stark contrast to this notion of the prose artist, or rather, as a perfect parody of it. He wants his words to release a "single theological line of meaning;" he demonstrates time and again that he lacks a "very keen ear," all the while claiming that "there is not a thing about" literature that he does not know. His literary allusions unfailingly reveal him to be merely a parody of the artist or scholar, lacking all artistic sensitivity and literary understanding. Rather than contributing to a rich verbal palette they ironically and parodistically point to his literary failings, and undermine his narrative credibility: "At school I used," he writes, "invariably, to get the lowest mark for Russian composition, because I had a way of my own with Russian and foreign classics; thus, for example, when rendering 'in my own words' the plot of *Othello* (which was, mind you, perfectly familiar to me), I made the Moor

skeptical and Desdemona unfaithful, (56). And: "There is, I believe, somewhere in Pascal a wise thought: that two persons resembling each other do not present any interest when met singly, but create quite a stir when both appear at once. I have never read Pascal nor do I remember where I pinched that quotation." (89). The first passage quoted--the unfaithful Desdemona--is Nabokov's, not Hermann's, reference to the infidelity that haunts the text. Unbeknownst to Hermann, his wife is having an affair with her cousin, Ardalion. And although this affair is outrageously obvious to the reader, Hermann remains blind to it throughout *Despair*. Not only does Nabokov mock the character he has created here, but he adds another level to Hermann's inability to function within society: sexual dysfunction. Sexual dysfunction may be viewed as yet another metaphor for the exilic state. In particular, it may symbolize the feelings of incapacity that the exile experiences regarding the new language he must learn and the new cultural codes he must interpret.

The second passage quoted above reinforces Hermann's narcissistic preoccupation with doubles and doubling, parodying Nabokov's own parodies of the literature of the "double" (see below), while at the same time adding another,

twisted layer to Hermann's unreliability as a narrator. This time, he has claimed *not* to have read something which, clearly, he *has* read. Here is Pascal: "Deux visages semblables, dont aucun ne fait rire en particulier, font rire ensemble par leur ressemblance," (*Pensees*, 13, 47). (And note that in Hermann's variant the word "rire"--laughter--does not exist. Hermann has no sense of humor and does not see what is "laughable" about his situation.) Again, there is a relation here to bilingualism and exile, states in which a *comparison* between two languages and two cultures is a fact of daily existence that informs all literary creation. This is not true for the monoglot, of whom Alan Titley has written:

> It often comes as a shock to the monoglot that there are whole universes of creation outside his ken, great vistas out there in the noncomprehensible netherlands of otherness." (127).

"I fear nothing and will tell all," writes Hermann. "It should be admitted that I exercise an exquisite control not only over myself but over my style of writing," (79). Here, Hermann is attempting to posit himself as an Author-God, both in relation to his literary work and in relation to his "criminal masterpiece," the murder of Felix. But as we have

seen, Hermann's material is always eluding him, not only because he is a failed artist, but because Nabokov has created him as a failed moral being as well. Nabokov describes his vision of Hermann and *Despair* in a 1936 letter to the British publishing company Hutchinson & Co.:

> My book is essentially concerned with subtle dissections of a mind anything but "average" or "ordinary": nature had endowed my hero with literary genius, but at the same time there was a criminal taint in his blood; the criminal in him, prevailing over the artist, took over those very methods which nature had meant the artist to use.

It is clear here that Nabokov wishes Hermann to stand as a parody of the true artist, in this case, Nabokov himself, and it is important to grasp the *moral* relationship he sees between literary talent and its use as exposed here. "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style," says Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*. Michael Wood writes about Humbert's style, "we might want to say that the prose is a redemption of the images [of strangled, comic helplessness], a compensation in language for the fiascos of action," (159). And whereas Humbert Humbert is attempting to pay tribute to Lolita and to atone for his crime through his book of the same name, Hermann's prose serves no such lofty ambition.

It is not an atonement for his crime, but rather an attempt at a justification, a rationalization of it. He writes: "Any remorse on my part is absolutely out of the question: an artist feels no remorse, even when his work is not understood, not accepted." (187)

Thus, to take but one example of Hermann's style, he uses wordgames in an entirely self-serving manner, and they unvariably reveal the ugliness of his aims. Hermann, unlike Humbert ("Ah, my Lolita, I have only words to play with."), does not see the beauty in words, but constantly drags them down to his own base level: "I liked, as I like still, to make words look self-conscious and foolish, to bind them by the mock marriage of a pun, to turn them inside out, to come upon them unawares. What is this jest in majesty? This ass in passion? How do God and Devil combine to form a live dog?" (56) Majesty, passion, and God--words which are ordinarily invoked to call upon a power beyond the self--are mocked by Hermann's manipulations, thereby losing any possibility of transcendent significance.[1]

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[1]This is an important instance in which Nabokov makes Hermann a more heinous character in English than he was in the Russian text. The Russian passage

Hermann's inability to see transcendent significance anywhere is what isolates him from the realm of creativity. Just as he equates the game with winning, rather than with playing, he equates God only with power, not with creation, and therefore cannot create. He reveals his isolation in a key passage in Chapter Six:

> There is yet another reason why I cannot, nor wish to, believe in God: the fairy tale about him is not really mine, it belongs to strangers, to all men; it is soaked through by the evil-smelling effluvia of millions of other souls that have spun about a little under the sun and then burst....it is foreign to me, and odious and absolutely useless. (111-12)

"All men" are "strangers" to Hermann. He has not only exiled himself from the Kingdom of Heaven, but from the Kingdom of mankind. His attitude towards the "evil-smelling effluvia" of humanity is striking. The "foreign" is only

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translates literally as "what is the soviet wind doing in the veterinarian? Whence this tomato in a slot-machine?" Nabokov could easily have found English equivalents that were just as neutral. (For example, something like "How did this room get in mushroom? What has butter to do with a butterfly?" The fact that he did not do so, that he specifically added a negative tone to this passage upon reworking, shows perhaps that he had less sympathy for Hermann as time went on.

"odious" and "useless"--there is clearly no understanding, nor desire to understand, anything but himself.

As *Despair* "deteriorates into a lame diary" (211) when Hermann loses complete control over his life and his writing, into something which is clearly a parody of a "diary of a madman" at the end of the novel, Hermann's final entry is written on April first. The Russian reader easily identifies this date as Gogol's birthday, and the reference to it reinforces the many connections between Gogol's *Diary of a Madman* and Nabokov's *Despair*.[1] The American reader has another point of reference: April Fool's Day. And the allusion to this day of fools underscores the "trick" aspect of Nabokov's art and points to the person--Nabokov himself--who is really in control of the writing, unfortunately unbeknownst to his character. In the final pages of

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[1]The hero of Gogol's *Diary*, Aksenty Poprishchin, is, like Hermann, a paranoiac and a megalomaniac. Simon Karlinsky writes, "In the 19th century, *Diary of a Madman* was frequently read as a clinical case study. Medical specialists wrote and published articles certifying that the story contained a classical outline of paranoia, a fully believable account of how a normal and sane man retreats into a world of day dreams and loses his mind under the pressure of his unbearable humiliating and lowly position in life and his disappointment in love," (*Gogol*, 119). Hermann can easily remind the reader of Aksenty, and could also be used as a "case study," something which Nabokov warns against in his preface.

Invitation to a Beheading, for example, the entire scenery of the novel collapses, and the about-to-be-executed Cincinnatus leaves the scaffold to "make his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood, beings akin to him" (223). At the end of *Bend Sinister*, when Adam Krug is shot, "the wall vanished, like a rapidly withdrawn slide, and I [Nabokov] stretched myself and got up from among the chaos of written and rewritten pages, to investigate the sudden twang that something had made in striking the wire netting of my window." (200) Similarly, Hermann writes in his Diary on April Fool's Day, "Maybe it is all mock existence, an evil dream; and presently I shall wake up somewhere, on a patch of grass near Prague." (211) At some point in his narrative, Hermann in fact senses that he has another "double" watching his every move, but unlike Krug, whom Nabokov saves at the last minute before "another and better bullet" can hit him, and unlike Cincinnatus, who moves off in an almost heavenly choir to the world beyond the text inhabited by his creator, Nabokov does not allow Hermann to escape his hellish fate, but rather condemns him to the circular rewriting and rereading of his tale of murder, until he himself is perhaps captured and killed directly beyond the borders of the text.

All of Hermann's intertextual manipulations in *Despair* reverberate with Nabokov's own parodies. Hermann is also Nabokov's parody of Pushkin's anti-hero in *The Queen of Spades*, also named Hermann. Pushkin's Hermann's cruel attempts to seduce the innocent Liza Ivanova begin with his plagiarizing, in a letter to her, a passage from a German sentimental novel. Liza Ivanova unfortunately believes that the letter is a true expression of Hermann's emotions, when in fact it is nothing more than a calculated recopying of an earlier text to serve his goal, the discovery of the secret of the cards. Nabokov's Hermann never, in fact, alludes to Pushkin's *Queen of Spades* and the text becomes conspicuous in its absence. As we recall his statement that "There is not a thing about literature I do not know," we again realize the falsity of this claim and how it adds an additional layer to his exile. Hermann is buffeted like a rag in the wind by the texts that he does not know and therefore does not control, and Nabokov, somewhat maliciously, controls him in this way, thereby pointing to a complicity between Nabokov the author and the reader, who become the two players in a game, with Hermann as the pawn. Not only exiled from country and language as is his creator, Hermann, who cannot see how he fits into literary history, is condemned to wander

ceaselessly among texts of which he has no knowledge, and becomes an exile from the kingdom of literature itself.

It is in fact possible that Nabokov exerts such "dictator-like" control upon his character because of the inability he had to wield that same power over the forces which propelled him into exile. Art, it would seem, is the only place where one can have control, and when that control slips away, as it does in Hermann's case, "therein the road to madness lies."

Talking about his youth, Hermann writes:

> As a child I composed verse and elaborate stories. I never stole peaches from the hothouse of the North Russian landowner whose steward my father was. I never buried cats alive. I never twisted the arms of playmates weaker than myself; but, as I say, I composed abstruse verse and elaborate stories, with dreadful finality and without any reason whatever lampooning acquaintances of my family. But I did not write down those stories, neither did I talk about them. Not a day passed without my telling some lie. I lied as a nightingale sings, ecstatically, self-obliviously; reveling in the new life-harmony which I was creating." (55)

Constructing a new self through fiction is what Hermann attempts to do in his text. He tries to believe that there is no distinction between the fictional construct of the

self and the actual self who lives in historical and moral time. It is through this inability to distinguish between the "rhetorical" and the "empirical" "I" that Nabokov enters and parodies the autobiographical/confessional genres (the reference to stealing peaches above is a parody of the fruit-stealing incident in Augustine's *Confessions*), deforming them (a "fictional confession" should by rights not exist; it is an oxymoron), and calling into question claims of "truth" in the construction of the self through writing.

E. Autobiographical Parodies: Self as Other; Product and Process

> It is the internal transformation of the individual--and the exemplary character of this transformation--that furnishes a subject for a narrative discourse in which "I" is subject and object. (Starobinski, 78)
>
> *Exil.* Une sorte de prédilection pour ce mot qui, par une fausse etymologie, devient *ex il*, hors du il, hors de soi. Ce sera l'exil. (Sojer, 83)

Despair is a parody of the quest for the "self" and the literary genres that accompany or enact that quest: the diary, the memoir, the confession, the autobiography. In this novel, Nabokov exploits the conventions and weaknesses of the autobiographical forms in order to reveal their limitations and thereby to advance his esthetic posture vis-a-vis the relationship between "art" and "truth." At the same, the work represents, through Hermann's inability to construct a coherent self, the exile's struggle to do the same, when he is, in Sojer's terms, "hors du soi," outside of the self. In the words of Czslew Milosz, "New eyes, new thought, new distance: that a writer in exile needs all this is obvious, but whether he overcomes his old self depends upon resources which he only dimly perceived before."[1]

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[1]In addition, because *Despair* is so clearly a parody of the autobiographical forms, the reader cannot help but compare

Hermann's confession never accomplishes what he sets out to achieve: it neither demonstrates his abilities as a literary artist nor exonerates him of his crime. Rather, it is very similar to what the narrator of Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* writes about Razumov's journal, when he describes it as "the mental and psychological self-confession, self analysis...the pitiful resource of a young man who had near

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Hermann's "autobiographical" work to Nabokov's own autobiography, *Speak, Memory*. Nabokov wrote *Speak, Memory* first in English as *Conclusive Evidence* (1951), then translated it into Russian as *Drugie Berega (Other Shores)* (1954), and then reworked it once again into English as *Speak, Memory* (1966). Thus, like *Despair, Speak, Memory* is in fact not one text, but three, and it undergoes changes related to a shift in language and a shift in audience much as *Despair* does. In the preface to the final English edition of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov writes:

> I have not only introduced basic changes and copious additions into the initial English text, but have availed myself of the corrections I made while turning it into Russian. This re-Englishing of a Russian re-version of what had been an English re-telling of Russian memories in the first place, proved to be a diabolical task, but some consolation was given me by the thought that such multiple metamorphosis, familiar to butterflies, had not been tried by any human before. (12-13)

him no trusted intimacy, no natural affection to turn to," (214).

Nor does Hermann's text accomplish what Jean Starobinski establishes as one of the primary functions of autobiographical texts. According to Starobinski, autobiography "only requires that certain possible conditions be realized, conditions that are mainly ideological (or cultural): that the personal experience be important, that it offer an opportunity for a sincere relation with someone else," (Starobinski, 77). Thus Nabokov condemns Hermann to wander in Hell, not because he fictionalizes his life, but because that fictionalization is based on insincerity rather than on an attempt to attain a higher truth. When John Shade--the "genuine" poet in *Pale Fire*--hears someone being referred to as "technically a loony" because he thought "he was God and began redirecting the trains," he responds: "That is the wrong word....One should not apply it to a person who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention. That's merely turning a new leaf with the left hand," (169). Hermann has done more than replace a drab and unhappy past, however. He has murdered another human being, and tried to construct a fiction in order to justify his deed. His lies are both self-directed and other-directed. The fact that he "confesses" to

being a liar cannot be construed as an act of courage or a desire for atonement, but rather as one more attempt to refute the actual nature of his crime. By writing *Despair*, Hermann hopes to fictionalize his act, to transform himself from murderer into artist, to translate an ethical problem into an esthetic problem, and to overcome his "old self". As Sergei Davidov has pointed out:

> The likely model for Hermann's criminal esthetics is Thomas de Quincey, who in his famous triptych "On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts," called the murderer an "artist" and his crime an "oeuvre." By raising the crime to the level of esthetics, Hermann successfully eliminates all ethical consequences which might otherwise stem from it." (161)

Although I would argue with Davidov's use of the word "successfully"--for neither Hermann, nor the reader, are in the end convinced that the ethical consequences of his act disappear--Hermann's attempt to transform the ethical into the esthetic, his effort to organize the chaos of "life" into the form of "art", and his failure to do so, reflect his failed attempt at constructing a coherent psychological self and an artistic autobiography.

James Olney writes about the relationship between the self and its writing in autobiography, that:

> Neither the *autos* nor the *bios* is there in the beginning, a completed entity, a defined, known self or a history to be had for the taking. Here is where the act of writing--the third element of autobiography--assumes its true importance: it is through that act that the self and the life, complexly intertwined...take on a certain form, assume particular shapes and images, and endlessly reflect that image back and forth between themselves as between two mirrors. (22)

And Nabokov writes in the first chapter of his own autobiography, *Speak, Memory:* "The following of...thematic designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography," (27).

Hermann, on the other hand, opens *Despair* in this way:

> If I were not perfectly sure of my power to write and of my marvelous ability to express ideas with the utmost grace and vividness...So, more or less, I had thought of beginning my tale. Further, I should have drawn the reader's attention to the fact that had I lacked that power, that ability, et cetera, not only should I have refrained from describing certain recent events, but there would have been nothing to describe, for, gentle reader, *nothing at all would have happened.*" (ellip*ses* in text, my italics)

If he could not write, nothing would have happened. For Hermann, there is neither *autos* nor *bios* without *graph*.

Unfortunately, he so totally equates his words with his life that he is incapable of distinguishing the two. Part of this inability may be attributed to his status as an exile, exiled, as it were, even from exile: As the son of a Russian-speaking German father and a Russian mother, Hermann finds himself in Berlin as "a man without a proper identity, neither at home in Germany nor an exile from lost Russia; he is, in many respects, an invisible man, yearning to create himself in a world that pays him no attention," (Dillard, 140). Hermann, like the exiled Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, and like Nabokov himself, has only "words to play with." They are the building blocks with which he longs to create his identity (autos and bios), through the act of writing (graph) *Despair*. A close reading of his opening paragraph above reveals, however, that Hermann lacks the very qualities he claims to have as a writer, and throughout the rest of *Despair*, his "autos" and "bios" must be pieced together by his reader; his "self" will be fashioned in spite of his words, not because of them. His claim to be "perfectly sure of [his] power to write, etc." is followed by ellipses and an "et cetera." There is no "grac*e*" here to draw us in, nor "vividness" of style. His beginning is a false start, his opening paragraph reveals weaknesses rather than strengths, as a writer and as a human being. What

Starobinski has claimed for the place of "style" in autobiography sheds light on the style of *Despair* as it parodies autobiography:

> Style, as an original quality, accentuating as it does the importance of the present in the act of writing seems to serve the conventions of narrative, rather than the realities of reminiscence. It is more than an obstacle, or a screen, *it becomes a principle of deformation and falsification.* (my italics).

While this is no doubt true of the majority of autobiographical acts, it is even more germane to Hermann's "confession," where "deformation" and "falsification" are the manifest principles by which he leads his life and writes his book. In *Le pacte autobiographique*, Philippe Lejeune writes that, in autobiography, the relation between writer and reader is based entirely on mutual trust:

> Sur le plan *interne* de l'autobiographie, il n'y a rien qui le distingue du roman autobiographique. La différence est donc externe: il faut pour l'établir fair intervenir la connaissance d'éléments exterieurs au texte. Dans l'autobiographie, on suppose qu'il y a identité entre *l'auteur* d'une part, et le *narrateur* et le protagoniste d'autre part. C'est a dire que le "je" renvoie a l'auteur. Rien dans le texte ne peut le prouver. L'autobiographie est un genre fondé sur la confiance. (24)

Hermann, as a parody of the autobiographer, insists on destroying this trust, and thus Nabokov, through him, highlights the artifices necessary to confessional literature, and the complex relationship between *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit* in all literature, autobiographical or otherwise. In *Despair*, Nabokov creates a first-person narrator who is one of the most dishonest confessors ever to present himself to the reader's judgment. Not only does Hermann qualify himself as a "light-hearted and inspired" liar, but he insists that in any work narrated in the first person, is own included, "the first person is as fictitious as all the rest," (53).

By constantly undermining his narrative authority, Hermann makes it difficult--if not impossible--for the readers to orient themselves within the web of his lies. He claims, for example, to have twenty-five different kinds of handwriting, and that his manuscript for *Despair* "is written in all my twenty-five hand mixed together...and it is...extremely probably that some rat-faced, sly little expert will discover in its cacographic orgy a sure sign of psychic abnormality. So much the better," (90). Hermann's words are more than a gratuitous Nabokovian slap in the face of psychoanalytic criticism. They reveal the impossibility of

knowing *through the text itself* whether Hermann's statement corresponds to an extra-textual reality. For the text we are reading is of course a *printed* text: the purported author's handwriting is nowhere to be seen. And the "rat-faced sly little expert," Freud or one of his followers no doubt, could not get his hands on a manuscript even if he tried, because Hermann's manuscript of course does not exist.

Nabokov no doubt could have framed this story in the same way that he framed *Lolita* (the pun on "frame" is a good one and I let it stand, for the frame in *Lolita* is of course as fictional as the rest, an attempt to "frame" not only the text, but the reader as well). That is, he could have invented a character like John Ray, the fictitious editor of the *Lolita* manuscript who pens a forword to the work. This character could have informed the reader of something to the effect of "I found this manuscript one winter day lying on the ground in a woods by a lake in Germany. It was written in twenty-five different hands. At first I thought it was written by several people, but upon closer inspection, etc." In *Despair*, there is no voice save Hermann's own, nothing against which to weigh his statements, no "frame" to undermine his credibility, to ironize his perspective, or even, oppositely, to corroborate what he says. He alone

undermines his credibility by deconstructing his own constructed self and text, thereby destroying any "confiance"--trust--the reader could have in him.

Carroll warns that, in *Despair*,

> we must be unusually cautious readers, but we need not go as far as Stephen Suagee, who feels that the "more drastic instances of delusion. . . totally discredit Hermann as a reporter," and concludes "in the end, we cannot decide what is real and what unreal" What "really" happens is less important than what Hermann believes has happened, and if we are cast adrift with few external bearings, it isn't the onnly time in Nabokov." (83)[1]

The question which Carroll does not raise here, however, and one which must be raised, is why Nabokov casts his readers adrift "with few external bearings" in the first place. One answer relates to Nabokov's aesthetic posture as defined in the quotation about the "divine game" above: The structural autonomy of all Nabokov's novels, their structural circularity, is also a symbolic circulairity;

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[1]Suagee writes "Clearly, Hermann is not in control of what he chooses to call his artist's memory, and it is up to us as readers to make what we can of all these mysterious repetitions and intercombinations. We can try to sort real from unreal, but since we must use as reference the document of a self-deluding neurotic, the task is futile," (In Proffer, p. 58).

pushed to the extreme, as it is in the case of Hermann's confession, it becomes a closed world in which paranoia and madness thrive. This microcosm of madness is a mad metaphor for the macrocosm of literature, a fantastic, autonomous world in which the only intruder from the "outside" is an "anthropomorphic deity" who manipulates his characters like pawns on a chessboard. Positing a lunatic as narrator serves to heighten the intensity of this closed-offness, especially when the only attempts this narrator makes to escape his solipsistic view of the world are through other works of literature which he has baldly misinterpreted to serve his own ends. And in this sense, the only "landmark" that the reader has is *his or her own knowledge of the works that Hermann misinterprets.* Only if we are familiar with Shakespeare, Pascal, Pushkin, etc., can we get our bearings. (One could say that Hermann is analogous to the literary critic motivated by ideology, the critic with a "hidden agenda." In this he resembles his cousin Kinbote of *Pale Fire* fame).

Nabokov also, and perhaps most importantly, casts his readers adrift to force them into a duplication of both Hermann's and Nabokov's experience as exiles, maneuvering through a series of unfamiliar linguistic and cultural practices. The book itself is like some bizarre, unfamiliar

terrain, a landscape of the strange that reproduces for the reader trying to negotiate its reality the exile's experience in navigating uncharted territory while trying to retain one's bearings. Literature is what we carry with us into exile--it is our landmark, our mooring point. Only our knowledge of it, therefore, enables us, as readers, to deconstruct Hermann's character fully, and to understand the extent of his madness.

Finally, Nabokov casts us adrift with his mad autobiographer to underscore the links he sees between "fiction" and "autobiography," between the creation of a "character" and the creation of a "self." In all autobiographical writing, both the autobiographical "self" and the "other" with whom that self reacts on the page are *constructs*, and claims to "truth" are, at best, specious, and at worst, hypocritical. If the "real" Rousseau begins his "true" confessions with the statement "Je veux montrer à mes semblables un homme dans toute la verité de la nature; et cet homme, ce sera moi"; and if the "fictional" narrator of Gide's "fictional" *L'immoraliste*, to take but two examples, begins "Je vais vous raconter ma vie, simplement, sans modestie et sans orgueil, plus simplement que si je parlais à moi-meme," both "je" are constructs. Nabokov, in the first American edition of his own autobiography, wrote in the preface that the book was as truthful as he could possibly

make it and that any lapses from truth were due to the "frailty of memory, not to the trickery of art." The title of this first American edition, *Conclusive Evidence*, itself suggests that Nabokov was convinced that there was nothing disputable in what he had written. Eventually, however, he changed the title to the more neutral *Speak, Memory* (here, we do not know if "memory" will tell the truth when she speaks or not), and he deleted the passage about making it as truthful as possible, thereby implicitly acknowledging that even (or especially) autobiography is an artificial construct, subject to the whims of memory and to the image of the self one is attempting--consciously or unconsciously--to convey. As Roman Jakobson wrote, "the artist is no less play acting when he declares that this time he is abandoning *Dichtung* for *Wahrheit* then when he assures us that his work is nothing but sheer invention," (in Galan, 112).

There are several important reasons why Hermann's voice must be the only one we are allowed to hear in *Despair*. The first has to do with the internal dynamics of the text itself. For Hermann to be able to convince his reader of a similarity between himself and Felix in the first place, there can be no outside "view" of the situation. Thus, for example, his appeal to the "painter's art" is entirely specious:

> I am afraid that words alone, owing to their special nature, are unable to convey visually a likeness of that kind [between him and Felix]: the two faces should be pictured side by side, by means of real colors, not words, then and only then would the spectator see my point...At the present moment it is not literary methods that I need, but the plain, crude obviousness of the painter's art. (26)

Notice, too, how Hermann does not appeal here to photography, but to the "painter's art," unaware that a painting, like all art--including his own--is an aesthetic construct, not a representation. Since we can have no picture or painting of Hermann, the tension between verbal and visual representation is exacerbated in this work, and reinforces the argument that the only grounds we have for upholding any resemblance to Felix-- or anything else that Hermann says, for that matter--is his word(s). His words are his "notes from the underground;' they both reflect and feed his psychological illusions and delusions.

Again, however, there are other, metaphorical readings for the fact that Hermann speaks alone here. Hermann's voice is a lone voice crying in the wilderness, and again here he stands for an extreme case, a parody of, the condition of exilic isolation. The fact that there is no "frame" to this book is especially interesting in light of what we have already said

about the frame narrator in *Amy Foster*. Whereas in that work, the framing narrator both pushed the reader away from Yanko and attempted to bring the reader toward him by being a participant in the same culture (English) as the reader, in *Despair* lack of a frame has a similar effect. We have no guide, no "translator" to facilitate our "communication" with Hermann, who remains trapped in his solipsism with only his mirror to talk to.

In the final chapter of the book, when Hermann realizes he has nothing left to lose, he claims to have received a letter from Ardalion, his wife's cousin and (unbeknownst to Hermann) lover. It reads, in part:

> Let me warn you: it is with considerable doubt I regard all the dark Dostoevskian stuff you had taken the trouble to tell [Lydia]. Putting it mildly, it is all a damned lie, I dare say....It is not enough...to kill a man and clothe him adequately. A single additional detail is wanted and that is: resemblance between the two; but in the whole world there are not and cannot be two men alike, however well you disguise them." (214-215)

Ardalion is the "true" artist in the book. Here, in fact, is a rare instance in which another voice enters the text and Hermann immediately attempts to deny its validity: "really too much out of shape, too wide of truth, too full of libelous

assertions, the absurdity of which will be easily seen by the...attentive reader...how dare he?...Oh, go to the devil, go to the devil, all go to the devil!" (217). These words--which in fact are more applicable to *Hermann*'s own writing, are, then, the final words of his "constructed" text, that is, the text written in (untranquil) recollection. Following these words, Hermann's narrative of the past "degenerates into a diary," (218). Ardalion's words, however, linger on for the "attentive reader," who grasps the importance of the thought that "in the whole world there are not and cannot be two men alike, however well you disguise them." And these words allow us to enter into an analysis of Nabokov's parodic use of the theme of the double.

F. Nabokov and the Double

> Stories that deal explicitly with the Double seem in the main to be written by authors who are suspended between language and cultures: writers such as Conrad, balancing between Polish, English and French, Higgins and Stevenson between Scottish and English, Henry James, between "English" English and American "English" or Wilde between English and French. Here, the Double is the self which speaks another language. (Coates, 2)

Nabokov's quarrel with representations and manifestations of the "double" in literature stems in part from his distate for Freud and for psychoanlaytic theory in general[1], in part from his desire to distance himself from

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[1]Nabokov's distate for Freud and for psychoanalytic criticism is amply documented and we need not linger on it here. For one view of the question, see Geoffrey Green, *Freud and Nabokov*. According to Green, Nabokov "sustained the grandest and most extravagant contempt for psychoanalysis known to modern literature." Another approach is found in J.P. Strute, who argues that "Nabokov's principal strategy against psychoanalysis is a pre-emptive form of parody which incorporates the competing discourse into his own text, thus robbing it of its interpretive power....Nabokov's situation here typifies that of the twentieth century writer--even Freud himself--in the continuing struggle for discursive power," (DAI 44/08A, 2470, 1983). And Daniel Albright writes most convincincly that "the first principle of semiotics is the arbitrariness of the sign; and the alogical patterns of which Nabokov is so fond...range themselves over the velvet backdroup of despair, the blessed failure of omens to be

literary traditions which he claims have had no influence on him, and in part from his belief that what is important, in art as in life, is difference, not similarity. In other words, he attempts to distance himself and criticize the literature of the double on psychoanlytic, aesthetic, and moral grounds. Thus, rather than using the "double" in the manner of a Dostoevski or a Poe, that is, to represent, for example, the "conscious" and "unconscious" aspects of the self, Nabokov employs a succession of warped mirror images that "reflect," in both sense of the word, the impossiblity of perfect pairs. And this impossibility of perfect pairs again reminds us of that other impossible coincidence between thought and language, or between Russian and English, or between the pre-exilic and post-exilic self. John Shade/Kinbote in *Pale Fire*, Humbert Humbert/Quilty in *Lolita*, or even the planets

Terra and Anti-Terra in *Ada* can all be construed as warped mirror images of one another.[1]

In *Despair*, Nabokov uses these false doubles to emphasize that the notion of any possible identity between

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ominous. Because the signs have no inherent mechanical meaning-identifications--and this is nearly the whole of Nabokov's quarrel with Freud--because the symbol is a thing, freestanding and independent, random, before it is a symbol, the imagination is liberated, able to devise its own patterns of meanings without prior constraint from the racial unconsciousness, from the book of all dream interpretation, from any old, weary manual of emblems. The world's randomness is the artist's strength."

[1]The distorting mirror is one of Nabokov's favorite images. In *Invitation to a Beheading* he has a long passage about a game which involves a kind of funhouse mirror: "Well, you would have a crazy mirror like that and a whole collection of different "nonnons," absolutely absurd objects, shapeless, mottled, pockmarked, knobby things, like some kind of fossils--but the mirror, which completely distorted ordinary objects, how, yo see, got real food, that is, when you placed one of these incomprehensible, monstrous objects so that it was reflected in the incomprehensible, monstrous mirror, a marvelous thing happened; minus by minus equaled plus, everything was restored, everything was fine, and the shapeless speckledness became in the mirror a wonderful, sensible image; flower, a ship, a person, a landscape. You could have your own protrait custom made, that is you received some nightmarish jumble, and this thing was you, only the key to you was held by the mirror," (135-36). Here, it would seem that the "mirror" represents art or the artist, something or someone capable of making sense out of the chaos that is life.

human beings, each of whom is unique, is offensive to him. Ardalion had said "in the whole world there are not and cannot be two men alike," and the narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* confirms this: "There is only one real number: One," he writes. Hermann, who insists he has a double in this world, is only able to perceive similarity, not difference. Again, the aesthetic and the ethical are linked through Hermann's inability to distinguish between individuals and individual sensibility and his obsession with human duplication. Aesthetically, this inability is what makes him unable to distinguish artistic detail, it is why he can confuse a painting painted by someone's aunt with a painting painted by Ardalion, the true artist of the novel. Ethically, his obsession with human similarities rather than differences is what allows him to be able to justify, in his mind, another human being's annihilation:

> Let us suppose I kill an ape. Nobody touches me. Suppose it is a new ape--a hairless, speaking species. Nobody touches me. By ascending these subtle steps circumspectly, I may climb up to Leibniz or Shakespeare and kill them, and nobody will touch me, as it is impossible to say where

> the border was crossed, beyond which the sophist gets into trouble. (220)[1]

In fact, it is Hermann who is the sophist here and his "unforgiveable spiritual vulgarity is the hunger for a resemblance that amounts to identity--something that can only be attributed to inanimate things, dead things," (Anderson, 11-12). This is why Felix only resembles Hermann when sleeping ("his face broke into ripples of life--this slightly marred the marvel," (9)) and why, of course, Hermann must kill Felix in order for their two identities to merge.

For Nabokov, Hermann, in attempting to justify murder through "sameness" or "similarity", aligns himself with both Soviet and National socialism, the forces which propelled

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[1]Nabokov took Hermann's sophism one step further in his novel *Bend Sinister*, one of the rare books in which he even vaguely hints at a possible political content, referring to it as a total condemnation of Nazi Germany. In this novel, he invents the term "ekwilism" or "equalism"--a parody of both nazism and communism--which is the philosophy of the book's ruling politcal party, "etermon": the party of everyman. The ideology of ekwilism maintains that the difference between "the proudest intellect and the humblest stupidity depends entirely upon the degree of world consciousness condensed in this or that individual." This world consciousness must be equalized between the various human vessels in order to introduce a balance, which is the "basis for universal bliss."

Nabokov into exile, first from Russia and than from Germany. Here again, then, Hermann is a parody of Nabokov, his "false double":

> It even seems to me sometimes that my basic theme, the resemblance between two persons, has a profound allegorical meaning. This remarkable physical likeness probably appealed to me (subconsciously!) as the promise of that ideal sameness which is to unite people in the classless society of the future; and by striving to make use of this isolated case, I was , though still blind to social truths, fulfilling, nevertheless, a certain social function....
>
> In fancy I visualize a new world, where all men will resemble one another as Hermann and Felix did; a world where the worker fallen dead at the feet of his machine will be at once replaced by his perfect double smiling the serene smile of perfect socialism. Therefore I do think that Soviet youths of today should derive considerable benefit from a study of my book under the supervision of an experienced Marxist who would help them to follow throughout its pages the rudimentary wriggles of the social message it contains. (168)

Besides parodying psychoanalyitic criticism ("subconsciously!") and Marxism,[1] this passage of Hermann's writing displays Nabokov's attitude towards the "new world, where all men will resemble one another." In this world, the humans have become machines and the machines have become people: the worker falls dead not at the *foot* of his machine, but at its *feet.* This simple change from singular to plural personifies the machine that stands, unmoving and unmoved, above the lifeless worker. It offers a poignant view of how Nabokov envisions the Soviet state he has fled.

Nabokov parodies the double not only because he interprets the Freudian view of conscious and unconscious as reductive, or because he sees Marxist ideology as the anathema of individualism, but because he believes, along with Pushkin, that "two fixed ideas can no more exist in one mind than, in a physical sense, two bodies can occupy one and the same place" (*Queen of Spades*): "The dualism and schizophrenia of Nabokov's Hermann are anticipated in Pushkin's figure, whose "German" and "Russian" halves are in conflict," writes Carroll.

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[1]It must not be forgotten that Hermann's patronynmic is Karlovitch, "son of Karl." Is this another sly Nabokovian allusion to Karl Marx?

Exile and bilingualism often entail a "doubling" that is not far from schizophrenia. Eva Hoffman, in *Lost in Translation*, explains her difficulty in writing in English compared to Polish: "It seems that when I write (or, for that matter, think) in English, I am unable to use the word "I". I do not go as far as the schizophrenic's "she"--but I am driven, as by compulsion, to the double, the siamese-twin 'you'." (121). Hermann's character is, in fact, schizophrenic (at least in the common usage of the word). Whether or not it is safe to say that Nabokov's "Russian" and "American" halves are also in conflict, he has created an exile who is at the extreme of isolation, and who never manages to transcend, move beyond this isolation.

Hermann is obsessed with the notion of self as both subject and object, and Felix becomes for him a miraculous materialization of the "self" as "other." When Hermann returns from his first meeting with Felix, he looks in the mirror of his hotel room and sees, not himself, but Felix looking back at him. Or again, he writes in a letter to Felix, "First of all, we must have an eye-to-eye monologue and get things settled," later pointing out that "I cannot recollect now if the "monologue" was a slip or a joke," (69). Well before he meets Felix, Hermann has a tendency to split himself in two,

as in this passage where he watches himself making love to his wife:

> ...I would be in bed with Lydia, winding up the brief series of preparatory caresses she was supposed to be entitled to, when all 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... (27)

Interestingly, this entire passage was added in the 1966 version of *Despair*: it existed neither in the Russian version nor in the first English version. Its insertion adds strongly to the theme of madness that pervades the text, while also eroticizing Hermann's splitting tendencies. Again, sexual dysfunction serves as a metaphor for Hermann's exilic state.

R. Rogers, in *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature*, maintains that:

> Hallucinations of seeing oneself constitute a special category, one to be distinguished sharply from hallucinations of anything or

> anyone else because delusions of encountering one's own self betray a morbid preoccupation of the individual with his own essence. These visions of the self can be characterized without exception as narcissistic. (18)

Rogers's psychoanlytic explanation of autoscopic hallucinations coincides surprisingly with Georges Gusdorff's view of the autobiographer as a kind of psychological aberration:

> One is wonderstruck by everything else much sooner than by the self....The subject who seizes upon himself for object inverts the natural direction of attention; it appears that in acting thus he violates certain secret taboos of human nature....Narcissus, contemplating his face in the fountain's depth, is so fascinated with the apparition that he would die bending towards himself. According to most folklore and myth, the apparition of the double is a death sign. (32)

Hermann, too, compares himself to Narcissus on two occasions. On his first meeting with Felix, he writes: "With a condescending grin he offered his hand, hardly bothering to sit up. I grasped it only because it provided me with the curious sensation of Narcissus fooling Nemesis by helping his image out of the brook," (13). The sentence which begins "I grasped" was again added in the 1966 version. Thus the figure of Narcissus is reinforced--he will reappear some two

pages later--but also the figure of Nemesis is introduced, as Felix will in fact prove to be Hermann's "nemesis." And, as Beaujour points out, it is important that unlike Narcissus, who merely stared, Hermann here pulls the other image out, concretizing it, and therefore making him even madder than Narcissus.[1] The figure of the double here does indeed point to death.

In a certain sense, in Hermann's autobiography, the rhetorical "I" does represent the death of the empirical "I." "No autobiography," writes Olney,

> as conceived in a traditional, commonsense way can possess *wholeness* because by definition the end of the story cannot be told, the *bios* must remain incomplete....Furthermore, by its very nature, the self is (like the autobiography that records and creates it) open-ended and incomplete: it is always in process or, more precisely, is itself a process. (25)

Hermann wants to short-circuit this process by killing Felix. That is, if Hermann murders Felix, who is in fact Hermann (according to Hermann), the murder becomes a suicide. And this suicide in a sense allows Hermann to write a *posthumous* work, no doubt the dream of any autobiographer. And "the various ways that the theme of

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[1]personal communication

doubling is played out in...*Despair*," writes Victoria Arana, "all contribute to a cogent...criticism of the perilous practices of narrative self-objectification," (126). At the same time, this narrative self-objectification is typical of the exile, and endemic to bilingual exile literature, where, as we have seen, the "self" is "other."

As Hermann aspires to perfect control over both his life and his art, he attempts to close what must remain an "open-ended" process by his murder/suicide of Felix. As he rereads his work, he comments that "with an unexpected potency the story blazed forth anew, demanding of its creator a *continuation and an ending*," (212, my emphasis). But once again, his material eludes him, and where he sought closure, more gaps appear. He thinks he will end his autobiographical confession with Chapter 10, but he is forced to write an eleventh chapter, in diary form, when he realizes that the police are about to discover his identity. And it is through Felix's walking stick that his identity, and Felix's, will be betrayed.

G. Conclusion: Rereading/Rewriting/Transcending "Despair"

For Henry James, the novel was conceived as a charting of the reader's understanding in relation to an unchanging fact. In *Despair*, that "unchanging fact" is Felix's walking stick. The reader's understanding, however, cannot be "charted" in any lineary sense: a full understanding of this "unchanging fact" can only be had upon rereading. Thus, this work, like many of Nabokov's, is posited on circularity rather than on linearity. This circularity has both negative and positive connotations in terms of exile literature. Whereas a unidirectional, linear structure would lead infinitely away from the past, and from home, a circular structure enables time to be, in a sense, "recaptured." This is the sense that the circular structure has for Nabokov in the text itself, and when *Despair* ends with the words "I'm coming out now," we have a sense that it is Nabokov who is coming out, coming out as an English writer through his translation/re-writing of the text. On the thematic level, the circularity, however, represents a kind of cyclical, repetitive prison from which Hermann cannot escape. He is condemned to rereading his failed work. And yet, he too learns from this rereading and his knowledge is, in a sense, both the gift of and the punishment from his creator, Nabokov.

Thus, on a first reading, the "alert commuter" (Nabokov's term) probably interprets or "symbolizes" Felix's stick simply as a trap Nabokov lays for readers who would invest it with a psycho-sexual symbolic significance. Hermann is very close to his creator's stance when he scoffs at "the rat-faced, sly little expert" who will discover sure signs of his psychic and sexual abnormality through such symbols. The fact that Hermann overlooks Felix's "phallic" stick in his master plan may or may not indicate his ignorance of his own sexual dysfunction--of which we are in fact given ample proof in the book. For Nabokov, however, this dysfunction can never account for the entire range of Hermann's deeds and, were it not so ironic to see any similarity between the thinking of Nabokov and that of Shoshana Felman, one could almost imagine him agreeing with her when she writes, in "Turning the Screw of Interpretation":

> The literal is "vulgar" because it *stops* the *movement* constitutive of meaning, because it blocks and interrupts the endless process of metaphorical substitution. The vulgar is anything which misses, or falls short of, the dimension of the symbolic, anything which rules out, or excludes, meaning as a loss and as a flight.... (107)

The "vulgar" signficance of the stick is as phallic symbol; but in Nabokov's private symbolic system, its significance *moves* beyond sexuality, and it comes to stand as a symbol of the act of *rereading*.

It is, in fact, upon a second or third reading of the text that both Hermann and the reader come to see the stick as an object which represents the knowledge--factual (the stick both "points to" and *is* his mistake) and psychological (it "points to" his misunderstanding of himself as artist) that Hermann can obtain from his own text. It is thus the equivalent of a blindman's cane, a tool that allows both Hermann and the reader to "see." When Hermann reads in a newspaper article that an object of Felix's has been found, he is so disconcerted that he withdraws into the rereading of what he has written, hoping thereby to escape "reality." But it is while actually *rereading* his text that he stumbles upon the stick, and the shock of having forgotten about it jolts him from any feeling of security he had hoped to find in what he had expected to be the perfect tale of a perfect crime. Instead, the stick shows him that not only was his crime not the perfect crime, but that his artwork is equally flawed.

Because Hermann only discovers the stick through rereading, and it is the stick which brings him enlightenment, rereading and enlightenment become

equivalents in the world of the text, and in Nabokov's aesthetic view in general. Barthes seems to be speaking about *Despair* directly when he writes, in *S/Z:*

> La relecture, opération contraire aux habitudes commerciales et idéologiques de notre société qui recommmende de "jeter" l'histoire une fois qu'elle a été consommée (devorée), pour que l'on puisse alors passer à une autre histoire, acheter un autre livre, et qui n'est tolérée que chez certaines catégories marignales de lecteurs (les enfants, les viellards, et les professeurs), la relecture est ici proposée d'emblée, car elle seule sauve le texte de la répétition (ceux qu negligent de relire s'obligent à lire partout la même histoire).

Hermann indeed belongs to a "marginal category of readers": through his exile, his bilingualism, and his "schizophrenic" or neurotic approach to both texts and life. Rereading, according to Barthes, is what saves the text from repetition, and also what "saves" a life from repetition. "History repeats itself": this knowledge is only possible if one knows one's history. Thus the notion of rereading extends from text to life. It applies not only to Hermann as the writer and re-reader of his text; but also to us, the readers of *Despair*, and to the writer (Nabokov) as rereader of his own text and life. In the end, Hermann joins all those

other marginal readers (like myself) who reread and gain knowledge from it. His knowledge leads not to repentence, however, but only to a sense of his own fallibility and failure.

For Nabokov, with his novel *Despair*, rereading becomes rewriting, and rewriting becomes transcendence. Despair is not only Hermann's re-writing of his life (in the sense contained in the phrase "rewriting history," i.e., lying); it is also Nabokov's refashioning of his own work from the perspective allowed by the shifts of place, change of language, and the passage of time. The three versions of *Despair* bear witness to Nabokov's own trajectory, and become part of his own autobiographical journey through language and time. Felix's walking stick also embodies this journey textually. Its role in the novel was multiplied in the 1936 English version and again in the 1966 English version:

> Structurally, E1 [1936] makes two important changes,, both concerning the stick...E2 (1966) inserts three more references to this stick. (Grayson, 61, 65).[1]

It is clear from these changes that as Nabokov himself reread his original version, and his first translation, the stick

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[1]For details about these changes, see Jane Grayson, *Nabokov Translated*..

represented for him a way of readjusting and perfecting his text, strengthening its structure. So whereas for Hermann the stick represents the horror of *imperfection*, for Nabokov it represents a key to *perfection*. Again, Hermann is here the parody/warped-mirror image of Nabokov.

Thus it would seem that Nabokov's exile and mastery of written English allowed him to "reread" and "rewrite" his former, pre-exilic life, to transcend in ways that were not possible for Conrad's Yanko, or for Hermann, who remains trapped in *Despair*, caught in despair.

IV. Samuel Beckett: Writing Bilingually, Reading Bilingually

As the individual sound stands between man and the object, so the entire language steps in between him and the nature that operates, both inwardly and outwardlly, upon him. He surrounds himself with a world of sounds, so as to assimilate and process within himself the world of objects.... Man lives primarily with objects, indeed, since feeling and action in him depend on presentations, he actually does so exclusively as language presents them to him. By the same act whereby he spins language out of himself, he spins himself into it, and everylanguage draws about the people that possesses it a circle whence it is possible to exit only by stepping over at once into the circle of another one. To learn a *foreign language* should therfore be to acquire a new standpoint in the world-view hitherto possessed, and in fact to a certain extent is so, since very language contains the whole conceptual fabric and mode of presentation of a portion of mankind. But because we always carry over, more or less, our own world-view, and even our own language-view, this outcome is not purely and completely experienced.

Wilhelm Von Humboldt, *On Language*

It is suicide to be abroad. But what is it to be at home, Mr. Tyler, what is it to be at home? A lingering dissolution.

Samuel Bekcett, *All that Fall*

A. Introduction: Of the Reception and Origin of the Double Text

> The movement to-and-fro obviously belongs so essentially to the game that there is an ultimate sense in which you cannot have a game by yourself. In order for there to be a game, there always has to be, not necessarily literally another player, but something else with which the player plays and which automatically responds to his move with a counter-move. Thus the cat at play chooses the ball of wool because it responds to play.
>
> Gadamer, *Truth and Method.*
>
> En français, c'est plus facile d'ecrire sans style.
>
> Beckett

Beckett's entire *oeuvre* may be envisioned in the light of Gadamer's formulation of the game outlined above, as this formulation is echoed by the "solitary child" in *Endgame* who "turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together and whisper together, in the dark," (70). Indeed, Samuel Beckett's "other player" may be said to be language itself, the "ball of wool" which responds to his play. Since Beckett translated almost each and every one of his texts from French into English or from English into French, we can

imagine each second language responding to the move of the first language with a counter-move, so that the two versions of any one text "whisper together in the dark." This interplay between two languages and the space that is thereby created between them, is a space of both presence and absence, the ideal "shape" to contain Beckett's *mise en question* of identity and memory on the one hand, and representation and communication on the other. "Où maintenat? Qui maintenant? Quand maintenant? Sans me le demander. Dire je. Sans le penser." (*L'Innommable*, 7) "Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I say I. Unbelieving." (*Unnameable*, 291). Are these statements identical in both languages? Can a writer whose mother tongue is English be saying the same thing when he says "je" as when he says "I"? Are language and identity separable? Is it enough merely to posit that it is not Beckett himself who is speaking, but his narrator--who can have either French or English as a mother tongue, or neither--to be able to ignore the question completely? These are some of the questions that come to mind for the bilingual reader reading the bilingual writer. In the case of Beckett, this reader has four categories of texts to contend with:

A. texts written in English;

B. translations into French of A.

C. texts written in French;

D. translations into English of D.

"A" and "C" are "originals"; "B" and "D" are translations; whereas "A" and "D" are English-language texts, and "B" and "C" are French-language texts. The clarification is necessary because, as

Marjorie Perloff wrote:

> whereas Beckett's early critics... were very much aware of Beckett's bilingualism, perhaps because Beckett's turn to French in *Molloy* was such a novelty, recent discussions, even those that deal closely with stylistics, seem to assume that the Beckett text is a stable and unitary entity...when the difference between the French and English versions is noted, the tendency is to assume that the text in one's own language is the 'real one.' (44)

There are, however, no "stable and unitary" entities in Beckett's fiction, and the shifting and fluid identity of the "urtext" itself as it moves from one language to the other echoes and is echoed in the shifting and fluid identities of Beckett's fictional universe.

While Perloff was writing several years ago, recently critics have again begun to address Beckett's bilingualism and its centrality to his work, among them Elizabeth Beaujour, Ann Beer, Steven Connor, Brian Fitch, and Guy Scarpetta. Others continue to ignore it, focussing instead on a particular thematic, or simply relegating it to the realm of footnotes or a single sentence within the body of a text.[1] In Beckett's work, the problem of the "original" and its reception as such (or not) has its locus both in the reader and in the very nature of Beckett's art, which, by the act of self-translation, decenters the "original," causing the traditional meaning of origin to explode.

Is, for example, a work written in a second language more "original" than its translation into, by the same author, his mother--and thus "original"--tongue? Or does "original" have nothing to do with mother tongue, but apply only to the language of the first ("original") composition? In this latter case, should the first composition be considered definitive,

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[1]To take but one example, here is Wolfgang Iser in a twenty page article on the Trilogy: "...Beckett's trilogy of novels...appeared originally in French between 1951 and 1953 and were translated into English for the most part by Beckett himself," (264). The small place self-translation has here is somewhat amusing, given the fact that the article appears in a book on reader response.

rather than the later version (as is generally the case), even though it is in a different, and thus not original, language? The subversive act of self-translation, as with other kinds of "re-creative translation" (parody, pastiche, plagiarism even), is that it "produces the possibility of a potentially infinite set of equally valid and authentic translations" (Lloyd, 106) because we are, in fact, not dealing with translation, but something on the "border-land" of translation, where the second text has just as much authorial authority as the first.

The questions raised here regarding origin concern not only the author of the texts, who, after all, is at the "origin" of each of them (*pace* Barthes); but also the readers, who can make the decision about "origin" for him or herself, or, especially in the case of the bilingual reader, read the two texts in tandem, finding their meaning (their "originality" if I may) in the interstice *between* the two texts, "a space," in Beckett's case, "where neither English nor French has autonomy," (Perloff, 47). For this bilingual reader, then, as Fitch points out:

> Il n'est plus question de se demander laquelle des deux 'versions' des textes on devrait prendre comme objet d'étude. Ici, tout choix est necessiarement un mauvais choix, car il n'est pas loisible de se limiter à une seule et unique 'version': il faut, de toute évidence, analyser les deux

> textes...chacun pour lui-même, avant de procéder, dans un deuxième temps, à l'étude des rapports qu'ils entretiennent l'un avec l'autre. (Fitch, 96)

In an otherwise sympathetic review of Fitch's *Beckett and Babel: An Investigation into the Status of the Bilingual Work*, which continues and elaborates on Fitch's argument above, Arnold Weinstein insists that Fitch is doomed to a kind of "interpretive reticence" regarding Beckett's work because of his

> dogged view that bilingualism is Beckett's matter rather than his manner....The bilingual imperative is posited...at the heart of Beckett's writing, and one cannot help feeling that something has been twisted. Surely, Beckett's protagonist is expressing a sense of lostness, alienation and duty that go beyond bilingualism. Language as alien structure with its own logic has, here, a kind of fascination and horror that have little to do with French And English.

While I would agree with Weinstein that the alienation of Beckett's characters goes beyond simply linguistic disenfranchisement, it is the combination of this disenfranchisement, and its "unmetaphoric objectification" in writing in a second language, with the other types of alienation that offer the particularities of Beckett's--and

Nabokov's and Conrad's--work. What Weinstein seems to object to, then, is the *totalizing* aspect of Fitch's interpretation, his inability to leave open that space of uninterpretability which we discussed in the introduction to this work and in the chapter on Conrad. Still, it would seem to me that Fitch is trying to redress a balance, attempting a kind of "affirmative action" for bilingualism in the study of Beckett that is useful, not only in understanding Beckett's work, but in understanding other bilingual writers, and other bilingual readers. Even Weinstein concedes that "it does seem amazing that the voluminous critical literature on Beckett has been largely silent on the issue of bilingualism."

Hugh Kenner, in *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett*, writes:

> How the French originals strike French readers an alien cannot guess--beyond the fact that critics seem not to take exception to details of usage--but indisputable the English versions arrived at by this process [self-translation] constitute something new in English prose. (86)

How *do* the French originals strike French readers? An alien can of course do more than guess. An alien can read what French critics have written about them (in French,

if the "alien" is bilingual; in translation if he or she is not). Kenner's statement seems almost as disingenuous as Beckett's own now-famous "en francais, il est plus facile d'ecrire sans style." Whether we take that statement to be a true expression of how Beckett felt about French is irrelevant. Even if Beckett--as an Anglo-Irish writer trying to avoid the impasse of writing in English in a post-Joycean age--could feel that writing in French was a way out of that impasse, even if he felt that he could, supposedly, *write* without style, is it possible for a French person, or, for that matter, any "alien" with some grasp of the language, to *read* Beckett "without style?" It is too easy to take Beckett's statement on this point at face value, and to ignore the question of reception and reader response. How could I, were I a French reader, ignore the connotations of certain words, the intertextual evocations of certain words, in *my language*, even if they did not have the same connotations for the writer, since he is writing in a foreign tongue? Obviously, it is impossible for the French reader to make a *tabula rasa* of his or her linguistic (denotative and connotative) knowledge, just as it is, of course, sheer pretense on Beckett's part--when he had been studying French language and literature for years before he began writing in French--to claim that he is writing "without style."

Just as there can be no "degre zero de l'ecriture," there can be no "degre zero de la lecture." It does appear, however, that readers who read the texts in both languages, whether the mother tongue of these readers is English or French, agree that this is the necessary and most effective way to read Beckett. Guy Scarpetta, for example, in his *Eloge du Cosmopolitisme*, seems to agree to a large extent with Fitch, and he goes as far as to say that "la *seule* force de Beckett" (my emphasis) is:

> sa position d'entre-deux-langues, position d'écart et de surplomb, à égale distance des langues 'enracinées', l'anglais et le français....Cet ecart...est l'impossible lieu de l'exil, de la solitude, et du déracinement....Passer d'une langue à l'autre, s'autotraduire, éprouver les changements d'intensité, les pertes, les impasses d'un registre à l'autre est la seule maîtrise que l'inappartenance radicale autorise: celle qui consiste à arracher chacune des deux langues au silence (ou au trop-plein compact et figé)....Là où celui-ci pose une langue particulière comme "naturelle" et "universelle," l'écriture de Beckett se désigne comme n'appartenant a aucune langue, jouant d'une langue toujours etrangère." (161)

Perloff offers another reason for the different reception by French and English readers of Beckett's texts in

her analysis of the English and French versions of *Mal vu mal dit/Ill seen Ill said*:

> When...Beckett translates *Mal vu mal dit* in English...he inserts into the interstices of the text a network of parodic allusions to what we might call the English Literary Canon. Given this particular subtext, the English version demands rather a different reading from the French original. Indeed, if French readings of this and related Beckett texts have been rather different from those in English, surely the critical difference is prompted not only by the different cultural and literary predispositions of Francophone and Anglophone readers, but by the simple practical fact that the two groups are reading different *texts*.

Again, the fact that the two texts are different can only and obviously be perceived if one has read both. Perloff's argument about the differences between two equally "original texts" is the same one we call attention to in our discussion of Nabokov's transformations of his text of *Despair*, and again points to the different status one must accord to the act of self-translation when compared to translation in general. As with Nabokov, Beckett's self-translations become critical reappraisals of his previous work, and, as Steven Connor affirms:

> Beckett's exploitation of the implications of self-translation connects this exercise with the more general question of the successive reconstruction of the self in language and narrative. This means that the work Beckett performs upon his texts from the outside uncannily repeats the textual work of displacement which occurs inside of them. Such an interference of levels throws into doubt the idea of translation as a simple transfer of preformed significance, and requires instead a sense of what Derrida has described as a 'regulated transformation of one language by another, one text by another' [in *Positions*, 20] (Connor, 90)

Connor, Fitch, Perloff, and Scarpetta thus call upon the bilingual *reader* to interpret the bilingual *writer*. Is it justifiable, then, to place myself, and those who have like me--and like Beckett--learned French as a second language, as privileged readers of both Beckett's English and French texts? There is no doubt that I am able to take advantage of bilingual to bilingual connotations (clins d'oeil) that shape Beckett's early French work and even his late English work, such as *Watt*,[1] that a monolingual French reader would fail to see. (Just as, no doubt, an Irish reader understands

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[1]For one of the best analyses of Beckett's bilingualism to date, see Ann Beer's article, "Watt, Knott, and Beckett's Bilingualism."

Beckett's English differently than an American reader). Elizabeth Beaujour discovers a similar phenomenon in Nabokov's writing:

> One of the simplest of Nabokov's techniques, the literal transplantation of wordings from one language into a work written in another, is invisible to any but a bilingual reader. Thus a cliche may be reborn into a live metaphor in a new language, and the bilingual reader reacts both to the origin and to new associations from the counterpart. (106)

There is no question, however, that even the reader who is able to grasp these transformations from "cliche" to "live metaphor" is still faced with that unbridgeable gap of "personality" Beckett pointed to early on in his *Proust*, and which Nabokov alludes to in his *Invitation to a Beheading*, and which forms the core of Conrad's *Amy Foster* and *Under Western Eyes*. In other words, bilingualism or multilingualism--for the reader and the writer--in no way guarantees communication any more than monolingualism does. It opens up multiple possibilities of understanding, as well as misunderstanding.

Thus, bilingualism enables an enrichment of the reading and writing experience, as well as its opposite, an *appauvrissement*, or impoverishment: bilingualism as

limitation, bilingualism as deformation. The bilingual narrator of Abdelkebir Khatibi's novel *L'Amour bilingue*, (*Love in Two Languages*), for example, writes: "Perhaps I'm capable of writing only for bilingual cripples," (24), establishing a clear link between what he perceives as his own incapacitation and that of his audience. Beckett, too, seems to think of his readers as mentally deficient, incapable of understanding: "D'ailleurs le lendemain, j'abandonnai le banc...car les premiers froids commencaient a se faire sentir, et puis, *pour d'autres raisons, dont il serait oiseux de parler a des couillons comme vous.*" (*Premier Amour*, 26, my emphasis).

The association of bilingualism with handicap and deformation is a powerful one, and it also calls to mind Beckett's old, impotent, and crippled characters in works such as *Molloy, L'Expulsé, Le Calmant,* etc. In fact, other bilingual writers have also used physical crippling as a metaphor for linguistic incapacitation. The Argentine writer Manuel Puig, for example, in his novel *Eternal Curse on the Reader of these Pages*--his first and only English-language novel to date--uses the figure of the old man in a wheel chair as a metaphor for both exile and loss of language.[1]

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[1]The opening dialogue between Mr. Ramirez, a 74-year-old man from a Spanish speaking country living in New York,

Elizabeth Beaujour, in *Alien Tongues*, points to Elsa Triolet and Jacques Hassoun as examples of bilingual writers who use disease as a metaphor for their bilingualism. "On dirait une maladie: Je suis atteinte de bilinguisme," writes Triolet, and Hassoun declares: "Nous sommes tous des 'infectés' de la langue." (Quoted in Beaujour, 40-41)

Tzvetan Todorov, another bilingual writer in exile, describes the difficulty he encountered when translating

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and the (strong, young) American he hires to push him aroud in his wheelchair, centers on loss of language and sets the tone for the entire book:

> - What is this?
> - Washington Square, Mr. Ramirez
> -I know "square" but not "Washington." Not really....
>
> - ...I know English, I know the words. I know the words in French and in Italian. I know all the words in Spanish, my native language, but...
>
> - In my country I was very ill. I remember all the
> words, the names of things, that can be seen, heard, smelled tasted, touched. But other things that are...
> -...in your head...
> -No, no...though you'll see what I mean soon enough. (3-4)

something he had written in French (his adopted tongue) into Bulgarian (his mother tongue), and in so doing reveals another aspect of bilingualism's ability to maim or deform:

> Les difficultés ont surgi au moment ou je commençais à traduire mon discours, écrit originellement dans ma langue d'emprunt, le français, en bulgare, ma langue d'origine. Ce n'etait pas tellement une question de vocabulaire ou de syntaxe; *mais en changeant de langue, je me suis vu changer de destinataire imaginaire...*
>
> Or la teneur de mon propos dépend trop du lieu de son énonciation pour que le fait de me trouver ici ou là soit indifferent. Ma double appartenance ne produit qu'un résultat: à mes yeux meme, elle frappe d'inauthenticité chacun de mes deux discours, puisque chacun ne peut correspondre qu'à la moitié de mon être; or je suis bien double. Je m'enferme donc de nouveau dans le silence opressant. (*Du Bilinguisme*, 21; 22, my emphasis)

The result of Todorov's empiric bilingualism is a split that is perceived not as a doubling of perspective, but as a deformation which in turn deforms the self, allowing for the expression of only "la moitie"--half--of one's being. In Beckett's French fiction, his narrators are also struck by their "duality" and the "inauthenticity" of their language, much as Todorov expresses it. Why, then, would Beckett choose

French if his chances of failure are equally great in either language?

B. Why French?

One critic has written that, "By composing in a foreign language, Beckett necessarily confined himself to a smaller lexicon, significantly emptied of all those familiar named things that encourage the proliferation of memories..." (Sabin, 242). In as much as I would agree that a foreign language is to a large extent emptied of its memory-evoking, connotative powers for the non-native speaker--at least for a certain time--I would argue that writing in a foreign language does not "necessarily" confine one to a smaller lexicon: one need simply think of the "lexicons"--far from small--of Conrad or Nabokov to see that the "necessarily" does not hold. The diminished lexicon of Beckett's work, especially the stark, unembellished language of the later prose, has more to do with an aesthetic/epistemological *choice*, related to, among other things, a post-war "fundamental crisis in communication and aesthetic representation":

> Beckett's creatures have been stripped of all the elements which identified the bourgeois individual as the subject and center of the world: possessions and property, social relations and human ties, knowledge and rationality. Beckett treats these values of bourgeois life with cynical contempt, parodying the most important discourses that provide the ideological backing of Western society--the Bible,

> Science and Philosophy--whose failure in explaining the world and providing useful knowledge of the self and society became drastically apparent in the historical moment of fascism and war. (Bruck, 160)

The "inauthenticity" that accompanies speaking [writing] in a second language both feeds and feeds off of this crisis in communication. If Nabokov's brand of shimmering nostalgia is a direct result of his having been severed from the Russia of his childhood, which remains intractably intact in his memory, and if his past is remembered as a time of emotional and aesthetic bliss, Beckett's narrators, on the other hand, live in a perpetual present: the past is inaccessible because there are no tools for remembering. "Si on pense aux contours à la lumiere de jadis, c'est sans regret," writes Molloy, one of Beckett's first French-speaking narrators. "Mais on n'y pense guère. Avec quoi y penserait-on?" Memory, which relies so heavily on language, on the "contours" of language, on "accumulated associations," in Eva Hoffman's terms, loses its power as language loses its power to conjure up the past:

> The words I learn now don't stand for things in the same unquestioned way the did in my native tongue. "River" in Polish was a vital sound, energized with the essence of riverhood, of my rivers, of my being immersed in rivers. "River" in

> English is cold--a word without an aura. It has no accumulated associations for me, and it does not give off the radiating haze of connotation. It does not evoke. (106)

Although Hoffman's "biographical" experience differs significantly from Beckett's own--he chose French, she was obliged to learn English--their aesthetic experience overlaps considerably. For example, in Beckett's works,

> whatever is important has already happened, but the connection between the past events and present state of affairs is unclear....The past that Beckett reveals to us is a fractured, degraded past, odd shards of experience, ambiguous and dislocated in time and space. (Winer, 75)

Clearly this is the case for Molloy, who equates his inability to connect past events with present events with language's inability to express and signify:

"My life, my life. Now I speak of it as of something over, now as of a joke which still goes on, and it is neither, for at the same time it is over and it goes on, and is there any
tense for that?" (36).

"Je dis ca maintenant, mais au fond qu'en sais-je maintenant, de cette epoque, maintenant que grelent sur moi les mots glaces de sens et que le monde meurt aussi, lachement, lourdement nomme? J'en sais ce que savent les mot et les choses mortes et ca fait une jolie petite somme, avec un commencement, un milieu et une fin, comme dans les phrases bien baties et dans la longue sonate des cadavres. Et que je dise ceci ou cela ou autre chose, peu importe vraiment. Dire c'est inventer. Faux comme de juste. On n'invente rien, on croit inventer, s'echapper, on ne fait que balbutier sa lecon, des bribes d'un pensum appris et oublie, la vie sans larmes, telle qu'on la pleure. Et puis merde." (46)

When the narrator of the French version of *Premier Amour* points out the fact that he is not French, that he pronounces words with an accent, all the while writing his first person narrative in French, he explicitly highlights both his foreignness and his bilingualism:

> Le nom de la femme avec qui je m'unis, à peu de temps de là, le petit nom, etait Lulu. Du moins elle me l'affirmait, et je ne vois pas quel intérêt elle pouvait av oir à me mentir, à ce propos....N'étant pas française elle disait, Loulou. Moi aussi, n'étant pas français non plus, je disais Loulou comme elle. Tous les deux, nous disions Loulou. (17)

This foreignness is then linked to lack of memory: "Elle m'apprit également son nom de famille, mais je l'ai oublié," (18). And this lack of memory becomes both existential dilemma: "La chose qui m'intéressait moi, roi sans sujets...c'était la supination cérébrale, l'assoupissement de l'idée de moi et de l'idée de ce petit residu de vétilles empoisonnantes qu'on appelle le non-moi, et même le monde, par paresse," (21); and narrative posturing: if I can forget everything, I can therefore invent everything: "D'ailleurs j'en ai marre de ce nom Lulu et je m'en vais lui en donner un autre, d'une syllabe cette fois, Anne, par

exemple, ce n'est pas une syllabe mais cela ne fait rien," (29). And if everything is invented, that is, if what the narrator narrates is neither "true" nor "false," as in *Molloy*, as in *Premier Amour*, neither "authentic" nor "inauthentic," then words themselves--French or otherwise--become questionable vehicles of communication:

> Il me sembla que le sens de ces paroles, et même le petit bruit qu'elles firent, je n'en pris connaissance que quelques secondes après les avoir prononcées. J'avais si peu l'habitude de parler qu'il m'arrivait de temps en temps de laisser échapper, par la bouche, des phrases impeccables au point de vue grammatical mais entièrement denuées, je ne dirai pas de signification, car à bien les examiner elles en avaient une, et quelquefois plusieurs, mais de fondement. Mais le bruit, toujours je l'entendais, au fur et à mesure que je le faisais. (46)

Obviously, "le bruit," "noise" of spoken words is more often perceived as such in a foreign language than in one's own, where sound and sense are so linked that one rarely distinguishes between the two. Is this the meaning that Beckett intends here? Or is language, any language, merely one more noise among all other noises?

The narrator of the French *L'Innommable* writes: "Peut-être que cette fois encore je ne ferai que chercher ma

leçon sans pouvoir la dire, tout en m'accompagnant *dans une langue qui n'est pas la mienne* (my emphasis). Whereas this quotation is easily understood on a literal level in the French version, i.e. "la langue qui n'est pas la mienne" is the French language to a narrator for whom English is his mother tongue, when translated by the author himself back into English, it becomes more of a puzzle and its ambiguity opens the field to allow for a variety of more metaphorical readings. The English version is an almost literal translation of the French: "to the self-accompaniment of a tongue which is not mine." If we persist in reading this on a literal level, we must imagine that the narrator of *The Unnameable* is a non-native speaker of English. On the other hand, on the metaphorical level, it reads as an affirmation that no language "belongs" to anyone, regardless of its status a mother tongue or acquired language. And if no language is Beckett's language, then French can just as easily "belong" to Beckett as English can. Both are equally valid, or equally failed, vehicles.

C. Linguistic versus Cultural versus Artistic Identity

Clearly, Beckett cannot be said to be seeking the "exotic" in turning to the French language and culture. As Beaujour has pointed out, Beckett was hardly interested in rendering "an intimate contact with external cultural complexity," but rather with descending "into an inner space without texture, a space as much as possible emptied of all objects and of all being," (170). Like Conrad, it would seem that Beckett believes that "the artist descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife finds the terms of his appeal," (Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*). Unlike Nabokov's *Lolita*, which gives us Americana as Exotica as seen through the eyes of Humbert Humbert, or his *Pnin*, where the eponymous hero comes to grips with American technology in comical and touching ways (see, for example, the scene with the washing machine), Beckett's landscapes (roomscapes?), especially in the later works, can be anywhere, nowhere, or everywhere. Molloy's mother's room, Lulu/Anne's house, the dustbins of *Fin de Partie* obviate to a large extent any process of cultural contextualizing by author, narrator, or reader.

And yet, cultural identity cannot be said to be entirely absent from Beckett's work, although Beckett attempts to

divorce it to a large extent from linquistic identity. For example, when Beckett writes, first in French,

> ne pouvoir ouvrir la bouche sans les proclamer, à titre de congenère, voilà ce à quoi il croient m'avoir réduit. M'avoir collé un langage dont il s'imaginent que je ne pourrai jamais me servir sans m'avouer de leur tribu, la belle astuce. Je vais le leur arranger, leur charrabia. Auquel je n'ai jamais rien compris du reste, pas plus qu'aux histoires qu'il charrie, comme des chiens crevés. Mon incapacité d'absorption, ma faculté d'oubli, il les ont sousestimées. Chère incomprehension, c'est à toi que je devrai d'être moi, a la fin. Il ne restera plus rien de leurs bourrages (*L'Innomable, 63)*;

and then in English:

> Not to be able to open my mouth without proclaiming them, and our fellowship, that's what they imagine they'll have me reduced to. It's a poor trick that consists in ramming a set of words down your gullet on the principle that you can't bring them up without being branded as belonging to their breed. But I'll fix their gibberish for them. I never understood a word of it in any case, not a word of the stories it spews, like gobbets in a vomit. My inability to absorb, my genius for forgetting, are more than they reckoned with. Dear incomprehension, it's thanks to you I'll have been myself, in the end. Nothing will

> remain of all the lies they have glutted me with (325),

this diatribe can be read metaphorically, in both languages, as a reassertion of Beckett's national identity as an Irishman: just because I speak English, don't go thinking that I am English, and that *you*, Anglophone readers, can understand me (or that I understand you and/or am writing for you). I can therefore, and also, write in French and *still* be an Irishman, misunderstood or understood. Tom Bishop points to the fact that the English language cannot be equated with the Irish culture:

> we must also keep in mind the fact that Beckett's linguistic choices do not necessarily involve cultural choices; thus, for instance, Ireland remains a key thematic background element without even being separable into a language of composition. (140)

And Brian Fitch warns:

> ne negligeons pas non plus...sans toutefois l'exagérer, le role possible joue par le statu politique et ethnique de la langue anglaise pour l'Irlandais d'origine dont le pays avait été colonisé non seulement par les Brittaniques mais aussi par la langue anglaise, qui devait prévaloir sur la langue celtique. (Fitch, 1987, 225)

Yet whereas Joyce's Stephen Dadaelus in *Portrait of the Artist*, writes about *his* English in comparison to the English of an Englishman in lyrically mournful terms:

> The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master* on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (189)

Beckett's narrator in *Watt* takes a much more humorous approach: "what you might call what I think the English call six of one and half a dozen of the other, do they not, might you not? Or do I confuse them with the Irish?" (*Watt*, 58).

Yet Joyce remained with (a form of) English as his language of aesthetic expression, even in exile, whereas Beckett willfully (with malice aforethought?) adopted French. As for Conrad and Nabokov, "writing in another language...is a way of objectifying the entirely unmetaphoric experience of alienation and exile," (Chamberlain, 265).

Let me tell you said Mercier, before you go any further, I haven't an answer to my name. Oh there was a time I had, and none but the best, they were my only company. I even invented queries to go with them. But I sent them packing long ago.

Mercier and Camier

D. Mercier et Camier and *Mercier and Camier*

> Certes il fallait de la force pour rester avec Camier, comme il en fallait pour rester avec Mercier, mais moins qu'il n'en fallait pour la battaille du soliloque. (131)
>
> Admittedly strength was needed for to stay with Camier, no less than for to stay with Mercier, but less than for the horrors of soliloquy. (78)

Beckett coined the term "pseudocouple" in *L'Innommable* in reference to two of his previous anti-heroes, Mercier and Camier.[1] The term is important here, for it not only brings to light the relationship he sees between his two characters, but helps to clarify the relationship between the French and English versions of his texts, and, more generally, the relationship between any translated text and its "original" (bearing in mind the *méfiance* we have towards the notion of "translation" and "original" in Beckett's work to begin with). If we break the word into its component parts (and the word in and of itself

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[1] "Deux formes donc, oblongues comme l'homme, sont entrées en collision devant moi. Elles sont tombées et je ne les ai plus vues. J'ai naturellement pensé au pseudocouple Mercier-Camier," (*L'Innomable*, 16).

is a "pseudocouple" practically begging to be thus divided), we have: *pseudo* and *couple*:

Pseudo: (Gr. *pseudo* from *pseudes*, false, from *pseudein*, to deceive) a combining form meaning (a) fictitious, pretended, sham, as in *pseudonym;* (b) counterfeit, spurious, as in *pseud*epigraphia; (c) closely or deceptively similar to (a specific thing), as in *pseudo*morph; (d) not corresponding to reality, illusory; (e) in chemistry, an isomer or related form of (the specified compound).

Couple: 1. two of the same species or kind, and near in place, or considered together; a pair, as a *couple of men.* 2. a man and woman who are engaged, married, or joined as partners in dances, games, etc. 3. that which links or connects two things together. 4. in mechanics, two equal and parallel forces producing rotation by acting in opposite directions.

"The first investigative step is always philological," writes Vico. "In other words, a word has to be examined for its shades of meaning...." (Quoted in Said, *Beginnings*,). Playing with the possible combinations of meanings from each term in our pair, our "philological investigation" indeed results in strange bedfellows. Shall we for example define Mercier and Camier as (a) and 1? (c) and 2? (b) and 4? By examining Beckett's language in this way, we follow happily in Watt's footsteps, who followed with magical confusion in Vico's: "And is it not strange," says Watt, "that one says of a

thing that it is full, when it is not full at all, but not of a thing that it is empty, if it is not empty?" (*95*).

Or shall we consider, for example, the French *Mercier et Camier* in relation to the English *Mercier and Camier* as being (c) "closely or deceptively similar to" a (1) "...same species or kind, and near in place, or considered together"? Viewing the two texts as a pseudocouple is analogous to considering them as the embodiment of "translation...as replication rather than reproduction, "naked" repetition rather than clothed repetition, or repetition with difference," (Connor, 89).

Translation and parody share a common status here again, since they may both be considered as "repetition with a difference." In this sense, too, *Mercier et Camier/Mercier and Camier*, and many of Beckett's other works, enact the possible definitions of pseudocoupling, since parody is an integral part of these works. Eric Levy writes that, in Beckett's work, "the couple's function is to protect subjectivity by assuring its relation to a world by which it is bounded, any world, even that of its own torment and solitude," (40). In the same way, parody--with its necessary condition of duality--offers a boundary, a sense of limits and limitations in the interpretation of Beckett's work. In the Trilogy, for example,

> ...each [of the three novels of the Trilogy] is sustained by some structural underpinning derived from an established literary form. In *Molloy*, it is the epic and the memoir. *Malone Dies* rests upon the death-bed confession, while *The Unnameable* deploys several, but stresses the philosophical discourse. Without the support of recognizable genres, the novels would be little more than the results of a strange narrative compulsion to "blacken a few more pages." Held by these literary forms, the reader steers safely through the stories as Ulysses past the Sirens, hearing the many voices, but never rushing madly towards them. (Levy, 55)

Thus, whereas epic ordinarily attempts to create fixed identity in a determined universe, and memoir undertakes to create selfhood as an aggregate of experience, Beckett's fiction strives to circumvent both strategies by parodying the genres that enforce them. [1]

Levy's allusion to Ulysses is not gratuitous, for *MEC/MC* is a parody of, among other things, the quest narrative, a genre in which the tangible goal may be anything, from the Terrestrial Paradise to the Holy Grail, but whose metaphoric or symbolic goal is the self. Mercier and

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[1]My thanks to Dr. Rodger Friedman for his ideas on epic and memoir in relation to identity here.

Camier indeed prepare to go on a quest, but unlike in traditional quest narratives, they have no conscious goal. And unlike traditional quest narratives, the hardships they must overcome, far from being of heroic dimension, are quite mundane: getting from one pub to the next, dealing with inclement weather, wondering whether to turn left or right (they throw an umbrella in the air and decide to follow the path to which it points upon falling): "They had to struggle," writes the narrator in one of the the opening passages of *Mercier and Camier*, "but less than many must, perhaps less than most." At the same time, the novel is very much a novel of exile, and it takes as one of its main sources for parody Dante's *Divine Comedy*.[1] English and French, quest and exile, parody and parodied, these are some of the pseudocouples which stand behind the characters-as-pseudocouple Mercier and Camier.

And indeed Mercier and Camier act together as a (pseudo) couple to "protect subjectivity by assuring its [the couple's] relation to a world by which it is bounded." The

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[1]"It is not so much a case here of *Mercier and Camier* paralleling or mimicking the *Divine Comedy* as of the later work being superimposed upon the earlier spiritual voyage. Hence, at every moment we can see, underneath the wanderings of this Beckettian couple, the Dantean convictions which they cannot glimpse," (Levy, 41).

dialogue between Mercier and Camier illustrates how the two are constantly checking with one another to see if their individual perceptions are sound. They lack, or believe they lack--and it amounts to the same thing--the ability necessary to interpret what they see, to give meaning not only to complex signs, but to phenomena as banal as the weather. In the following passage, they are debating whether or not to put up their umbrella (they have but one for the two of them). Camier begins:

> Are we to put it up?
> Mercier scrutinized the sky.
> What do you think? he said.
> Camier left the shelter of the porch and submitted the sky to a thorough inspection, turning celtically[1] to the north, the east, the south and finally the west, in that order.
> Well? said Mercier.
> Don't rush me, said Camier.
> He advanced to the corner of the street, in order to reduce the risk of error. Finally he regained the porch and delivered his considered opinion.

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[1] This is a charming reminder of Mercier and Camier's Irish "roots." The French has simply the word "succesivement." My guess here is that Beckett is either refering to the movements of a celtic ritual, or that celtic here simply has the same meaning as successively, that is, in the sense of following the movement of the circle at the inside of what is known as the celtic cross.

> In our shoes I wouldn't, he said.
> And may one inquire why not? said Camier. It's coming down, if I am to believe my eyes. Can you not sense you're wet? (73-74).

Alas, neither Camier nor Mercier can "believe their eyes" and even if Mercier were to "sense" that he is wet, he could not rely on his sensation without first checking with Camier. Thus, they constantly send the ball back into the other's court for confirmation, or non-confirmation, as the case may be, of what their senses perceive. This interrelationship, or even symbiotic relationship, between the two terms in Beckett's pseudocouple, the manner in which they constantly test one another's reactions to perceived phenomena may again be placed in relation to Beckett's two languages, and to the movement "to and fro" between them mentioned in our opening paragraphs. Mercier and Camier here seem literally to incarnate each of the two languages and their constant questioning of one another seems to be an additional consequence of Beckett's own bilingualism: in a situation where no language system dominates the other, linguistic relativism becomes the norm.

"Through the learning of many languages, the concept increasingly separates itself from the word." (Schopenhauer,

54)[1] In *Watt*, which is the last of Beckett's novels composed in English, Beckett "begins to examine and externalize language which is gradually shifting from its status as a mother-tongue, habitual and instinctive, to that of a language whose relative and arbitrary nature is clear, and whose structures and assumptions are becoming exposed as he lives more and more fully in different human speech," (Beer, 36) The resulting narrative and linguistic ambiguities "undermine...representational function," (Gibson, 413), releasing in turn epistemological uncertainties and ontological ambiguities which, in the case of *Mercier et Camier/Mercier and Camier*, are played out both intra- and intertextually. Below I show how reading the English and the French texts in tandem points to "repetition with a difference" and opens up an interstice where a meaning that did not exist in either text singly exists when the two are juxtaposed. Although the changes Beckett made, or did not make, from one version to the other reveal several things,

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[1] Beckett was an avid reader of Schopenhauer when he was young, and as André Karatson has pointed out, "l'oeuvre de Sameul Beckett, on le dit trop peu, s'inscrit directement dans la perspective de Scopenhauer." (117). For an interesting analysis of Beckett's relation to Schopenhauer, see Andre Karatson, "Le Nirvana comme supplice de Tantale" in *Roman 20-50/6*, decembre 1988: 117-123).

my focus is on those that deal with questions of language and exile, and the self as other.

As Connor wrote:

> It seems...that the act of translation is a means, for Beckett, of distancing himself from the original *Mercier et Camier*, even though, on another obvious sense, it is translation which reacquaints him with his previous work. Like many of his characters, Beckett reaches into his own past but finds there no confirmation of the singleness and continuity of his identity, but rather evidence of otherness, of the divided nature of experience and memory. The act of translation, like the act of memory, recalls the past in order that it may be rejected." ("Tradutorre, traditore," 43)

In the French version of *Mercier et Camier*--one of Beckett's first texts composed directly in French--a great deal of Mercier and Camier's dialogue is devoted to questions of language itself, and to the ambiguities of language. Many of the passages in which they play with language, or correct each other's language, are excised in the English version, as if Beckett's attention were drawn to certain peculiarities of the French language that would not strike a French ear as peculiar. The following passages, for example, do not appear in English:

-Mon père me disait toujours, dit Mercier, d'oter ma pipe de la bouche avant de m'adresser à un étranger, quelque humble que fut sa condition.

-Quelque humble, dit Camier, que cela sonne drolement." (21)

-Je te dois des esplications, dit Camier. Camier disait toujours esplications. Presque toujours.

-Je ne te demande pas d'eSplications, dit Mercier, je te demande de répondre oui ou non à ma question." (62)

-Penchés sur les sas nous essayons de comprendre. Des chalands amarrés contre la berge s'envolent les voix des mariniers, nous souhaitant le bonsoir. Leur journée est terminée, ils fument la dernière pipe, avant de se mettre au lit.

- *Les sas? dit Mercier.*

- *Les sas, dit Camier, S-A-S, sas.*

(italicized sentences excised in English)

-Tu as dit oui, dit Camier. A quoi acquiesces-tu?

-A quoi à qui est-ce? dit Mercier. Tu perds le nord, Camier.

Other passages that deal with language exist in both versions, but rather than being specific comments about the French or the English language, they refer to language in general as a failed vehicle for expressing one's thoughts:

> Il y a des jours [says Mercier] ou l'eau et le feu envahissent mes pensées, et partant ma conversation, dans la mesure où il existe un rapport entre eux. (146)
>
> ...there are days when fire and water invade my thoughts, and consequently my conversation, in so far as the two are connected. (87)
>
> Je ne connais pas le mot, dit Mercier, ni même la phrase, capable d'exprimer ce que nous croyons être en train de vouloir faire. (140)
>
> I can think of no word, said Mercier, nor of any set of words, to express what we imagine we are trying to do. (83)

The following passages reveal most convincingly how a comparison of the two texts illuminates language's function according to Beckett:

> Les paroles me manquent [dit Mercier] pour *exprimer* ce que je ressens." (MEC, 63, my emphasis. Literal translation: "Words fail me to *express* what I feel.)

> Words fail me, he said, to *disguise* what I feel. (MC, 41).

The French version is simply an unironic comment about language's inability to convey feeling that we find so often in Beckett, whereas the English is a much more complex and ironic view of the purpose of language: rather than being a vehicle of expression which Mercier lacks, words become vehicles of intentional obfuscation which, unfortunately (according to Mercier), he also lacks.

Andrew Gibson writes that "the Beckett narrator tends to think of himself as exposed to hostile scrutiny. He sees his narrative as highly vulnerable to incisive intelligence," (415). The "hostile scrutiny" to which the Beckett narrator is exposed in the case of the English *Mercier and Camier* is clearly that of Beckett himself, whose "incisive intelligence" is brought to bear on his own, previous work. In the following quotations, we see how certain changes show the English narrator's ironic and superior attitude towards his French predecessor: "Voila. C'est cosy. Vous allez voir. Patrice! cria-t-il. Il ajouta, d'une voix basse et comme tatonnante, c'est...gemütlich," (MEC, 66). The English reads "It's...snug, said the man, there is no other word. [Clearly, there is another English word, "cosy," but the French text has already usurped it]. Patrick! he cried. But there was another

word, for he added, *in a tone of tentative complicity, whatever that sounds like.* It's...gemütlich," (MC, 43, ellipses Beckett's, emphasis mine). The phrase added in English, "whatever that sounds like" is the voice of Beckett, not that of the narrator, who mocks his own previous writing.

As Beckett comments on his previous writing, or as the English narrator reacts to the French narrator, it is as if the banter between the two characters that occurs monolingually and intratextually in either text (French or English) is repeated bilingually and intertextually between the two texts; only this time, the English text has the upper hand, since the French text does not get to respond in kind.

In the French version of *Mercier and Camier*, the narrator seems to be addressing an audience which is not Irish, although what he describes is most certainly Ireland: the pubs, the parks, the infamous Irish weather. This is not the no-man's-land of Beckett's later works, although, as Connor accurately points out, the later English version does much to excise descriptions that refer to the outside world. More than simply demonstrating Beckett's tendency towards laconism and excision in his later work (for Mercier et Camier was translated into English some 26 years after its composition), this excision seems to reconfirm some of our hypotheses regarding the way self-translation alters the text

being translated for a new audience: an Anglo-Irish reader would not need these descriptions of Ireland in the way that a French reader perhaps would, just as in Nabokov's Russian *Otchananyie* allusions to Pushkin were *not* identified, whereas in the English versions they were attributed. In French, the narrator feels obliged to explain the Irish weather to an outsider, all the while situating Mercier and Camier as "insiders":

> Le temps, quoique souvent inclement (*mais ils en avaient l'habitude)*, ne sortit jamais des limites du tempéré, c'est-à-dire de ce que peut supporter, sans danger sinon sans désagrément, un homme de chez eux convenablement vêtu et chaussé. (8, my emphasis)

The changes Beckett makes in the English version are ever-so-slight, but revelatory and exemplary:

> The weather, though often inclement (*but they knew no better*), never exceeded the limits of the temperate, that is to say, of what could still be borne, without danger if not without discomfort, by the average native fittingly clad and shod. (7, my emphasis)

There are two "discrepancies" here. First, between the French "ils en avaient l'habitude" and the English "they knew

no better" lies, on close inspection, an immense gap which reveals how the narrator's attitude towards his pseudocouple has evolved. The French, which translates literally as "they were used to it" is free of value judgment. The English, on the other hand, points to an inadequacy, a lack, in the two characters and in their knowledge and seems to imply that, *had* they known better, i.e. anything more than Ireland and its inclement weather, they would perhaps have followed Beckett (who "followed" Joyce) into exile. In fact, it is precisely Stephen Daedelus' "silence" (they talk too much), "cunning" (they are not clever) and "exile" (they do not "venture forth") that Mercier and Camier lack.

The second revealing change occurs in the phrase "un homme de chez eux" ("a man from their country"), which becomes "the average native." "Un homme de chez eux" is obviously set in opposition to the understood "un homme de chez nous." They come from there, and we (narrator? readers? narrator and readers?) come from somewhere else; whereas "the average native" can be interpreted in two ways, that is "the average native of their country" or "the average native of our (or my) country." In any event, in the French, the "chez eux" forces a distance between narrator and protagonists whereas that distance is ambiguous in the English.

This kind of fluid identity can only be seen if one compares the two texts. We cannot establish for the narrator either an Irish or French nationality (and thus cannot establish his mother tongue). Perhaps, in fact, he is neither.

A previous paragraph uses the term "chez eux" in the French and the word "home" in the English. Again, the switch is revealing:

> Ce fut un voyage materiellement assez facile, sans mers ni frontières à franchir, à travers des regions peu accidentées, quoique désertiques par endroits. Ils resterent *chez eux*, Mercier et Camier, ils eurent cette chance inestimable. Ils n'eurent pas à affronter, avec plus ou moins de bonheur, des moeurs etrangères, une langue, un code, un climat et une cuisine bizarres, dans un décor n'ayant que peu de rapport, au point de vue de la ressemblance avec celui auquel l'âge tendre d'abord, ensuite l'âge mur, les avaient endurcis. (7, my emphasis)

> Physically it was fairly easy going, without seas or frontiers to be crossed, through regions untormented on the whole, if desolate in parts. Mercier and Camier did not remove *from home*, they had that great good fortune. They did not have to face, with greater or less success, outlandish ways, tongues, laws, skies, foods, in surroundings little resembling those to which first childhood, then boyhood, then

> manhood, had inured them. (7, my emphasis)

In both languages, the passage reads as a nostalgic lament of an exile for his homeland, but whereas "chez eux" situates the French narrator (and, most likely, the French reader) *outside* Mercier and Camier's "home territory," "from home" more likely means from "our shared"--narrator's, readers', Mercier and Camier's (and, perhaps even author's?)--home.

Both in English and in French, then, the passage deals--especially when the two versions are juxtaposed in this way with the idea of home and the narrator's relation to it. Because the French *Mercier et Camier* clearly takes place in Ireland, and Mercier and Camier--despite their French names--have grown to "manhood" in Ireland, they are "chez eux": in *their* homeland. The narrator, on the other hand, because he does not say "chez nous" seems to be an outsider, and the paragraph in which he catalogues the hardships of exile indeed seems to indicate that he has had some experience of it. Writing in French then, is he a Frenchman exiled to Ireland, Beckett's mirror image?

If this is true, then it would seem that in the English version, the narrator has *returned* home *after* some period of exile, and undertakes his journey with Mercier and Camier

("The journey of Mercier and Camier is one I can tell, if I will, for I was with them all the time," is how he opens his narrative) as a repetition of his more difficult journey into exile. The schema would then be:

French writing = exile = journey out. The narrator undertakes his journey with Mercier and Camier to discover things about "chez eux," which is not "chez lui" and which is, as we have shown, Ireland. The French reader, along the way, who is also not from "chez eux," also discovers Ireland and the Irish character as represented by Mercier and Camier.

English writing (translation?) = homecoming = (easier) repetition of the violent journey out (exile/original creation). In other words, the re-writing/translation becomes here a means of recreating the past without the violence of actually reliving it (in contrast to the composition of the French version). It also allows Beckett to view his previous text in a new light, with the ironic distance of an "outsider."

These comparative/synthesizing examples taken from the English and French texts demonstrate how the two texts can function together to offer a meaning that did not exist in either of the texts individually, shedding additional light on the condition of bilingualism and exile. An interpretation of this sort becomes the (bastard?) child of the "pseudocouple,"

who may produce additional children, i.e. additional interpretations, since "once the integrity of an original has been broken into by repetition, there is always the possibility of another repetition still, followed by further repetitions," (Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 299).

With this opening up of the spiral of repetition, Beckett's self-translation radically questions the status of the "original." And again, it joins parody here, which "actually rebounds upon itself, calling itself into question as it does the parodied work, and suggesting its own potential as a model or target, a work to be rewritten, transformed, even parodied in its turn," (Hanoosh, 114).

Thus the center, or origin, does not hold. Rather than leading to a Yeatsian apocalypse, however, this *mise en question* of origin leads to what Derrida has described as a

> joyous affirmation of the play of the world and the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth and without origin which is offered to active interpretation. This affirmation then determines the noncenter otherwise than as loss of center. (*Writing and Difference*, 292)

In the same way, bilingualism is perceived as both loss, and gain:

> An infinite number of nuances, similarities, differences, and relationships among objects rise to the level of consciousness as a result of learning [a] new language, and thus one perceives multiple perspectives of all phenomena. This confirms that one thinks differently in every language, that our thinking is modified and newly tinged through the learning of each foreign language, and that polyglotism is, apart from its many immediate advantages, a direct means of educating the mind by correcting and perfecting our perceptions through the emerging diversity and refinement of concepts.

Of course, there is a possible third configuration, which is one of neither loss nor gain; a configuration which returns us to our notion of hermeneutic ambiguity, or to what I like to refer to as the "hermenutically sealed" text, and which seems to be Beckett's: "No symbols where none intended," he writes in *Watt*. And in *L'Innommable*: "Deplorable manie, des qu'il se produit quelque chose, de vouloir savoir quoi. Si seulement je n'etais pas dans l'obligation de manifester." (15) ("Deplorable mania, when something happens, to inquire what. If only I were not obliged to manifest." (296)) "Chere incomprehension, c'est a toi que je devrai d'etre moi, a la fin." (63) ("Dear incomprehension, it's thanks to you I'll be myself in the end." (325))

V. Conclusion

The three texts on which I have concentrated in this study possess three different ontological statuses in relation to the respective languages of their creators. *Amy Foster* was written in English by a Pole who never wrote in Polish; the version of *Despair* I have analyzed is a revised/rewritten translation into English of a novel originally written in Russian, Nabokov's mother tongue. *Mercier et Camier* was first written in French, Beckett's second language, and then translated by him into English, his mother tongue. Yet, despite these ontological differences, this study reveals sufficient essential and existential similarities for me to retain my classification of them as "bilingual" texts, or, more accurately and to use Vincent Crapanzano's term, texts of *biscriptural* writers. The texts speak--in the metaphorical sense and as our title indicates--the language(s) of exile.

What unites these disparate bilingualisms or biscripturalisms is the kind of bi-, or multi-, culturalism that Conrad, Nabokov, and Beckett share; the ability, both in spite of and because of their exile, to make themselves a home (and a name) in what can be described as a shared cosmopolitan literary space.

These bilingual/multicultural writers, and the intertextual/intercultural/interlinguistic realm they both inhabit and create offer to the contemporary reader a rather astounding look at the possibility of severing oneself from an unhealthy nationalism without, however, losing the sense of home. At a time when nationalism and tribalism are running rampant--in the ex-USSR, in ex-Yugoslavia, in Somalia, Rwanda, and South Africa--and where we seem to be returning to what is being decried everywhere as a "new medievalism," it is important to turn our gazes to the works of writers who, by means of a modernity which had not yet become post-, offer a vision of a world, not free from struggle, but a world in which it is still possible *to* struggle; their world is a world not free from strife, but one in which hope exists.

Thus, in spite of the pessimism I point out in the work of our three writers in the introduction to and throughout this study, their literature asserts another, more optimistic vision that I see as an essential factor in their having overcome the obstacles exile can erect on the path of artistic expression. Not merely aesthetic, however, this shared vision becomes an ethical one, and it is conveyed by the moral passion for language and literature and an understanding of the role of the artist in the world that we find in their theoretical writings and in their fiction. In

Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, for example, this vision is eloquently expressed by Kinbote, the self-proclaimed exiled king and literary critic:

> We are absurdly accustomed to the miracle of a few written signs being able to contain immortal imagery, involutions of thought, new worlds with live people, speaking, weeping, laughing. We take it for granted so simply that in a sense, by the very act of brutish routine acceptance, we undo the work of the ages, the history of the gradual elaboration of poetical description and construction, from the treeman to Browning, from the caveman to Keats. What if we awake one day, all of us, and find ourselves utterly unable to read? I wish you to grasp not only at what you read but at the miracle of its being readable.... (204)

Reading is miraculous; creating worlds from nothing "undo[es] the work of the ages"; there is no pessimism here; history is not the sad compilation of horrors that one could believe, but it is "the gradual elaboration of poetical description and construction." Nabokov's Kinbote seems here to be speaking for Nabokov and he is in perfect harmony with Conrad, who states, in the Preface to the *Nigger of the Narcissus*, that the aim of art is:

> To arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a

> moment at the surrounding vision of form and color, of sunshine and shadows; to make them pause for a look, for a sigh, for a smile--such is the aim, difficult and evanescent, and reserved only for a very few to achieve. But sometimes, by the deserving and the fortunate, even that task is accomplished. And when it is accomplished--behold!--all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile--and the return to an eternal rest.

Here again, the language expresses the notion of the miraculous, of art achieving what no other human endeavor can achieve.

Beckett, who rarely spoke about his own work (he did *not* write prefaces to his texts), expresses his optimism without these same references to the miraculous, and with irony. But the optimism is there nonetheless. In his essay entitled *Le Monde et le Pantalon*, which originally appeared as the introduction to a catalogue of the works of the painter Bram Van Velde, he comments on the difficulty making words accomplish a "travail de transbordement":

> Chaque fois qu'on veut faire faire aux mots un veritable travail de transbordement, chaque fois qu'on veut leur faire exprimer autre chose que des mots, ils s'alignent de facon a s'annuler mutuellement. (26)

This vision of words as belligerent adversaries, as things personified that prevent one from making them capable of "transbordement" (a word, in fact, whose usual meaning is the transfer of passengers or goods from one boat, plane, etc. to another, but which here seems to indicate a kind of transcendence), is immediately deflected, and cedes to a characteristic Beckettian irony that displays distance from his own artistic effort and a sense of humor that proves that, in spite of the difficulties, this effort is worthwhile: "C'est, sans doute, ce qui donne a la vie tout son charme," (26).

Life's charm comes from obstacles overcome; it is a charm to be reckoned with, appreciated, and, in the end, a charm for which one must be grateful. Beckett's use of the word charm evokes that other meaning of the word, then, which ties his vision to that of Conrad and Nabokov: not merely a "trait that fascinates, allures, or delights; but "an act or expression believed to have magic power; the chanting or reciting of a magic spell."

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