

The Tingling Spine

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Bibliophilia and the Structure of Desire in Vladimir Nabokov's

The Original of Laura (2009)

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Table of contents

Introduction	2
 Chapter 1. Loving Books	
 Metaphorical Desire	6
Bibliophilia	10
The Bibliophilic Gaze	12
 Chapter 2. The Structure of Desire	
 Framing Desire	17
Unwriting: A Textual Striptease	19
The Spine	21
 Conclusion	25
 Bibliography	26

Introduction

Ever since the posthumous publication of *The Original of Laura: (Dying is fun)* (2009), Vladimir Nabokov's (1899 - 1977) unfinished "novel in fragments" instantly became a controversial addition to his already infamous literary oeuvre.¹ The lavishly published hardcover edition consists of 138 handwritten index cards that the reader can press out and change to construe his or her own story, offering an interactive and bodily experience to the reader with the novel.² As the novel has been surrounded by controversy on the point of the author's instructions to his wife Véra to destroy the manuscript after his death, a lot of academic attention has been given to the moral and aesthetic dilemma of publishing the novel altogether.³ This focus, however, has turned attention away from the novel as an interesting object of literature on its own, a lacuna only partially filled by a collection of essays and reviews edited by Yuri Leving dating four years after the novel's first appearance: *Shades of Laura* (2013).⁴ Most of the essays bundled in this most recent and only academic enterprise focusing solely on *The Original of Laura* offer an interpretation of the novel as a reflection of Nabokov's deteriorating health at the time (Wood, Barabtarlo, Rodgers) or as a fragmented body of text, "as unfinished as any book that calls itself a 'book' could possibly be".⁵

In this thesis, I will resist the conspicuous perspective on Nabokov's novel as 'unfinished' or as a reflection on death, by analyzing the novel 'as is', by distancing it from a Nabokovian context – to which I will return in my last chapter. Although it is undeniable that the book is factually unfinished, through this approach I hope to lay bare a theme that has not been expanded upon as yet in Nabokov's oeuvre, that is to say the notion of bibliophilia. I will interpret this concept as twofold, pertaining in this case both to the eroticization of the book as a material object and to the act of transforming the desired female personage, Flora Wild, into a textual body through the use of metaphors relating to the 'book' as a material object. Specifically, I will investigate the function of these metaphors relating to books used in the description of the main female character, Flora, in Nabokov's *The Original of Laura* (2009).

The novel's subject matter could be viewed as a metatextual novel on writing, as the main character, Flora Wild, becomes the object of desire in the intradiegetical novel 'My

¹ Boyd (2013): 245.

² Theroux (2013): 174.

³ Leving (2013): 3-14.

⁴ Leving (2013): 3.

⁵ Antman (2013): 194.

Laura', most likely written by a spiteful rejected lover of hers – referred to as Ivan Vaughan by Maurice Couturier and several authors in *Shades of Laura*, based on the appearance of his name in the margins of Nabokov's index cards.⁶ In addition to this, Flora is continually described in terms relating to books as material objects, up to a point that could be considered a form of 'bibliophilia', pertaining in this case to the act of eroticizing the book as a material object as well as transforming the desired female object into a textual body. Flora is thus both transformed into a book through the novel *My Laura* as well as compared to books in *The Original of Laura*.

This form of 'bibliophilia' is latently present in Maurice Couturier's *Nabokov's Eros and the Poetics of Desire* (2014), in which he sets out to examine sexuality in Nabokov's oeuvre, differentiating between "more or less standard sexual behaviors" and "perversions".⁷ In the second chapter Couturier mentions the curious recurrence of Nabokov's author-protagonists, specifically in relation to their sexual desire:

In the three novels studied here [*Despair*, *Lolita* and *The Original of Laura*], three men associated one way or the other with writing, literary or scientific, are shown desperately to cope with their sexual desire and being systematically made fool of by unloving women who are either promiscuous or frigid.⁸

In this passage, Couturier shows (whilst this not being the main point of his argument) that desire and the act of writing are intimately linked in a substantial part of Nabokov's literary legacy, including *The Original of Laura* (2009). Even more so, one could conclude that the attempt of the author-protagonists 'to cope with their sexual desire' results in the materialization of the desired female figure into a desirable object: the book. As the object of desire is transcribed onto paper and, thereby, fixed in writing, she literally becomes an *object* of desire. This is exactly the case with Flora in *The Original of Laura*, since she is consistently compared to 'the book' as a material, lifeless object. Not only are descriptions of her identity *composed* of a synecdochical collage of body parts: the very existence of her identity is at issue through the comparison with the book. In order to analyse the function of this comparison, I will make use of David Punter's notion of the use of metaphor as an attempt of fixation, as formulated in his book *Metaphor* (2007). Within this work, he defines metaphor as a "verbal process whereby two discrete objects or ideas become linked [...]" such

⁶ Nabokov (2009): 121. Barabtarlo (2013): 70, Couturier (2014): 54, Wood (2013): 58, Wyllie (2013): 130.

⁷ Couturier (2014): 4.

⁸ Couturier (2014): 61.

that, for the duration of the metaphor, one of the items actually becomes the other, and vice versa [...].”⁹

In this thesis, I will investigate the function of metaphors relating to books used in the description of the main female character, Flora, in Nabokov’s *The Original of Laura* (2009). The first part consists of an analysis of the function of the metaphor of ‘the book’ as an erotic object in relation to Flora as the object of desire. This analysis will be specifically based on David Punter’s work *Metaphor* (2007), as he has played a pivotal role in establishing a method to analyse the function of metaphors. This thesis establishes that ‘the book’ can be viewed as the materialization of desire, providing a ‘layered’ character to the novel *The Original of Laura*. Moreover, I will discuss the ‘optics of desire’, by focusing on the bibliophilic gaze of the narrator of ‘My Laura’. It is this ‘bibliophilic gaze’ that functions as the ‘semiotization’ of the female body into a ‘textual body’, as Marie Bouchet has proposed in her article on *Lolita*, “‘The Details of Desire’” (2005).

The second chapter consists of laying bare the ‘structure of desire’.¹⁰ Firstly, I will discuss the way in which the female body is described in the novel, highlighting the fragmented nature of this description and its shifting focus on the function of language itself. Secondly, I will interpret Martin Hägglund’s notion of ‘unwriting’ as a method established by Nabokov as part of a ‘textual striptease’, laying bare the structure of the body of the text. Lastly, I will return to the ‘poetics of desire’ by introducing the notion of the spine as a ‘carrying’ concept within Nabokov’s poetics. By introducing the concept of ‘bibliophilia’ as a main theme in Nabokov’s posthumously published novel, this thesis complements an elaborate field of research on ‘perverse sexuality’ in Nabokov’s writing.¹¹

⁹ Punter (2007): 27.

¹⁰ Bouchet (2005): 113.

¹¹ Naiman (2010): 13.

Chapter 1. Loving Books

Metaphorical Desire

In his book *Metaphor* (2007) David Punter questions the validity of the traditional tenor-vehicle-model for metaphor analysis, which encompasses differentiating between the tenor (“or the material which is supposed to be conveyed by the metaphor”) and the vehicle (“which is the term for the image doing the conveying”).¹² His main concerns are, first of all, that “the intention [of the use of metaphor] is to convey both ideas simultaneously”, which means that it would be a vain attempt to untwine the metaphor into two isolated and hierarchically structured elements.¹³ His second objection is that this model does not allow for the existence of different metaphorical ‘levels’.¹⁴ When Punter speaks of the different metaphorical ‘levels’, he suggests that the metaphor encompasses more than a comparison on the basis of two parts, but rather is present on a more intricate, less identifiable level. Certainly when it comes to the ‘extended metaphor’, running through an entire text, the basic metaphor-analysis cannot do justice to the interwoven quality of the metaphor within the text, as it consists of a hierarchical differentiation between tenor and vehicle.¹⁵ Instead, Punter prefers to emphasize the fluidity of the function of the metaphor:

Thus, metaphor represents a basic operation of language: it seeks to ‘fix’ our understanding but at the same time it reveals how any such fixity, and such desire for stability and certainty, is constructed of shifting sands.¹⁶

Metaphor is viewed here as a ‘textual desire’ – the desire to fixate meaning within/through text - while acknowledging that the metaphor always carries within itself a ‘surplus’, causing some slippage of meaning to remain defiant to fixation.¹⁷

Punter’s view on metaphor coincides with the aim of Nabokov’s protagonists’ longing to fixate the desired female figure on paper through writing, as this exact same desire to fixate through the use of language, especially through the act of writing, is paralleled in Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) and *The Original of Laura* (2009). The same fate is ascribed to the promiscuous Flora in *The Original of Laura*, although, in this case, the attempt to pin-down, or rather: pen-

¹² Punter (2007): 15.

¹³ Punter (2007): 15.

¹⁴ Punter (2007): 15.

¹⁵ Punter (2007): 27.

¹⁶ Punter (2007): 126, 9-10.

¹⁷ Punter (2007): 92, 27.

down, is in a way more violent. The first index card, for instance, immediately suggest the ‘metaphorization’ of the body into text, while describing a violent act of ‘pinning down’¹⁸:

Her husband, she answered, was a writer, too – at least, after a fashion. Fat men beat their wives, it is said, and he certainly looked fierce, when he caught her riffling through his papers. He pretended to slam down a marble paperweight and crush this weak little hand (displaying the little hand in febrile motion).¹⁹

Without explicitly drawing attention to the use of metaphor, the opening lines establish a connection between Flora’s body and paper through the use of the object of the paperweight, meaning that her ‘hand’ is equated to ‘paper’. A basic metaphor analysis of this fragment would point to a comparison between paper (tenor) and hand (vehicle) on the basis of likeness, such as ‘flatness’ or fragmentation of text, as it is crushed imaginatively.²⁰ This analysis, however, would only make sense in light of the extended metaphor of the female figure being compared to a piece of writing. For the connection in the opening passage could be seen as synecdoche, since the ‘hand’ is part of Flora’s body, rendering a comparison between the body of the female object of desire and ‘paper’ as metonymy for ‘text’.

The comparison between paper and hand becomes evident further along in the novel, when Flora’s arm is literally used as material for writing, as I will elaborate on further on in this paragraph. What is also striking is the fact that “the hand” is the body part associated with the act of writing and her “fairy script”, revealing that her husband, Philip Wild, wants to ‘efface’ or ‘write off’ Flora’s agency, her ability to behave like an active subject.²¹ Wild, indeed, personifies the ‘paper weight’, not only because of his physical appearance “as an obese bulk with formless features” (signalling the heaviness of his body), but also because of the way in which he would like to “possess” Flora, to fixate her fleeting character, as is the function of a paperweight.²² Her ‘fleetingness’ is a common thread, as both narrators within the novel complain about her resistance to stay in one place or defiance of temporal or relational fixation. Thus Flora’s lover and author of ‘My Laura’, Ivan Vaughan, complains about her “stormy life” and “not wishing to harness herself to futurity”.²³ Flora’s husband,

¹⁸ Punter (2007): 28.

¹⁹ Nabokov (2009): 1.

²⁰ Lodge (1977): 61.

²¹ Nabokov (2009): 91.

²² Nabokov (2009): 135.

²³ Nabokov (2009): 117, 27, 35.

Philip Wild, “a writer too – at least, after a fashion” in turn mentions that “Every now and then she would turn up for a for moments between trains, between planes, between lovers.”²⁴

In a way, the male authorial figures surrounding Flora would all like to ‘bind’ her like the pages of a book, to fixate her movement and fleeting character by turning her as the object of desire into a desired object: the book ‘My Laura’.²⁵ As she is fixated on paper in the form of ‘Laura’, Flora only seems to be allowed to be the *object* of writing instead of a writing agent and is allowed at most to read passively about the death of her literary doppelganger within ‘My Laura’, as the following fragment will show.²⁶ Particularly of interest is the way in which she, as the object of desire, is described in relation to the book she is holding, since the book can be viewed as the materialization of her former lover’s desire. Not only does this notion lend an explicitly erotic character to the book as an object, the description of Flora with the book has various erotic overtones. Moreover, it becomes apparent that the book itself (and book-related items such as ‘the bookstall’) more or less overshadows Flora as a person in the eyes of the omniscient narrator, as an old friend, Winny Carr, addresses her only in reference to the book she is holding:

Winny Carr waiting for her train on the station platform of Sex, a delightful Swiss resort famed for its crimson plums noticed her odd friend Flora on a bench near the bookstall with a paperback in her lap. This was the soft cover copy of Laura issued virtually at the same time as its much stouter and comelier hardback edition. She had just bought it at the station bookstall and in answer to Winny’s jocular remark (“hope you’ll enjoy the story of your life”) said she doubted if she could force herself to start reading it.²⁷

First of all, the element of sexuality is introduced through the pun on ‘Sex’ as the place where Flora holds ‘a paperback in her lap’, suggesting an immediate relation between the book as an erotic object and Flora’s body. Secondly, the description of the materiality of the book is very detailed, as much attention is given to the fact that it concerns a ‘paperback’ and ‘the soft cover copy’ in comparison to the ‘much stouter and comelier hardback edition’. A similar detailed description sounds through the text as “Sex” is described as ‘famed for its crimson plums’, whereby the body and the book are equated once again through the intricate characterization of these two objects. The description of Flora holding the novel ‘My Laura’ gives away the narrator’s viewing point as typically ‘bibliophilic’, since genitalia and text (a text conveying anecdotes of Flora’s sexual encounters) are in very close contact. Moreover,

²⁴ Nabokov (2009): 263.

²⁵ Nabokov (2009): 117.

²⁶ Nabokov (2009): 225.

²⁷ Nabokov (2009): 223-225.

the perspective of the bibliophile shows precisely in this attention to the materiality of the book, causing the book to be described in the same way as a body. The word ‘stout’, for instance, occurs once more, in the description of Flora’s first lover “drawing a junior-size sheath over an organ that looked abnormally stout at full erection”.²⁸ The description of the materiality of the book parallels the depiction of genitalia, accentuating the connotation of the book as an object as related to sexuality.

Even before “a neurotic and hesitant man of letters” turns Flora into a book, her bodily appearance is continuously associated with books on a more implicit level. This implicit reference occurs through metaphors related either to Flora as a part of literature or to the equation of her body to the materiality of the book.²⁹ For instance, while reminiscing her first sexual encounters, her surroundings signify the residues of a literary period:

Back in Paris Flora found new lovers. With a gifted youngster from the Lanskaya school and another eager, more or less interchangeable couple she would bicycle [sic] through the Blue Fountain Forest to a romantic refuge where a sparkle of broken glass or a lace-edged rag on the moss were the only signs of an earlier period of literature.³⁰

These words indicate the connotation of Flora’s sexuality as related to literature, since certain relics within the setting of her teenage rendezvous are described in terms of ‘signs of an earlier period of literature’. Through this mention of literature, Flora becomes a part of the chronological development of literature, as her youth is equated to ‘an earlier period of literature’. This complementary sentence indicates the artificiality or constructed quality of Flora’s being, since even in the description of Flora (as opposed to Laura) her past references a literary period, blurring the boundary between real and imagined. Also, this fragment emphasized her sexuality in relation to literature, affirming the connection between sexuality and literature in the perspective of the writer of this fragment (whose identity remains oblique). Moreover, ‘the book’ is described as a desirable object, as the nonchalant mentioning of the book’s status on the bestseller-ranking exposes:

The novel *Laura* was begun very soon after the end of the love affair it depicts, was completed in one year, published three months later and promptly torn apart by a bookreviewer in a leading newspaper. It grimly survived and to the accompaniment of muffled grunts or the part of the libristic fates, its invisible hoisters, it wriggled up to the top of the bestsellers’ list then started to slip, but stopped at a midway step in the vertical ice.³¹

²⁸ Nabokov (2009): 77-79.

²⁹ Nabokov (2009): 121.

³⁰ Needless to say, Hubert Hubert is a metatextual allusion to Nabokov’s *Lolita*, in which the protagonist is called Humbert Humbert and has a similar preference for little girls.

³¹ Nabokov (2009): 117.

This mention could be seen as a clue to the reader that ‘My Laura’, referring both to the book and to Flora, is a desirable object – not only in the eyes of the narrator, but also to the readers, as it “wriggled up to the top of the bestseller’s list”. Moreover, this description displays an anthropomorphism of the book by terms as ‘wriggling’ and ‘slipping’, which emphasizes the narrator’s bibliophilic gaze, as descriptions of the book and the human body are interchangeable. This relation between Flora and the book is intensified, as the book is “promptly torn apart by a bookreviewer” while “The ‘I’ of the book is a neurotic and hesitant man of letters, who destroys his mistress in the act of portraying her”. These two sentences both display an act of destruction, showing a comparison between ‘the book’ and ‘the mistress’ as objects that are destroyed.

Bibliophilia

Bibliophilia in this case thus both pertains to the ‘love’, or desire for the book as a material object – which, as we have seen becomes an *erotic* object, constantly linked to sexuality – and to the transformation of the female figure into a book. Seen in this way, the concept of bibliophilia is not only present in the sense of a fetishizing view on the book as a material object, but also in the sense that the female object of desire (Flora) is continuously compared to a book, while eventually being turned into one (‘My Laura’). This parallel between Flora (person) and Laura (personage) implicates the comparison between her and text. This identification becomes quite literal, when the need to compare her to a book is expressed, placed in the text just after the citation in which her bodily appearance is described:

Only by identifying her with an unwritten, half-written, rewritten difficult book could one hope to render at last what contemporary descriptions of intercourse so seldom convey, because newborn and thus generalized, in the sense of primitive organisms of art as opposed to the personal achievement of great English poets dealing with an evening in the country, a bit of sky in a river, the nostalgia of remote sounds – things utterly beyond the reach of Homer or Horace. Readers are directed to that book – on a very high shelf, in a very bad light – but already existing, as magic exists, and death, and as shall exist, from now on, the mouth she made automatically while using that towel to wipe her thighs after the promised withdrawal.³²

Not only is Flora compared to a book; there appears to be a necessity of identifying her with a book, since it is ‘only by identifying her’ with a book that a part of her identity can be conveyed. This suggests that her sexuality cannot be depicted by means of mere description of her behaviour. The necessity of the comparison with a book also emphasizes the relation

³² Nabokov (2009): 21-23.

between sexuality and the book as an erotic object, since the comparison with ‘a book’ is used in order to make it possible for the reader to imagine ‘what contemporary descriptions of intercourse so seldom convey’.

The fact that it concerns “an unwritten, half-written, re-written book” is even more intriguing, since Nabokov’s novel is laid bare as a half-written, re-written and in a way ‘unwritten’ book itself, as it consists of a posthumously published version unauthorized by the author himself. The addition of the three words mentioned above render the comparison with the female character and a book into a metatextual allusion, rather than a vague comparison of ‘bookishness’, since it seems to hint at the book’s own materiality. Also, the mention of the book as ‘unwritten’ fits precisely in Nabokov’s strategy of bringing something into existence and erasing it at the same time.³³ Punter refers to this strategy as “a structure of negatives”, pointing out that the metaphor “invokes a powerful sense of *what is not there*” – in this case through the word ‘unwritten’.³⁴ This is even more striking in reference to the last sentence, which functions as a performative act which (contrastingly) brings a behaviour of the character into existence, through the words “as shall exist, from now on” while describing her facial expression and act of wiping seminal fluid from her thighs –an act through which she erases the materialization of desire. These last words draw even more attention to the self-referential quality of this passage, since the female figure is compared to a book within a book, and the author-protagonist, Ivan Vaugan, describes his authorial power within the text through the act of writing itself. In that way, the female character within the book (Flora) is compared to a book and in the act of doing so, is already ‘metaphorized’ into a book.

In this way, the implicit metaphor of the opening lines becomes an extended metaphor throughout the book. Rather than being neatly divided into tenor, vehicle and ground, this metaphor encompasses derivative signs, or “rudiments of metaphor” rather than a direct comparison between the female body and text.³⁵ This ‘hidden’ metaphor bears likeness to what Punter describes as the ‘unwritten’ quality of ‘the text instead’:

This phenomenon tends to make the reader wonder, first, whether what is being read is metaphorical at all and second, whether in some sense the entire text is metaphor for something else, something ‘unwritten’ but perpetually haunting the words on the page.³⁶

³³ Hägglund (2012): 93.

³⁴ Punter (2007): 94.

³⁵ Kuzmanovich (2009/2011): 194

³⁶ Punter (2007): 60.

This ‘text instead’ could on the one hand relate to the metatextual allusions within *The Original of Laura* mainly to *Lolita*, and on the other hand to the ‘gaps’ within the texts as to Flora’s identity.

This practice of ‘unwriting’ relates to Martin Hägglund’s chapter on Nabokov in his book *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf and Nabokov* (2012), in which he observes a connection between “The inscription of memory – and thereby the writing of time”, when Nabokov’s character Ada (of the eponymous novel) writes and thus “performs a *spatialization of time* since the moment is recorded as a trace of the past” as well as “a *temporalization of time* since the trace is left for the future and thereby remains exposed to the possibility of erasure”.³⁷ In *The Original of Laura* writing does not just function as a way to defy time through materialization, but coincides with ‘erasure’, thereby encompassing a complex form of deconstruction rather than simply construction or destruction. Even the act of Flora writing on her wrist in fairy script points to the fact that what is written shall be erased, since the handwriting serves as a cheat sheet to be washed of as soon as the exam is over. The fact that the writing material is her body emphasizes the notion that writing is just as much under the spell of time as the material on which it is written, in which case the body explicitly signifies this element of decay. Seen in this way, the act of writing in *The Original of Laura* does not function as a way of defiance of Time, as Hägglund asserts is the case in Nabokov’s oeuvre, but on the contrary draws attention to the fact that writing cannot serve to immortalize or eternalize since writing, too, will languish under the burden of time. At the same time, the fact that Flora writes on herself could serve as an emphasis of the fact that she already is ‘textual’, artificial and encapsulated in a web of textual allusions, as she can be said to be immortalized through her fixed appearance the novel ‘My Laura’: “Statically- if one can put it that way – the portrait is a faithful one. Such fixed details [...] are absolutely true to the original”.³⁸

The Bibliophilic Gaze

As has been mentioned above, the female character, Flora, is “safely solipsized” into a passive object of desire through the metaphor of the book.³⁹ There is, however, one instance in *The Original of Laura* when Flora writes herself – referring both to the fact that she can finally be seen as an active subject when it comes to writing, and to the fact that she writes *on*

³⁷ Hägglund (2012): 93.

³⁸ Nabokov (2009): 121.

³⁹ Nabokov (1991): 60.

herself, using her body as a ‘TOOL’ for documentation, a medium to convey a textual code.⁴⁰ Even her own act of writing seems to exemplify the blurred boundary between her body and text:

A sweet Japanese girl [...] taught Flora to paint her left hand up to the radial artery (one of the tenderest areas of her beauty) with miniscule information, in so called ‘fairy’ script, regarding names, dates and ideas.⁴¹

This fragment shows an implicit comparison between Flora’s hand and paper as the material on which one writes. Her body is thus transformed into a textual body, functioning as a ‘sign’. In her article ‘The Details of Desire: From Dolores on the Dotted Line to Dotted Dolores’ (2005), Marie Bouchet shows a similar transformation of the body into text in the case of *Lolita* (1955). Bouchet uses Roland Barthes’ concept of ‘the punctum’ to examine the ‘signs’ or marks on the (textual) body of *Lolita* (1955). In *Camera Lucida* (1980) Roland Barthes uses the concept of ‘punctum’ to verbalize the detail of an image “which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)”.⁴² Barthes uses the metaphor of the bruise, as a ‘mark’ on the surface of the body where an object has ‘touched’ me. The ‘punctum’ thus refers to a detail that affects me, that directs my gaze and, in so doing, uncovers a certain desiring gaze. Marie Bouchet interprets Barthes’ notion as a ‘detail of desire’ in the viewing point of *Lolita*’s narrator, Humbert Humbert, for whom particular signs on the nymphet’s body function as his ‘punctum’. She sets out to examine these “‘desire spots’” on *Lolita*, both referring to “body marks (moles, freckles, dimples) and markings on the body (scars, insect bites, traces)”.⁴³ Bouchet claims that it is through these ‘signs on the body’ that “The nymphet’s body is thus textualized, semiotized – turned into a sign meant to be deciphered”.⁴⁴ In Bouchet’s interpretation, the “semiotization” of the female body functions to emphasize the process of writing and the ‘fictional quality’ of the character:

From “Dolores on the dotted line” to a Dolores dotted with sensual details, Nabokov parallels *Lolita*’s desired body to a text through sensual as well as textual signs. The recurrence of these dots is yet another original way for the author to foreground the written, fictional quality of his creation. This technique of semiotization of the nymphet’s body has to be underlined, as it is an unnoticed aspect of the metatextual strategies Nabokov persistently uses, as many critics have otherwise noted.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ In reference to Nabokov’s own abbreviation for the novel’s title.

⁴¹ Nabokov (2009): 91.

⁴² Barthes (1980): 27.

⁴³ Bouchet (2005): 109-110.

⁴⁴ Bouchet (2005): 110.

⁴⁵ Bouchet (2005): 113.

This emphasis on ‘the written, fictional quality’ makes sense in the case of *Lolita*, as Dolores Haze’s existence as ‘Lolita’ solely relies on Humbert Humbert’s literary imagination.⁴⁶

However, this notion gains in complexity in the case of *The Original of Laura*, as I shall point out in the following paragraphs.

When following Bouchet’s method to find ‘punctums’ on Flora’s body in the case of *The Original of Laura*, it becomes apparent that there are no similar marks on the body to be found – that is to say: not in the sense of “body marks”. There is, however, one instance in which there is a form of “marking on the body”, namely when Flora writes in “fairy script” on her wrist, as has been mentioned above. Therefore, it is only through Flora’s act of writing on her own body in which Nabokov’s strategy of explicit textualization of the female body comes to light. The fact that Flora writes herself refers both to the fact that she can finally be seen as an active subject when it comes to writing, and to the fact that she writes *on* herself, using her body as a ‘TOOL’ for documentation, a medium to convey a textual code.⁴⁷

Although her own act of writing establishes Flora’s agency – and establishes her as an author “at least- after a fashion” -, the writings on her arm seem to exemplify the blurred boundary between her body and text.⁴⁸ This fragment shows an implicit comparison between Flora’s hand and paper as the material on which one writes, thereby reinforcing the relevance of the metaphor of the book that is continuously used to describe Flora. Through the metaphor of the book Flora is metamorphosed into a passive object of desire, as her body is transformed into a textual body, functioning as a ‘sign’.⁴⁹ At the same time, she is not just the object of this metaphorization, but an active contributor to this process, through her own act of writing.

What also should be taken into account is the fact that Bouchet seems to equate Humbert Humbert’s desiring gaze on marks on *Lolita*’s body quite easily to Nabokov’s own love for details, projecting the narrator’s focus on “the details of desire” on the author.⁵⁰ Concerning the fragment mentioned above, the question is who the narrator of this flashback to Flora’s childhood is. On the one hand, and almost self-evidently, it would be safe to assume that it is Flora who recounts this anecdote while reminiscing her childhood. On the other hand, this would be curious, as her memory has been conveyed through the imagery of an abandoned library, indicating that she almost never thinks about her past. Moreover, only sentences previous to this fragment it is asserted that Flora cannot distinguish between reality

⁴⁶ Nabokov (1991): 9.

⁴⁷ In reference to the novel’s abbreviation. Kuzmanovich (2009/2011): 188.

⁴⁸ Nabokov (2009): 1.

⁴⁹ Nabokov (1991):

⁵⁰ Bouchet (2005): 109.

and fiction, since “of the difference between dreaming and waking she knew nothing”.⁵¹ In addition to this, Flora has been narrated by an omniscient and most likely extra-diegetical narrator all along, as the opening lines indicate: “Her husband, *she answered*, was a writer too – at least after a fashion”. This method of narration at the same time shows that Flora is the object of narration, and that the narrator in question is particularly focused on anything relating to books when it comes to Flora – even her short and disdainful mention of her husband as a writer catches the narrator’s eye, so to say. The gaze of both the intradiegetical narrator, most likely Ivan Vaughan, and the omniscient, extradiegetical narrator thus display a particular interest in anything related to the thematic field of ‘books’, displaying a bibliophilic gaze.

This bibliophilic gaze is foregrounded in such a way, that it is nearly impossible for the reader to distinguish between ‘book’ and ‘body’, as the reader is drawn into the narrator’s outlook on Flora, not having the chance to see her from another perspective. Moreover, the intradiegetical book, ‘My Laura’, emphasizes the ‘fictional quality’ of both Laura and Flora up to a point that the division between copy and original cannot be made. As Maurice Couturier has pointed out: “the scene soon becomes very confused when Flora is compared to the character in the novel for whom she is supposed to serve as a model”.⁵² On the basis of this confusion over “Flora/Laura”, Marijeta Bozovic has concluded in her article ‘Love, Death, Nabokov – Looking for the Original of Laura’ (2011): “One way or another, this body is all book”.⁵³ Flora’s body is thus immediately equated to the book as an object, indicating it is not so much the case that “the poor girl’s skeleton was required elsewhere from the start”, but rather that her ‘skeleton’ is in fact deeply connected to the material form of the book itself.⁵⁴ Bozovic, however, does not follow up on the function of the metaphor of the book or the implications of this claim – as I will do in the following chapter.

⁵¹ Nabokov (2009): 85-87.

⁵² Couturier (2014): 56.

⁵³ Bozovic (2011): 7.

⁵⁴ Bozovic (2011): 7.

Chapter 2. The Structure of Desire

‘Framing’ Desire

Bozovic’s and Bouchet’s observations are reminiscent of Eric Naiman’s claim in *Nabokov, Perversely* (2010) that “*Lolita* is an incantation, but its conjuring never moves from word to flesh”.⁵⁵ In saying this, Naiman painfully lays bare the fact that the novel’s textual anatomy prevails over any sensual experience, as the subject of *Lolita* is ultimately language itself, more than it is about Dolores Haze: “the brilliance and tragedy of language is that it is only language and therefore useless”.⁵⁶ The material presentation of *The Original of Laura* precisely parallels the problem of a lack of ‘flesh’, emphasizing the failed attempt to maintain this sense of the body within the act of metaphorization into a text. That is to say: this ‘body’ “is all book”.⁵⁷ For example, whenever Flora’s body is described, it is described in terms of a lack of similarity to the ordinary body:

She was an extravagantly slender girl. Her ribs showed. The conspicuous knobs of her hipbones framed a hollowed abdomen, so flat as to belie the notion ‘belly’. Her exquisite bone structure immediately slipped into a novel – became in fact the secret structure of that novel, besides supporting a number of poems.⁵⁸

Not only does her physical appearance include a negation of her female anatomy in belying ‘the notion of belly’; her body immediately references the materiality of a book, ‘became in fact the secret structure of that novel’. In a different way than described by Bouchet, but with a similar effect, Flora’s textual anatomy is foregrounded, in this case through the negation of a female physiology and the metaphor of the book. The ‘semiotization’ Bouchet speaks of, as in the act of turning the female body into a textual sign, encompasses a very specific form of sign in this case, that is to say through metaphor. Indeed, the emphasis on the ‘fictional quality’ of this character seems to be one of the functions of this metaphor. Moreover, Flora’s body can be described as a purely textual anatomy, indicating the surfeit of the textual surface, similar to that experienced in *Lolita*. This concept of the ‘textual surface’ describes another aspect of the metaphor of bibliophilia, in the sense that the female character is continuously described in relation to the metaphor of ‘the blank page’. This form of semiotization occurs mostly in relation to her body, for instance in the sentence:

⁵⁵ Naiman (2010): 44.

⁵⁶ Naiman (2010): 44.

⁵⁷ Bozovic (2011): 7.

⁵⁸ Nabokov (2009): 15.

She wore a strapless gown and slippers of black velvet. Her bare insteps were as white as her young shoulders.⁵⁹

As the surface of her body is foregrounded in emphasizing the ‘whiteness’ of her body through a metonymical view from her feet to her (near) head, this whiteness is also contrasted with the colour black through her garments, creating the effect of a likeness to black lettering on a white blank page. The lack of body marks on Flora’s body are replaced by text on a literal level, and are conveyed through the imagery of black-and-white on a metaphoric level, taking over the function of a textual sign. In this way, the ‘punctum’, which Marie Bouchet identifies in *Lolita* as ‘signs-on-the-body’ becomes quite literal in the case of *The Original of Laura*, as it refers to the literal as well as literary ‘textualization’ of the female figure in the act of turning the female figure into a textual sign.

What also should be taken into account, is the ‘desiring gaze’ that is displayed when it comes to the description of Flora’s body. In every description of Flora’s body there appears to be a mention of her ‘harshness’, through a collage of body parts emphasizing her bone structure. For example, from the opening lines up to the point that the need to identify her with a book is expressed, the narrator draws attention to: “the little hand”, “her bare insteps”, “her young shoulders”, “finger”, “heel”, “ribs”, “the conspicuous knobs, her hipbones framed a hollowed abdomen”, “her exquisite bone structure”, “cup-sizes breasts [...] with pale squinty nipples and firm form”, “painted eyelids”, topped of with “a tear of no particular meaning [that] gemmed the hard top of her cheek”, “eyebrows”, “eyes opened and closed again”.⁶⁰ Through this synecdochical description of her body, Flora becomes utterly fragmented, while the narrator’s gaze notices that “She wore a strapless gown and slippers of black velvet”, gazing from her shoulders down to her feet and then up to her shoulders again.⁶¹ Although the fragmentation of body parts might indicate a non-steady perspective or ‘jumping’ gaze, this textual fragment indicates a concentrated and desiring gaze, as the words ‘strapless’ and ‘bare insteps’ emphasize the fact that the narrator’s stare is focused not so much on her clothing as ‘cover’ of the body, but of its allusion to the nakedness of the body underneath. As Jenefer Shute proclaims in her chapter ‘So Nakedly Dressed: The Text of the Female Body in Nabokov’s Novels’ (2003):

⁵⁹ Nabokov (2009): 5

⁶⁰ Nabokov (2009): 1, 5, 13, 15, 17, 19.

⁶¹ Nabokov (2009): 5.

In Nabokov's art, the female body is a privileged *topos* [...] Yet the more it is invoked, the more it eludes him, receding him always [...] and fragmenting beneath the pressure of the very language that aims to articulate it.⁶²

In her article Jenefer Shute conceptualizes Nabokov's method of focalization as "verbal striptease", following a "sexual logic".⁶³ Through this method of denuding and fragmentation of the female body, the attention shifts from the body to the description of the body, or the function as language. This especially becomes clear through the method of 'unwriting', as it parallels the fact that the female body 'fragments' under the focalizer's gaze. This method of 'unwriting' appears to function as a 'textual striptease', as this laying bare of the (textual) body draws attention to the function of language as well as the materiality of the book itself – coinciding with a bibliophilic perspective – as this next section will address.

Unwriting: A Textual Striptease

Häggglund's notion of Nabokov's method of 'unwriting', functioning here as a textual striptease, becomes more explicit when specific parts of Flora's identity are compared to books and objects related to books:

This is Flora of the close-set dark-blue eyes and cruel mouth recollecting in her midtwenties fragments of her past, with details lost or put back in the wrong order, TAIL between DELTA and SLIT, on dusty dim shelves, this is she. Everything about her is bound to remain blurry, even her name, which seems to have been made expressly to have another one modelled upon it by a fantastically lucky artist. Of art, of love, of the difference between dreaming and waking she knew nothing but would have darted at you like a flatheaded blue serpent if you questioned her ~~knowledge of dreaming~~.⁶⁴

First of all the text draws attention to Flora's 'textual anatomy' since she is brought into existence through the performative act of writing as can be found in the first sentence, stressed by the repetition of "This is she [...] this is she". This introduction of Flora is striking, since the sentence indicates the first example in the book in which Flora is described not from the outside, through the eyes of an intradiegetic character (presumably her former lover), but is narrated by an omniscient narrator, who seems to coincide with the author of this book, given the preoccupation within this passage with themes such as writing and books.

⁶² Shute (2003): 119.

⁶³ Shute (2003): 118.

⁶⁴ Nabokov (2009): 85-87.

This engagement with ‘books’, specifically as a part of the comparison with Flora to a book, shows when specific aspects of Flora’s identity become related to written text. Her memory, for example, seems to consist of ‘fragments’ that can be systematically ordered in a manner similar to the cataloguing of a library, but are put back in “the wrong order”, referring to a non-alphabetical one of “T” between “D” and “S”. The imagery of memory (in general) as a “neglected library”, as Barbara Wyllie mentions, is emphasized within this fragment by the mentioning of “dusty dim shelves”.⁶⁵ “Dusty dim shelves” seem to suggest a negligence for the upkeep of this (head)space related to memory, indicating that Flora does not think of her past too often. Moreover, the three words used as point of reference for the structuring of her memory are quite obscure: “Tail”, “Delta” and “Slit”. According to Barbara Wyllie, in her contribution to *Shades of Laura: Vladimir Nabokov’s Last Novel, The Original of Laura* (2013) titled “Looking for Flora: Deviance and Disclosure in Nabokov’s *The Original of Laura*”, these words indicate “a crude allusion to the three points of her sexual anatomy”, serving as an insult that “she is not merely a nymphomaniac, but a *stupid* nymphomaniac”.⁶⁶ Although I disagree with the fact that Flora’s narrator designates her in this passage as a “*stupid* nymphomaniac”, I do agree on the fact that these words seem to have some sexual overtones, emphasizing the connotation of the narrator in question, when it comes to the relation between ‘books’ and ‘sexuality’.

What is also striking, is the fact that Flora’s memory is written into existence, and obscured at the same time – completely according to the method of ‘unwriting’ as mentioned by Punter. In this case, the narrator imagines Flora’s memory as a library, then excludes all textual references and emphasizes three obscure words as only content, before asserting that “she knew nothing” at all. Through the method of ‘unwriting’ even Flora becomes obscured as a character within the book, when it is said that her name is “made expressly to have another one modelled upon it”. This statement creates confusion over her identity, which is *made expressly*, signalling her constructed nature, and is furthermore only constructed with the intention to serve as a model, leaving her to be a disposable ‘original’. The reader is thus refrained from insight into how Flora has been turned into literature, since the novel itself remains ambiguous in the distinction between copy and original. The very term ‘Original’ could be seen as a term related to books, in the sense of an original manuscript. This word both implies ‘a double’ or ‘copy’ by negation, agreeable with the poetics of ‘unwriting’, as well as establishing a link between Flora and the handwritten text.

⁶⁵ Wyllie (2013): 132.

⁶⁶ Wyllie (2013): 132.

The ‘embodied reader’ thus parallels the narrator of *Lolita*, by engaging in an act of reading the body (of the text), indicating reading as an erotic act. As Eric Naiman asserts, the reader becomes part of the ‘structure of desire’ that Nabokov sets out within his novels -for instance through methods such focalization as a ‘striptease’ or unwriting as a textual striptease:

Ironically, in engaging with the novel, the embodied reader of *Lolita* inevitably slips into a form of fetishism, replacing a desired body with a desired text. Reading *Lolita* closely becomes akin to Humbert’s attempt to find traces of Quilty on *Lolita*- and thus to substantiate his feeling of being deceived [...].⁶⁷

In the case of *The Original of Laura* this claim becomes highly meaningful. As the female personage is metaphorized into a book, her lover ‘reads’ her body in a way that is similar to the way in which the actual reader of *The Original of Laura* reads this ‘body of text’ as it lies before him or her. This attention to the book as a sensual object is emphasized through the appearance of the book, as its appearance functions as a constant reminder of the materiality of the book itself. Moreover, the reader takes part in a visceral and bodily relationship with the book, emphasizing the fact that the reader is drawn into a reading that is based upon sensuality. This sense of an ‘embodied reading’ is enhanced by the fact that the reader – in principle – has the opportunity to make ‘authorial’ choices when it comes to the content and order of the novel by shuffling with the pressed-out index cards, thus duplicating an authorial role.

The Spine

In an interview for *Close Up* on the 25th of November 1958, Vladimir Nabokov is asked about his intentions in writing a ‘shocking’ book like *Lolita* (1955). In his response, Nabokov clarifies that he wanted to initiate ‘a tingle’ in the most ‘perverse’ part of the reader’s physiology, the spine: “I don’t wish to touch hearts and I don’t even want to affect minds, very much. What I want to produce, really, is that little sob in the spine of the artist-reader.”⁶⁸ This citation displays Nabokov’s telling preoccupation with ‘the spine’. In his book *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, Leland De la Durantaye summarizes Nabokov’s ‘sensitive’ poetics and brings to light his (almost obsessive) preoccupation with the reader’s

⁶⁷ Naiman (2010): 45

⁶⁸ Berton (2017): 11. Whiting (1998): 843.

spine as an instrument for intuitively understanding the intention of the author.⁶⁹ In this case, the word ‘spine’ is used ambiguously, referring both to human anatomy and the novel’s material structure. This ambiguous use of the word is no coincidence, since Nabokov seems to view the spine as transpositional *topos*, establishing an intimate relation between author and reader. The interchangeable use of the word spine suggests that Nabokov views author and reader and, more importantly, between body and book, as intertwined. Chloë Kitzinger demonstrates this intimate relation between reader and writer in the case of Nabokov in her article ‘“A Variety of Forms”: Reading Bodies in Nabokov’ (2016):

[...] this most abstract connection is the only one instantiated in a real physical body, albeit precisely in the part that bodies share with books: “a wise reader reads the book of genius not with his heart, not so much with his brain, but with his spine. It is there that occurs the telltale tingle” (*LL* 6).⁷⁰

In Kitzinger’s reading of *Lolita* (1955) and *Pnin* (1953/1955), the narrative methods within these novels engage the reader in an act of “aesthetic pleasure”, as the novels function to “induct the reader into the living ‘body’ of the text itself”.⁷¹ In *The Original of Laura*, this ‘induction’ of the reader occurs in two ways, as the reader takes part in an erotic act while Flora’s textual anatomy is ‘denuded’ in two ways: by the method of displaying a desiring (bibliophilic) gaze within focalization that is fixated on the spine (as a desired frame), and by engaging in a ‘textual striptease’ as the structure of this character is exposed through the practice of ‘unwriting’.

The main point of difference with this ‘textual striptease’ from a stereotypical pornographic striptease is that Nabokov does not seem to reach the ‘inside’ of the female body.⁷² The closest he gets to reaching this ‘inside’ is through comparison with an object in the outside world, serving as a metaphor (for sexual organs), according to Jenefer Shute.⁷³ In the case of *The Original of Laura*, this object could be the “inodorous rose” mentioned in ‘My Laura’, albeit quite explicit as a metaphor.⁷⁴ On a more sophisticated, metatextual level, the object of reference could pertain in this case to the metaphor of the book, as we have seen the continuous association between sexuality and this particular object. This might also explain

⁶⁹ De la Durantaye (2007): 58.

⁷⁰ Kitzinger (2016): 13.

⁷¹ Kitzinger (2016): 4, 14.

⁷² Shute (2003): 113.

⁷³ Shute (2003): 118.

⁷⁴ Nabokov (2009): 121.

the discrepancy between the descriptions of Flora's body seen from the front and from the back, as the special interest in 'the spine of the book'. In the description of Flora as seen from the front, there is the emphasis on the body parts mentioned above, indicating harshness. Seen from the back, however, the description is very different:

Her frail docile frame when turned over by hand revealed new marvels – the mobile omoplates of a child being tubbed, the incurvation of a ballerina's spine, narrow nates of an ambiguous irresistible charm (nature's beastliest bluff, said Paul de G watching boys bathing).⁷⁵

In this fragment, Flora's body is not described in terms of harshness but of mobility and flexibility, related to a number of desired figures within Nabokov's works, such as the motif of the child (or: nymphet) and that of the ballerina.⁷⁶ The reference to the fact that is concerns a 'paperback' versus 'hardback' is telling in relation to the description of Flora's body. This description of the 'spine' as flexible establishes a relation between the 'frail docile frame' of Flora and the textual anatomy of 'My Laura', as Flora is seen holding its published form as a "paperback in her lap".⁷⁷ The narrator's gaze thus lingers on the 'back' of the female body, indicating that the erotic relation between the female body and the book is related to the spine of the book as the figural and literal 'structure of desire'.

The act of turning over a lover's body by the use of one hand is a remarkable image on its own. In the light of the metaphor of the book, however, this act serves as an allusion to the act of flipping a page with one hand, while holding the spine of the book with the other. This element of the spine has a central place in this fragment, followed by 'nates' evoking a two-folded element similar to the pages of the book when unfolded. The mobility of the 'paperback' is quite similar to the way in which the usually harsh and stubborn Flora is depicted in this scene, with a "frail docile frame". As we have seen, the spine is of central importance to Nabokov's poetics, both when it comes to the body of the reader/writer and the body of the book. It can be noted that many sexual acts centralize Flora's back, as part of Punter's 'hidden metaphor' of the book:

The only way he could possess her was in the most [] position of copulation: he reclining on cushions, she sitting in the fauteuil of his flesh with her back to him. [...] ; and he holding her in front of him like a child being given a sleigh ride down a short slope by a kind stranger, he saw her [] back, her hip between his hands.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Nabokov (2009): 19-21.

⁷⁶ Shute (2003): 111, Sweeney (2003): 121-122.

⁷⁷ Nabokov (2009): 223.

⁷⁸ Nabokov (2009): 197-199.

During this sexual position (of which Nabokov notes “see animaux” in the margins of the index-card), all that the male narrator can see during his sexual act is Flora’s back, coinciding with the central significance of ‘the spine’ in Nabokov’s poetics.⁷⁹ Flora’s perceived indifference during this act, as “The procedure [...] meant nothing to her”, coincides with the ‘harsh’ indifference of an object, rather than a subject.⁸⁰ The indication that a particular sexual position focusing on her back is ‘the only way he could possess her’, also points to her status as an object, as a ‘thing’ that is perceived as his property once she is ‘sitting in the fauteuil of his flesh’.

This erotically-associated attention to the spine as central structure of the body (of the text) also comes to the surface when the narrator imagines that “her bone structure immediately slipped into a novel, became in fact the secret structure of that novel”.⁸¹ In my opinion, this prominent description of her bone structure in relation to the ‘spine’ - as an elementary part of the material aspect of the book in general - refers to Flora’s metaphorical and literal metamorphosis (and metaphorisation) into a book, as the imagery of her own back is used to evoke the spine of the book. The fact that the spine plays such a central role in the description of Flora, is yet another way of affirming Flora’s status as ‘fictional’, as it proclaims a desire for her body’s textual materiality. Vice versa, the notion of the spine in relation to Flora proclaims a desire for the materiality of the book.

⁷⁹ Nabokov (2009): 199.

⁸⁰ Nabokov (2009): 197.

⁸¹ Nabokov (2009): 15.

Conclusion

This thesis consisted of two parts. In my first chapter titled 'Loving Books', I have focused on bibliophilia in *The Original of Laura* as a twofold concept. On the one hand, it refers to the narrator's perverse obsession with the book as a material object, which surfaces through elaborate descriptions of the book's materiality and the focus on 'the spine'. On the other hand, 'bibliophilia' refers to the aim to 'metaphorize' the object of desire (Flora) into a book through an erotically-laden description of both the book as a material object and Flora's body. I have demonstrated, making use of David Punter's notion of the function of metaphors, that the metaphor of the book functions in the case of Flora to assert her constructed nature and lay bare her 'textual anatomy'. The 'book' in this case thus represents an erotic object. In the second chapter, I have given an outline of the implications of this notion of bibliophilia. I have asserted that it is through two methods that the reader is drawn into a structure of desire. First of all the method of 'unwriting' suggests a poetical striptease, by laying bare the structural anatomy of this textual body. This method affirms the materiality of the book, by drawing attention to the 'fleshly' textual anatomy of the novel. At the same time, the distinction between body and text is blurred through the emphasis on the spine as a as the structure of the body of the text. Through this act, the book does not function as a lifeless object for the reader but as a body, as he or she becomes part of the 'structure of desire', by engaging with the anatomy of the book and by viewing the book in general as an erotic object through the focalization of the narrator.

Concluding, there seems to exist a fourfold relationship concerning writing and desire in the case of *The Original of Laura*: first of all, there is the blurred boundary between body and text through the use of metaphor, secondly the book as the materialization of writing in desire, thirdly the bibliophilic gaze of the narrator (concerning the book as a material object and the comparison between the female body and a book), and lastly there is the relationship between the reader of *The Original of Laura* and the novel itself. Whether or not this structure of desire can be found within other works of Nabokov remains a topic for following research. It is this structure of desire within Nabokov's novel that establishes the tingle in the spine of the reader, by exposing "the magic of art [...] present in the very bones of the story".⁸² Through this method, Nabokov invites "a wise reader" to read "the book of genius not with his heart, not so much with his brain, but with his spine".⁸³

⁸² Nabokov (2002): 6.

⁸³ Nabokov (2002): 6.

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