King, Queen, Knave, or
Lust under the Linden

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet,
Are of imagination all compact.

William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream 5.1

Nabokov's second novel, King, Queen, Knave (Korol', dama, valet, 1928), a self-reflexive satirical version of the novel of adultery, asserted his intellectual and artistic independence, his refusal to restrict himself to the genre of the "human document" (KQK, viii), or to cater to the émigré readers’ need for explicit moral and ideological support.

The characters of King, Queen, Knave are Germans, people whom Nabokov during his stay in Berlin did not bother to observe as closely as he would later observe his new compatriots across the Atlantic. "I spoke no German," he says in the foreword, "had no German friends, had not read a single German novel either in the original, or in translation. But in art, as in nature, a glaring disadvantage may turn out to be a subtle protective device" (KQK, viii). Protective from what? Perhaps from "human humidity" (KQK, viii), the potentially overwhelming compassion which, but for a timely exercise in detachment, would have become difficult to control. Perhaps also from the duty to deal with issues of the recent political agenda, which—in particular the Russian revolution—were almost "an encroachment upon creative

1See also Pifer’s excellent discussion (Nabokov and the Novel, pp. 14–18) of Nabokov’s detachment from his characters in King, Queen, Knave as a break with the formal tradition.
freedom” (D, 79); according to The Defense, “The general opinion was that [the revolution] had influenced the course of every Russian’s life; an author could not have his hero go through it without getting scorched, and to dodge it was impossible” (D, 80). A non-Russian environment, however, allowed a respite from this predicament. “The fairytale freedom inherent in an unknown milieu,” notes Nabokov in the foreword, “answered my dream of pure invention” (KQK, viii). It was freedom to deal with a subject of universal, transnational significance.

The major theme of King, Queen, Knave is the rejection of spiritual life. Whereas the protagonist of Mary rejects human commitment for the sake of the perfection of a disembodied spiritualized image, the main characters of King, Queen, Knave spurn fate’s offer of an experience that could have raised them above the satisfaction of carnal desires. The “bright brute,” as Nabokov called the book (KQK, vii), is an inquiry into the mechanics of the devaluation of love and the substitution for it of lust.

The flippant heroine of Nabokov’s Ada has occasion to criticize a book called Love under the Lindens (A, 403): the title is an Antiterran hybrid of Eugene O’Neill’s Desire under the Elms and the name of Berlin’s (now East Berlin’s) main street, Unter den Linden. Lust, rather than love, under the lindens, is examined in King, Queen, Knave, a narrative whose coloration is influenced by “the map and weather of Berlin” (KQK, viii). The characters’ bondage to lust gradually reveals its horrifying aspects, yet the grim logic of their fate is counteracted by the comic mode in which their experience is rendered.

According to Henri Bergson, the admixture of the mechanical with the living is an infallible source of comedy. Nabokov maintains the comic spirit of King, Queen, Knave by fully developing one of the aspects of nonauthentic life—its imitative, artificial, mechanical features. Moreover, the novel flaunts the machinery through which it brings about its comic ending, subverting the mechanics of causality by the countermoves of coincidence through which the novelist self-consciously monitors the plot.

The consciously self-imposed artificiality of the characters’ lives is brought into relief with the help of a “fellow artist,” the name—

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less, mysterious, and somewhat pathetic Inventor (Herr Frankenstein?) who creates walking mannequins for the department store owned by the "King." The automannequins are impelled not by a robotlike imitation of a brain but by a network of currents that pass through voskin, the waxlike material out of which they are made (vOSK is the Russian for "wax"). These currents simulate the "self-awareness" of human muscles, a phenomenon which, according to one of the Inventor's assistants, may account for one's "well-known capacity of waking up at a self-imposed hour" (KQK, 194). The "Knave" of the novel, Franz Bubendorf, exemplifies this capacity by waking up at exactly the predetermined time on the day when his self-conscious body is to be used as a murder weapon (see KQK, 238).

The cast of automannequins—the mature gentleman, the lady, and the young sleepwalker—reproduces the human trio of King-Queen-Knave, so that the moving dummies come to symbolize the state to which the main characters of the novel are likely to degenerate. The "Knave" comes closest to doing so.

Franz arrives in Berlin from the province and is given employment by his uncle Kurt Dreyer (the "King"), out of whom he is self-consciously, and first not without a tingle of shame, determined to "squeeze everything he possibly [can]" (KQK, 27). He falls in love with Dreyer's wife Martha (the "Queen") and, soon after the affair is consummated, surrenders to her his body and his will. His lovemaking becomes mechanical ("to work, old soldier": KQK, 166), and the perceptions and thoughts of his everyday life become completely automatic:

He would rise; shuffle to the smelly toilet . . . , shuffle back, wash his hands, brush his teeth, shave, wipe the soap from his ears, dress, walk to the subway station, get on a non-smoking car, read the same old advertisement ditty overhead, and to the rhythm of its crude trochee reach his destination, climb the stone staircase, squint at the mottled pansies in the bright sun on a large flowerbed in front of the exit, cross the street, and do everything in the store that he was supposed to do. Returning home in the same way, he would do once again all that was expected of him. After her departure, he would read the newspaper for a quarter of an hour or so because it was customary to read newspapers. Then he would walk over to his uncle's villa. At supper he would sometimes repeat what he had read in the paper, reproducing every other sentence verbatim but strangely jumbling the facts in between . . . .

His thoughts were characterized by the same monotony as his actions, and their order corresponded to the order of his day. Why has he stopped
the coffee? Can't flush if the chain comes off every time. Dull blade. Piflke shaves with his collar on in the public washroom. These white shorts are not practical. Today is the ninth—no, the tenth—no, the eleventh of June. She's again on the balcony. Bare arms, parched geraniums. Train more crowded every morning. Clean your teeth with Dentophile, every minute you will smile. They are fools who offer their seats to big strong women. Clean your teeth with Dentophile, clean your minute with your smile. Out we file. [KQK, 200–201]

The mechanization of his mental life is welcome to Franz because in waking hours (his nights are “full of terror”: KQK, 200) it suppresses the desires and adolescent disgust between which his consciousness oscillates when not dulled by routine. He shrinks from creative, de-familiarizing perception for fear that it may expand his “chamber of horrors” (KQK, 3), the repository of disgusting memories formed in his brain at more impressionable times. Lacking the courage to confront “average reality,” he becomes part of that reality; indeed, the smell that Dreyer notices around Franz (KQK, 185) is more than a symptom of the latter's rudimentary hygiene.³

“The slow motion of a sleepwalker” (KQK, 74), which at the beginning of the novel was caused by Franz's erotic languor, eventually becomes one of the symptoms of his lack of control over his life.⁴ His stultification is brought into high relief in the episode in which amid the hilarious interplay of the author's imagination with that of the characters, Franz is confused with a mannequin, while Dreyer appears in the role of a fitter (see KQK, 186).

In the best tradition of literary adultery,⁵ Franz soon gets tired of his affair with Martha, yet he not only obediently continues the affair but is also prepared to carry out her plan to murder Dreyer. His mental debility progresses. In the last chapter, when the Inventor's automannequins are demonstrated to a potential buyer, the young

³“Average reality begins to rot and stink as soon as the act of individual creation ceases to animate a subjectively perceived texture” (SO, 118). See also the discussion of this statement in Chapters 1 and 3 above.

⁴Cf. Nabokov's development of the theme of sleepwalking in Transparent Things.

⁵King, Queen, Knave is in many ways a parody on the genre of literary adultery as well as a reinterpretation of some of its conventions. For an interesting analysis of such conventions, see Carol Bensick, “His Folly, Her Weakness: Demystified Adultery in The Scarlet Letter,” in Michael Colacurcio, ed., New Essays on “The Scarlet Letter” (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 137–59; Martha, however, gains weight by the end of the novel (like Anna Karenin) not because adultery is “illegal, immoral, and fattening” (p. 159), but because she has a heart condition and is a greedy eater.
sleepwalker is not among them—perhaps because, realizing a metaphor, he has completely merged with the dehumanized Franz.

Of the three main characters, Franz comes closest to matching the state of the automannequins; his uncle and potential victim Kurt Dreyer manifests the least resemblance to his own waxwork portrait. His frequently unconventional conduct and avid love of life may even mislead the reader into considering him an artist *manqué*, one of the Nabokovian avatars of the artist, 6 but Dreyer is a true artist as far as business is concerned. Reading such modern novelists as Robertson Davies and Walker Percy, we have become accustomed to the idea that moneymaking is a talent in its own right; in the case of Dreyer, who gets rich by successfully translating his fantasies into commercial ventures during a period of inflation, this talent is definitely artistic. (Ironically, his wife Martha is the only person to appreciate this, although for the wrong reason.) Dreyer considers himself a "happy and healthy failure": "What prevented him from seeing the world? He had the means—but there was some fatal veil between him and every dream that beckoned to him" (*KQK*, 223-24).

Dreyer's "fatal veil" is also the Coleridgean "film of familiarity" (both expressions appear only in the revised version of the novel), which cancels the "thrill" of perception: "Natures like his spend enough energy in tackling with all the weapons and vessels of the mind the enforced impressions of existence to be grateful for the neutral film of familiarity that soon forms between the newness and the consumer. It was too boring to think that the object might change of its own accord and assume unforeseen characteristics. That would mean having to enjoy it again, and he was no longer young" (*KQK*, 106). 7

Whereas Franz embraces the automatic way of life out of moral cowardice, it is out of indolence and premature intellectual fatigue that Dreyer allows his mental life to acquire the automatic quality that his adventurous physical life successfully escapes. Dreyer fancies himself a

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6Cf. Vladislav Khodasevich: "The life of the artist and the life of a device in the consciousness of the artist—this is Sirin's theme, revealing itself to some degree or other in almost every one of his writings, beginning with *The Defense*. However, the artist (and more concretely speaking, the writer) is never shown by him directly, but always behind a mask: a chess-player, a businessman, etc." ("On Sirin," in Appel and Newman, *Nabokov*, p. 100).

7In this respect, Dreyer is the diametrical opposite of Nabokov's Martin Edelweiss, who finds a "thrill" and "glamour" in "the most ordinary pleasures as well as in the seemingly meaningless adventures of a lonely life" (*GI*, x.).
born artist who is "a businessman by accident" (KQK, 223); he is, in fact, a talented businessman and an avid yet lazy audience for artistic performances (including the Almighty's), a superficial "consumer" of the kind that would enjoy and pigeonhole the novel in which he himself appears but would neither reread or remember it nor deepen or modify his understanding. As his former mistress Erica complains, he treats living people like statuettes: "You seat a person on a little shelf and think she'll keep sitting like that forever" (KQK, 175). Thus Dreyer's aesthetic failure turns into a moral one. His insufficient respect for the autonomous development of others also blinds him to the plot hatched against him by Martha and Franz.

The motif of consciously self-imposed artificiality is reflected in Dreyer's love life. Like most husbands in novels of adultery, he is married to a woman who, he well knows, cannot really love him; it is by gifts and compromises that he coaxes her into counterfeit eroticism. His extramarital sex is characterized by a quest for novelty—such as skiing ("shee-ing": KQK, 160) trips with both identical twin girls instead of just one—in order to achieve artificial stimulation in the absence of genuine feelings. His love for his wife has an element of genuineness about it, but the Martha he loves is the image he has conceived in his brain, an image left far behind by the woman who cannot remain "on the little shelf" where she was seated in the placid early days of their marriage. And yet, because of this glimmer of genuine feeling, Dreyer is felt to deserve the rescue that the self-conscious artifice of the novelist grants him.

As to Martha, artificiality is her chosen way of life. It is she who gives a new expression to the Nabokovian theme of artistic creativity, but she is an anti-artist rather than an artist manqué. She represents the kind of destructive militant banality that one day may just slip into crime.

Martha starts by plagiarism. She furnishes the villa that Dreyer has bought for her out of the contemporary German version of Better Homes and Gardens, demands of him conventional behavior and respectable savings accounts, chooses a lover who resembles a famous actor (a contemporary sex symbol), and conducts the affair "strictly adhering to every rule of adultery" (KQK, 115). Plagiarism yields to a grim parody on artistic creation. Regarding Franz as "warm, healthy young wax that one can manipulate and mold till its shape suits your pleasure" (KQK, 31), Martha proceeds not to create a person out of
clay—as two real artists, God and Pygmalion, are said to have done—but to reduce a living human being to the state of mechanical dummy.

Besides serving as the sinister mirror image of the Inventor, who creates dummies from a different sort of wax, Martha enters, as it were, into a presumptuous competition with the novelist himself. She undertakes to usurp his prerogative of determining his characters’ fate: “She needed a sedentary husband. A subdued and grave husband. She needed a dead husband” (KQK, 197)—the word “dead” suddenly stops being a figurative synonym for “sedentary” and “subdued” and recovers its literal meaning. Having passed from exercises in domestic artifice to the pseudocreative act of “molding” Franz, Martha now engages in the glaringly anticreative pursuit of her husband’s death. At first she half believes that she can get rid of Dreyer by just intensely wishing him gone, but unlike the black magic of the novelist during the automannequin demonstration (the female mannequin collapses behind the stage at the exact time when Martha enters the final stage of her illness), her voodoo exercises fail (“My spells don’t work”: KQK, 128). She then starts planning a murder, calculating details, choosing weapons, seeking for clues in detective novelettes, “and thereby plagiarizing villainy (an act which after all had been avoided only by Cain)” (KQK, 178). Leaving an exhibition of criminology, Dreyer thinks “what a talentless person one must be, what a poor thinker or hysterical fool, to murder one’s neighbor” (KQK, 207). His “veil of familiarity” prevents him from applying this insight to his nephew and wife.

By concocting different murder plans and rejecting them as unsafe, Martha plagiarizes, as it were, the trial-and-error workings of Fate in The Gift or of the invisible matchmaker in The Defense.8 Like these two agents of the novelist, she later evolves a workable plan by adjusting all the details to Dreyer’s character: Dreyer cannot swim, so he can be drowned; he likes bets and games, so he can be lured into a dangerous situation. Even these ideas are not quite her own: it is Dreyer who offers her a vacation at the seaside and laments his helplessness in water. At this point, however, the self-conscious countermoves of the novelist rescue Dreyer from his “logical fate” (BS, 233).

8In these two novels (as in Sebastian Knight’s novel Success) Fate seems to miscalculate in its first attempts to bring two potential lovers together: e.g., early in the novel Fyodor fails to meet Zina because he does not like to make German translations; Luzhin is not led to his future wife either by his classmate or by his geography teacher because he avoids their company.
II

The installation of this countermechanism is delegated to none other than the Inventor of the automannequins, whose function is thus not limited to providing an indirect commentary on the main characters of the novel.

While Martha believes that destiny is on her side (see KQK, 156), “wise fate” (KQK, 160) is quietly preparing to sabotage her plans. One of the guests at a party in the Dreyers’ house is the director of the Fatum Insurance Company, later referred to as Mr. Fatum (see KQK, 145). Insofar as characters are “methods of composition” (RLSK, 95), Fate is thus a member of the cast. It has aliases: “the imp of coincidence” (KQK, 38); the “god of chance (Cazelty of Sluch, or whatever his real name was), once you imagined that god in the role of a novelist or a playwright, as Goldemar had in his most famous work” (KQK, 224). The word “Sluch” is sometimes incorrectly understood as the Russian for “rumor.” According to the “Notes on Transliteration” in Nabokov’s volumes on Eugene Onegin, however, the Russian word for “rumor” would be transliterated as sluh or slukh. The “sluch” of King, Queen, Knave is a truncated (bastard) form of the Russian sluchai, meaning “chance event, random occurrence.” Just as “Cazelty” is the plain-folk distortion of “casualty” (“plain-folk” being Nabokov’s translation of prostonarodnykh in the Prefatory Piece of Eugene Onegin), “Sluch” is the slick double of the good-natured slouchy Fate of The Gift.

Unlike Franz, this mysterious character refuses to be manipulated by anyone except the novelist himself. Aided and abetted by the novelist, Sluch sends the “fifth business,” the actual writer’s fictional fellow Inventor, in pursuit of the troublemaking Franz and even accommodates him in the same hotel room where Franz had spent his first night.

9Goldemar is, of course, Vladimir, and his most famous work in 1928 is, of course, King, Queen, Knave, where “Sluch” is the puppeteer’s alter ego.


11Cf. Andrew Field’s note on Pnin as the truncated form of Repnin bestowed upon illegitimate offspring (Nabokov: His Life in Art, p. 139).

12The “fifth business,” made famous by Robertson Davies (in his novel bearing that title), is a character who stands aside from the central conflicts of the plot yet without whom the denouement would not be possible. Several such characters, including the Inventor of King, Queen, Knave, are discussed in my essay “A Nabokovian Character in Conrad’s Nostromo,” Revue de littérature comparée, no. 1 (1985), 15–29.
in Berlin: "It is significant that Fate should have lodged him there of all places. It was a road that Franz had travelled—and all at once Fate remembered and sent in pursuit this practically nameless man who of course knew nothing of his important assignment, and never found out anything about it, as for that matter no one else ever did, not even old Enricht" (KQK, 107–8).

The Inventor's assignment is, first and foremost, to provide Dreyer with one of his favorite escapes to other people's imagination, escapes that he has grown wise enough to conceal from his wife until they become remunerative. Aware of Martha's impatience with risky financial ventures, Dreyer has postponed mentioning the automannequin project to her until he is about to sell the patent to Mr. Ritter (a variation on the "mon oncle d'Amérique" theme; L, 29). The information is imparted to Martha a moment before she is supposed to give Franz the sign to push Dreyer into the waters of Pomerania Bay, and since the prospect of adding a hundred thousand dollars to her bank account is irresistable she deems it worthwhile to give her husband a reprieve and postpone her widowhood. This, as the narrator notes in another connection, is a "fatal postponement" (KQK, 220). Just as Dreyer never gets to tell Franz the end of a funny story that must be accompanied by "certain vehement gestures and extravagant attitudes" (KQK, 219–20), so Martha never gets to start the series of vehement movements that would lead to her husband's drowning. The chill and the overexcitement trigger the pneumonia of which she dies.

Her change of mind is consistent with Martha's stinginess and greed. She has married Dreyer for money; she meets Franz in a second-class railway car because, despite her husband's wealth, she grudges the expense of a first-class ticket; she haggles with old Enricht, Franz's landlord, over five marks a month, and does not send Franz to buy manuals on poisons because the "dutiful darling" (KQK, 164) may wind up with "ten volumes costing twenty-five marks each" (KQK, 163). Since she would not spend two hundred and fifty marks to get information on how to brew a poison for Dreyer, and since her potential willingness to "grant [Dreyer] a reprieve for some solid deal" is anticipated earlier in the novel (KQK, 196), Dreyer's escape is related as much to the patterns of her mind as to the danger itself. Nor is the reader unprepared for Martha's expedient sickbed exit at the end of the novel—and not only because the heroines of the novels of adultery usually die in the end: King, Queen, Knave, especially its revised version, contains a sufficient number of references to her ill health and
susceptibility to colds. Thus Fate, or Sluch, turns the tables on Martha for having presumed to plan an “in character” death for the shallow yet essentially well-meaning Dreyer.

Yet Dreyer owes his rescue primarily to the timely mention of the automannequin deal and to the preparations for this deal: that is, to arrangements made a long time before the crisis. The self-conscious artifice of King, Queen, Knave thus takes the shape of insurance (the “Fatum Insurance Company”). The logical development of the situation is carrying Dreyer inexorably to destruction—as in the plays of Molière and in Fielding’s Tom Jones, comedy threatens to yield to tragedy—but then it turns out that art is not governed by the same grim causality as the lives of the trio; that Dreyer is insured by the foresight of Fate, which has the Inventor (and Mr. Ritter, product of a generous literary convention) up its capacious sleeve.

The narrative does not conceal the artificiality of this insurance: the Inventor is explicitly presented as an emissary of Fate (see KQK, 107–8); after the aborted murder a restaurant singer keeps repeating a song about Montevideo, which also happens to be the name of the hotel in which the Inventor has succeeded Franz (see KQK, 253); then the automannequins begin to crumble and disintegrate (see KQK, 262–63)—not because the Inventor is a charlatan but because they have served their purpose and are no longer necessary. This is one of the improvements over the Russian version of the novel.13 While editing the translation of his early work, Nabokov seems to have been compelled to transfer to it the method that he evolved much later in Invitation to a Beheading, in which the fictional setting frankly crumbles once the need for it is over. The accident that befalls the Inventor and his mannequins at the end of the novel (see KQK, 262–63) cannot be taken at face value; Mr. Ritter, who is watching the demonstration, does not seem to notice anything wrong and several pages later cables his wish to clinch the deal (see KQK, 270). In his grief over Martha’s death Dreyer brushes aside the news of his financial success, and the novelist himself dismisses the “fifth business” just as he would have

13 Most of these changes are surveyed in Jane Grayson, Nabokov Translated: A Comparison of Nabokov’s Russian and English Prose (Oxford, 1977); and Proffer, “A New Deck for Nabokov’s Knaves,” pp. 293–309. One amusing detail: the strawberries that Dreyer wants but cannot buy in the first chapter (KQK, p. 6) were plums in the Russian version. Why the change? Perhaps because in 1967 Nabokov, unlike the Sirin of 1928, was familiar with the sinners reaching out for strawberries in Hieronymus Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights.
discarded a used Kleenex tissue—the absence of which is anachronistically lamented in the English version of *King, Queen, Knave* (see KQK, 108).

### III

Franz, Martha and Dreyer are not, in general, the lifeless cardboard figures that the title of the novel may suggest. The title *King, Queen, Knave* outlines the conventional triangle about which—after *Anna Karenin, Madame Bovary, La Princesse de Clèves, Le bal du compte d’Orgel*, The Scarlet Letter, and so on—there is little left to say in terms of the “human interest” that V. Sirin demonstratively restrained. The images of playing cards refer, moreover, not only to the three cards in Hans Christian Andersen’s fairytale but also to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and the obnoxious Queen of Hearts, who orders heads off until Alice cancels her illusion of grandeur together with the whole Wonderland dream. In other words, the title should not be taken as an admission of the main trio’s flatness. In fact, they are fully realized characters (national coloration excepted): we know more than we sometimes wish to know about their appearance, age, antecedents, occupations, wardrobe, personal habits, preferences, manner of speaking, capacities and limitations, state of health and its changes,

14Nabokov’s titles are often deceptive: though *Despair* holds the promise of a Dostoevskian murky gloom, the novel turns out to be pointedly anti-Dostoevskian; “Lik” (1939), which is the Russian for “image” in a religious or poetic context, turns out to be the acrostical soubriquet of a character shaped almost as a sarcastic answer to Dostoevsky’s Myshkin; “Recruiting” (1935) contains no human interest story about would-be soldiers; and “A Matter of Chance” (1924) deals not with chance as such but with different kinds of wickedness masquerading as chance.

15*Le bal du compte d’Orgel*, a subtle variant of the novel of adultery, was published in 1924, shortly after the death of its author, Raymond Radiguet, at the age of twenty. In Nabokov’s 1935 story “Torpid Smoke” it is mentioned as one of the protagonist’s favorite books (see RB, 31). There is no similarity between Radiguet’s protagonist, François de Séryeuse, and Franz Bubendorf, yet their first names may have been connected in a naughty cell of Nabokov’s brain—though it seems that he foresaw such observations: “The greatest happiness I experience in composing is when I feel I cannot understand, or rather catch myself not understanding (without the presupposition of an already existing creation) how or why that image or structural move or exact formulation of phrase has just come to me. It is sometimes rather amusing to find my readers trying to elucidate in a matter-of-fact way these wild workings of my not very efficient mind” (SO, 69).
sexual performance, and means of contraception. They are, in sum, as rounded, or three-dimensional as the Inventor's automannequins. What they lack is "only" the fourth dimension, the something else that arrests Nabokov at the end of "Mademoiselle O" (see SM, 117). In plainer words, they lack what is commonly called the soul—not because Nabokov failed to endow them with one but because the central theme of the novel is the suppression of the spiritual part of the self, a suppression that is, moreover, self-imposed.

This theme is related to the main moral issue that Nabokov diagnoses in Tolstoy's Anna Karenin:

Lyovin's marriage is based on a metaphysical, not only physical, concept of love, on willingness for self-sacrifice, on mutual respect. The Anna-Vronski alliance was founded only in carnal love and therein lay its doom.

It might seem, at first blush, that Anna was punished by society for falling in love with a man who was not her husband. Now such a "moral" would be of course completely "immoral," and completely in-artistic, incidentally, since other ladies of fashion, in that same society, were having as many love-affairs as they liked but having them in secrecy. . . . The decrees of society are temporary ones; what Tolstoy is interested in are the eternal demands of morality. And now comes the real moral point that he makes: Love cannot be exclusively carnal because then it is egotistic, and being egotistic it destroys instead of creating. It is thus sinful. And in order to make his point as artistically clear as possible, Tolstoy in a flow of extraordinary imagery depicts and places side by side, in vivid contrast, two loves: the carnal love of the Vronski-Anna couple (struggling amid their richly sensual but fateful and spiritually sterile emotions) and on the other hand the authentic, Christian love, as Tolstoy termed it, of the Lyovin-Kitty couple with the riches of sensual nature still there but balanced and harmonious in the pure atmosphere of responsibility, tenderness, truth, and family joys. [LRL, 146-47]

Nabokov develops Tolstoy's theme by presenting a group of people who are averse to the life of the spirit; love gives them a chance to embark on this life, but they reject the gift and thus profane that fragment of the divine which is hidden in every human being.

This is also a variation on the theme of Mystery that runs through most of Nabokov's writings. In the worlds of his novels, as in the world of A Midsummer Night's Dream, the poet, the lover, and the lunatic are allowed to perceive more than the daily reality known to the uninitiated. Most of Nabokov's fictional heroes are lovers, artists,
madmen, or any combination of the three; and they do, indeed, seem to be made aware of "something else," of something that transcends the familiar. In *King, Queen, Knave*, falling in love is presented as just such an extraordinary experience, yet the stereotypic consciousness of the characters immediately attempts to pigeonhole and debase it. Franz Bubendorf, for instance, does not realize how beautiful (despite the bafflement and the pain) his world becomes after he has broken his glasses. The outlines of objects disappear, and the world picture, formerly a mosaic of concepts, acquires an artistic integrity: "Once in the street he was engulfed in streaming radiance. Outlines did not exist, colors had no substance. Like a woman's wispy dress that has slipped off its hanger, the city shimmered and fell in fantastic folds, not held up by anything, a discarnate iridescence llimply suspended in the azure autumnal air. Beyond the nacrine desert of the square, across which a car sped now and then with a new metropolitan trumpeting, great pink edifices loomed, and suddenly a sunbeam, a gleam of glass, would stab him painfully in the pupil" (*KQK*, 23).

It is on this day, "in the unsubstantial radiance of his myopia" (which now has more meanings than one) that Franz really falls in love with Martha, whom he had seen, and lusted for, on the train the previous day. At that first meeting, fascinated by her glamour, he "eagerly started to seek human, everyday tokens that would break the spell" (*KQK*, 11); his petit bourgeois upbringing makes him impatient with every sort of enchantment. Therefore, as soon as his spectacles are repaired, "Franz experienc[es] at once a feeling of comfort and peace in his heart as well as behind his ears. The haze dissolv[es]. The unruly colors of the univers [are] confined once more to their official compartments and cells" (*KQK*, 45).

The motif of the compartments and cells involves a determined exclusion of the carnivalistic element in which partitions are knocked down and communion becomes possible. As noted in Chapter 3, Nabokov is wary of a too enthusiastic removal of partitions. He would

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16It may be interesting to read the passage describing Franz's first (myopic) view of Berlin in the light of the following remarks of Schopenhauer: "However fine the mosaic may be, the edges of the stones always remain, so that no continuous transition from one tint to another is possible. In the same way, concepts, with their rigidity and sharp delineation, however finely they may be split by closer definition, are always incapable of reaching the fine modifications of perception. . . . This same property in concepts which makes them similar to the stones of a mosaic, and by virtue of which perception always remains their asymptote, is also the reason why nothing good is achieved through them in art" (*The World as Will and Representation*, 1:57).
respond to Whitman’s urge to “unscrew the locks from the doors” but would not go on and “unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs.” In fact, one of the most important images in the Nabokov oeuvre is that of a nonhermetic partition, of a door that has come ajar. This image is brought into high relief in the poem “Vlyublyonnost’” (“The Being in Love”) included in his Look at the Harlequins! (1974). The last stanza of the poem provides a crucial clue to the treatment of falling in love in Nabokov’s fiction—the claim that “being in love” opens the door on the beyond:

Napomináyu chto vlyublyonnost’,
Ne yáv’, chto mětínny ne té.
Chto mòžhet-byt’ potustorónnost’
Priotворíla’s v temnoté.

[LATH, 25]

In an attempt to explain the meaning of this stanza, the protagonist of Look at the Harlequins! translates the word potustorónnost’ as “the hereafter”: “Napomináyu, I remind you, that vlyublyonnost’ is not wide-awake reality, that the markings are not the same (a moon-striped ceiling, polosatyy ot luny potolok, is, for instance, not the same kind of reality as a ceiling by day), and that, maybe, the hereafter stands slightly ajar in the dark” (LATH, 26).

Vera Nabokov cites this poem as one of the texts that most clearly reveal Nabokov’s preoccupation with the theme of Mystery (see S, 3). In Look at the Harlequins! it appears in the episode that parallels the so-called “detective” phase of Nabokov’s work, the phase that includes King, Queen, Knave. It may thus be read as an indirect commentary on the image of doors that recurs persistently throughout the novel. Some doors in King, Queen, Knave are ajar in the light or in the darkness, but most are closed, slammed, locked or unlocked with keys or latches. Martha musters all her strength to keep the door of Franz’s room closed against her husband’s intrusion, shuts the door abruptly behind Dreyer’s dog, imagines herself snatching Dreyer’s book of poems and locking it away in a suitcase. The shutting of doors (and

18This may be a subversive allusion to “What is Love? ’Tis not hereafter” from Shakespeare’s carnivallistic Twelfth Night (2.3).
lids) is endowed with unmistakably symbolic significance when, after Franz's first visit to the Dreyers, Martha locks the door behind her husband with unwonted violence:

As soon as the door had noiselessly closed behind him, Martha sprang up and furiously, with a wrenching twist, locked it. This was utterly out of character: a singular impulse she would have been at a loss to explain, and all the more senseless since she would need the maid in a minute, and would have to unlock the door anyway. Much later, when many months had passed, and she was trying to reconstruct that day, it was this door and this key that she recalled most vividly, as if an ordinary door key happened to be the correct key to that not quite ordinary day. However, in wringing the neck of the lock she failed to dispell her anger.

Martha attempts to translate this “not quite ordinary” experience into the “in character” notion of respectable middle-class adultery. Her love for Franz is genuine at first and therefore not reducible to the familiar order of things. Martha resents this loss of control and, misinterpreting its nature, directs her anger against her husband, the only person who has been eluding her reins. Slamming the door, she rejects the exquisite gift offered by “the being in love.”

Franz, a prisoner of physical sensation, profanes his love for Martha by his insistence on translating it into plain carnal lust. Because he is genuinely in love with her at first, he abstains from adventures with prostitutes, and his languor infuses the city with sordid yet mysterious splendor. Yet when sleep hands him “the key of its city” (KQK 74), the passage that Franz chooses to open leads him only to the “solitary practice” (KQK, 22) that he has been promising himself to give up. He is not aware that his restlessness is not entirely libidinous and that, unlike Alice in a Wonderland hall, he has chosen the wrong door.

A loud motorcycle that Martha and Franz dream of at the same time (see KQK, 75) suggests that, when in love, they are capable of unusual experience without wishing it or recognizing its nature. It is noteworthy, however, that Nabokov inserts the motorcycle into Martha’s dream only in the revised edition (in the original only Franz dreams of it), wishing, as it were, to intensify the sense of the mysterious gift

offered to the lovers.\(^{21}\) They do not accept the gift. A door on the beyond has come ajar, yet they promptly shut it by consciously seeking only satisfaction of physical desire. Martha regrets that November is “being squandered on trifles as money is squandered on trifles when you get stranded in some dull town,” and Franz regrets that he is “draining his passion in useless fantasies” (\(KQK, 84\)). Soon after the affair is consummated, Martha’s lovemaking turns into a kind of masturbation: she seeks to appropriate Franz’s body and treat it as her own appurtenance—“my dining room, my earrings, my silver, my Franz” (\(KQK, 124\)). Her visits to Franz take place when she is supposed to be attending classes in “rhythmic inclinations and gesticulations” (\(KQK, 131\)); instead of improving her control over her own body (which lets her down by the end of the novel), she learns to manipulate the body and the will of the subdued lover.

Only the shallow, egotistical, yet rather well-meaning Dreyer—who, despite his eccentric infidelities, still loves his wife—does not seek to shut himself off hermetically from mystery. Consciously, he looks for it in the wrong places: when in her delirium Martha talks of their dog’s death, Dreyer takes that for evidence of “second sight” (\(KQK, 271\)) because he does not know that Martha has given orders for Tom to be poisoned. Like Franz, Dreyer tends to choose the wrong doors. Symbolically, it is not through the front door but through a squalid back entrance that he first leads Franz into his emporium (see \(KQK, 68\)).

Yet not all doors fail Dreyer. The night before the boating expedition during which Martha plans to drown him, he is tortured by the “upright glare of a door ajar” (\(KQK, 236\)). The glare comes from Martha’s room and merges with the scorching pain in his sunburned back. Dreyer is too sane to realize that it is a danger signal, warning him that he is on the brink of the “hereafter,” yet something deep within him responds to the writing on the wall: the next day he pronounces the magic formula, “Tomorrow . . . I’m making a hundred thousand dollars at one stroke” (\(KQK, 247\)), just in time to save his life. One may recall that Dreyer has met Franz’s landlord, the self-styled Menetek el Pharsin, whose variant of the magic “Close, Sesame” (“Your girl is in there”: \(KQK, 221\)) prevented him from forcing the door open and discovering Martha in Franz’s room.

\(^{21}\)Nabokov’s lecture on \textit{Anna Karenina} comments on Anna’s and Vronski’s double nightmare (\(LRL, 175-77\)).
At the very end of the novel it is from behind a partition (a "thin wall": KQK, 272) that we listen to the frenzied laughter of Franz. Among the most significant revisions made in 1966, when Nabokov was preparing the English edition, is a greater emphasis on the gradual and thorough dehumanization of Franz Bubendorf. Consider, for instance, the treatment of the "visits of inspection" (KQK, viii) that "Nabokov" and his wife (equipped with their butterfly net, which is absent from the Russian original; see KQK, 232) pay to the world of King, Queen, Knave in the last two chapters. In the original the foreign couple that Franz notices at Pomerania Bay is given less narrative space, yet Franz suddenly understands what their image means (Kdv, 239–40). This scene hints at the role played by the Lyovin–Kitty marriage in Anna Karenina: the two young foreigners genuinely love each other; their feeling is much more than the carnal lust that Franz had known. In the revised version of the novel Franz is never granted this insight; he is too degenerate even to recognize what he can no longer be.

The fact that the foreign couple seem to be discussing Franz in the last chapter is given greater prominence in the revised edition. As a result, their appearance functions less as emphasis on the theme of love and more as a structural device, an embryonic form of the Roots III technique that is brought to perfection in Pnin. The brief encounter that takes place between the novelist and the characters at Pomerania Bay is, to some extent, a counterpart of chapter 7 of Pnin, where the narrator recounts his contacts with Pnin and the firsthand information that seems to have been transformed into various motifs of Pnin's life. Indeed, the foreword to King, Queen, Knave informs us that the novel was conceived "on the coastal sands of Pomerania Bay" (KQK, vii).

Franz's development anticipates the development that thousands of German youths would undergo in the next two decades: from satisfaction of basic physical needs through brainwashing, stultification, and habitual unquestioning obedience to the routine commission of atrocious crimes. The novel presents the mechanical round of lower-middle-class life as one of the factors conducive to the eventually enormous sway of Hitler's propaganda. While revising King, Queen, Knave in 1966, Nabokov was moved to insert into it the remark that in the future Franz would be "guilty of worse sins than avunculicide" (KQK, 138). Yet it is interesting that even in the Russian original, Franz is
ominously singled out from the rest of the trio. At the end, when Martha dies and Dreyer goes to pieces with grief (figuratively reen­acting the literal fate of the automannequins in the last demonstration), Franz remains disconcertingly alive. Nabokov does not use the self­conscious artifice of the novel to cancel this character as he cancels the protagonists of Pnin, Mary, Bend Sinister, and Pale Fire; the story of Franz is not over when the curtain falls. As in Mary and The Gift, we are invited to follow the character in our own imagination for a short while after the narrative ends.

We can, moreover, construct not one but two sequels to Franz's story. The first involves the sleepy girl in the next room who overhears Franz's wild rejoicing in the last paragraph of the novel. Since Franz has been waiting for a chance to get free of Martha and pursue other women, the reader expects him to start an affair with a chance neigh­bor. In the revised version Nabokov brings out the potentialities of this situation: the girl in the next room becomes “a miserable tramp whom a commercial traveller had jilted” (KQK, 272). The promiscuous “commercial traveller” looks forward to Nabokov's story “A Dashing Fellow,” published in 1930 (that is, shortly after the Russian version of King, Queen, Knave); the protagonist of that story has syphilis, which Franz would carry away from the encounter with the “miserable tramp.” The noseless face that terrifies Franz on the train is probably his own future in which, according to the revised version of the novel, he will be very ill (see KQK, 138).

It seems that the waxlike Franz is about to step out of the fictional gallery of waxworks into the historical chamber of horrors: the other implicit sequel is suggested by the remark that in his more mature life Franz would be “guilty of worse sins than avunculicide” (KQK, 138); he is presented as a Nazi in the making. In 1927 V. Sirin was only intuitively aware of what Vladimir Nabokov would highlight in 1967. The implied connection between Franz's progress through the novel and his Nazi future is retrospectively intensified not only by the revisions that Nabokov eventually made in the novel itself but also by his description in his postwar autobiography of Dietrich, a young German he had known during his years in Berlin, a “well-bred, quiet, bespectacled” university student “whose hobby was capital punish­ment” (SM, 278). He collected grisly pictures, traveled with his camera from one active execution site to another, and was disappointed when a friend of his got drunk instead of committing the suicide he had been looking forward to witnessing. The segment concludes: “I can well
imagine the look of calm satisfaction in his fish-blue eyes as he shows, nowadays (perhaps at the very minute I am writing this), a never-expected profusion of treasures to his thigh-clapping, guffawing co-veterans—the absolutely wunderbar pictures he took during Hitler’s reign” (SM, 279).

The motif of the victim’s expected cooperation with the executioner relates this description to Invitation to a Beheading, yet it may also be read as containing the motif of poker cards alluded to in the 1967 foreword to King, Queen, Knave (KQK, xi): it is out of the “meager stack” (SM, 278) of his non-Russian and non-Jewish acquaintances of the period spanning the two world wars that Nabokov sorts out the image of Dietrich. It may at first seem that Dietrich and Franz share only their quietness and spectacles, yet if one thinks about the psychological origins of sadism, the gap between them is bridged. Here is Schopenhauer’s explanation of cruelty as an end in itself:

a person filled with an extremely intense pressure of will wants with burning eagerness to accumulate everything, in order to slake the thirst of egoism. As is inevitable, he is bound to see that all satisfaction is only apparent, and that the attained object never fulfils the promise held out by the desired object, namely the final appeasement of the excessive pressure of will. He sees that, with fulfilment, the wish changes only its form, and now torments under another form; indeed, when at last all wishes are exhausted, the pressure of will itself remains, even without any recognized motive, and makes itself known with terrible pain as a feeling of the most frightful desolation and emptiness. . . . he then seeks indirectly the alleviation of which he is incapable directly, in other words, he tries to mitigate his own suffering by the sight of another’s, and at the same time recognizes this as an expression of his power. The suffering of another becomes for him an end in itself; it is a spectacle over which he gloats; and so arises the phenomenon of cruelty proper, of bloodthirstiness, so often revealed by history in the Neros and Domitians, in the African Deys, in Robespierre and others.22

At the end of the novel Franz Bubendorf is on his way not only to the satisfaction of desires but also to the loss of the capacity for further direct satisfaction—the psychological grounds for sadistic enjoyment are being laid. Together with a defenselessness against the authority of the rulers, produced by habitual obedience to orders and absence of an

22Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, 1:364.
independent moral or ideological stand, Franz's disposition presents him as the stuff that war criminals are made of. It is characteristic of all totalitarian regimes (Nabokov notes that there is nothing intrinsically German about his characters; see KQK, viii) that they thus promise their subjects material well-being and seek to suppress those aspects of their spiritual lives that could counteract the frightening outcome of the scramble for the gratification of desires.

Thus, paradoxically, Nabokov's "bright brute" did come after all to bear an imprint of the political agenda. From the frying pan into the fire: if in 1927 V. Sirin chose a German milieu so as not to be obliged to deal with the Russian Revolution, in 1967 that choice forced Nabokov to deal with the problem of World War II. Before 1967 this subject had been partly "got rid of" in Bend Sinister and Pnin. Yet it would, it seems, always lurk close by, a "shadow behind the heart" (P, 126; KQK, 251).