Laughter in the Dark:
Guinea Pigs and Galley Slaves

And there is also an art of throwing a wet blanket upon sympathy at the very moment it might arise, the result being that the situation, though a serious one, is not taken seriously.

Henri Bergson, “Laughter”

The years 1929–32 saw an outburst of creative activity: upon completing The Defense, Nabokov wrote a number of shorter works, including The Eye, and two novels, Glory and Kamera obscura. In 1938 his own considerably revised translation of Kamera obscura came out in America under the title Laughter in the Dark.

There is a close thematic relationship between Glory and Kamera obscura. Both are devoted to a metaphysical error: their protagonists feel a call, a lure of something inaccessible, and attempt to pursue it in different wrong ways. Whereas Martin Edelweiss of Glory mistakes this mysterious beckoning for nostalgia, Bruno Krechmar of Kamera obscura, alias Albert Albinus of Laughter in the Dark, seeks to capture what Shelley might have called Intellectual Beauty through possession of a sexual eidolon.¹

An art critic and collector used to owning beautiful things, Albinus forgets that it is the “hopeless sense of loss which makes beauty what it is: a distant tree against golden heavens; ripples of light on the inner curve of a bridge; a thing quite impossible to capture” (LD, 10). It is not surprising that some of the pictures in his collection turn out to be fakes. Margot Peters, a vulgar, scheming young girl with whom he becomes infatuated, has only the accidental surface attributes of beauty; in his fixation on her fake loveliness, he half-consciously ignores

her inner life, brushes aside his own better feelings, stifles his pity for his wife, and allows lust to take control over his life. He cares little for Margot as an individual. For all his abject obedience to her, she becomes an objectification of his desire: when she betrays him, he tries to kill her instead of destroying her image in his consciousness. If in *King, Queen, Knave* Martha's wish for a "dead husband" is a natural sequel of her wish for a "subdued husband," in *Laughter in the Dark* the murderous impulse is an outcome of self-inflicted moral obtuseness. To emphasize, as it were, the relationship between the literal and the metaphoric, the author eventually realizes the metaphor of moral blindness by depriving Albinus of his physical eyesight.

Whereas Albinus turns the object of his pursuit into a potential victim, Hermann, the protagonist of Nabokov's next novel, *Despair* (1934), treats his pseudo-double Felix not as a human being or even as an object but as a dehumanized instrument of his pursuit; and the pursuit is, prophetically, an experiment with murder as a medium of what Hermann considers "art." The idea of experiment is also present in *Laughter in the Dark*, especially in its Russian version. Nabokov's troubled attitude toward this notion may reflect both the experimental attitudes characteristic of contemporary modernist art and the giant social and military experiment that Nazism was preparing to carry out.

The rise of fascism is only obliquely reflected in a brief reference to Mussolini (see *LD*, 138), but the novel complements *King, Queen, Knave* by exploring a psychological phenomenon that makes Nazi crimes possible: the deliberate suppression of sympathy for the suffering of another. Albinus consciously suppresses compassion for his wife; chance lovers shamelessly exploit Margot in her early days; Margot and Axel Rex inflict suffering on others for sheer entertainment. It is this specific theme (rather than the theme of the sexual eidolon, which connects this novel with *Lolita*) that is reflected in the narrative techniques of *Laughter in the Dark*. These techniques, comic and illusionist, systematically counteract the reader's impulses toward sympathy for the protagonist. The suppression of sympathy, both by the

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characters and by the reader, is the structural principle of *Laughter in the Dark*.

I

*Kamera obscura*, the first version of the novel, opens with a description of a cartoon character invented by Robert Horn (Axel Rex in *Laughter in the Dark*). This rival of Disney's cheerful creatures is a guinea pig called Cheepy, an object of medical experiments. There is a strong whiff of black humor in the pictures where this unfortunate animal appears. Its inventor is a lover of sadistic experiment: "As a child he had poured oil over live mice, set fire to them, and watched them dart about for a few seconds like flaming meteors. And it is best not to inquire into the things he did to cats. Then, in riper years, when his artistic talent developed, he tried in more subtle ways to satiate his curiosity, for it was not anything morbid with a medical name—oh, not at all—just cold, wide-eyed curiosity, just the marginal notes supplied by life to his art" (*LD, 91*). It is with this same curiosity that he watches the suffering of the protagonist, subtly yet inventively augmenting it by the end of the novel. Krechmar/Albinus becomes the human guinea pig of Horn/Rex.

While translating and revising this book for publication in America (*Laughter in the Dark* is, strictly speaking, his first American novel), Nabokov deletes all the traces of the long-suffering guinea pig and replaces its description on the first page with the following prolepsis:

Once upon a time there lived in Berlin, Germany, a man called Albinus. He was rich, respectable, happy; one day he abandoned his wife for the sake of a youthful mistress; he loved; was not loved; and his life ended in disaster.

This is the whole of the story and we might have left it at that had there not been profit and pleasure in the telling; and although there is plenty of space on a gravestone to contain, bound in moss, the abridged version of a man's life, detail is always welcome. [*LD, 5*]

It is appropriate that the "Americanized" version of the novel should refrain from bringing into relief the motif of experiment, well known to its new audience from, say, Hawthorne's "Birthmark," "Rappaccini's Daughter," "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment," and *The Scarlet Letter*
(which, incidentally, ends as Laughter in the Dark begins—with a reference to a gravestone). Moreover, emphasis on experiment might have been misleading, since the imaginative procedure at work in Laughter in the Dark is not that of experimentation (a movement from cause to effect) but rather that of pondering the data: the reconstruction of the way a given effect has been produced. Indeed, the first paragraphs are strongly reminiscent of the opening of Hawthorne’s “Wakefield”:

In some old magazine or newspaper I recollect a story, told as truth, of a man—let us call him Wakefield—who absented himself for a long time from his wife. The fact, thus abstractedly stated, is not very uncommon, nor—without a proper distinction of circumstances—to be condemned either as naughty or nonsensical. . . . The wedded couple lived in London. The man, under pretense of going a journey, took lodgings in the next street to his own house, and there, unheard of by his wife or friends, and without a shadow of a reason for such self-banishment, dwelt upward of twenty years. During that period, he beheld his home every day, and frequently the forlorn Mrs. Wakefield. And after so great a gap in his matrimonial felicity . . . he entered the door one evening, quietly, as from a day’s absence, and became a loving spouse till death.

This outline is all that I remember. But the incident, though of the purest originality, unexampled, and probably never to be repeated, is one, I think, which appeals to the generous sympathies of mankind.¹

Like “Wakefield,” Laughter in the Dark seems based on a Hawthornean, potentially symbolistic principle: “Whenever any subject so forcibly affects the mind, time is well spent in thinking of it.”² What is one’s mind affected by in Laughter in the Dark? Not by a story of marital infidelity; like Albinus’s wife Elisabeth, we have all “heard and read that husbands and wives constantly [deceive] each other; indeed, adultery [is] the core of gossip, romantic poetry, funny stories, and famous operas” (LD, 45–46). Rather, what justifies the time “spent in thinking of it” is, to borrow Hawthorne’s words, the problem of appeal “to the generous sympathies of mankind.”

Albinus is not a typical middle-class adulterer. He cannot, for instance, apply certain timeworn safety rules, such as maintaining a

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self-protectively callous attitude toward his mistress; his chief claim on the reader’s sympathy is based precisely on his inability to sustain such an attitude. This inability, however, is caused not by his sympathy or respect for Margot but by her ascendancy in the power struggle: she takes full advantage of the hypertrophy of Albinus’s desire. The reader’s sympathy likewise remains dormant, but this is an effect of the novel’s rhetoric rather than of any features of the characters or the plot.

Albinus is presented, symbolically, as a bungler who cannot do anything with his hands. He bungles his whole life, and yet we are not really sorry for him. Why? The narrative does not blunt sympathy for him completely but does reduce it to a bare minimum. The rhetoric of Laughter in the Dark is indirectly commented on by the far more radical rhetorical experiment performed by Jerzy Kosinski’s Painted Bird. In Kosinski’s novel, the sheltered prehistory of a child is abruptly put to an end when he becomes an unprotected outcast and witness to acts of cruelty; these acts are presented on a rising scale: the first is staggering to the reader but is followed by successively more horrifying brutalities until the sadistic escalation blunts the reader’s sense of horror—thus revealing the mechanism by which one becomes inured to the suffering of another. The Painted Bird is a narrative not so much of what was as of what may be, a narrative that accusingly implicates the reader. In a much less violent way and in the delicate spirit of aesthetic inquiry, Laughter in the Dark does the same. The novel implicitly offers two explanations of what dampens sympathy, one ostensible and one real.

II

The ostensible explanation of the suppression of sympathy is “poetic justice.” If our heart does not go out to Albinus—this pleasant, kindly, and rather deep-feeling man who is ruthlessly subjected to ever increasing torments—it is, poetic justice would hold, because “he had it coming” and because his punishment is not disproportionate to the crime (his betrayal of his family is responsible for his daughter’s death). Albinus’s failure to dissociate his metaphysical quest from carnal lust and his granting of priority to lust over human sympathies take a variety of easily perceivable external forms. He is not chaste: before his marriage he was involved in numerous loveless affairs (a cardinal sin of nineteenth-century fiction). He has an ostrichlike ability to ignore the suffering of others by turning away from them. His
jealous rage arouses in him an automatic impulse for murder, the worst of all crimes. If we watch his suffering without much pity, is it because we find it justifiable that the man who has inflicted pain on others should, to continue the optical metaphor, give an eye for an eye?

Not really. Poetic justice does not suffice to sabotage pity; if it did, much of the power of Othello or King Lear would be lost. In his own nontragic genre Nabokov continues the Gogol-Chekhov tradition of bestowing cautious pity on the sordid and the undeserving. He makes the reader feel compassion not only for the gentle Vasili Ivanovich of “Cloud, Castle, Lake” (1937) but even for the obnoxious Koldunov in “Lik” (1939) and for the counterfeiter Romantovski in “The Leonardo” (1933). In order to emphasize that the pain of a little money forger is no less intense than that of a Romantic poet—a forger of a universe (note the root of Romantovski’s name)—Nabokov ends “The Leonardo” with a complaint: “My poor Romantovski! And I who believed with them that you were indeed someone exceptional. I believed, let me confess, that you were a remarkable poet whom poverty obliged to dwell in that sinister district. . . . My poor Romantovski! It is all over now. . . . Everything floats away. Harmony and meaning vanish. The world irks me again with its variegated void” (RB, 23–24).

Hence it is not because Albinus “deserves to be punished” that the novel is free from melodramatic appeal. Our pity for the protagonist is held in check because our attention is deliberately diverted from matters that invite emotional response.

III

In a circus the conjuror’s patter diverts the observer’s attention from the real action. The virtuoso techniques that call the reader’s attention away from the characters’ suffering in Laughter in the Dark take the shape of circus tricks: the stage manager combines the skills of juggling with a trick known as the vanishing act.

Vanishing Act is the title of a novel by one Udo Conrad, a writer who is mentioned at the beginning and who appears at the crucial point of

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3This story has inspired the pioneering comparison between Hawthorne and Nabokov in Chapel Louise Petty, “A Comparison of Hawthorne’s ‘Wakefield’ and ‘The Leonardo’: Narrative Commentary and the Struggle of the Literary Artist,” Modern Fiction Studies, 25 (1979), 499–507.
the American version of the novel (he has also written *Memoirs of a Forgetful Man*, which is a good description of the unreliable narrative of *Despair*). As befits the fictional author of a book “about the old conjurer who spirited himself away at his farewell performance” (*LD*, 5), Udo Conrad performs his own vanishing act in his last lines. Unwittingly, he informs Albinus about Margot’s infidelity and, on seeing the effect his remarks have produced, understands that something has gone wrong: “‘I wonder,’ muttered Conrad, ‘I wonder whether I haven’t committed some blunder (…nasty rhyme, that! “Was it, I wonder, a—la, la la—blunder?” Horrible!)’” (*LD*, 143). The “nasty rhyme” of “wonder” and “blunder” obtains only in English, whereas Udo Conrad—who would like to address the French audience but is “loath to part with the experience and riches amassed in the course of [his] handling of” his native German (*LD*, 138)—is thinking in German, whose corresponding *wunder* and *Schnitzer* do not rhyme. The situation is logically impossible and therefore cancels itself when subjected to linguistic scrutiny, “spiriting” Udo away as soon as his function in the novel is accomplished. The episode is a self-referential literalization of the “impossible situations” that have fallen to the lot of Albinus.

A similar vanishing act is performed by the actress Dorianna Karenina in her last line. Like all the characters of the novel, she is German, yet when asked by Axel Rex whether she has read Tolstoy, she replies with an unwitting English pun: “Doll’s Toy?” (*LD*, 123). The linguistic impossibility is less obvious than in Udo Conrad’s act, but the element of the grotesque is highlighted by the notion of a toy possessing a toy. In the Russian original of the novel, the fun is limited to Dorianna Karenina’s unfamiliarity with the author of *Anna Karenina*.

Disappearance is one of the most persistent recurrent motifs of the novel. Though as an art connoisseur Albinus wishes to devote himself to the preservation of things of beauty, the “impossible situations” that he cannot control turn his life into a series of vanishing acts. First, his peace of mind disappears when he meets Margot; then his family life is shattered; then his daughter Irma dies. The illusion of his idyllic happiness with Margot is also soon destroyed; then he loses his eyesight and finally his life. Further, the motif of vanishing is an important aspect of the novel’s aesthetic theme: beauty cannot be possessed; it vanishes upon appropriation.

The motif of *juggling* is evoked in Axel Rex’s feeling that the story of his relationship with Albinus is stage-managed by an “elusive, dou-
ble, triple, self-reflecting magic Proteus of a phantom, the shadow of many-coloured glass balls flying in a curve, the ghost of a juggler on a shimmering curtain" (LD, 118). The “many-coloured glass balls” (reminiscent of the “dome of many-coloured glass” in Shelley’s “Adonais”) are the recurrent images and motifs in the novel—one of which is the vanishing act.

The anticipatory and recurring visual images and motifs of *Laughter in the Dark* are in fact juggled with consummate skill. The images of the cinema poster and of the movie that Albinus watches when he first meets Margot foreshadow his own future; the screen funeral that he imagines on the day of his daughter’s birth foreshadows her funeral, which he does not attend; the scene between Margot, Rex, and Frau Levandovsky foreshadows a later scene between Margot, Rex, and Albinus. Colors, particularly red and blue, come into play with the colorlessness associated with Albinus and Elisabeth as well as with the “darkness” of the title; moral blindness comes into complex interplay with physical blindness, as does movement with stillness, sincerity with hypocrisy, earnestness with cynicism, clothing with nudity, tenderness with cruelty, and so on. Particularly important is the motif of doors, which in this novel (by contrast to *King, Queen, Knave*) are all too often locked fast. On her visit to Albinus’s apartment Margot locks him up in his bedroom just as Rex had locked Frau Levandovsky in the lavatory; later she locks the door of the shower between two adjoining hotel rooms in Rouginard in order to pass to Rex’s room undetected. Like Martha in *King, Queen, Knave*, Margot and Rex resolutely lock the door on anything beyond sensual gratification; Albinus, in a somewhat loftier although mistaken quest, always seeks out the wrong doors. The door on the Beyond does not come ajar for him as it does for Dreyer, and it is only at the moment of his death that doors symbolically open wide—the doors through which Margot makes her own vanishing act.

The effect of the juggling of motifs is equivalent to the effect of the conjuror’s patter; it is a device that diverts us from the characters’ suffering. Yet Nabokov does not merely address our intellect, the known enemy of emotion, in order to divide our attention between the subject and the manner of the presentation. That technique would be part of the *skaz* tradition, elements of which, though transformed

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6Accounts of the novel’s film imagery can be found in Alfred Appel, Jr., *Nabokov’s Dark Cinema* (New York, 1974); and Stuart, *Nabokov*, pp. 87–106.
almost beyond recognition, occur in *Pnin*: the narrator keeps foregrounding himself, clowning in front of the reader for whose attention he thus competes with the story. In *Laughter in the Dark*, however, the narrator is hardly ever felt; he participates in the author's own “vanishing act.” The reader's attention is diverted from Albinus not to the narrator but to the “details” of Albinus's world; not from the subject to the manner of the presentation but from the action to the *mise-en-scène*.

IV

The juggling of imagery in *Laughter in the Dark* is so consummately skillful that the plot may sometimes seem to be a pretext for its display. Yet images are not ornamental vignettes but integral parts of the plot; their selection cancels the difference between the story and the narrative, the subject and the manner of the presentation.

In moments of deep distress, one's eyes are often arrested by a chance detail of the surrounding scene; the detail may then acquire an almost hypnotic power. References to details of the setting, often densely yet elusively meaningful, likewise effectively divert the reader's attention from the force of the character's distress. Whereas in Chekhov's work (as in the work of his fictional fellow writer Trigorin) “the broken bottle glitters on the dam and the mill-wheel casts a black shadow—and there you have the moonlight night,” Nabokov's images in *Laughter in the Dark* do not so much convey the atmosphere of the scene as eclipse it; Nabokov evokes the hypnotizing detail at the expense of the pain that has caused a character's fixation on it.

Nevertheless, the inferable relationship between the pain and the symptomatic image endows the latter with symbolic significance. Thus, on finding that Elisabeth has read Margot's letter and left him, Albinus walks into the bedroom and sees a telltale disorder: “His wife's evening gowns lay on the bed. One drawer of the chest was pulled out. The little portrait of his late father-in-law had vanished

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from the table. The corner of the rug was turned up” (LD, 56). The short sentences convey the fragmentariness of Albinus’s consciousness: he has not yet taken in the full impact of the havoc he has wreaked in his life. Elisabeth has taken away what is most precious to her—not the evening gowns but her daughter, her love, the picture of her father (the word “vanish” applied to the picture is significant: when Margot vanishes from the same apartment at the end of the novel, it is the costly miniatures from a cupboard that she carries away). A drawer is open—a secret is out. The corner of the rug is turned up—the underside of Albinus’s love life has become visible (the momentary look of genuine anguish in the eyes of Cecilia C. in Invitation to a Beheading is similarly compared with the visible lining of a turned up corner of life; see IB, 136).

The full power of such images as the turned-up corner of a rug merits a separate phenomenological study, which cannot be undertaken here. It must be noted, however, that a repeated reading of the novel intensifies the force of this particular “glass ball,” linking it with a “glass ball” of a different color: the “frozen wave” of the bulging carpet in the scene of Albinus’s death (LD, 187). During the brief struggle between Albinus and Margot a piece of furniture gets pushed in such a way as to produce an upward crease in the carpet, an almost en-abîme image of darkness within darkness. The two carpet positions are expressive traces of, respectively, Elisabeth’s outrage and Margot’s and Albinus’s spasmodic violence. The inference concerning the exact origin of the disorder is an act of the intellect that further deflects the reader’s psychic energy from vicarious emotion, enhancing the anaesthetic effect of aesthetic distance.

Aesthetic distance is further increased by dramatic irony and shifts of perspective. Dramatic irony, the difference between the reader’s and the protagonist’s interpretations of the same set of details, distances Albinus’s horror on the morning when he discovers that he has become blind. It does not take us long to understand the meaning of the discrepancy between the daytime sounds of the hospital and the absence of light: Albinus has gone blind. The elaboration of this discrepancy is, in itself, an interesting aesthetic exercise. The pleasure that it produces (at the expense of attention to Albinus’s pain) may be related to our subconscious memories of awakenings: hearing is usually the first of the five senses to come alive. For more than a page of the narrative we watch Albinus staving off the truth by attributing the darkness to a series of implausible causes, because the obvious cause is too horrify-
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ing. A further irony is achieved by the relative frequency of the wrong and the right causes: blindness is a much rarer phenomenon than, for instance, the noisy though moonless night that Albinus is trying to imagine. He clings to the less logical though more statistically probable explanation rather than to the more logical yet frightfully unusual one. This kind of self-delusion is, in fact, the story of his life.

When the realization of the truth can no longer be delayed, the narrator resorts to a behavioristic description of Albinus's reaction and makes up for its inevitable touch of callousness by using the metaphor of the globe, which suggests the cosmic magnitude of Albinus's pain. Moreover, as if to evade the "emotional danger" lying in that region, the chapter is hastily cut short: 'I... I... Albinus drew a deep breath which seemed to make his chest swell into some vast monstrous globe full of a whirling roar which presently he let out, lustily, steadily.... And when it had all gone, he started filling up again" (LD, 157). The narrative thus reenacts the wariness with which Albinus turns away from his wife's grief upon the death of their child, unwilling to let pity for Elisabeth keep him away from Margot. It turns the tables on Albinus by eventually shifting his own pain to the periphery of the reader's field of vision.

The shifts of perspective in Laughter in the Dark frequently amount to turning aesthetic distance into physical distance. Such a monitoring of the "camera eye" is most obvious in the short chapter devoted to Albinus's car accident. The account of the event that causes his blindness is a catalogue of different ways of seeing. The distance between the camera eye and the car increases and begins to decrease only after the accident has taken place; the camera eye never closes up on the accident itself.

In the first sentence of the chapter an old woman is gathering herbs (for medicine or magic?) on a hillside. She sees two cyclists and Albinus's car converging at a sharp bend of the road. The camera eye then rises to look down with the pilot of the mail plane flying over the scene, and then still higher, to a spot from which it can overlook the mountains of Provence and finally the whole "cheek of the earth from Gibraltar to Stockholm" (LD, 152).

The camera eye descends over Berlin, and in the ensuing two paragraphs seeing yields to vision. The narrator—or is it Elisabeth?—seems to have a strong visual memory of Irma looking at the ice cream vendor; then Elisabeth notes the symbolmaking contrast between an ice cream vendor's white clothes and her own black ones; finally,
standing on her balcony, Elisabeth becomes aware of a strange nervousness. For the second time in the novel (the first time was after her brother Paul had run into Albinus and Margot at the stadium) this bland, habitually absentminded and self-deluding woman turns out to be capable of a keen intuitive insight (involutive insight, one may say, into her creator’s mind). The balcony on which she is standing seems “to soar higher, higher” (LD, 153), rising over the European cheek of the earth and descending over Provence, first to the mail plane, then to the old herb gatherer. The pronoun “she” in the last sentence of the chapter (“For a whole year at least she would be telling people how she had seen... what she had seen...” LD, 153) is ambiguous: it is not clear whether the sentence refers to the actual scene witnessed by the herb gatherer or the telepathic vision of Elisabeth. Paradoxically, though this control of distance spares the reader’s emotions, it nevertheless presents the accident—and Albinus’s ensuing loss of eyesight—as a cosmic event, no less important than anything else that may be happening in Europe on that particular morning.

V

The uneasy combination of soberness and awe in the treatment of Albinus suggests that a touch of callousness is an almost inevitable result of the comic approach to a melodramatic subject. The comedy stems from those features of the character that, by themselves, have the power to reduce his appeal to sympathy. Albinus is a perfect illustration of what Bergson described as a potentially comic character, one whose emotion is a parasitic growth, rigid and disconnected from the rest of the soul: “This rigidity may be manifested, when the time comes, by puppet-like movements, and then it will provoke laughter; but, before that, it had already alienated our sympathy: how can we put ourselves in tune with a soul which is not in tune with itself?”

One might say that we can do so if the character is telling his own story; indeed, part of the troubling effect of Nabokov’s first-person narratives consists precisely in our resentment of the occasional sympathy that the narrators extort from us despite our better judgment. The third-person narrative of Laughter in the Dark, however, plays down the attractive features of Albinus and emphasizes the parasitic

hypertrophy of the passion that suppresses his concern for Elisabeth, his love for his daughter and feeling of guilt upon her death, his artistic tastes, his judgment. The recurrence of similar situations and patterns of behavior throughout the novel presents Albinus as a "galley slave" (SO, 95) at the mercy of his obsession, if not a puppet on the master juggler's strings.

Albinus's disposition forms the ground for the comic; the actual laughter, however, is provoked by the incongruities that stem from his predicament.10 His desire for Margot as an embodiment of transcendent beauty is incongruous in view of her vulgarity, greed, hypocrisy, and cruelty. This global incongruity yields sundry local errors that also expose Albinus's tendency to commodify art and reify people. The close connection between an aesthetic misprision and a moral flaw is evident in the episode that follows Margot's visit of inspection to Albinus's apartment. Noticing a scarlet patch in the library, Albinus decides that it is the edge of Margot's dress and that she is still hiding behind a bookcase after his family has come back home. During the evening hours he suffers tortures of fear lest she be discovered. However, when his household finally retires his passion for Margot surmounts all caution and propriety. He makes his way to the library not so much to release Margot as to make love to her there and then, with his family sleeping behind the partitions:

Albinus undid the neck of his pyjamas as he crept along. He was trembling all over. "In a moment—in a moment she will be mine," he thought. Noiselessly he opened the door of the library and turned on the softly shaded light.

"Margot, you mad little thing," he began in a whisper.

But it was only a scarlet silk cushion which he himself had brought there a few days ago, to crouch on while consulting Nonnenmacher's History of Art—ten volumes, folio. [LD, 44]

The effect of the anecdote is enhanced by the catalogue-like description of the art book: it is characteristic of Albinus to treat the book not just as a source of information but also, perhaps mainly, as a valuable—that is, expensive ("ten volumes, folio")—possession. He wishes to turn Margot, or rather the beauty that he sees in her, into

10 According to Schopenhauer, laughter results "from nothing but the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real objects that had been thought through it" (The World as Will and Representation, 1:59).
such a possession. Moreover, he has expected her to remain motionless for hours behind a bookcase, like an art book on its shelf or a cushion that has tumbled to the floor, waiting patiently for the master’s approach. The absurdity of this expectation foreshadows the disappointments that are in store for him, the empty rooms into which he will grope his way in search of his fickle mistress.

The name of the author of the art book can be understood as “a maker of nonnons.” In Invitation to a Beheading, “nonnons” are strange, grotesque objects that converge to make a picture when they are reflected in a special mirror (see IB, 135–36), probably an anamorphoscope (the mirror held up to nature?). As possessions rather than conditions of aesthetic experience, books and objects of art are little more than “nonnons.” Creative perception is the anamorphoscope that organizes entropic “average reality” (SO, 118) so as to endow it with “harmony and meaning” (RB, 24). Albinus and Margot are incapable of authentic perception. They structure their respective world pictures on movieland stereotypes, and as the pervasiveness of the film imagery in the novel suggests, their lives become parodies of film romances and therefore ample sources of the incongruous and grotesque.

VI

“The life of every individual,” says Schopenhauer, “viewed as a whole and in general, and when only its most significant features are emphasized, is really a tragedy; but gone through in detail it has the character of a comedy.” The “detail” in question is exactly what, according to the second paragraph of Laughter in the Dark, “is always welcome.”

One of the reasons why the title Laughter in the Dark is more appropriate than the earlier Kamera obscura is that Daguerre’s gadget (see Chapter 1 above) could capture only what is “viewed as a whole and in general, and when only [the] most significant features are emphasized.” Though the novel is permeated with visual imagery and veiled references to optical effects, its new title contains a sinister auditory

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11Johnson also interprets the “nonnons” of Invitation as an allusion to anamorphic art; see Worlds in Regression, pp. 160, 181.

12For a detailed discussion of the parodistic element in Laughter in the Dark, see Stuart, Nabokov, pp. 87–113.

13Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, 1:322.
image that conveys the prevalently somber coloration ("A title . . . must convey the colour of the book,—not its subject": RLSK, 72) of a motley novel haunted by a basic uneasiness: is it right to present human suffering in a way that leaves the reader’s sympathy unengaged? Moreover, though explicit references to experimentation have been excluded, the novel does, after all, perform a little experiment of its own—not on human beings but on the limits of the tragicomic. Albinus’s life, viewed in detail, does indeed have the features of a comedy, if one forgets its sad ending. Can any person become a comic character, or is a comic character necessarily one that displays a particular sort of flaw?

Nabokov’s Pnin shows that the answer depends on the sort of laughter the comedy provokes; there, the fun is tempered by the lyrical element. The pathetic Timofey Pnin tends to get so carried away by his memories and research that he forgets average reality; the little mishaps that constantly befall him are the petty revenge of the “here and now.” With Pnin, however, no psychological tendency grows beyond an admissible proportion, and there is a great deal of poetry in both his escapes and his returns.

In lectures on Don Quixote delivered at Harvard in the spring of 1952 (that is, when the work on Pnin had just begun), Nabokov demonstratively dissociated himself from the black humor of Cervantes’ contemporary audience (see LDQ, 51–57). Accordingly, though history plays ping-pong with Pnin, the author never lets him fall over the edge of farcical catastrophes. On the way to the library, for instance, Pnin totters but does not fall; he breaks a tumbler under the soap suds but not Victor’s precious present; he does make it to Cremona in time not only for his lecture but also for dinner; and Isabel Clements is prevented from surprising him, toothless and aghast, in her former room.14 Pnin’s classroom chair emits “an ominous crack,” interrupting his story of Pushkin’s death, but it does not break—at least not in the text. The narrative tactfully refrains from showing us how Pnin fights his embarrassment; instead, we are given a flashback scene that symbolically summarizes the difference between the practical jokes played on Cervantes’ hero and the tests to which the author periodically subjects the resilience of Pnin: "Sometime, somewhere—

14 These and similar episodes are brilliantly discussed by David H. Richter as cases of Nabokov’s handling of the “interrupted pratfall” theme in Pnin: see “Narrative Entrapment in Pnin and ‘Signs and Symbols,’ ” Papers on Language and Literature, 20 (1984), 418–30.
Petersburg? Prague?—one of the two musical clowns pulled out the piano stool from under the other, who remained, however, playing on, in a seated, though seatless, position, with his rhapsody unimpaired? Where? Circus Busch, Berlin!” (P, 68).

No matter how strenuously Jack Cockerell, the painter Komarov (whose name is derived from the Russian for “mosquito,” another prickly nuisance), or the narrator attempt to turn Pnin into a farcical failure, the lyrical strain in Pnin’s character remains unimpaired. Moreover, the author seems to be always unobtrusively helping him keep an even score with his tormentors—in much the same way that Don Quixote, according to Nabokov’s calculations (see LDQ, 89–112), keeps an even score of victories and defeats.

Albinus, however, is no Pnin. The times in which he lives are more sinister than those even of Don Quixote, and the laughter of the novel is not the one of light comedy; it is “laughter in the dark,” one of the most sinister sounds that can be produced by a human voice. The gradual loss of all that is dear to Albinus in a series of vanishing acts is a grim inversion of what Bergson calls the snowball effect. It is not surprising that in Bend Sinister Nabokov will use the image of a snowball as a metaphor for the historical changes in the course of which human individuality is coldly and callously suppressed by the ruling party’s drive toward a systematic undermining of human sympathies.

Laughter, according to Bergson, is a social corrective that seeks to check rigidity and parasitic growths, yet it entails—or is made possible by—a suppression of sympathy, a suppression that in itself can develop into a malignant disease. While Nabokov was preparing the American version of the novel, such a disease was rapidly spreading through Europe. Perpetrators of present and future crimes were officially absolved—in advance—of any guilt for carrying out ruthless orders; the Schadenfreude of Margot was becoming the order of the day. Like King, Queen, Knave with its study of the rejection of spiritual life, Laughter in the Dark, with its ill-at-ease atmosphere and its exploration of callousness, is a response to ominous processes on the inner agenda of its decade.

16Ibid., pp. 73–77.