

# The Theme of the Body in *The Original of Laura*

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## 1. Introduction

Nabokov's unfinished novel *The Original of Laura* has recently been published after more than thirty years since the author's death. 138 3x5 note cards survived Nabokov when he died in 1977 and these cards form at least the first five chapters of the book, the (provisional) ending, and a scattering of episodes that come in between. *The Original of Laura* (TOOL) has come to us in a tragically embryonic state, making critical judgment on the text's merits and demerits more than difficult. Literarily, what we have of TOOL cannot be favorably compared to the richness and complexity of Nabokov's other late novels (*Ada*, *Transparent Things*) and thus Dmitri Nabokov's insistence that TOOL displays "unprecedented in structure and style" should be taken more as a son's fond tribute than a strict critical assessment. Indeed, as to the structure of the text we can say very little, just as it would be foolish to judge the architecture of a building solely from the appearance of its front steps. Nevertheless, as for style, there are more than a few sparkling moments of Nabokovian genius spread throughout the work. The opening lines of the text immediately come to mind. As does the "prowling" and "pushing" of Hubert H. Hubert and the comedic dance of Philip Wild as he tries to dress himself. And the phonetic

puzzles that Nabokov loved are always a joy to find (e.g. Wild's typist Miss Ure or Sue U (Sue Ure = "sewer")).

The story—such as it is—describes a beautiful Flora as the unfaithful, gold-digging wife of Philip Wild, a brilliant and aged neurologist. Flora has an affair with someone we assume to be the narrator of the tale and this relationship becomes the model for the novel *My Laura* (the phonetic similarity of the names *Flora* and *Laura* should be noted). Wild, exhausted with the aches and pains of his ailing body, hits upon the idea of *willing* his body away in a kind of mental experiment/suicide. How these plot lines develop is anybody's guess. What we can glean from the passages that survive Nabokov is the thematic lines that thread their way through the text. One of the most striking of these is the theme of the body, which is emphasized in a variety of ways through the characters of Flora/Laura, the hidden narrator Ivan Vaughan, and Philip Wild. Each of these characters is placed in a special relation to their bodies and these various relations make for some of the most interesting aspects of the text. Flora's body *literally* becomes the structure of the novel *My Laura* (ML). But even in the narration of TOOL, she is painted in the most physical of terms, a fact that suggests that perhaps the body of Flora *is already* structuring the text of TOOL. Ivan Vaughan, on the other hand, has hardly any body at all and seems to linger vaguely at the margins of the text that he narrates. Philip Wild's project of "self-dissolution" is addressed directly to his flesh, which he attempts to erase with the power of his will. Furthermore, the connection with Wild's project and

Vaughan's narration of the body of Flora/Laura becomes evident in their parallel movements of creation and destruction.

While it would be impossible to trace the complete trajectories of these thematic arcs, it is at least possible to outline their appearance in what little exists of *TOOL*. In this essay I will attempt to do just that. Rather than attempt to articulate a position on how precisely *the body* is addressed in *TOOL*, I will describe some of the elements that appear to participate in this thematic field. Even in the short text of *TOOL* the appearances (and disappearances) of flesh and bodies are sufficiently numerous that even a mere catalogue of these requires considerable effort. The theme of the body is complex enough in itself, and I think that in *TOOL* Nabokov was successful in expressing several aspects of that complexity. In exploring this theme I will first discuss the character of Flora/Laura, then Ivan Vaughan, and finally Philip Wild.

## **2. The body of Flora/Laura**

One of the most remarkable passages in *TOOL* appears on the 8<sup>th</sup> card: "Her exquisite bone structure immediately slipped into a novel—became in fact the secret structure of that novel, besides supporting a number of poems." How can the bones of a person "slip" into a text? What does it mean for the material of the flesh to become that of the text? Without attempting to conclusively answer these questions, I will at least attempt to explore some possibilities of what this cryptic statement could mean and how it is dealt with in the text.

Vaughan, the narrator of the above passage and the author of “that novel”—*My Laura*—claims that the very bones of Flora form the structure of his book. The results of this enterprise are, of course, unknown to us in what we have of *TOOL*; but if we examine the way in which Vaughan narrates the text of *TOOL*, we can perhaps understand something of what it would mean to transform the body into a literary work. Indeed, from the very beginning the narration of *TOOL* begs for such an examination, as Flora is depicted almost exclusively in physical terms, ones that describe her gestures, her clothing, and of course her beautiful flesh. It is noteworthy that of her mental life we learn very little—and what we do learn suggests that Flora is a simple, uncaring philistine. Flora, if she is anything, is a body and very little else.

The book opens with us listening to Flora speak (albeit indirectly, through the gnarled narration) but we soon find ourselves—along with Vaughan and everyone else at the party—following the story of her body, complete with its theatrical gestures and strapless dress. “The party seemed to have degenerated into a lot of sober eyes staring at her with nasty compassion from every corner, every cushion and ashtray, and even from the hills of the spring night framed in the open French window” (3). Every gaze, human and otherwise, from every point of space, seems focused on the details of her flesh.

It is in such a literary space that the body of Flora is built up before our eyes. Of course, this might be said of any work of fiction where physical descriptions are given, where characters are literally *written before our eyes*, and

where a fictional world is created. The dimensions in which such fictions are created are various, but often include physical, temporal, conceptual, as well as romantic elements. But in the case of Flora, her creation is almost entirely physical and the obsessive insistence with which the *corpus* of Flora is detailed and catalogued in TOOL obliges us to give this process special attention. The 20 cards that make up chapter 1 contain no less than 27 descriptions of Flora's body, beginning from her "little hand" (1), passing her "narrow nates" (10) and finally arriving at the "gratefully shouldered weight" of her head and the "tickle of her hair" (16). Card 8 is especially replete with the body of Flora and deserves to be quoted in full: "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 of "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. The cup-sized breasts of that twenty-four year old impatient beauty seemed a dozen years younger than she, with those pale squinty nipples and firm form." This minute detailing of Flora's makes a rich contrast to the spare narration of *actual events* in chapter 1, and thus the reader is given to feel that perhaps *this body is the story being told*, and, furthermore, that the "secret structure" of ML that Vaughan speaks of is already and in advance forming the text of TOOL.

Flora's body pervades the text of TOOL, and it is *within this text* that Vaughan describes the incarnation of

Flora into the text of ML. On one level, Flora's body is the original of what will become the text of ML; the body is the material and Vaughan's novel is its literary product. The latter is understood as dependent on the former, just as a copy depends on an original print. However, if we take into account the composition of chapter 1 itself, we can already glimpse this "secret structure" at work—which forces us to ask if TOOL itself is not already just a copy, a reproduction of some meta-original body that lends it its structure. This may seem like a dizzying search—and perhaps a bit pointless—but when we recall the title *The Original of Laura* we should be asking ourselves what exactly this *original* is describing. Indeed, with Nabokov, the borders of Truth and Fiction are rarely fixed. A clear—because of its very opacity—example of this can be found in *Transparent Things* (TT), where R's novels—their titles, covers, and stories—all seem to foreshadow the story in which they appear. And thus, the issue of which narratives are originary and which are derivative—i.e. is *Transparent Things* a retelling of *Figures in a Golden Window*, or vice versa?—becomes frustratingly hard to discern. So it is in TOOL, where—at first glance—Laura's original (i.e. prototype) is clearly Flora; a second (or third) glance reveals that the causal relationship between the two is anything but simple.

Indeed, when we look to chapter 5 we can notice a strange blending of the texts of TOOL and ML. On card 54 Flora is called "Laura" and on card 56 she and her fictional counterpart are compounded as "Flaura". This takes place under the narration of Vaughan, who appears to have

blurred the borders of his women so that, in the first instance, one becomes the other, and, in the second, they are conflated into the same creature, the hybrid “Flaura”. What is the cause for these orthographical monsters suddenly appearing in a chapter describing Flora’s relationship with Wild? I have no satisfactory answer to offer; however it seems to me that these misspellings only highlight the difficulties in locating the originary subject that the title encourages us to find.

### 3. Ivan Vaughan, the absent narrator

I have tried to highlight the striking bodily presence of Flora especially as she appears in chapter 1, as well as address the problem of origins that seems to explode in chapter 5. In the next part of the paper I would like to briefly contrast Flora’s overwhelming bodily presence with the striking *absence* of Vaughan, the narrator of the tale.

As is often the case with first-person narrators, they themselves become the least conspicuous characters in their tales—which is interesting when we consider the title of *first-person narrator*, which might imply a priority of presence—but which in practice often designates the *last* character to come to our attention. Nabokov explodes this concept in the character of Vaughan: a more elusive narrator there has never been. Tadashi Wakashima, in his essay “Watashi no Keshikata (The Effaced ‘I’)”, has already pointed out the spectral nature of the narrator in TOOL, who, through a brilliant manipulation of indirect speech, manages to almost completely conceal his presence. Nabokov, in a May 1974 diary entry writes about the

narrator of the tale as “*the gliding eye*, being implied throughout”. Chapter 1 is a monument to the success of this narrative strategy.

The evasive narrator of the first chapter is—in bodily terms—hardly present at all, and comes through only in relief to Flora’s actions, which the narrator follows and participates in so inconspicuously as to almost disappear. The conversation held between them at the beginning of chapter 1 immediately comes to mind as an example of this disappearing act, so much so that Flora’s interlocutor is hardly noticed by the reader. He absents himself in other ways too. “Masking her face, coating her sides, pinaforing her stomach with kisses” (10): *subject-less* sentences like this abound in the first chapter, and while Flora is being dressed by kisses, there is no hint as to *whose lips* are at work. And just like the ‘I’ of the narrator, so too does his body become *implied*—which fact stands out against the immense presence of Flora’s flesh throughout. If the narrator’s existence is implied, then Flora’s is certainly *insisted upon*. The narrator makes his appearance as the ‘I’ of the chapter only when asked by Flora, “Was I game for another round” (15), and—as Wakashima points out—this glimpse is so brief that most readers are bound to read on by, unaware and thoroughly confused by all of this apparently subject-less kissing and touching going on. One of the effects of this nearly-absent narrator is that hole left by his absence is more-than-filled by Flora, whose body seems to overflow from the very page. His disappearance seems to condition Flora’s appearance.

Again, in contrast to the intangible presence of Vaughan, there is a certain *palpability* to Flora that makes the reader feel as if her character could almost be taken in hand and grasped—just as the narrator surely does when the two are left alone in the Carr’s flat. Their sexual contact, understood in barer terms, is of course the act of one body touching another; and with the body of Flora shown in such vividness before us, our relationship with her seems to approach one of physical contact—even though we are of course only touching the fibers of page. Flora, it seems, is always kept in clear focus—while Vaughan’s presence remains largely peripheral and suggested. However, in chapter 5, Flora’s immaculate outline begins to waver. What was once so vividly set before our eyes now fades into an image seen in a house of mirrors. And the *original* that had once been so obvious has now started to bleed into its copy, making any certainty about said *original* devilishly hard to obtain.

#### 4. Wild’s plan

These issues of the body and the originary subject that I have attempted to outline above seem to me to form one of the central thematic strands that run through the text of TOOL. Indeed, I think that if we take into account the character of Wild, this centrality of the body becomes clear. In the final two sections I will outline the details of Wild’s project of self-effacement and contrast his work with Vaughan’s narration of Flora/Laura.

A large portion of TOOL is concerned with the character of Wild and his project of self-annihilation.

There is little written about Wild in Vaughan's narration (or, indeed, in the text of *My Laura*, wherein "he is sympathetically depicted as a conventional "great scientist"", with "not a single physical trait ... mentioned" (63)—this latter is especially ironic when we consider that his own body is one of Wild's overwhelming preoccupations). However, much of the novel appears to be narrated by Wild himself—although it may be that we are just reading excerpts from his "Poisonous Opus" (2) on self-destruction. In any case, the parts written by Wild address his childhood recollections, his dreams, his bodily complaints, his rare and unpleasant encounters with his wife, and finally his project of thinking away his flesh. Cards 64 through 87 represent the most concentrated description of Wild's experiment; but there are numerous cards that come later which give further details about Wild's work.

A 1975 article in the Times probably suggested the idea for Wild's project to Nabokov. On card 64 Nabokov names the drug "enkephalin" that had at that time begun to be produced synthetically. Like morphine and other opiates it not only relieves pain but produces in addition "feelings of euphoria." In brackets beneath this passage, Nabokov notes: "invent a trade name, e.g. cephalopium; find a substitute for enkephalin." (64) Whether this drug was to make an appearance in the text of TOOL remains a question; however it seems to me that Nabokov instead opted to transform the drug into Wild's project itself, which essentially achieves the same results; namely, freedom from pain, and euphoric pleasure. Rather than

have a drug produce the desired intensities of pain and pleasure, Nabokov assigned this task to the *will* of Wild—which in any case is a much more interesting idea.

Destroying the body through the power of the will: this is thrust of Wild's work, which he describes at the beginning of chapter six in the following way: "I taught thought to mimick an imperial neurotransmitter, an awesome messenger carrying my order of self-destruction to my own brain." (64) Wild's description of this process, although cryptic at points, is addressed to "the student who wishes to die" (66), and as such it is written with a pedagogical clarity that is more or less easy to understand. The first step in the process is to mentally project one's image on the "inner blackboard" of the mind (66). It is important to eliminate "the hypnagogic gargoyles and entopic swarms which plague tired vision" (67) to ensure the clarity of the image. The image itself must be simple enough to preserve in one's mental vision long enough for the task at hand. Wild recalls that he first attempted to paint a recognizable portrait of himself (which he puzzlingly calls "Nigel Dalling" (68)) but was unable to maintain the image for any length of time. He finally hits upon the following "elegant solution": "a simple vertical line across my field of inner vision, I, could be chalked in an instant, and what is more I could mark lightly by transverse marks the three divisions of my physical self: legs, torso, and head" (69). That Wild can represent himself as three chalk strokes is especially comedic in light of his impressive corpulence. However, this simple

rendering of himself makes sense in that it is both easy to create and (more significantly) easy to destroy.

In this way Wild recreates himself on the field of his mind. This, of course, is the creative prelude to the final step: self-effacement. “Soon, with the strong thumb of thought I could rub out its base, which corresponded to my joined feet” (70). He confesses to experiencing a kind of ecstasy from this self-erasure. As he rubs out his feet—which have caused him a lifetime of discomfort—he says that he feels a “more than masturbatory joy” (70). For Wild, whose flesh has given him little pleasure and much pain, *pleasures of the flesh* comes to mean *pleasures of destroying the flesh*. This is of course different from more common expressions of masochism, which derive pleasure from pain. Indeed, for Wild, there is no pain involved—it is rather the denial of pain that affords him his pleasure.

It should be noted, however, that at this point Wild’s self-destruction is relegated to his stylized mental image, which he works on in what he calls a “perilous trance” (73). What this “trance” exactly is is somewhat difficult to ascertain; however, we can at least surmise that while in this state the damage inflicted upon his mental portrait *is not* reflected as damage to his actual body—or, if it is reflected, then he is at least able to “restore” his body (i.e. retrace the erased lines) before leaving the trance. One day, however, Wild decides to leave his erased toes unrepaired before he awakes from his trance. “Scientific curiosity and plain logic demanded I prove to myself that if I left the flawed line alone, its flaw would be reflected in the condition of this or that part of my body” (80). And indeed

he awakes from his *hypnotrance* to find his toes still present but completely devoid of sensation: “all sensation had been slashed away by a razor of ice” (84). This test proves the power of his will over his corporeal form and through this discovery he learns that “the process of dying by auto-dissolution afforded the greatest ecstasy known to man” (86). The bracketed subtitle of TOOL, (*Dying is Fun*), no doubt refers to the joy derived from willing oneself away.

The above are the steps of Wild’s experiment. In what remains of TOOL, he gets as far as deleting his toes, but the reader must assume that he intends to spread his destruction throughout his entire body. That he dies of a heart attack sometime later might indicate that he was successful in his auto-destruction (i.e. by erasing his heart) or, oppositely, that he was prevented from taking his project to the end by a naturally occurring death.

## **5. Wild’s project and Vaughan’s narrative**

Distilled into its simple parts, Wild’s project traces an arc of creation and destruction. In order to delete his physical self, he must first go about building it up on the blackboard of his mind. Understood in these terms, Wild’s project should recall to the reader the passage in chapter 5 where the narrator of TOOL comments that the “I” of *My Laura* “is a neurotic and hesitant man of letters who destroys his mistress in the act of portraying her” (61). How we are to understand this description of ML’s narrator remains a mystery, and we may certainly wonder how identifiable the narrator of ML is with the narrator of

TOOL—the elusive *I* of (we assume) Ivan Vaughan? We may also wonder whether the destruction spoken of stays within the confines of the text of ML or whether it stretches out to Flora, the apparent model for the Laura of the novel? These questions—any many similar—will have to remain unanswered. That said, the parallel between Wild’s project and the structure of ML seems evident insofar as they both trace the complimentary paths of creation and destruction. Indeed, while creation and destruction by themselves can be the products of blind impulse, the linked combination of the two completes an artistic cycle.

The connection between these two projects continues in their emphasis on the importance of the body. The object of Wild’s project is precisely his own flesh. And while he claims at points to be also deleting his mind, we may be skeptical of this claim. “I hit upon the art of thinking away my body, my being, mind itself. To think away thought—luxurious suicide, delicious dissolution” (122). Here Wild speaks as if he were actually practicing a complete effacement of his existence, both mental and physical; however the practical steps that he takes all belie this claim. It is the body that he creates on the chalkboard of his mind and it is this that he destroys. His mind, far from dissolving in kind, rather increases its potency with every successful experiment. It seems that his mental self strengthens and vivifies in inverse proportion to the weakening of his flesh—a phenomenon which reminds us of R’s last letter, written to his publisher as his liver is rotting away inside him: “The more I shrivel

the bigger I grow” (TT 84). Suffering from his ailing body, R is surprised by how gigantic his consciousness and its preoccupations grow. While this movement of growth-in-depletion can be found in Wild’s project as well, the key difference is that while R’s succumbs to his sickness unwillingly, Wild effectively *wills* his bodily depletion. In both instances their mental identities, if they are affected at all, only become more energetic as their bodies are destroyed.

Just as Wild targets his own body for destruction, we may surmise that something similar occurs in the text of ML. “Statically—if one can put it that way—the portrait [of the narrator’s mistress] is a faithful one” (61). If we assume that Ivan Vaughan is indeed the author of ML and that Flora is his mistress/model, then we can understand that (from Vaughan’s point of view) Flora is represented accurately. What is represented is, of course, her body: “Such fixed details as her trick of opening her mouth when toweling her inguen or of closing her eyes when smelling an inodorous rose are absolutely true to the original” (61). I have shown above how important the body of Flora is to the text of TOOL, and it seems at least possible that the same kind of singularly physical portrayal occurs in the text of ML—especially when we judge from the proceeding passage. The details that describe both Flora and Laura outline the body and little else is focused upon.

At this point we can refocus on the destructive element in ML alluded to on card 61. The “I” of the novel apparently destroys his mistress in his very depiction of her and this is perhaps what Winny Carr refers to when

she tells Flora about her “wonderful death” (114). What kind of end is written for Flora’s fictional counterpart in ML escapes us, but I would like to think that her death (“the craziest death in the world”) is an overwhelmingly physical one, a death appropriate for such a corporeal creation. Nabokov left us no clues on this point and thus even the most careful speculation comes to nothing. However, it seems (at least thematically) plausible to assume that the manner of destruction in store for Laura might trace an appropriate parallel to the manner of her creation.

## 6. Conclusion

I have attempted to highlight some of aspects of the theme of the body in TOOL and although my analysis is far from conclusive, I think that I have succeeded in noting some of the most important strands of this thematic web. With this in mind, we can say that TOOL was to become Nabokov’s most *physical* novel, where the problem of the body is addressed in a myriad of ways. The importance of this theme to Nabokov himself, whose own body was failing him as he wrote, is perhaps significant in understanding the text of TOOL. Despite the embryonic state of TOOL, it is nevertheless true that the complex manner in which Nabokov dealt with this theme attests to his genius, still extant at the end of his days.

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