

# **THE ORIGINAL OF LAURA: A GREAT NOVEL THAT NEVER WAS**

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## *Abstract*

Perhaps no book has ever produced so much interest and impatience as Nabokov's last novel, *The Original of Laura*. The purpose of this paper is to set *The Original of Laura* into Nabokov's 'metanovel' and to weigh it on its own merits, considering features such as themes, images, characters and style that make his prose so outstanding or, simply, Nabokovian. The themes and images of the novel have been developed by Nabokov since the very beginning of his literary career. *The Original of Laura* has a complex 'matreshka-type' of narrative, thus resembling his previous novels such as *The Gift* and *Ada*. One can easily recognize a web of metatexts and intertextual allusions to masterpieces of other writers, as well as Nabokov's own previous works. The style of the novel can also be identified as typically Nabokovian: the text abounds in puns, alliterations and intense vocabulary, including French expressions, and mixing up different registers.

Due to its fragmental form, one can hardly follow the plot development

## *Resumen*

Quizás, ningún libro haya despertado jamás tanto interés e impaciencia como la última novela incompleta de Vladimir Nabokov, *The Original of Laura*. El objetivo de este artículo es identificar *The Original of Laura* como una parte del canon literario de Nabokov, considerando algunas características como las ideas, los conceptos, los personajes y el estilo, que hace que su prosa sea tan original, o tan nabokoviana. Las ideas y los motivos de esta novela ya habían sido tratados por Nabokov ya en sus primeras obras. Por otro lado, la novela tiene una estructura compleja (una narración dentro de otra), que se parece a las novelas anteriores, como *The Gift* o *Ada*. Otra de las características claves de la prosa de Nabokov es la intertextualidad. *The Original of Laura* introduce alusiones a la literatura universal y también alude a obras previas de Nabokov. El estilo de la novela también se puede identificar como típicamente nabokoviano. Su texto abunda en juegos de palabras, aliteraciones y asonancias. La novela presenta un léxico variado: aparecen los extranjerismos, las palabras y las expresiones procedentes de diferentes estilos y registros, entre otras características.

Debido a la forma fragmentaria de la novela, resulta difícil analizar su argumento y su desarrollo. Tratándose de la última

of the novel and the least one can do is to treat it as the last reflection of Nabokov's pure art.

*Key Words:* Vladimir Nabokov, *The Original of Laura*, metanovel, intertextuality, style.

obra de Nabokov, *The Original of Laura* nos invita a verla como el último reflejo del arte puro de Nabokov.

*Palabras clave:* Vladimir Nabokov, *The Original of Laura*, meta-novela, intertextualidad, estilo.

“All this task of putting *The Original of Laura* to the torch has illuminated some dark corner of Nabokovia.” (Delage-Toriel 2009:8)

Perhaps no novel has ever produced so much interest and impatience as *The Original of Laura*, “the most eagerly awaited literary novel of this fledgling century [...] the posthumous and fragmentary work of the greatest writer of the second half of the last century” (Antman 2009:1). But since its appearance, almost every reader has wondered whether it should have ever been published. Some critics define the novel as being disastrous (i.e. Ted Hamilton or Martin Amis); there are even those who consider that the publication of the novel may ruin the fame of Nabokov as a great writer (i.e. Bourge or Hemon); and others who approve the publication (i.e. Eric Naiman, or Grossman). Though the purpose of this paper is not to deal with this dilemma, let us make reference to some critical comments of American and British reviewers to illustrate this point.

On the one hand, publication of *The Original of Laura* was a disappointment to some critics. Martin Amis (2009) stated in *The Guardian*: “When a writer starts to come off the rails, you expect skid and broken glass. With Nabokov, naturally, the eruption is on the scale of a nuclear accident”. Whereas Hemon (2009) compared *The Original of Laura's* release with publishing someone's grocery list. Hamilton (2009) suggested not naming this book among Nabokov's creations: “*The Original of Laura* should be never numbered among Nabokov's works.” Bourge (2009) came to the conclusion that “*Laura* provides the reader a view of the toil that must be overcome: it is a messy sight that might be best avoided.”

On the other hand, there were those who appreciated Nabokov's last novel. Heller McAlpin approved of the publication: “Nabokov fans and scholars have reason to thank Dmitri for publishing this invaluable glimpse into the way his brilliant father worked [...]. Its publication feels like a generous gift to the

readers [...] the book is filled with sly wit and memorable images.” Sam Anderson (2009) defined it as follows:

A fascinating read on many levels [...] An exquisite thing [...] *Laura* offers just enough of the familiar Nabokovian pleasure to be enjoyable as a straightforward read: style, inventions, humour, occasional sprays of archaic vocabulary. But its deepest pleasure is the one Nabokov wanted us never to have: a peek at the imperfect, ordering intelligence behind all of his finished products. This glimpse shouldn't hurt his reputation; if anything, it should help. It's like seeing an unfinished Michelangelo sculpture –one of those rough, half-formed giants straining to step out of its marble block. It's even more powerful, to a different part of the brain, than the polish of a David or a *Lolita*. It humanizes the perfection.

According to Grossman (2009),

[...] for readers who are devoted to Nabokov, *The Original of Laura* affords its own ecstasies. It comes at you as a reprieve; a final appearance from an old friend you thought was already gone for good [...] *The Original of Laura* is a beautiful ruin, like the Venus de Milo [...] You admire what you can see, and you dream about what might have been.

The purpose of this paper is to give the readers a critical appreciation of *The Original of Laura*, from the standpoint of Nabokov's 'metanovel' and to weigh it on its own merits, considering features such as themes, images, characters and style that make his prose so outstanding or, simply, Nabokovian.

Both, from the conceptual and stylistic perspectives, Nabokov's prose is outstanding. Seen from the conceptual point of view, all his novels make a coherent whole: readers identify “a constant repetition of some characteristics, lines, images and structures that make up a frame for the themes and ideas [...] this perfect, complete and highly functional picture is one of the most important characteristics of Nabokov's literary legacy”<sup>50</sup> (Barabtarlo 2002:2). Such a repetition of themes and ideas makes his novels group into a so-called 'metanovel' (Erofeev 1988) that has a unique plot. This plot is reproduced in each of Nabokov's novels. As to the intertextual level, one should bear in mind the fact that Nabokov is well-known for his elaborate game with world literature: his novels are characterised by their high literary allusiveness. Nabokov plays with French, English and Russian literature; he also alludes to his previous works, thus, making his prose complex and literarily rich. Another trademark of Nabokov's legacy is its language: his works are characterised by their innovative and distinctive style. Anderson (2009) defined the writer's prose as a rich little stylistic Versailles: with its “orderly cadences, exotic vocabulary, clauses nested in whimsical rows, meticulous touches of colour,

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<sup>50</sup> All the English translations from Russian in this paper are our own.

puzzles built out of concentric sub-puzzles, alliterative accents, [and] perfect tropes.” Apart from tropes, proper names and foreign vocabulary also play an important role in Nabokov’s prose, as they help to decode the writer’s meaning. These are the main characteristics of the writer’s literary legacy. As stated before, our purpose here is to identify these features in his last unfinished novel, *The Original of Laura*. Once set into the Nabokovian canon, it will be able to justify its publication.

Dealing with the conceptual level, one can easily see that this unfinished work forms a part of Nabokov’s metanovel. Here, the writer introduces some themes he developed in his previous texts. Before dealing with *The Original of Laura* as a part of this metanovel, two important assumptions should be made aside. On the one hand, Nabokovians have defined different themes of this metanovel (see Barabtarlo, Erofeev, among others); the number and the names of the themes to be distinguished here can be modified taking into consideration various points of view. On the other hand, those familiar with Nabokov’s life and art recognise that some of these themes are connected with or derived from the themes of his own life and ideology. Different critics (Nosik 1993; Shakhovskaya 1998; Gurbolikova 1990, among the others) have analyzed autobiographical elements in Nabokov’s works and pointed out some events of his real life reflected in his fiction. Nevertheless, we cannot forget that his fiction is created by mixing up his memory and imagination. For example, Fyodor’s words in *The Gift* help us to clarify this point:

I so shuffle, twist, mix, re chew and rebelch everything, add such spices of my own and impregnate things so much with myself that nothing remains of the autobiography but dust –the kind of dust, of course, which makes the most orange of skies. (Nabokov 1963:331-2)

Henderson also talks about autobiographical elements in Nabokov’s prose and warns us that:

Sure, there's a sense of autobiography everywhere in Nabokov, but in almost every case (the guy never lets you get away with sweeping statements) there's a tragic and purely fictitious flaw. He thinks he's perfect just as he is, or perhaps, he loathes public introspection. So he invents problems he doesn't have, nightmare mutations of himself as pedophile, homosexual, fundamentalist, libertine, dimwit, Philistine, madman, criminal, American. He slings himself with misfortunes like poverty, alcoholism, the deaths of his wife and child, inescapable terror. Thus he stays on the solid ground –his heroes all share the vast majority of his inner life, and there's no need for any journalistic immersion in other lifestyles and cultures – at the same time he has this tremendous patch of quicksand where he can let his imagination run wild. (Henderson 1997:1)

Autobiographical elements do not form the scope of our research; however, it seems appropriate to add that *The Original of Laura* reflects partially Nabokov's life. When we compare Dmitri Nabokov's account on the last days of his father's life with the text, the echoes of Nabokov's suffering are present on the pages of his novel:

During the last months of his life in the Lausanne hospital, Nabokov was working feverishly on the book, impervious to...his own suffering including incessant inflammations under and around his toenails. At times, he felt almost as if he would rather be rid of them altogether than undergo tentative pedicures from the nurses and the compulsion to correct and seek relief by painfully digging at the digits himself. (Nabokov 2009:xvi)

*The Original of Laura* forms an integral part of Nabokov's metanovel not only because it reflects some events of the writer's life but because it also shares themes and concepts with his previous novels. The novel's central theme, death and dying and what lies beyond it, has been already developed by Nabokov in his Russian novels, as for example in *The Eye* or *Invitation to a Beheading*. The question of death has always interested the writer and here he seems to find an answer to this dilemma: 'dying' means 'fun.'

Another theme that can also be connected with the concept of death is the contrast between the real and unreal worlds. Some Nabokovians (Alexandrov 1997; Buhks 2002; Savelieva 2002; among others) studied the double world of Nabokov's fiction (this theme appeared in *The Eye*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Look at Harlequins*, and others). For example, Dolinin (1989:465) analyses the unreal world in his novels and comes to the conclusion that "Nabokov does not imitate reality; he creates a new one in order to destroy the mimetic perception of a literary text." Buhks and Savelieva identify this unreal world in terms of a perfect dimension of art. For Alexandrov and Barabtarlo, this world represents life after death. All these interpretations are significant and all follow the main plot of Nabokov's metanovel; but this unreal world reflects and reproduces this plot in Nabokov's novels in different ways. In *The Original of Laura*, this unreal world also makes its presence clearly: Philip Wild enters it through self-hypnosis. The real world for this character means suffering and humiliation while the imagined world makes him feel at ease.

Another favourite theme of Nabokov, the double and the doubles, is also introduced here. In fact, Nabokov reproduces this parallelism mainly on two levels: on the basis of competence between two characters (as for example, between Ganin and Alferov in *Mary*, Martin and Darwin in *Glory*, Luzhin and Turati in *The Defense* or Humbert Humbert and Quilty in *Lolita*) or on the basis of similarity (Herman and Felix in *Despair*, Smurov and the narrator in *The Eye*, Fyodor and the unreal Koncheyev in *The Gift*). Here we can suggest a possible double for the main female character, Flora and her fictional

representative Laura. Due to the novel's incompleteness, these two characters are not fully developed and the parallelism between the two can be set on the basis of the phonetic similarity of their names. Another pair of possible doubles represents Philip Wild and his fictional representative Philidor Sauvage. Apart from this, *The Original of Laura* has also a double plot reflected in the double title of the novel.

The main characters, Philip Wild and his wife Flora, introduce another common theme in Nabokov's previous novels: unhappy marriages. In the writer's metanovel this pair stands near other couples destroyed by adultery on the part of the wife (as for example, Martha in *King, Queen, Knave*; Matilda in *The Eye*; Margot in *Laughter in the Dark*, or Marthe in *Invitation to a Beheading*). And we can also talk about a love triangle that appears in early Nabokov's Russian-language novels. Here Philip Wild "is deteriorating in the obtuse corner of a love triangle while his wife Flora and someone named Eric occupy the other two corners" (Hemon 2009:3). Furthermore, Philip Wild completes the chain of Nabokov's extraordinary protagonists that belong to the world of intellectuals or artists (his characters are painters, writers, poets, teachers or professors.)

All these themes connect *The Original of Laura* with Nabokov's metanovel. Apart from the conceptual and thematic levels, this novel resembles his previous works on an intertextual level: one can easily recognise a web of metatextual and intertextual references to his previous novels. In his late fiction, Nabokov also seems to be reflecting on his own life and early works, setting up intertextual references to his own previous books. The most evident allusion can be found in the character of Flora's mother's lover, Mr Hubert H. Hubert who, like the similarly named protagonist of *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert, tried to seduce a teenager. This new character, as well as his literary predecessor, turned on Flora, "mesmerising her, enveloping her so to speak in some sticky invisible substance and coming closer and closer no matter how she turned" (Nabokov 2009:57). These male characters refer to their girls with the diminutive "pet." Regarding the character of Flora, she takes tennis lessons, as well as her literary predecessor, Lolita.

There is also another reference to *Lolita* in *The Original of Laura*: the depiction of the male's obsession of youthful female beauty. Descriptions of Flora remind us those of *Lolita* and *The Enchanter*:

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"...the cup-sized breasts of that 24-year-old impatient beauty seemed a dozen years younger than she, with those pale squinty nipples and firm form. (Nabokov 2009:15)

According to Martin Amis (2009:3) –one of Nabokov’s admirers– “we do notice the fevered dream about a juvenile love. In other words, *Laura* joins *The Enchanter*, *Lolita*, *Ada*, *Transparent Things*, and *Look at the Harlequins* in unignorably concerning itself with the sexual despoliation of very young girls.”

Flora’s mother, Lanskaya resembles Charlotte Haze, *Lolita*’s mother: both women prefer their lovers to their daughters. The following passage echoes the scenes from *Lolita*, where Charlotte tried to justify Humbert and to blame *Lolita*: Lanskaya “soothed the absolutely furious, deeply insulted Mr Hubert before scolding her daughter. He was a dear man, and his life lay in ruins all around him. He wanted her to marry him, saying the image of the young actress who had been his wife [...]” (Nabokov 2009:72).

*The Original of Laura* contains another allusion to *Lolita*: Annabel Lee who haunts Humbert’s memory in *Lolita* is transformed here into Aurora Lee. Amelia Glaser (2010:6) offers a comparative analysis of this image and also establishes an intertextual reference to Poe’s Annabel: “Dr Wild’s double muse like Poe’s Annabel is not “wife and bride”, but “life and bride.”

Apart from the references to *Lolita*, *The Original of Laura* introduces intertextual elements of other Nabokov’s novels. The reader recognizes the title of “Spring in Fialta”, Nabokov’s early short story, in the painting named *April in Yalta* made by Flora’s grandfather. Actually, one of the passages recalls the haunted tone of this short story:

Every now and then she would turn up for a few moments between trains, between planes, between lovers. My morning sleep would be interrupted by heartrending sounds –a window opening, a little bustle downstairs, a trunk coming, a trunk going, distant telephone conversations that seemed to be conducted in conspiratorial whispers. If shivering in my nightshirt I dared to waylay her all she said would be ‘you really ought to lose some weight’ or ‘I hope you transferred that money as I indicated’ –and all doors closed again. (Nabokov 2009:263)

Some of the characters in *The Original of Laura* are also allusive. Apart from a clear reference to Humbert Humbert, there is another one: Mr Spenshade seems to be an allusion to John Shade from *Pale Fire*. The pair of the main characters, Philip Wild and Flora resembles another Nabokov’s couple Albinus and Margot from *Laughter in the Dark*: a rich middle-aged artist falls in love with a girl, half his age, who betrays and hates him. One of the secondary characters of the novel, a professor of Russian literature, seems to be Nabokov’s self-portrait. The writer identifies him as “a forlorn looking man bored to extinction by his subject” (Nabokov 2009:93). This character asks the same questions Nabokov liked to discuss in his lessons and *Lectures on Russian Literature*: “What kind of folklore preceded poetry in Rus?; speak a little of

Lom. and Derzh.; paraphrase T's letter to E.O.; what does I. I's doctor deplore about the temperature of his own hands when preparing to his patient?" (Nabokov 2009:95). The passage mentions Nabokov's literary idols: Pushkin and his *Eugene Onegin*, as well as Tolstoy.

*The Original of Laura* has also been considered by Delage (2009) an "elaborate bow to the subtle art of the Renaissance." This critic suggests the influence of such Italian artists as Titian and Giorgione that constitute variations on the theme of Petrarch's *Laura*. These painters present depictions of deceitful female characters, each of them with faithful images, offered to the viewer's appreciation. Nabokov's representation of Flora is compared with the descriptions of Renaissance courtesans: Giorgione's *Laura* and Titian's *Flora*. Delage (2009) discovers that these depictions reveal the same qualities: it is up to the reader "to decipher the myriad signs generated by its specula structure."

Apart from these Italian artists, the novel makes references to Russian and English writers as well. Literary intertextuality is a core characteristic of Nabokov's prose. As if it were a chess board, his works show harmonious rows of chessmen in which we recognise different writers. Nabokov has always dominated all the moves of that game and it is the reader's task to identify and understand them. Unfortunately, Nabokov did not have enough time to present such a game in his last novel, only a few of his chessmen appear on the pages: Pushkin, Tolstoy, Lomonosov, Derzhavin, Poe, Horace and Dante.

Seen from a structural level, the novel with its *matreshka*-type structure resembles *The Gift* and *Ada*. There is a narration inside another narration. *The Original of Laura* presents a variety of text types: the main narrative is mixed with passages from *My Laura*, notes on philosophers, newspaper's extracts, and even dictionary entries and definitions. This last unfinished novel intentionally introduces these intertexts as if its purpose were to reflect the last rays of Nabokov's setting sun: his art.

In spite of the novel's fragmentation that prevents us from doing a full conceptual, thematic structural and intertextual analysis, we can study its language and style. *The Original of Laura* presents Nabokov's trademarks: it contains lexical figures, such as puns, elaborate and intense vocabulary, foreign words and a mixture of registers; and aspects dealing with "the sound of Nabokov's prose" (Proffer 1968:82) such as alliterations and rhymes. It is easy to find the typical writer's puns and puzzles, as for example: "TAIL between DELTA and SLIT", "typist Sue U", "a roman à clef with the clef lost forever"; or his neologisms, like: "autosuggetist", "mis-clothing" "volupty", "aftereffect", "bonzery", "brahmahood", "brahmism", "cephalopium", "strelitzias". There are also puns based on alliteration and assonance: "Malraux, Mauriac, Maurois, Michaux, Michima, Montherland and Morand", "its temping emptiness", "as



spectres doing their spectral job”, “potentate had been potent till”. Alliteration is another core characteristic of Nabokov’s stylistics. *The Original of Laura* also contains different examples of sound-play. There are acoustically coupled epithets with alliteration on the initial phoneme, such as “watchful will”, “maddening masterpiece” or “Velvet valet”, among many others. Sometimes the first two sounds are reiterated, for instance: “brown brooks”, “constant contributor” or “resolutely replacing the receiver.” There are also a lot of examples of alliteration on the three or four words in close succession: “certainly for no earthly reason does this passage resemble in rhythm another novel”; “possibilities of power and pleasure”; “girlfriend, a sniggering tart with gilt fingernails”; “station platform of Sex, a delightful Swiss resort famed for its crimson plums” or “from the favourite florist of fashionable girls”. In other instances alliteration and assonance are combined and there is a repetition of entire syllables in consecutive words: “Rascal asks” or “scornful Cora.” We can also identify typical Nabokov’s doublets that involve a repeated word and parallelism reinforced by alliteration: “watching a dour old don watching boys bathing”; “she’d turn up for a few moments between trains, between planes, between lovers”; “black fans and violet ones, fans like orange sunbursts, painted fan” or “my wayward wife and your flimsy frock.”

Proper names, as it is usual in Nabokov’s prose, also present some word – and sound– play. The readers find examples, such as: “let it be ‘Landskaya’ – land and sky and the melancholy echo of her dancing name” (Nabokov 2009:101) or “artist Rawitch, pronounced by some Raw Itch, by him Rah Witch” (Nabokov 2009:109). The name of the female protagonist reflects typical Nabokov’s mirroring: ‘Laura’, ‘Flora’, and ‘FLaura’.

Another element that distinguishes the writer’s style is the presence of foreign words. *The Original of Laura* is sprinkled with words from French, Latin and Russian. All these words appear underlined in Nabokov’s manuscript, as if the author tried to help his readers to recognise them. Nabokov does not offer translations of these words into English.

The last point to be dealt with here is the language register. Nabokov’s characters are often characterized by the language they speak (just remember the unforgettable accent of Pnin). Here, Nabokov follows his canon in depicting Wild, Erick and Flora. They belong to different classes and the languages they speak belong to different registers. Thus, the text presents a mixture of registers: words and expressions from medicine and anatomy: ‘inguen’, ‘nates’, ‘hallux’, ‘omoplates’, ‘adenoma’, ‘encephalin’ –are some examples; others from philosophy and theology, as for instance: ‘sophrosyne’, ‘bonze’, ‘postulates’; and conversational expressions, like ‘hit upon the art’ and ‘coed.’

As we have seen, *The Original of Laura* can be easily identified as purely Nabokovian. It shares the themes with his metanovel and it reflects intertextual games Nabokov was keen on. It also reproduces Nabokov's outstanding style with its stress on the word –and sound– play and elaborate vocabulary. Due to its fragmental form, the novel is hard to follow in terms of the plot development, thus it has been and it will probably continue to be an object of criticism and a source for a long running dispute whether it should have ever been published or not. Anyway, the real Nabokovians will not forget Nabokov's concept of art and its function: his novel should be treated only as a product of art for the art's sake. Naiman (2009:8) suggests that we should read *The Original of Laura* as Nabokov's last metafictional parable. Only then can we treat *The Original of Laura* as a great novel that never was.

In no meaningful sense a novel *Laura* has its closest predecessor, probably Nabokov's 1957 poem "The Ballad of Longwood Glen", in which Art Longwood, "a local florist" climbs up into a tree and disappears. When the tree is felled, there is precious little left: the benighted tourists who visit the spot don't know, of course, that the compensation for Art's disappearance is supposed to be the poem they are in.

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