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VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S "THE BANALITY OF CRIME" AND HANNAH  
ARENDT'S "THE BANALITY OF EVIL"

Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977), a writer of world renown, and Hannah Arendt (1906–75), a prominent philosopher and political theorist, appear to have a great deal in common in their world outlook—the subject matter that has recently begun to attract some scholarly attention (Norman). In this note, I would like to address a specific example of affinity between Nabokov's and Arendt's pronouncements on "the banality of crime" and on "the banality of evil."

*King, Queen, Knave* contains a passage that describes Kurt Dreyer's musings during his visit to a crime exhibition:

[W]hat a talentless person one must be, what a poor thinker or hysterical fool, to murder one's neighbor. The deathly gray of the exhibits, *the banality of crime*, pieces of bourgeois furniture, a frightened little console on which a bloody imprint had been found, hazel nuts injected with strychnine, buttons, a tin basin, again photographs—all this trash expressed the very essence of crime. How much those simpletons were missing! Missing not only the wonders of everyday life, the simple pleasure of existence, but even such instants as this, the ability to look with curiosity upon what was essentially boring. (*King, Queen, Knave* 207–8, hereafter *KQK*; emphasis added)

The above-quoted passage conjures up a connection between Vladimir Nabokov's "the banality of crime" and Hannah Arendt's "the banality of evil"—her characterization of Adolf Eichmann's personality and deeds that served as the subtitle for her account of his 1961 well-publicized, memorable trial in Jerusalem, Israel.

Before addressing this matter, it might be expedient to explore the origins of Nabokov's attitude toward crime, murder first and foremost, and to look at the chronology of his second novel's publication in Russian, German, and English.

For his views on crime, which Nabokov seems to articulate here by way of Dreyer, he largely drew on the opinions of his criminologist father,

Vladimir Dmitrievich. In 1908, when Nabokov senior spent three months in St. Petersburg Kresty prison on political charges, he could observe criminals in their everyday activities. Vladimir Dmitrievich was shocked by their “facial expressions, either gloomily embittered or insolent and coarse,” and remarked on a prison barber, a minor who was serving six years for murder, that “in appearance, he was a rather dull-witted fellow with a repulsive physiognomy.”<sup>1</sup>

In the spirit of Vladimir Dmitrievich, Dreyer comments after watching the crime exhibit, “What dreary fools! A collection of idiotic faces” (*KQK* 208). In addition, Dreyer thinks that criminals, specifically murderers, lack imagination and are missing “the wonders of everyday life, the simple pleasure of existence” (*KQK* 207). Likewise, in “Tyrants Destroyed” (1938), the narrator avers that “murder, the intent to kill, is after all insufferably trite, and the imagination, reviewing the methods of homicide and types of weapons, performs a degrading task” (*Stories* 454).<sup>2</sup>

The following passage from Nabokov’s lecture on “The Art of Literature and Commonsense” upholds the supposition that Nabokov bestowed on Dreyer and on the story’s nameless narrator his own standpoint on crime, inculcated in him by his father:

Criminals are usually people lacking imagination. [. . .]  
Lacking real imagination, they content themselves with such half-witted banalities as seeing themselves gloriously driving into Los Angeles in that swell stolen car with that swell golden girl who had helped to butcher its owner. [. . .]  
[I]n itself, crime is the very triumph of triteness, and the more successful it is, the more idiotic it looks. (*Lectures on Literature* 376)

In his endeavors to understand human nature, the budding writer, in all likelihood, had discussions with his father about the human propensity

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<sup>1</sup> «выражения лиц, либо мрачно озлобленных, либо наглых и грубых», «На вид он был довольно тупым парнем с отталкивающей физиономией»; V. D. Nabokov 17–18 and 51–52.

<sup>2</sup> Martha and Franz are preoccupied with this “degrading task” as they consider various ways of murdering Dreyer. In the original texts of his second novel and of this story, Nabokov characterizes murder with the cognate locutions «пóшлого» and «пóшло», which may be rendered as “trite” or “banal”; *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda*, 2: 264 and 5: 369; hereafter *Ssoch*.

to commit crime and especially about motivations for its ultimate manifestation—murder.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the devastatingly tragic death of his father, no doubt, played a decisive role in Nabokov's preoccupation with the following conundrum: what prompts a human being to take the life of a fellow human being? The writer repeatedly examines the thought process of potential and actual murderers. Suffice it to mention *King, Queen, Knave; Despair*, and *Lolita*.

Now to the chronology of the novel's publication. It initially appeared as *Korol', dama, valet* in 1928. The novel's first German translation came out in 1930 in the Ullstein publishing house under the title *König, Dame, Bube: Ein Spiel mit dem Schicksal*. Before appearing in book form, the novel was serialized between March 15 and April 15, 1930, in *Vossische Zeitung*, a renowned Berlin newspaper, also owned by Ullstein (Juliar 564). The book was reprinted in 1959. Nabokov translated the novel into English in collaboration with his son, Dmitri, and published it in 1968.

Although the German translator, Siegfried von Vegesack, rendered «ПОШЛОГО ПРЕСТУПЛЕНИЯ» (*Ssoch*, 2: 264)—the original phrase corresponding to the above-italicized locution, “the banality of crime,” in the opening citation from the novel's English translation—as “das gemeine Verbrechen,” that is, “the common crime” (*König, Dame, Bube* 137; hereafter *KDB*), he accurately conveyed Nabokov's belief that criminals are talentless people and poor thinkers devoid of imagination. The passage in question reads: “What these fools are missing! Not only all the wonders of everyday life, the simple joy of being, but also moments like this one, the ability to be interested in what is inherently boring” (“Was diesen Dummköpfen alles verlorengelht! Nicht nur alle Wunder des alltäglichen Lebens, die einfache Freude am Dasein, sondern auch sogar solche Augenblicke, wie eben dieser, die Fähigkeit, sich für das zu interessieren, was an sich langweilig ist”) (*KDB* 137).

One wonders whether Arendt read the novel. In her letter to Mary McCarthy of June 7, 1962, Arendt writes about her familiarity with Nabokov's works as follows: “I know only one book of his that I truly admire, and that is the long essay on Gogol” (Brightman 136).<sup>4</sup> So even if

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<sup>3</sup> On V. D. Nabokov's juridical career and for Nabokov's adopting many legal tenets of his father, see Shapiro 7–45, and especially 12–32.

<sup>4</sup> In the same letter, upon reading McCarthy's laudatory review of the just-published *Pale Fire*, which she much enjoyed, Arendt writes: “I have not read the book. I am going to get it soon” (Brightman 135). One would think that Arendt eventually read *Lolita*. She mentions the novel when reporting

Arendt did not read *King, Queen, Knave*, she undoubtedly acquainted herself with Nabokov's detailed discussion of *poshlost'* (or *poshlust*, as Nabokov wittily altered the Russian term), synonymous with the concept of "banality," in his monograph on Gogol, originally published in 1944 (see *Nikolai Gogol* 63–74). However, if Arendt's memory failed her and she did read the novel, and particularly Dreyer's musings at the crime exhibition, she could have drawn inspiration from Nabokov's stance on banality of crime and on its association with thoughtlessness and lack of imagination.

That Arendt was capable of forgetfulness becomes evident from the recent exchange between Kenneth Hermele and Seyla Benhabib (Hermele). This exchange suggests that, in all probability, it was Karl Jaspers, Arendt's long-term mentor and friend, who provided her with "the banality of crime" concept with regard to Nazi atrocities, which later morphed into "the banality of evil." As the source, Hermele cites Jaspers' letter to Arendt of October 19–23, 1946. In this letter, according to Hermele, Jaspers argues that "the Nazis are to be seen as banal criminals": "Mir scheint, man muss, weil es wirklich so war, die Dinge in ihrer ganzen Banalität nehmen, ihrer ganz nüchternen Nichtigkeit—Bakterien können völkervernichtende Seuchen machen und bleiben doch nur Bakterien," which Hermele renders as "It seems to me, because this is how it really was [during the war], that we should see the total banality of these things [the Nazi crimes], their sober nothingness—bacteria may cause pandemics exterminating peoples and yet remain just bacteria" (ibid.). This, in turn, could mean that the notion was either conceptualized by Nabokov and Jaspers independently, or that in formulating this idea Jaspers was perhaps impacted by Nabokov's novel which he could have read in the 1930 German translation in serialized or book form.

As for "thoughtlessness," it might be Martin Heidegger's idea of *Gedankenlosigkeit* that served "as the inspiration for Arendt's 'banality of evil' thesis" (Wolin). Heidegger, Arendt's other mentor, conceptualized this notion in the mid-1940s. One should keep in mind, however, that the philosopher rather challengingly applied this notion to human beings in general when he asserted that "contemporary man is in flight-from-thinking" (Heidegger 46). Heidegger made the idea public first in his "Memorial Address," a commemorative speech honoring a composer Conradin Kreutzer, which he delivered in 1955 and which he later included in his *Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking* originally published under the title *Gelassenheit* in 1959 (Pezze). Once again, as in the case of

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that Eichmann, who was given the book in the Israeli prison, found it "unwholesome" (Arendt 44).

Jaspers, it is not altogether clear whether Nabokov and Heidegger arrived at the concept independently, or Heidegger possibly formulated it upon reading Nabokov's novel and extended it to all humankind. And if the former is the case, it is indeterminate whether Arendt borrowed this notion from Heidegger, per Richard Wolin's intimation, or from Nabokov's second novel.

As for the "lack of imagination" as a prerequisite for criminality, unless Arendt arrived at this notion on her own, Nabokov's second novel seems to be its only recognizable antecedent. One is mindful that both "thoughtlessness" and "lack of imagination" are of utmost importance to understanding Arendt's outlook, since in her conceptualization of "the banality of evil" she so defined Eichmann's fundamental character flaws (Arendt 287; Bernstein).

Lastly, while, to the best of my knowledge, Nabokov makes no reference to Arendt and her well-known book on the Eichmann trial, it is highly likely that when translating *Korol', dama, valet* into English in 1967–68, the novelist, in his turn, decided to employ "the banality of crime" as a reverberation of Arendt's then-recently coined memorable phrase. This is all the more plausible since Nabokov and Arendt were reportedly acquainted, had some mutual friends, and most importantly, both were often published in *The New Yorker* which commissioned Arendt's account of the Eichmann trial (Norman 9–10).

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