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Worrying versions of the real has been a perennial preoccupation of philosophers, scientists, writers and artists at least since the pre-Socratics. In its own configuration of the problem, modernist aesthetics returned the real, once more, from public forms of representation to the representation of individual cognitive states. Rather than an embrace of the objects, forces and structures that compose what we might call everyday life, dominant strains of modernist aesthetics placed greater value on the representation of individual states of mind that often took the form of intractability and extreme artifice, raising the creations and vicissitudes of mental states above both non-human nature and the ‘real’ world of material actuality. In Peter Burger’s words, modernist aesthetics defines “art’s detachment from the context of practical life.”

There are other modernisms to be sure: Objectivist and Imagist American poetry, for example, sought to limit and surrender the power of internal states and mind-made images to the representational limitations and semantic possibilities imposed by the phenomenal facts of the object of perception itself, and the Futurists sought to re-invent a two-dimensional, heroic mode of being inextricably linked to new technologies, machines and violence. But if there could be a

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(3) Among his many declarations in support of Futurism, the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky once declared war “magnificent” because it overturned the social order and returned poetry to a muse who “wants to ride the gun-carriage wearing a hat of fiery orange feathers” (quoted in Edward J. Brown, Mayakovsky: A Poet in the Revolution, Princeton: Princeton
dominant grammar for modernist aesthetics it would be in the range of sensitivities, consciousnesses, sensations and moods that modernist forms of abstraction sought both to represent and inhabit. There are many modalities within this range, but it is in the connective tissue between them that ‘states of mind’ exerts both a binding and an abiding influence as an interpretive force or “differential trace” to use a Derridean term.

One of Samuel Beckett’s primary obsessions, I have argued elsewhere, is in the “attachment of thought to being” in ways that do not simply replicate and reiterate the limitations and failures of the modern cogito, nor push all that is hostile and unpleasant to the margins of consciousness. Instead, suffering intensifies and focuses the consciousness of his characters between those defining moments in their existence of birth, copulation and death. Stephen Dedalus’s project in Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man is, according to Richard Ellman, “an apprehension of his own separateness as a recording consciousness” as the reader, “like the narrative is caught up in the agitations and images of the unconscious mind.” Roger Fry, in a letter to Virginia Woolf, described her as, “no longer bothered with the simultaneity of things [but she went] backwards and forwards in time with an extraordinary enrichment of each moment of consciousness.” Woolf herself wrote in “A Sketch of the Past” of the ghostly “invisible presences” in To The Lighthouse, of consciousnesses that “tugged” the subject of the memoir “this way and that,” and considered that she had created a new, modernist aesthetic that would “achieve a symmetry by means of infinite discords, showing all the traces of the mind’s passage

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through the world.”7 Wallace Stevens, in his preoccupation with the relationship between imagination and objective reality, positions the mind as both subject and object of his poems, most particularly in the ways we conceive of the objective “real” and the imaginative powers that apprehend it. The real, for Stevens, “changes from substance to subtlety, a subtlety in which it was natural for Cezanne to say: “I see planes bestriding each other and sometimes straight lines seem to me to fall” or “Planes in color.... The colored area where shimmer the souls of the planes, in the blaze of the kindled prism, the meeting of planes in the sunlight.”8 Cezanne himself often spoke of becoming the “subjective conscience” of a landscape, just as his paintings would become its “objective conscience.”9

I could continue the catalogue of similarly related, modernist aesthetic dispositions which position man’s own self-regard as their subject, but suffice it to say that most often lost among these connective nets of consciousness are the objective details and ordinary acts of contingency, error and randomness that mediate and circumscribe the events of our everyday existence. The disparity between the representations of the mind and the matters-of-fact of the everyday real, I will argue, creates a rift whereby distorting perceptions, delusions and falsifying memories stand in place of objective reality itself. Sigmund Freud identifies this rift, in its more extreme forms, as symptomatic of narcissism. The narcissist, according to Freud, unquestionably maintains his connection to the outside world, but does so primarily through the mechanisms of fantasy, delusion and sometimes violence, by substituting “for real objects imaginary ones from his memory, or [mixing] the latter with the former.” The narcissist renounces his volitional activity towards the objects of desire, and remains in a state of existential passivity where fantasy, introversion and delusion feed

the self-reflective demands of the libidinal self and, finally, the ego.\(^\text{10}\)

Passivity itself is a complex mode of being that reflects a range of ethical valencies, from the sensual to the social to the perverse. For the sensualist, it is suspended cognitive activity or torpor that enables increased capacities for sensation as a way of embracing the potential for pure *aesthesis*, the intoxicating possibility of unmediated sensory experience. Such a state manifests a quintessentially Romantic desire for the transcendental, and seems to be the primary means for poets such as Percy Shelley, especially in poems such as “Mont Blanc” and “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” to achieve states of static intensity in which man’s reason is subordinated to the position of passive spectator to manifestations of the symbolic power of universal, transcendental order: “....and when I gaze on thee / I seem as in trance sublime and strange / to muse on my own separate phantasy, / My own, my human mind, which passively / Now renders and receives vast influencings, / Holding an unrelenting interchange / With the clear universe of thing around.”\(^\text{11}\)

If Shelley understands the power of passivity in sensibility’s role in symbol formation, then Severin von Kusiemski, the masochistic narrator-protagonist of Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs*, actually lives the aesthetic exactitude of such a state, which he refers to as “suprasensibility” – the state of being in which “sensuality is sacred, indeed the only sacredness.”\(^\text{12}\) As a simple faculty of reception, according to Kant, sensibility itself is passive by definition because it does no work, no synthesis, but simply relates sense impressions to the a priori forms of their representation. Emmanuel Levinas, on the other hand, privileges passivity as an ethical state by prioritizing its capacity to underwrite non-intentional states of consciousness that introduce humility into the social bond and prepare the ground for the Other through the “laying down by the ego of its sovereignty.”\(^\text{13}\) For him, radical passivity is a


positive ethical state, but for Freud, it occupies the other end of the ethical spectrum, breeding a megalomania based upon the perceived omnipotence of the narcissist’s delusory thinking combined with his belief in the “thaumaturgic” or magical power of language.

Whilst delusory thought may demonstrate similarities to vague thought its form, it is not vague in its content. Questions of vagueness that Richard Rorty claimed in 2005 had become such a “hot [philosophical] topic” and which are so often implied in critiques of the impressionistic techniques of modernist aesthetics, are more to do with the rules governing ordinary language predicates than with the ways in which our representations can be measured against the way the world is ‘in itself.’ Much to the analytical philosopher’s chagrin, these rules do not allow precise lines dividing the objects to which the predicates apply from objects of any other sort. Questions of vagueness therefore cause us to revert to a consideration of how the sentences we use to describe the world map an independent reality and to the more general, but well-rehearsed, question of how well language itself is able to represent the world and what is known. Neither is delusory thought vague in the sense meant by Bertrand Russell who claimed in his 1923 paper “Vagueness” that it is an issue of, “Stimuli which for various reasons we believe to be different [producing] in us indistinguishable sensations.” Instead, delusory thinking is maintained by the power of

(14) Richard Rorty, “How Many Grains Make a Heap?”, in The London Review of Books, 20 January, 2005, http://www.lrb.co.uk/v27/n02/print/rort01.html. Rorty relates being told that “vagueness is huge” and that philosophical inquiry in the area of “vagueness studies” had “exploded in the last thirty years.”

(15) Bertrand Russell took up the issue of vagueness much earlier in a paper, “Vagueness” delivered to the Jowett Society, Oxford on 25 November 1922 and subsequently published in the Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy, 1 (June 1923), pp. 84-92, and recently reprinted in Vagueness: A Reader, ed. Rosanna Keefe and Peter Smith, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1996, pp. 61-68. More recently, Megan Quigley in her “Modern Novels and Vagueness”, in Modernism/Modernity. Vol.15, No.1, pp. 101-129, presents a comprehensive overview of the critique of vagueness during the twentieth century from which it emerges that the preoccupation with vagueness is predominantly an Anglo-American and analytical philosophical issue. She rather curiously ignores the point that Continental philosophy seems generally disinterested in the issue, perhaps already understanding that language always and everywhere lacks the sort of precision demanded by Russell and others in the analytical tradition. Such a viewpoint reached its zenith of course with poststructuralism and Derrida for whom diff é rence represented the complete liquefaction of formalized meanings and structures.
an individual's own narcissistic demands and desires that feed states of consciousness and modes of thought to willfully sustain false perceptions and beliefs despite contradictory evidence from the everyday real.

While Freud placed narcissism within the framework of the subject's sexual life and the work of the libido, claiming that narcissism is "the attitude of a person who treats his body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated" and "a perversion that has absorbed all of the subject's sexual life," the same logic can be applied to the aesthetic narcissist. Both types desire and obsessively pursue absolute goals, the reflected body for the sexual narcissist and aesthetic transcendence for the aesthetic narcissist, as the primary condition for an autonomous life.

For Romantic philosophers particularly, the making and experience of art provides the highest cognitive paradigm of autonomy and freedom. Friedrich Schelling held that the real world of objects is produced by the same cognitive processes as those that produce the ideal world of aesthetic being, the only difference is that the former is produced "without" consciousness, the latter "with" it. The organ of aesthetic transcendence for Schelling is "inner sense," that facility of the mind that not only produces "original acts of the intellect" but that also reflects upon them so that it always and everywhere remains, at the same time, "both the intuited (the producer) and the intuitant." This alloyed state of consciousness enables the aesthete, like the narcissist, to maintain the delusion that it is possible for her to be entirely reconciled with objective necessity and the everyday real.

(18) Søren Kierkegaard, the most obvious proponent of such a view, proposed that the aesthetic life is *eo ipso* the unethical life and therefore already inevitably a life of despair. I have found nothing to suggest that Nabokov had Kierkegaard specifically in mind when writing his novel, but the similarities between the two are striking. For a fuller reading of Kierkegaard's "despair" see his Either/Or: A Fragment of Life, trans. David and Lillian Swanson. 2 Vols. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944, in which he establishes that the aesthetic life is despair, particularly in Vol. II where he goes so far as to suggest that the "aesthetic" even includes the "unreflective" pursuit of a goal and the pursuit of the "interesting". Two versions of this are outlined in "Crop Rotation" and the "Seducer's Diary."
One modernist who resisted this narcissistic legacy in modernist aesthetics was Vladimir Nabokov. In many of his best known fictional works, his lectures on literature and his other writings and interviews, Nabokov emphasised that aesthetic transcendence could not be achieved by creating distance between it and the facts and details of the everyday real, but is instead realised by inhabiting “cool” forms of thought that apprehend the world without distorting it. Writers, he claims, must recognise the ontological truths of the things closest to them through creative work that is both “cool” and “sustained,” and respect the distinction, blurred by the narcissist, between real art and real life.

In his essay “The Art of Literature and Common sense” Nabokov opposes Romantic ideals of “inner sense” to an epistemology of “common sense” and the recognition of what he calls the “blessed matter” of the physical world. Common sense is manifested in the artist’s ability to recognize the “anatomic differences between obsession and inspiration, between a bat and a bird, a dead twig and a twig-like insect” and to apprehend the matters-of-fact and patterns of the physical world, granting their power to subordinate intentional mental states to undefined but external determinations.

Inspiration depends then on the supremacy of detail over ideas and generalities, and on the aesthetic work required to pass from the “dissociative stage,” as Nabokov calls it, in which the artist or writer “disconnects what he chooses” to the “associative stage” of purposeful reconstruction. He draws a distinction between two types of aesthetic inspiration on the basis of work and distance: the narcissistic, dissociative heat of “rapture” (vorstag in Russian) which entails the disconnection of the “old” world of sensations, perceptions, ideas and forms, and the sustained, reconstructive coolness of the associative stage (vdokhnovenie) when the artist or writer composes her work with a “serene and steady kind of inspiration.” Only in the passage between

(21) Lectures, p. 377.
these two forms of inspiration, in the work, does the artist experience the “spiritual thrill” of authentic creation.22

Nabokov’s aesthetic alternative is too mischievous, too complex to be considered simply naturalistic or empirical. His science undoes any idealistic illusions about the nature of reality, and caused him to resist the prevailing modernist forms of nihilistic consciousness that proposed the real as simply the result of conventions or states of mind, but it also gave him a sharpened sense of the elusiveness and deceptiveness of the real itself. Unlike the more deterministic ontologies of his nineteenth century, Naturalist predecessors, especially Zola who reduces affects to sensation and instinct, Nabokov’s aesthetics demonstrate a strong sense of felt but usually obscure design and purpose, of the pattern and the power of structures beyond human control to shape outcomes and ends.

There is an equally strong sense, however, that the attempt to discover these structures and patterns is doomed to a certain kind of failure. His aesthetic preferences for “images to ideas, obscure facts to clear symbols, and the discovered wild fruit to the synthetic jam”23 therefore align with his estimation of the real as a Zeno-like peeling away of sensory and epistemological layers in a search for a non-existent centre. The real is a recalcitrant concentricity, a complex, layered entity to which “you can get nearer and nearer… but you can never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable… So that we live surrounded by more or less ghostly objects - …”24 The real in reality becomes a liquid, Matrix form of substance, an image and an effect in which sensations are treated as reality itself rather than signs of that reality.

(22) Gilles Deleuze in his Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2003), makes an uncannily similar distinction when discussing the work of Francis Bacon. He says, “Too many people mistake a photograph for a work of art, a plagiarism for an audacity, a parody for a laugh, and worse yet, a miserable stroke of inspiration for a creation” (73).
The Real and the Ghostly – from Substance to Subtlety

As a way of animating the ghostly objects of the everyday real, Nabokov often wrote, with a lepidopterist’s enthusiasm, of the literary, nearly divine, value of individual perception and the richness of everyday patterns and details as an antidote to those works he considered “the Literature of Ideas ... topical trash coming in huge blocks of plaster that are carefully transmitted from age to age until somebody comes along with a hammer and takes a good crack at Balzac, at Gorki, at Mann.” In an effort to rescue Leopold Bloom from a return to what Wittgenstein terms a “fragment of nature,” Nabokov plotted the Dublin streets, landmarks, alleys and lanes in order to locate precisely Bloom’s “humdrum wanderings and minor adventures on a summer day in Dublin.” He also drew a plan of the 3-storey house at 7 Eccles Street in which the Blooms lived, adding explanatory notes such as, “It is a coldwater flat, with no bathroom, with a water closet on the landing and a rather mouldy privy in the back garden.” And in his lectures on Kafka’s Metamorphosis, Nabokov meticulously diagrammed the Samsa apartment in Charlotte Street which was “divided into segments as he (Gregor) will later be divided,” noting in particular the precise location of Gregor’s bedroom in relation to the other rooms of the apartment so introducing a structural element into his analysis of the story by equating the changes in the familial dispositions and fortunes with the changing locus and balance of familial activity in each of the rooms.

Nabokov’s representations are clearly aesthetic, but rather than shifting the aesthetic to the subtle modes of consciousness represented by other modernists he attempts his own substantial perspective by re-drawing and re-presenting the real in ways that are not simply ghostly, but that dwell upon the phenomenology of concrete details and lived experience. In this way, he rescues his subject material from the kind of critic who he claims is “more interested in ideas and generalities

(26) Vladimir Nabokov, Lectures, p. 305.
and human aspects than in the work of art itself,” and elevates the everyday real from the obscure and ghostly to the complex aesthetic forms of a mimetic art that dwells upon the apprehension of design in the patterns and obscurities of the everyday real.

Nabokov was not alone in his characterization of the real as ghostly. For Martin Heidegger, that element of the real he calls “average everydayness” is also obscure. It is an incomplete and undifferentiated mode of *Dasein*, the thing that takes the form of human existence, which constitutes our pre-ontological, pre-cognitive understanding of the world. As a form of non-consciousness or insensibility, the everyday real is not, he argues in *Being and Time*, nothing, and not a mere or partial aspect of a greater whole. Instead, “average everydayness” is a positive phenomenological characteristic that is obscure only because of its closeness to us, because of our absorption in it. And because this everyday real constitutes the “ontically proximal” it has, according to Heidegger, “again and again been passed over in explicating *Dasein*” and our public coexistence with others and the objects of our world. We fall into the immediacy of the everyday real and our comprehension of its qualities is diminished because, “that which is ontically closest and well-known” becomes “ontologically the furthest and not known at all; …. Self-consciousness, *Dasein*, falls way from itself into an impersonal world, and loses in its falling the potential to stand as an authentic self. Falling away or “fleeing” then becomes a mode of inauthenticity or “hazy indefiniteness” that can be recovered through the work of art in the world shifting us out of the realm of the everyday.

The ghostly or indefinite then is a function, according to Heidegger’s view, of the dialectic of proximity and distance: things closest to us are the most difficult for us to know, and “what is closest to us ontologically is at the same time furthest away.” Arranged along

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(27) *Lectures*, p. 287.
(29) Inauthenticity for Heidegger does not bear the existential burden of “bad faith” that it does for other philosophers. Instead it simply refers to a *Dasein*, a being in the world, which has not yet found its own self. For a fuller explanation of how works of art can lead to authenticity see his “The Origin of the Work of Art”, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Krell, San Francisco: Harper, 1993, pp. 143-203.
this dialectical continuum is Being's capacity for knowledge of entities other than itself amongst which it is thrown and which matter to it in its manifest interconnectedness with others.

Heidegger's view of the indefiniteness of the everyday real is illustrated in an example from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Culture and Value* that also dwells upon the liquid dialectics between ontic proximity and ontological distance. He suggests that the real is antitheatrical in the ways it predisposes real-life actors to inhabit states of non or diminished consciousness. Absorbed in the reality of their everyday tasks, agents cannot view their performance with a cool disinterest; instead, they function in a generally diminished state of consciousness in which they are, like ghosts, incomplete and unaware of the larger contexts in which they exist. Wittgenstein proposes an analogy to an earlier description of his friend and correspondent Paul Engelmann "rummaging around in a drawer full of his own manuscripts" in which he says,

> Nothing could be more remarkable than seeing a man who thinks he is unobserved performing some quite simple everyday activity. Let us imagine a theatre; the curtain goes up and we see a man in a room, walking up and down, lighting a cigarette, sitting down, etc. so that suddenly we are observing a human being from the outside in a way that ordinarily we never observe ourselves; it would be like watching a chapter of biography with our own eyes, - surely this would be uncanny and wonderful at the same time. We should be observing something more wonderful than anything a playwright could arrange to be spoken on the stage: life itself.\(^{30}\)

Viewing Wittgenstein's actor from the outside is like observing a ghost or a zombie, and he imagines that an unconscious or preconscious absorption in everyday activities underpins an aesthetics of "the real" itself. The everyday, as a powerfully absorptive form "more wonderful than anything a playwright could arrange to be spoken on stage," constitutes an aesthetic of the real that for Wittgenstein is antitheatrical, singularly and curiously devoid of artifice.\(^{31}\)

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Wittgenstein’s description suggests two different perspectives on the real. The first is what I would call the objectivity of everyday existence, ordinariness or “everydayness” of the actor himself, which is a conception of reality that does not put him at centre, but that sees him as unconsciously absorbed in the activities associated with his daily, everyday existence that has itself become “hazy and indefinite.” This state is Heidegger’s everydayness where the actor relates and responds to the things around him only as they are a function of proximity and distance: the things he knows and with which he engages are the most immediate (walking around, lighting a cigarette, sitting down, getting up, etc). He is, however, awake, attentive to stimuli in his surroundings and seems to behave in ways appropriate to his context and so fulfils the minimal and most general conditions for consciousness.

In this mode of being our understanding of the objective realities of everyday life is always and everywhere incomplete, and a blindness to this incompleteness stands at the centre of the narcissist’s inability to clearly separate the world from the mind that apprehends it. Incompleteness, the more general nature of the relationship between Dasein and things in the world, contains us so that, as Thomas Nagel claims, we will not be able to grasp an object’s most specific qualities “unless we can imagine them subjectively... We will not know how scrambled eggs taste to a cockroach even if we develop a detailed, objective phenomenology of the cockroach sense of taste.”

The second perspective is the real life of the imagination, that intentional frame of reference that represents the man absorbed in his daily activities as theatre or art. We make art of the ghostly. The everyday real is thus elevated to the aesthetic so that it becomes what Nabokov would call a “work” – a created object to which we assign meaning and value because it manifests some level of intentionality and perspective, so it appears in the world as a work of art. Intentionality and perspective, in this context, are the forces by which we fix and make determinate, through work, an otherwise “everyday” fluid or indeterminate field. For Wallace Stevens, intentionality is the “power

(32) Thomas Nagel, The View From Nowhere, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, p.25. Nagel attempts to reconcile the human capacity to apprehend the world both subjectively and objectively through an extended investigation of the idea of perspective.
of the mind over the possibilities of things,"^{33} so to assign intention is to attribute the power to make a "something" (roughly equivalent to a point-of-view) of a situation, circumstance or object by organising a perspectival rendering of it, even if the perspective turns out to be what Nagel calls the "view from nowhere." Making a something is a way of seeing, a perspective that is not simply an angle or 'take', but a becoming of what is seen until, finally, one sees nothing else.

Through work Heidegger thinks we come to know the real. We are lifted out of the obscurities of the everyday, where we are largely dependent upon our senses, and into an abstraction that is not the negation of sensation and nature but a recuperation of the forms of attention lost when sensation is habituated by the everyday real. He says in The Origin of the Work of Art that, "Much closer to us than all the sensations are the things themselves. We hear the door shut in the house and never hear acoustical sensations or even mere sounds. In order to hear a bare sound we have to listen away from things, divert our ear from them, i.e., listen abstractly."^{34} Listening away creates ontological distance and becomes a way of knowing independent of conceptual categories. This is the experience of presence, the capacity for "bringing forth," which for Heidegger is the function of art and aesthetics.

Wittgenstein also proposes that work separates a "work of art" from a "fragment of nature." A work of art forces us to see it in "the right perspective," without which its aesthetic value is lost and it is reabsorbed into the world as an object like any other in its indistinctness and ghostliness. He gives the example of looking at somebody else's holiday photographs, those "insipid snapshots of a piece of scenery which is of interest for the man who took it because he was there himself and experienced something; but someone else will quite justifiably look at it coldly, ..."^{35} Perspective assumes intention, direction and usually thought. But for Wittgenstein, too, thought does not need to assume the conceptual and ontological burdens of meaning and understanding cast in hermeneutically bound linguistic forms. Instead, he proposes a type of thought that "...flies above the world and leaves it as it is - observing

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(33) Necessary Angel, p.136.
(34) Basic Writings, p.152.
(35) Culture, 4e-5e.
from above, in flight.” 36 “World” then becomes not just the collection of things that happen to be objects in it, nor an intentional framework in which our imagination adds to the sum of all given things, but a type of non-objective framework to which we relate and within which ideas and things assume a meaning and come into Being. World is selfhood, it determines in what ways things will be things. The world is, as Wittgenstein famously declares in the Tractatus, “all that is the case.” 37 Things will be things, finally, through the ontological distance created by Heidegger’s “listening away,” which becomes for Wittgenstein, through the activity of work, “coolness”; that is, thought that not only inhabits the ontological distance from ontically proximal things, but that also develops “a temple providing a setting for the passions without meddling with them.” 38

An architecture for the passions is the work of Nabokov’s “cool and sustained” associative phase of creativity where the artist or writer experiences the “spiritual thrill” of inspiration. The measure of inspiration is a sensation felt as “the telltale tingle between the shoulderblades.”

That little shiver behind [that] is quite certainly the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained when evolving pure art and pure science. Let us worship the spine and its tingle. Let us be proud of our being vertebrates, for we are vertebrates tipped at the head with a divine flame. The brain only continues the spine: the wick really goes through the whole length of the candle. If we are not capable of enjoying that shiver, if we cannot enjoy literature, then let us give up the whole thing and concentrate on our comics, our videos, our books-of-the-week. 39

The domain of “the shiver” is the province of cognitive feelings, and it is through intense feeling of this sort that we recognize aesthetic work and distinguish a work of art from a fragment of nature. Physiology and aesthetics here coalesce in a form of the real that oscillates between matter and mind; by giving more to the “blessed matter” of the world, as

(36) Culture, 5e.
(38) Culture, 2e.
(39) Lectures, p.64.
Nabokov does, we receive more from it, and at the same time recognize that the forms inherent in things cannot be entirely a consequence of our own work. The real then appears to be bound to the acceptance of the existence of things ontologically distant from our representation of and our proximity to them, but also to the denial that we can form determinate conceptions of these things as they are independently of our representation of them. The movement between the two, as Francis Bacon describes it, is a slow leak of sensation back into fact.40

Cool thought aligns thinking with a nonpropositional “sensing” and a return of thought to its pre-cognitive, non-foundational element. Heidegger in his “Letter on Humanism” claims that, “Thinking is judged by a standard that does not measure up to it. Such judgment may be compared to the procedure of trying to evaluate the essence and powers of a fish by seeing how long it can live on dry land. For a long time now, all too long, thinking has been stranded on dry land. Can then the effort to return thinking to its element be called “irrationalism”?”41

Thought is released from its conceptual burdens by seeing cognition and understanding as rooted in the sensuous order of “feeling” rather than in the processes of reflective consciousness. William James, in his paper “The Function of Cognition,” asserts that all cognitive functions are constituted by the subjective “feeling” attached to them and that “whatever elements an act of cognition may imply besides, it at least implies the existence of a feeling.” This generally anti-Cartesian formulation of consciousness is extended when James further suggests that if the reader is offended by the term “feeling” one can substitute the Lockean term “idea” or perhaps “thought.” Cognitive feelings, now thoughts, have an intentional component pointing to or aiming at things other than themselves in the same way that a gun aims at a target. James proposes that feelings/thoughts have a direction, and that “a feeling feels as a gun shoots” – an image to which I will later return. 42

(41) BasicWritings, p.219.
The Real and Despair

Hermann Karlovich, the protagonist of Nabokov’s 1934 novel *Despair*, fulfils all the criteria for Freud’s definition of the narcissist, and also embodies the narcissistic strain I have identified in modernist aesthetics. Variousely described as a liar, a failure, a dissociative madman, and as narcissistically tragic in his attempt to manipulate the thaumaturgic power of words in order to elevate himself from the status of a literary character to “a new life as a literary creator,” Hermann’s delusion is that he “sees his crime as a work of art and himself as the consummate artist.” In this delusory state, he is unable to dissociate the aesthetics of his narcissistic consciousness from the realities of his everyday world. To morph from character to creator, Hermann must live an inauthentic, aestheticised existence in bad faith by pursuing to their logical ends aesthetic ideas that are incongruent with the facts of his everyday reality. His overheated aesthetic obsessions by themselves constitute for some the denial of ethical values and, therefore, a life led in Kierkegaardian bad faith, but perhaps more importantly, Hermann’s failure as both an artist and a criminal demonstrates Brian Boyd’s claim that Nabokov believed that “art is not an occasion for self display, but a chance to reach beyond the self.”

Hermann becomes an embodiment for Nabokov of all that is wayward in the modernist shift from substance to subtlety and its blindness to the ontologies and patterns of the everyday real and their power to shape both human and aesthetic destinies. By ignoring the element of work in the reconstructive phase of Nabokov’s version of “inspiration” and relying instead on obsession, lies and memory, Hermann invites a certain aesthetic failure and infinite condemnation, not because of his ‘crime,’ but because of his inability to distinguish

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(43) *Despair* was written by Nabokov in 1932, and published in *Sovremennye zapiski* in 1934. It was translated into English by Nabokov in 1938, and then revised by him in 1966. I will be quoting from the Penguin (London), 2000 edition.


(45) *Vladimir Nabokov*, p. 384.
inside from out, a “bat from a bird.” Even Humbert Humbert of *Lolita* is offered some hope of redemption by Nabokov, but no such hope is held out for Hermann.

Hermann may be bad, mad and a thoroughly reprehensible faux artist, but he is also a quintessential modernist. As part of the Russian diaspora, he participates in, but never belongs to Russian, German, Czech and French culture. And being thoroughly modern, Hermann clearly inherits a modernist aesthetics displayed by his ingenuity in word play and allusions; his parodies of narrative conventions and genres such as the detective story, cinematic melodrama and soft porn; in his use of Freudian jargon; his intertextuality and his hybridisation of English and foreign languages. Hermann is displaced but still imagines himself a modernist writer in the tradition of Turgenev who, like Hermann, graduated from the University of St. Petersburg before moving to Germany; of Dostoevsky, whom he considers a “blundering fool” and of Pushkin, whose lines he quotes and misquotes.

By alluding to the works of his literary forebears Hermann believes, and wants his audience to believe, that he is in control of his language and its meanings, but his allusions primarily reveal his literary shortcomings and pretensions. While mulling over the plan to murder his “double,” Felix, steal his identity and move abroad, living decadently on the insurance money, Hermann mumbles lines of Pushkin’s poem, “Tis time, my dear, ‘tis time. The heart demands repose”46 but, crucially, misquotes the last line as “the abode of pure delight.” According to Nabokov’s translation of the poem in the Foreword of *Despair*, the line actually reads, “To a remote abode of work and pure delight.”47 The omission of *remote* and *work* from Hermann’s recitation of Pushkin reveals the flaws in Hermann’s own aesthetic activity. He is seduced by a distinctly modernist aesthetic in which he mistakes the coincidentally illusory patterns of his own limited and overheated consciousness for the cool disinterest of the “blessed matter” of the physical world, and lazily substitutes his own deluded memories for the work of the “reconstructive” phase of inspiration.

(46) *Despair*, p. 60.
(47) *Despair*, p. 11.
Perhaps remembering St. Augustine, Nabokov defines evil or "badness" as "the lack of something rather than a noxious presence." A criminal, he argues, lacks "real imagination," settling instead for "half-witted banalities" and "lunatics are lunatics just because they have thoroughly and recklessly dismembered a familiar world but have not the power [...] to create a new one as harmonious as the old." 48 Hermann is in similarly bad faith because he too not only lacks the imagination necessary to remake the work he creates as harmoniously as the reality from which he borrows, but he also is unable to inhabit the remoteness and disinterestedness of cool thought, opting instead for the narcissistic heat of finding himself too much with himself. The work that Nabokov associates with moving from the dissociative stage in which the artist "disconnects what he chooses" to the associative stage of imaginative reconstruction is absent; Hermann is stuck in the dissociative phase and so caught in the heat of "rapture" rather than the cool remoteness and sustained work of "recapture".

Hermann’s downfall is then not so much that his intent is evil, but that his life, not just his art, is an inspired lie in which he fails to recognise the difference between his internal and external realities. Admirable as his desire to associate with something transcendent, better and more beautiful may be, his inability to reconcile claims of his objective world with his narcissistically dissociative consciousness, and not the self-confessed "blunder" of Felix’s forgotten walking stick, is the heart of his failure.

Lying is a behavior related to the narcissist’s belief in the magical power of his words. In a highly aestheticized discourse such as Hermann’s, however, it is difficult to distinguish his "evil" lies from his more artful forms of deceit. Hermann believes that writing itself is a "lying art;" a belief enacted in his twenty-five different kinds of handwriting and his self-confessed propensity to "light-hearted, inspired lying." 50 Lies and deception, including self-deception, are topoi of form and content that, for the aesthetic narcissist, are not constructed with intent but ‘turn up’ as if possessed of their own volitional capabilities.

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(48) Lectures, pp. 376-377.
(49) Lectures, p. 378.
Most liars profess to tell the truth. Cocteau, for example, in his monologue “The Liar” has his liar begin with “I want to tell the truth. I like the truth,” but Hermann confesses his deceitful predispositions from the outset of his narrative, perhaps in the hope that his confession will not diminish but increase his reader’s trust and strengthen the communicative bond upon which the aesthete relies: once the duplicitous nature of his narrative is confessed, deception becomes a perverse pleasure for his readers. A delusional belief in the thaumaturgic power of words narrows the ethical divide between truth and deception, and reinforces Nietzsche’s belief that art is about deceptions, deceptions are normal, and that we are accustomed to lying from “time immemorial” so that we are all “much more of an artist than [we] know.”

Veracity is an ethical issue only when judged from beyond the perimeters of the narrative logic itself. But for Hermann, situated inside the narrative, everything he says is magically “real.” Aesthetics treats illusion as illusion, therefore there is no intent to deceive; it is true and real, especially when contained within and set amongst the things closest to us. Augustine’s definition of lying, “A lie is any pronouncement whatsoever accompanied by a desire to deceive,” may then need to be set against Wittgenstein’s claim that language, in general, is not the guise of thought but its disguise. In his dissociative state, Hermann’s real intentions are difficult to discern and it may be that his pious deceipts can be judged only within the framework of his own aesthetic heaven. He may therefore be guilty of “transcendental buffoonery,” to borrow a phrase from Schlegel, but to find him guilty based upon an understanding of his intentions or upon the veracity of his statements when placed within a different perspective is more problematic.

Hermann’s obsessive delusions cause him to develop an aesthetic ontology based upon imagined resemblances rather than perceived differences, so he becomes preoccupied with the similarities

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(54) *Tractatus 4.002*, p. 22.
of what he terms “zoological types” rather than the particularities of perceptual differences and distinctions. There are, he claims, “people with the features of apes; there is also the rat type, the swine type… People have told me I reminded them of Amundsen. I have frequently come across noses à la Leo Tolstoy.”

His greatest delusion is his belief that Felix, the itinerant low-life and chosen murder victim, is his doppelganger. Felix’s proximity to Hermann feeds his delusion of similarity and obscures the real differences between them, differences that are immediately obvious to others in the narrative, especially the police investigating Felix’s murder who recognize Felix and Hermann as not only non-identical but completely different. Felix stands in the narrative as an embodiment of Hermann’s own perceptual delusions resulting from his inability to distance himself from the object of his inspiration. The unreconstructed Felix represents Hermann’s lack of aesthetic work, a kind of mock image of Hermann’s own narcissism strutting about as a character in the book as if it was real.

Hermann initially attributes his perceptual delusions to his imperfect senses, to “the partiality and fallaciousness of human eyesight” which, he claims, “I have come to know.” Later he will blame his memory for the errors in his literary creation. His wife’s cousin Ardalion, however, the “true” artist of the book but a character dismissed by Hermann as “a cheery soul, but a rotten painter” argues for the value of particularities and differences. He undermines Hermann’s ontology of similarities by raising familiar stereotypes: “You’ll say next that all Chinamen are alike. You forget, my good man, that what the artist perceives, is primarily, the difference between things. It is the vulgar who note their resemblance.” When Hermann replies, “that sometimes it is the resemblance that matters,” Ardalion retorts that resemblances matter only, “When buying a second candlestick.”

In his final letter to Hermann, Ardalion again asserts that “…in the whole world there are not and cannot be, two men alike, however well you disguise them.”

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(55) Despair, p. 43.
(56) Despair, p. 19.
(57) p. 37.
(58) p. 44.
(59) p. 170.
Self-deceptions, however, continue. Hermann describes his wife Lydia as “faithful” and so “happy with me, she needs nobody else,” and as “slovenly” and “innocently dull” and as “a lamb in leopard’s clothes.”

Yet Lydia is in a transparently sexual relationship with her painter “cousin” Ardalion. And rather than being slovenly and dull, she undertakes a disciplined and detailed anatomical examination of Hermann’s face, holding him immobilized under her gaze as if he was a lepidopterist’s specimen,

She liked to examine my face this way and that; with thumb and finger, compasswise, she measured my features: the somewhat prickly area above the upper lip, the longish groove down the middle; the spacious forehead with its twin swellings above the brows; and the nail of her index finger would follow the lines on both sides of my mouth, which was always shut tight and insensitive to tickling.

The clarity of her vision and her employment of geometry to calibrate Hermann’s distinctive physiognomy add to Ardalion’s claims for the supremacy of particular details over generalized types, but these too are quickly absorbed by Hermann’s first person narration into a seamless repetition of his own imagined likeness to Felix. In Hermann’s mind, Lydia’s documenting of his own distinctiveness becomes, instead, a description of Felix.

In an alternative perceptual framework over which he seems to have little conscious control, Hermann believes in the opposite of what the real presents. His recalcitrance may be read as a perverse endorsement of modernist claims for autonomy and freedom from the authority of nature, and a Kantian excision of sensory experience from its constitutive connection to the world of things, but its malevolence cannot be ignored. Hermann’s misrepresentation of perceptual data reminds us of the tyrant of Agrigentum, Phalaris, who heard the agonized cries of the victims he had “imprisoned in a brazen bull, and slowly tortured over a steady fire” as “sweet music.”

Hermann, too, remembers hearing the shot that kills Felix as “persistent singing.”

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(60) Despair, pp. 149, 116.
(61) p. 34.
their shared pathogenesis, both characters masquerade grotesquely murderous behavior as aesthetic transcendence.

Only twice is Hermann able to distance himself from his aesthetic object. The first time is when Hermann’s self-confessed “dissociated self” reached its “perfect phase,” when “that imp Split had taken over” and he fantasized distancing himself from his love-making with Lydia in order to observe his sexual performance, voyeuristically watching “the ripples running and plunging along [his] muscular back.”63 By distancing himself from himself, Hermann accurately registers the phenomenological details of his “muscular back.” Remoteness offers Hermann the possibility to “think away” from things, but his narcissistic self-regard overpowers his cool thought. In a behaviour characteristic of the narcissist, Hermann becomes his own erotic object in “the performance” by withdrawing his libido from its connection with Lydia’s body and redirecting it towards his own ego.

The second, and more important, instance of Hermann’s cool thought is witnessed in the act of murder itself. Although the “evil imp Split” promises at the end of the story to disclose “more and more blunders and nothing but painful blunders,” 64 Felix’s murder provides Hermann with both a target for what James termed “cognitive feelings” and a stage upon which the reflective processes of his own aesthetic imagination are played out so that his solipsistic heat is momentarily trumped by his cool thought. The events before and after the murder are described by Hermann with a leisurely and cool disinterest and scrupulous attention to aesthetic detail, from the paring and cleaning of the body’s fingernails, trimming its eyebrows and exchanging Felix’s clothes for his own, to him lingering over the images and sounds of Felix’s death, “the shuffling sound he made on the snow, when he began to stiffen and jerk, as if his new clothes were uncomfortable, soon he was still and then the rotation of the earth made itself felt, and only his hat moved quietly, separating from his crown and falling back, mouth opened, as if it were saying ‘good-bye’ for its owner...” Only the pistol shot itself ruptures this artifice of death and detail. Hermann writes, in a single sentence itself like a shot, “He turned, and I shot him between

(63) Despair, p. 33.
(64) p. 167.
The bullet’s destination is precisely the site of aesthetic bliss identified by Nabokov in his lectures, and that “telltale tingle between the shoulder blades” was surely the last and most intense sensation Felix had ever felt. The trajectory of the bullet from Hermann’s pistol to Felix’s flesh traces the arc of Hermann’s aesthetic intent by bestowing aesthetic bliss upon the everyday life of a character he considered “a tramp.” It also traces the intentionality of what James termed his “cognitive feelings” by establishing an aesthetic link between the diverse elements of the linguistic, the cognitive, perceptual, mimetic and the gestural: in the way that Hermann’s gun is aimed at a target it points to something other than himself, to transcending the everyday, to committing the perfect murder and to writing the perfect novel whose images and style would, like Dickens (one of Nabokov’s literary heroes), relegate insipid and melodramatic forebears such as Dostoevsky to the scrapheap of literary history.

For the first time, Hermann is able to view his masterpiece with the cool disinterest of the artist, “Like an author reading his work over a thousand times probing and testing every syllable,” in order to establish the aesthetic perfection of his “work.” His blindness to everyday details and the force of the real and its power to determine outcomes beyond his control, however, ultimately punctures his project. In his generally diminished self-consciousness, Hermann remains ignorant of those ontic details that are most proximate to him; Lydia’s affair with Ardalion, Felix’s walking stick with his name and village engraved upon the handle accidentally left in Hermann’s car, and the phenotypic fact that his “double,” Felix, bore absolutely no physical resemblance to him.

The errors in his masterpiece Hermann attributes neither to his mendacity nor his dissociation but to a world of “treacherous reflections” in which his memory “inhaled, as it were, a double dose of oxygen” making his overheated delusions “still more graphic, because twice irradiated by art.” Early in the narrative Hermann recognizes memory as unreliable, but he insists on using it as a mode of entwining

(65) Despair, p. 143.
(66) Despair, p. 44.
(67) p. 168.
the real with the aesthetic, the sensuous with the rational. Rather than hybridizing differences to create an undifferentiated aesthetic bliss however, Hermann’s memory should have been working to differentiate and particularize them in the cool and sustained reconstructive work of the associative phase of inspiration. Herman characterizes the problem of memory as hinging on the distinction between his “rational memory [that] did not cease examining such minute flaws” and the “irrational memory of [his] senses” that saw only a reflection of his own self in “the sorry disguise of a tramp.”

As his memories come to represent something, if only, finally, something to blame for his failure, Hermann fails to understand that the dissociated parts he wants to compose into an aesthetically associated whole are related to each other only by the exercise of his own obsessive cognitive functions. His memory of Felix’s face, for example, is no longer simply recalled in its idiosyncratic detail and particularity, but is instead re-presented to Hermann’s consciousness as something other than what it is, as his doppelganger, in which Felix’s facial features no longer possess any ‘real’ parts, but have been transformed into what might be more accurately called Hermann’s ‘intentional’ parts. This transformation does not take place within the context of an anatomy lesson, but is rather what Gilles Deleuze in discussing Francis Bacon calls an “event” in which a figure becomes an intensification and extension or a composite of the elements and conditions that surround it. In Hermann’s case, however, the transforming elements and conditions belong to the obsessive distortions of his own mind rather than to the continuities of past and future temporal relations.

**Getting Real**

A modernist consciousness like Hermann’s has the power to modify the contents of its perceptual data, to shift from substance to subtlety in an act of recollection that transforms sensory data into a present construction related more to the perceiver’s intentions and obsessions than to the objects and stimuli of his perceptions. Memory,
for John Locke, is “the storehouse of our ideas” but “our ideas [are] nothing, but actual perceptions of the mind, which cease to be anything, when there is no perception of them; ...And in this sense it is that our ideas are said to be in our memories, when indeed they are actually nowhere.”

Locke’s version of memory is a storehouse whose goods are nothing stored nowhere. It is not a thing but a “power” of the mind to re-present ideas to itself with varying degrees of verisimilitude. So we should ask Hermann, if memory is to blame for his failure, as he claims, to what perceptions do his memories approximate? How could he be deceived by his memory if it consists of nothing other than the power to re-present?

Locke proposes that the perceptual pictures re-presented by memory are often acts of “will” and, sometimes, “tempestuous passions” in which “our affections [bring] ideas to our memory.”

Merleau-Ponty emphasizes this active, constructive element of memory over its more passive, conservative mode when he claims, “To remember is not to bring into the focus of consciousness a self-subsistent picture of the past; it is to thrust deeply into the horizon of the past and take apart step by step the interlocked perspectives until the experiences which it epitomizes are as if relived in their temporal setting.”

And William James in his analysis of the phenomenon of memory claims that memory itself is a product of an additive, or what Hermann terms “twice irradiated,” consciousness; it is “the knowledge of an event, or fact, of which meantime we have not been thinking, with the additional consciousness that we have thought or experienced it before.”

The past, for James and Merleau-Ponty, is therefore “appropriated” and “relived” by the rememberer who is bound by a reflexive belief in the synthetic and complex present representations of consciousness.

If Hermann’s memory cannot be held responsible for his failures but simply functions as memories function, perhaps Nabokov is critiquing a modernist preoccupation with artistic method and

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manipulation rather than cool and sustained work. Read this way, Hermann’s dissociated effort to turn Felix’s life into a literary work of art yields a distorted kind of *techne* whose only real telos is literary activity itself. Hermann’s aesthetic project is therefore a bid for immanence through his emancipation from and misunderstanding of the everyday real, but Nabokov may be reminding his readers, and his fellow modernists, that an absorption in aesthetic bliss has the capacity to diminish the affects of social norms and, perhaps more importantly, sublimate powerful natural patterns, differences and determinations. Hermann’s delusion is that he is limited by nothing more than his own creativity, and that he can transcend any social bond or biological determination. Accordingly, Ardalion’s description of the real as consisting not of “types” and similarities as Hermann believes, but of uniqueness and differences, is nowhere assigned any ontological value in Hermann’s aesthetic but is seen only retrospectively as a sometime limiting condition upon the mirror reflections of his own narcissistic obsessions.

Nabokov is suggesting that there is something in Hermann and his obsessive pursuit of the aesthetic life, some intrinsic ethical telos that he is thwarting by creating works of art on the basis he does. The title itself, *Despair*, may then reflect not only the loss of hope experienced by Hermann when he finally recognizes that “a blunder there had been” but the inability even of success, according to strictly aesthetic criteria, to furnish genuine art. This is a peculiarly Hegelian view of the ethical life in which human value is a subjective assent to and participation in the objective order of things. But Boyd’s claim that Nabokov sought “a means of defining human existence and an intimation of something beyond” is correct, then perhaps *Despair* refers to the sort of modernist aesthetics that prioritises a preconscious subtlety over substance, and the dissociative heat of “rapture” above the cool, associative thought of “recapture.” Modernist aesthetics may then reveal that its power depends upon a “blunder” or a delusion. The real is not just the representation of mental states in narcissistic acts of communicative self-consciousness, nor is it found in the dissociative heat of inspiration. Instead, it is the recognition and communication of

(73) *Nabokov*, p. 384.
our incomplete understanding of the objective world, its contingency and its power to undermine what Theodor Adorno calls the "fetish" quality of art; that quality of aesthetics that, like Hermann’s view of similarities and types, treats phenomena that cannot be absorbed into familiar conceptual frameworks as isolated and unimportant particulars.
Abstract

Modernist aesthetics emphasised the representation of states of mind over the “blessed matter” of the everyday real. This shift from “substance to subtlety” licensed modernist protagonists like Hermann Karlovich from Vladimir Nabokov’s Despair to engage in a narcissism that ignored real world contingencies in order to legitimate an aesthetic transcendence based upon inspiration rather than work, memory over creative reconstruction and lies instead of truths. The dissociative heat of Karlovich’s literary inspiration lacks the cool, remote thought Nabokov considered necessary for the associative work of artistic creation. His effort to communicate beyond the self fails because he never understands that while art may be an inspired lie, life is not. Nabokov therefore provides a critique of those strains of modernist aesthetics that understood the real as merely a set conventions rather than a constellation of forces that have the power to disrupt and overturn the best of human intentions.

ملخص

شددت الجماليات الحديثة على ممثّلات الفكر بدلًا من “المادة المقدسة” للواقع اليومي. هذا التحول من “الجوهر إلى الحداثة” سمح للأساطير الحديثة مثل هيرمان كارلوبرتش، بطل رواية فلاديمير نابوكوف “الآس”， الإشغال بالترجمة التي تتغاضى عن أحداث العالم الواقع. يهدف هذا الإشغال في البنية الروائية إلى تشريع التعالي الجمالي المؤسس على الإلهام بدلًا من العمل، وعلى الذاكرة بدلًا من إعادة الهيكلة الحالية، وعلى الأكاذيب بدلًا من الحقائق. إن الانصفاص الحر للإلهام الأدبي عند كارلوبرتش هذا هو في عرفة نابوكوف، ضروري لإعادة هيكلة عمل الخلق الأدبي. غير أن جهد الروائي للتوصل مع ما هو أبعد من الذات، إنه يفشل بسبب عدم فهمه أنه، بينما يمكن للذين يكون كذبًا ملهمًا، فإن الحياة ليست كذلك. بناءً على ما سبق، يقدم لنا نابوكوف نقدًا للذين يجهدون في الدفاع عن الجماليات الحديثة التي تفهم الواقع بوصفه مجموعة اتفاقات لا كوكبة من القوى التي لديها القدرة على وقف وشقلة أفضل للمقاصد الإنسانية.