

The Suffering Joker and the Cruel Joke: Nabokov's and Bellow's Dark Laughter

Gerald David Naughton  
*Gulf University for Science & Technology*

Yulia Pushkarevskaya Naughton  
*Gulf University for Science & Technology*

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**Gerald David Naughton and Yulia Pushkarevskaya Naughton,**  
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**Abstract:** This article interrogates the interrelationship between cruelty, suffering, and laughter in novels by Saul Bellow and Vladimir Nabokov, positing an affective reading of how bodies that suffer come to produce laughter as a confounding, unexpected, and at times inappropriate readerly affect. Nabokov's *Invitation of a Beheading* and Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* both explore suffering as a form of excessive somatic cruelty inflicted on protagonists who, in experiencing such punishment, engender a strange, troubling, and potentially transformative form of laughter. In order to bring together a discussion of the body, suffering, cruelty, and laughter in Nabokov and Bellow, the essay uses Henri Bergson's idea of the "elasticity" of laughter in connection to cruelty and suffering, and various "affective" formulations of the body. In both writers, such Bergsonian elasticity of laughter is what allows for laughing at suffering, but there are crucial differences in their depictions of somatic suffering, particularly the responses they elicit from the reader. In Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*, it is the protagonist himself who jokes about his suffering body. In Nabokov's *Invitation of a Beheading*, it is the ironic narrator who simultaneously invites the reader to "laugh in the dark" and to check such laughter. What emerges in both novels is laughter as an unsettling readerly affect. Laughing about suffering thus may well become suffering after laughing, as the reader is forced to explore the emotional and ethical implications of such cruel laughter.

## Gerald David NAUGHTON and Yulia Pushkarevskaya NAUGHTON

### The Suffering Joker and the Cruel Joke: Nabokov's and Bellow's Dark Laughter

This article interrogates the interrelationship between cruelty, suffering, and laughter in novels by Saul Bellow and Vladimir Nabokov, positing an affective reading of how bodies that suffer come to produce laughter as a confounding, unexpected, and at times inappropriate readerly affect. For the purpose of this comparative analysis, we have selected Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark* and Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*, both because of the intimate connections between the writers and the significant overlaps in the texts themselves, in terms of how they posit suffering and laughter. Elsewhere we have spoken of the difficult and, in some ways, intense relationship between the two writers: the "almost unbridgeable gap between them as writers and artists, as well as their rare, even for the literary world, burning hostility towards one another" (Pushkarevskaya Naughton and Naughton 121). Nabokov once complained that "Saul Bellow, a miserable mediocrity, should never have appeared on the jacket of a book about me" and asks his editor if it is "too late to eliminate that exhaust puff" from the cover of his book (*Vladimir* 434). Bellow once wrote in a letter that Nabokov "rubbed [him] the wrong way" and that Nabokov, "at his gruesome worst ... pins feminine roses to simian bosoms" (*Saul Bellow: Selected Letters*), suggesting perhaps that Nabokov is a writer who is inordinately fond of the grotesque.

Despite these tensions, the two writers' novels frequently exhibit startling, precise mirror reflections of each other. Bellow and Nabokov, indeed, weave complex matrices of similarity, divergence, and antipathy. They frequently occupy similar fictive terrain, leaving a sense that, despite their proclaimed ill feeling, comparative readings of Bellow and Nabokov can help illuminate our understanding of the two writers, and unpick the matrices that such comparisons create. Key to this comparative enterprise is an analysis of Bellow's and Nabokov's divergent understanding of suffering. *Laughter in the Dark* and *Henderson the Rain King* both explore suffering as a form of excessive somatic cruelty inflicted on protagonists who, in experiencing such punishment, engender a strange, troubling, and potentially transformative form of laughter.

Suffering in Saul Bellow has typically been conceived of either in its connection to humanism, English romanticism, or—more typically—as part of a tradition of Jewish literature that expresses despair out of a frustrated idealism (Chavkin 161). According to John J. Clayton, Bellow's frequent writing on suffering expresses simply "Jewish despair, Jewish guilt and self-hatred, Jewish masochism" (53). Many critics also point to the fact that in Bellow, suffering need not to be seen futile, as "it leads to self-knowledge and also to knowledge of the other" (Flath 84). Much of Bellow's work, however, cautions against placing value on suffering, which he sees as a ubiquitous and unromantic fact. In this regard, we may recall Moses Herzog's depiction of the effects of suffering, which most commonly "breaks people, crushes them, and is simply unilluminating" (317). Yet, in the very same paragraph, Herzog also writes the following:

Why not say rather that people of powerful imagination, given to dreaming deeply and to raising up marvelous and self-sufficient fictions, turn to suffering sometimes to cut into their bliss, as people pinch themselves to feel awake. I know that my suffering, if I may speak of it, has often been like that, a more extended form of life, a striving for true wakefulness and an antidote to illusion, and therefore I can take no moral credit for it. I am willing without further exercise in pain to open my heart. And this needs no doctrine or theology of suffering. (317)

Here, we arrive at a complicated framing of what suffering means, or potentially can mean to Bellow's suffering jokers. While refusing the unnecessary and "unilluminating" doctrines of suffering that may fashionably be offered as validation or transformation of human pain, he equally values the potential to "extend" reality at the core of the experience of suffering.

Nabokov is similarly preoccupied with the transformation of suffering into laughter. Suffering in Nabokov is generally startling because he typically eschews suffering. In his lectures on Russian literature, Nabokov famously described "Dostoyevsky's lack of taste" in depicting the excessive suffering of his characters" who agonize and "sin their way to Jesus" (*Lectures* 104). Although Bellow was influenced by depictions of spiritual suffering in Dostoyevsky, the focus in his own novels, like in Nabokov's novels, is on physical suffering. Cruelty in both Nabokov and Bellow is endured and articulated by the suffering body. The critical questions here are: to what extent is it possible to laugh at a suffering body, how can the suffering body, subjected to cruelty or punishment, produce laughter, and what reconceptualizations of suffering ensue? In order to bring together a discussion of the body, suffering, cruelty, and laughter in Nabokov and Bellow, we use Henri Bergson's idea of the "elasticity" of laughter

in connection to cruelty and suffering, and various 'affective' formulations of the body. In both writers, such Bergsonian elasticity of laughter is what allows for laughing at suffering, but there are crucial differences in their depictions of somatic suffering, particularly the responses they elicit from the reader.

Theory's much discussed "affective turn" -- or perhaps more accurately "sensory turn"—primarily focuses on the non-discursive construction of individual and social experience. Much of this work, of course, stems from biological and neuroscientific models which configure the body and the mind as inextricable systems. In the words of Nicholas Daly, such theories posit "that feeling and thinking are not discrete activities; that cognitive decision-making is shaped by emotion; and that emotions might be considered as a form of embodied cognition" (226). To give one example, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has famously suggested that "emotions and feelings may not be intruders in the bastion of reason at all: they may be enmeshed in its networks for worse and for better" (xii). Key to this "enmeshed" image of thought and emotion is an altered understanding of the sensory body's own primacy in human experience and subjectivity.

Claire Hemmings, for instance, argues that the work of affect theory is to construe "states of being," rather than socially determined perspectives on the subject. "All of our affective experiences to date that are remembered", she claims, constitute us in "the moment of responding to a new situation" (552). In other words, according to this view, the body "registers" experiences and stimuli which create individual subjectivity as we understand it. Thus, the body operates outside of social or humanistic explanation. The sensory body carries a primacy that questions and complicates notions of an autonomous self beyond processes of embodiment. Or, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty famously put it in his final lecture, it is the body itself, *le corps propre*, that makes consciousness corporeal. He wrote: "Insofar as I have hands, feet, a body, I sustain around me intentions which are not dependent on my decisions and which affect my surroundings in a way that I do not choose" (511).

What of the suffering body? Suffering has often been spoken about by affect theorists, though usually in its more dark and somber forms. Sara Ahmed, for example, has done much to highlight the affective dimensions and political economies of pain, suffering, and victimhood: "It is significant that the word 'passion' and the word 'passive' share the same root in the Latin word for 'suffering' (*passio*). To be passive is to be enacted upon, as a negation that is already felt as suffering. The fear of passivity is tied to the fear of emotionality, in which weakness is defined in terms of a tendency to be shaped by others. Softness is narrated as a proneness to injury" (3).

In assessing cruel laughter and suffering jokers, it is clear that this model of passivity does not always hold. Bellow's Eugene Henderson, for example, vigorously performs and displays his suffering body, rendering his torment and distress as active and dynamic. He also makes his suffering body a subject of joking and an object of laughter. Nabokov's Albert Albinus, on the other hand, though a victim of somatic cruelty and suffering, also inflicts suffering on others, which enables the narrative's ironic tone and the reader's laughter.

Henri Bergson discusses suffering and cruelty in connection to what he calls the "elasticity" of laughter, that is to say the temporary but profound change of the self through laughter. According to the critic John Bruns, laughter should be understood as a particular affect that foregrounds the unexpected, and by confounding our expectations, unsettles us into becoming someone other than who we are (Bruns 5-8; Hemmings 549). "What is so comical," asks Bruns, "about cruelty?" Bergson's essay on "Laughter" would answer this question with a single word: "elasticity." Bergson configures laughter as a movement, rather than a state or condition. It contains no "epistemological essence," and does not correspond to the subjectivity of the person who laughs. In order for us to laugh at cruelty and suffering, we ourselves do not need to change, because laughter itself is the very element of change (66).

Laughter, for Bergson, is indeed a troubling agent for change. He argues that the cost of this transformation is to silence and suffocate emotion. There is, he posits, "an absence of feeling which usually accompanies laughter" (130):

It seems as though the comic would not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion. I do not mean that we could not laugh at a person who inspires us with pity, for instance, or even with affection, but in such a case we must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity. (63)

This is particularly true of the depiction of suffering in Nabokov's cruel comedies, where it is the very absoluteness of the protagonist's affliction that engenders our mirth. The disproportionate, comedic proportions of Albinus's suffering actually precludes or "silences" other, more appropriately "emotional" responses. Such is the "disturbing effect" of laughter's "elasticity."

Moreover, in the previously cited quotation from *Herzog*, we noted Bellow's depiction of suffering as a transformative state, moving us from "dream" to "true wakefulness" (317), from "imagination" to fact (317). Here we can see parallels with Bergson's depictions of humor as a property of change. In *Henderson the Rain King*, the protagonist clearly follows Herzog's type, as the "person of powerful imagination, given to dreaming deeply and to raising up marvelous and self-sufficient fictions" (317), where the power of that imagination is perpetually undercut by harsh physical reality—the "cut" into the "bliss," the pinch to feel awake. This is where humor is derived from in much of Bellow's fiction: that simple movement from the metaphysical to the physical, or from bliss to pain. Suffering, in other words, becomes Bergsonian laughter in his novels.

As will be argued below, the transformation affected by cruel laughter takes many forms. Though in both *Laughter in the Dark* and *Henderson the Rain King*, humor is written through the excessive suffering of the two protagonists, the effects of such laughter are divergent. There is an unavoidable difference between Bellow's and Nabokov's cruel comedies. Allen Guttman has discussed *Henderson the Rain King* as one of Bellow's novels of "unsurpassed comedies" which derive from the "gusty eloquence" of their first-person narrators. Forced to choose between complaint and comedy, Guttman argues, these protagonists choose comedy. In Nabokov, this element of choice is absent. While in Bellow, the characters are joking about their own suffering and invite the readers to laugh along, in Nabokov, it is the narrator and the reader who are complicit in "laughter in the dark." Thus, though in both writers suffering has the capacity to be transformed into Bergsonian laughter, the effect is more "disturbing" in Nabokov, to continue the trail of Bergson's thought, because the impulse to laugh comes not from the "suffering body" itself, but from the observer (the narrator and the reader).

The "suffering joker" is an often-cited, though somewhat ill-defined, concept in Bellow's fiction. The phrase, of course, was initially used by Bellow in *Herzog* (1963), in a curious scene in which Moses Herzog, the brilliant academic, whose intellectual constructs prove to be comically outsized and inapplicable when compared to the everyday, "human" crises that engulf him—the end of his marriage to Madeleine, her adultery with a family friend. The novel represents Herzog's hopelessly comic attempts to intellectualize the unravelling of this marriage. As he recalls the moment his wife informed him of her decision to leave, he is plunged into a purely physical reality. The conversation had taken place at their home in the Berkshires, where Moses had been working in its wild, overgrown garden. Recalling the scene, he finds his sense of an autonomous self dissolving. He watches himself: "In his posture of collapse on the sofa, arms abandoned over his head and legs stretched away, lying with no more style than a chimpanzee, his eyes with greater than normal radiance watched his own work in the garden with detachment, as if he were looking through the front end of a telescope at a tiny clear image. *That suffering joker*" (14). Bellow's construct here is full of affect; while the thinking subject suffers "abandonment" and "detachment," the physical detail evokes "clarity" and "radiance." The image is animate—sensual, physical, "animal" -- and the self is given over to the production of this sensual incarnation.

The figure of the suffering joker, however, certainly preceded Herzog. Defined simply by Sanford Pinsker as "eggheads with lives 'in great disorder'" (223), Bellow's suffering jokers appear as protagonists in most of his great novels: Moses Herzog, Eugene Henderson, and Charlie Citrine in *Humboldt's Gift*, among others, have all been delineated through this comedy of cruelty. It is a mode described by Malcolm Bradbury as a delicate balance between "seriousness" and "absurdity":

The resulting perception is indeed comedy in its seriousness: which is an observation of disparity, an awareness that we are, indeed, '*suffering jokers*', vital but absurd, and of a secret freedom, lying in our gift to know. History, environment, concept and the reality-instructors tell us much, and much of it makes us despair; but against that there is a self-presence, vivid and curious, and of it Bellow is surely one of the great modern metaphysical comedians. (104)

This notion of "metaphysical" comedy has become relatively pervasive in criticism on Bellow. The physical in Bellow is always entwined with personal identity, thought, and meaning. James Wood describes Bellow's suffering joker figures as comic strivers, "embodied souls": "Their bodies are their confessions, their moral camouflage faulty and peeling: they have the bodies they deserve" (194). Everything in Bellow's fictive universe is, to a profound degree, embodied.

Here, we should pause to acknowledge that reading Bellow affectively, of course, may seem to be counterintuitive. Frequently cited as a writer of humanistic, even moralistic, thought, Bellow has been read as distinctively out of step with any "affective turn" in literary theory. Paul Giles has pointed to Bellow's reduced prestige in a posthumanist age, dismissing him as a writer of "curmudgeonly liberal humanism" (qtd. in Pushkarevskaya Naughton and Naughton 122). His art is frequently seen as primarily

examining the psychological suffering of individuals within an oppressive socio-historical setting (Pushkarevskaya Naughton and Naughton 122). Such struggles, so it would seem, reinforce our humanistic ideas of self and individuality, agency and choice. What we propose to do in this article, however, is to draw focus away from self-contained and enclosed selves, instead focusing more on Bellow's representations of the body and its affects. Eugene Henderson's very form is monstrous, considering his ill-health, bodily scars, and the damage that life has done to him. It is also a powerful emblem of his capacity for further suffering—a giant mound of flesh awaiting further punishment.

In "The Animal Ridens: Laughter as Metaphor in Modern American Literature," Del Kehl discusses Bellow's "animal ridens ... the laughing creature, forever rising up" (Bellow, *The Adventures* 587) as a primal laugh, which represents both mockery of a decadent world and a means of navigating that world's absurdities. Del Kehl actually finds Bellow's view of animal ridens consistent with contemporary comedic novels (including Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark*), which serve the reader, in John Updike's memorable phrase, "poisonous laughter distill[ing] all the cruelty and blasphemy in the world" (qtd. in Don Nilsen 76).

In order to be able to join in such "poisonous laughter, Bellow's and Nabokov's readers need a screen from cruelty. In Bellow, the characters themselves render their suffering funny, which helps us to see it as funny, too. In Nabokov, it is the ambiguous, ironic narrator who, in part, shields us from cruelty. In *Laughter in the Dark*, Albinus suffers greatly when he is blinded, but he is not aware of the cruelty inflicted upon him. Because he is blind, he does not see Rex, Margot's rogue lover, boldly installed in the same house as he, though he does suspect that there may be someone else living in the house. When Margot pretends to pity Albinus, she makes faces and mimics him to amuse Rex. Eventually, Paul, Albinus's brother-in-law, comes to rescue Albinus after his ex-wife, Elizabeth, discovers that his cheques are forged. The utter cruelty of the scene witnessed by Paul upon arrival to the little chalet in Switzerland is striking: "stark naked" Rex slapping Albinus's knees and tickling his face with a grass stem (186), making his victim produce "helpless movement" here and there (187). "This was good fun indeed," the narrator comments ironically (187). Although the reader does find Rex, by all accounts, repugnant, the cruelty with which he treats Albinus in the final section of the novel is part of the narrative's dark humor. It is as if the "disturbing" laughter, described by Bergson, suspends our capacity to feel for Nabokov's long-suffering protagonist. This is facilitated, to some extent, by Albinus's own lack of compassion (for his wife and daughter, whom he deserted abruptly earlier in the novel), by his incapacity to grieve the death of his child, and his complete—somewhat comical and somewhat unsettling—surrender to the eroticism of his relationship with Margot. Did Nabokov intend to make a moral point out of Albinus's midlife crisis and its ensuing suffering, or does the cruelty of his narrative only serve to make us laugh?

Nabokov famously began *Laughter in the Dark* with a synopsis: "Once upon a time there lived in Berlin, Germany, a man called Albinus. He was rich, respectable, happy; one day he abandoned his wife for the sake of a youthful mistress; he loved; was not loved; and his life ended in disaster" (1). The narrator continues by questioning the value of telling the story, but states that there is "profit and pleasure in the telling" and that "detail is always welcome" (1). Considering the extent of his character's suffering in the novel and the gusto with which his suffering is described, there is certainly an element of pleasure in the way Nabokov writes such cruelty. The resulting narrative is funny in a dark, mischievous, and grotesque kind of way.

Several critics and writers have pointed out Nabokov's propensity towards cruelty. Leland de la Durantaye, in particular, argues that there is a "pattern of cruelty" in Nabokov's fiction. He cites, among others, Richard Rorty, who in his essay on Nabokov, contends that the "central topic" of Nabokov's books is "cruelty," Martin Amis, who described Nabokov as the "laureate of cruelty," and Italo Calvino, who while crediting Nabokov "with having, 'invented an English of extraordinary richness'" also claimed that as a writer Nabokov "possessed 'an extraordinary cynicism and a formidable cruelty'" (qtd. in De la Durantaye 301-302). De la Durantaye argues that not only "Nabokov's characters are cruel to other characters" but "Nabokov is also cruel to them," in his excessive control over the characters and in the way "the unjust" are not "punished" in his novels (303). It is somewhat perplexing that a writer as complex and ironic as Nabokov would be expected to operate in a Manichean fictional universe, where 'good' characters are rewarded and 'evil' characters are punished. Rather than exploring "patterns of cruelty," Nabokov frequently presents us with patterns of mutual exploitation and explores suffering as an inevitable affect. He does this with the level of ironic detachment that is consistent with all of his work—if Beckett once claimed that "nothing is as funny as unhappiness," then Nabokov may have similarly claimed that suffering is actually funny—but the ultimate choice of how to handle cruelty lies with the reader. Julian Connolly provides an unequivocal appraisal of Nabokov's intentions in *Laughter in the Dark*: "The portrait of Axel Rex painted by Nabokov in *Laughter in the Dark* is pretty clear:

Nabokov's readers are meant to evaluate him negatively, and not to find his tricks hilarious, especially the ones he directs at Albinus after the man has lost his sight" (3). It seems that the relationship between the author, narrator, and reader is far more complex. Otherwise, why would Nabokov include such a level of detail in describing suffering and cruelty? Rex finds torturing Albinus amusing, and his amusement is connected to his art. Rex is a caricaturist and caricatures are produced specifically to evoke laughter. Nabokov has Rex muse about this in the novel:

A great painter one day, high up on the scaffold, began moving backward to view better his finished fresco. The next receding step would have taken him over, and, as a warning cry might be fatal, his apprentice had the presence of mind to sling the contents of a pail at the masterpiece. Very funny! But how much funnier still, had the rapt master been left to walk back into nothing— with, incidentally, the spectators expecting the pail. The art of caricature, as Rex understood it, was thus based (apart from its synthetic, fooled-again nature) on the contrast between cruelty on one side and credulity on the other. And if, in real life, Rex looked on without stirring a finger while a blind beggar, his stick tapping happily, was about to sit down on a freshly painted bench, he was only deriving inspiration for his next little picture. (92)

If it is possible for people to laugh at suffering as depicted in caricatures, might it also be possible to laugh at suffering inflicted by a caricaturist or, indeed, to laugh at the helplessness of suffering?

Perhaps the response elicited by the narrative is one of suppressed laughter. Laughter is an affect coming from the reader, just as irony lies with the narrator. If our first impulse, or affect, is to laugh, the second reaction is to evaluate our own capacity to laugh at human suffering. An influential study by Ellen Pifer, *Nabokov and the Novel* (1980), explored the ability of Nabokov's fiction to make the reader decide "how far we go about the act of reading, often centred on the issue of our resistance to his variously seductive, brilliant and cruel narrators" (Norman and White 9). "Beyond this," Norman and White note, the "debate over the intersection of Nabokov's ethics and aesthetics has been far from settled, and seems unlikely to become so" (9). Although it is undeniable that "Nabokov's fiction is inextricably concerned with questions of cruelty, responsibility, tyranny, freedom and, above all, suffering" (9), these issues are in many ways affects produced by the reader. Like Bellow's characters, Nabokov's readers learn to be affected and explore the limits of their affects. Thus, if Nabokov's novel is darkly funny, to what extent is it appropriate to laugh at cruelty and suffering in *Laughter in the Dark*?

Nabokov's narrative does not, of course, give the answer to this question, or any other question, and retreats into aestheticism (hence the final framing of dying Albinus as a film shot). The ethics of watching cruelty and suffering resides with the reader, as does laughter. Connolly summarizes the effects of narrative cruelty in Nabokov:

Ultimately, I think that there is a clear ethical dimension to Nabokov's use of humor in these novels. When one reads (and laughs at) the words of Nabokov's two narrators, one realizes that one needs to consider those narrators' agendas and attitudes toward the figures and situations they describe. One is not an ethically "bad" reader if one finds humor in Humbert's or *Pnin's* narrator's jokes, but one might be and ethically and aesthetically bad reader if one does not recognize the poison in the pen. "Go ahead and laugh," Nabokov seems to be saying, "but think about what you are laughing at, and why you are laughing." (10)

In other words, laughing at suffering and cruelty ethically demands a certain level of self-awareness and self-reflection, but is not unethical per se.

The ethics of suffering and cruelty in Nabokov's little novel is generally quite muddled. Margot, Albinus's mistress, and her illicit lover, Rex, are cruel towards Albinus, but Albinus is also cruel towards his wife and even his seven-year-old daughter. Indeed, by the time Albinus begins to suffer in the novel, which is the point at which he becomes blind, we expect him to suffer, both because of his blindness to the suffering of others and because of his blindness to the foolishness of his situation (a middle-aged man stereotypically exploited by a young, vulgar mistress). As the novella spins its dark tale, Albinus himself also exhibits a particular type of cruelty towards himself—what Lauren Berlant terms "cruel optimism" —whereby his relationship with his mistress, Margot, becomes an unhealthy and destructive obsession. "Death often is the point of life's joke" (117), says Rex in *Laughter in the Dark*. Death for his victim Albinus, who ends up cuckolded, blinded and abused by his mistress and her lover, is also relief. The cruelty of the narrative in this case is also, in some ways, the cruelty of the reader, who anticipates Albinus's death.

The reader, of course, knows that Albinus is going to die, because the narrator says so in the very first sentence of the novel. But there is something else, in the way we feel about Albinus, and this is

where Bellow's and Nabokov's visions of suffering and laughter begin to become enmeshed. There is something lacking in Nabokov's protagonist—indeed, there is something monstrous about the way in which he handles his grief over the death of his daughter, Irma, and returns back to his young mistress, Margot. His grief is obscured by the eroticism of his relationship with Margot, so that as he returns to Irma's nursery: "instead of thinking of his child he saw another figure, a graceful, lively, wanton girl" (118). He seems to lack the capacity to suffer deeply on behalf of others. Indeed, it may well be apt here to recall Bellow's description in *Herzog* of "people of powerful imagination, given to dreaming deeply and to raising up marvelous and self-sufficient fictions" who, in some sense, *need* to suffer in order to experience reality (317). If pain, in Bellow's fictive universe can represent "true wakefulness and an antidote to illusion" (*Herzog* 317), we may be tempted to say that *Laughter in the Dark* is suggestive of similar illuminations. Having elided suffering at his daughter's death, Albinus is initiated into reality through his own pain. Thus, it is only later, when Albinus is blinded in a car crash that we witness his suffering: "those paroxysms of deadly horror, when he had howled, flung himself about ... with the panic of one who wakes to find himself in the grave" (165). Stripped of his ability to see, Albinus is cruelly deceived and tortured by Margot and her lover Rex. What comes after, when Albinus tries to kill Margot in revenge but dies himself, is a strange relief, even "bliss": "So that's all," he thought quite softly, as if he were lying in bed. "I must keep quiet for a little space and then walk very slowly along that bright sand of pain, toward that blue, blue wave. What bliss there is in blueness. I never knew how blue blueness could be. What a mess life has been. Now I know everything. Coming, coming, coming to drown me. There it is. How it hurts. I can't breathe ..." (197). Albinus's "Now I know everything" reads as ironic. The transformations that such suffering can potentially enact in a writer like Bellow seem to fall flat. Suffering returns Albinus to somatic reality, but the profundity of his knowledge goes no further than "how it hurts." At this final point of the narrative, the reader is also strangely relieved at Albinus's death (for living blind was undoubtedly torture to him) and strangely amused to see the end of the narrative framed in cinematic terms, like the "last silent scene," with "stage directions" provided (196). Albinus's suffering at the end of the novel thus is aestheticized and performed. The reader feels little of Albinus's somatic pain, and, arguably, little emotion other than "laughter in the dark."

Contrasting with Nabokov's retreat from physical pain to something abstract or aesthetic, the eponymous hero of *Henderson the Rain King* suffers as an initiation into a somatic, visceral, even medical reality. Indeed, much of the novel is taken up with the medical complaints of Bellow's suffering protagonist. Bad teeth, war injuries, and other ailments plague Eugene Henderson's body to a comical degree. At the beginning of the novel, he provides a description of his physical state which serves as a sort of affective biography: "When I think of my condition at the age of fifty-five when I bought the ticket, all is grief. The facts begin to crowd me and soon I get a pressure in the chest. A disorderly rush begins -- my parents, my wives, my girls, my children, my farm, my animals, my habits, my money, my music lessons, my drunkenness, my prejudices, my brutality, my teeth, my face, my soul!" (1). Henderson aspires to become a doctor himself, and alludes to much reading of medical literature, yet many of his complaints appear to be beyond his understanding. "What I have defies classification" he tells the African king, Dahfu, himself also a trained medical doctor as well as being a kind of spiritual mentor to Henderson. To Dahfu, Henderson's suffering (and the toll that this suffering has taken on his body) "illustrates volumes" (209). "To me you are a treasure of illustrations," he tells Henderson. "I do not condemn your looks. Only I see the world in your constitution" (210). What we find here is a uniquely Bellowian framing of a physical reality that is deeply "illustrative." Later in the text, Henderson learns, through Dahfu, of a condition called "Obersteiner's allochiria," a rare syndrome in which the brain transposes sensations from the left and right sides of the body to the opposite sides (237). It is a phenomenon that fascinates Dahfu, because of the way it questions our understanding of the interaction between mind and body. Writing in *The New York Review of Books*, Adam Kirsch has pointed to the prominence of this obscure medical detail at the heart of Bellow's text:

As good scientific rationalists, we have learned that the mind is the product of the body; where earlier generations spoke of the soul or spirit, we speak only of epiphenomena of the brain. In allochiria, however, we can glimpse for a moment the complementary truth that the body—the way we perceive and live in the body—is also a product of the mind. And if the mind is powerful enough to turn left to right and right to left, could it also be able to shape the body's growth and form?

Dahfu lectures Henderson on this idea obsessively: "The spirit of the person in a sense is the author of his body," he tells him (229). In other words, the body itself is an epiphenomenon, and in reading the



body, we are forced to consider its affective dimensions. Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth indicate, by way of Bruno Latour, how "the body becomes less about its nature as bounded substance or eternal essence than the body 'as an interface that becomes more and more describable when it learns to be affected by many more elements'" (11). "Learning to be affected," in the case of Henderson, and many other Bellowian protagonists indicates exposure to intensities—to extreme emotions and crises, to excesses of physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering. In Bellow, bodies themselves are affected—formed and twisted into shapes by medical or physical processes that are in turn the very stuff of what makes us human.

Eugene Henderson, the exaggerated sufferer, is himself Bellow's best illustration of this concept. Learning that his physical appearance is perhaps all there is to him, he is disconsolate. "Why, King. . . that's the worst news I ever heard," he responds (229). Throughout the novel, his own physical grotesqueness has been at the heart of Henderson's most intensely humorous descriptions. Affliction for him is described as "an occupation" (23). "America is so big, he reflects, and everybody is working, making, digging, bulldozing, trucking, loading, and so on, and I guess the sufferers suffer at the same rate" (23). His appearance is resultantly bizarre, combining "strength and size with grotesque ferocity" (Kirsch): "I was huge but helpless, formidable in looks, but of one piece like a totem pole, or a kind of Galapagos turtle" (61).

Critics have attempted to position the process described by Dahfu as something like Emersonian transcendentalism (Helge Nilsen 327-9), but what should be noted in Bellow's vision is not, as is often supposed, how physical detail can reflect a more profound, deeper, "spiritual" truth (see, for example, Wood 137), but rather how physical and psychic realities are both, at various times, processes of affect -- processes that are beyond the control of any organizing human consciousness, or of any human capacity for choice. Man "himself is his principal work of art," Dahfu tells Henderson in one of his many lectures on the subject (228). It is the kind of statement that would appear to privilege "mind" over "body." But as he continues, we realize that what he is describing is an affective non-sequential chain in which body and mind commingle chaotically. It is, according to him, "the flesh influencing the mind, the mind influencing the flesh, back again to the mind, back once more to the flesh" (227). Thus, a reciprocal relationship is outlined, in which the body indexes a "state of being," and processes of embodiment are inextricable from subjectivity.

This creates a natural dispute with Cartesian divisions of body and mind. Saul Bellow was, of course, aware of the human tendency to experience thought as disembodied. Eugene Henderson, indeed, continuously perceives a gap between idea and action: "I often want to say things and they stay in my mind. Therefore they don't actually exist; you can't take credit for them if they never emerge" (168). If anything, Bellow's protagonist feels some sort of antagonism between body and mind: "That's how it is with my ideas. . . They seem to get strong while I weaken" (90). Dahfu, however, instructs him against such Cartesian divides. Ellen Pifer (1991), among others, has noted this aspect of the novel. Dahfu teaches his friend on the "connection between insides and outsides, especially as applied to human beings" (Bellow, *Henderson* 227). "[S]peaking somatically" (209), Dahfu illustrates the "utterly dynamic" (227) non-Cartesian union of body and mind—"the body, working in the flesh. What miracle! What triumph! Also, what a disaster! What tears are to be shed!" (228).

Though Henderson resists, he is ultimately forced to come face-to-face with his own embodiment, through his encounter with the lion Atti, which represents to him a fundamental and "unavoidable" (251) totem of embodied reality. Dahfu compels his friend to confront death "somatically" rather than abstractly, and this, gradually creates a sense of the body's inextricable primacy. He is encouraged to physically imitate and emulate the animal, finally abandoning himself to wild roaring. "And so I was the beast," he declares. "I gave myself to it, and all my sorrow came out in the roaring (258). Thus, the novel ultimately elides any distinctions between mind and body, soul and body, or human and animal, and it is through Henderson's acute suffering that we become aware of a complex process of the interactions between the self and the world in relation to its surroundings.

This is the transformation of perception that Deleuze and Guattari theorize in terms of jumping from the "plane of organization" to one of immanence, and it might equally happen through attending to rather than evacuating the body as affect, as "the variation that occurs when bodies collide or come into contact" (Colman 11). The bodies contain their fate as "immanence," and the relationships between the bodies 'colliding or coming into contact' are also 'immanent'. Like in Bellow's *Henderson*, characters in Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark* are defined through their bodies, and the physical detail encapsulates the fate of the unfortunate trio. Albinus, for example, is described as "good-looking, in a quiet well-bred way," with a "pleasant smile" and "mild blue eyes which bulged a little when he was thinking hard"; he also has a "slight hesitation in his speech, the best part of a stammer" (6). He is tormented by his

unfulfilled erotic desire and a longing for beauty. Margot is described as having a "slight figure," with a "swiftness of ...dispassionate movements," "limpid" eyes, and a "pale, sulky, painfully beautiful face" (10). It physically hurts Albinus to look at her and so he is forced to turn away from her when he first meets her (10). Rex is "tall", "slim", with "square shoulders" moving "splendidly" as he walks—his virile masculinity is in direct opposition to Albinus's "mildness." Rex's "full red lips" (186), bountiful body hair, such as the "black hair in the shape of a spread eagle" on his chest (20), and his tanned skin are referenced frequently, giving the reader a sense of not only the physicality of his presence, but also a sense of menace emanating from him.

All of the action and drama in the novel is produced by these three bodies "colliding and coming into contact," as Deleuze and Guattari would have it: Margot is predictably smitten and enslaved by Rex, Albinus is imprisoned in his longing for Margot, Rex controls and exploits both—"Rex," a "dominant gene," as his name suggests, winning over "Albinus's recessive gene." The nature of human relationships in *Laughter in the Dark* is thus presented to us in stark bodily and biological terms. Like Bellow, Nabokov also points to the connections between the inside and outside, the body and the mind, biological destiny and metaphysical fate. When Bellow once complained that Nabokov spent much of his time "pinning roses to simian bosoms" (2010), pointing out, perhaps justifiably, the distinctly animalistic nature of the lover figure in Nabokov, he also involuntarily acknowledged the intimate connections between Nabokov's fictional world and his own—processes of embodiment, of bodies coming into contact, and somatically driven plots. The defining qualities of the body are signaled early: Albinus's bulging eyes, for example, signal his weakness as a thinking being in the face of the purely physical (though also thinking, in a predatory kind of way) bodies of Margot and Rex. References to blindness, in the metaphorical sense, abound in the novel and serve as a premonition of Albinus's physical deterioration: there are over thirty references to blindness, in one form or another, in this short novel. The postman concludes "thoughtfully" that "love is blind" in his gossipy chat with the hall-porter about Albinus and Margot (122). Albinus describes himself as "blind" upon confronting Margot about her affair with Rex (152). His physical blindness is self-inflicted, as if the body fulfills the prophecy of the mind: he speeds down a sharp bend in a car, becoming physically blind in the ensuing accident. Entrapped in his blind body, given to the complete control of the predatory Margot and Rex, he is doomed to suffer and to die cruelly. Nabokov uses blindness, perhaps the most severe limitation of the body, as a way of showing his character's entrapment in his body, which enables the novel's focus on somatic suffering. It is this inevitability, as well as Albinus's previous indifference to the others' suffering, which makes the rest of the story possible to laugh at. The cruelty of the reader who laughs at his suffering and even death is akin to the complicity of spectators watching pain on the screen, ultimately revealing that laughter is integral to how humans deal with suffering. Nabokov's tale is thus an appeal to the very perversity of human nature, where serious, rational thought, which would prohibit laughing at suffering, can be suspended in order to laugh at suffering.

Both Nabokov and Bellow explore suffering through somatic cruelty and the ensuing unsettling laughter, with a crucial difference. In Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*, it is the protagonist himself who jokes about his suffering body. In Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark*, it is the ironic narrator who simultaneously invites the reader to "laugh in the dark" and to check such laughter. What emerges in both novels is an illustration of what Henri Bergson terms the "plasticity of laughter" and the emergence of laughter as an unsettling readerly affect. Laughing about suffering thus may well become suffering after laughing, as the reader is forced to explore the emotional and ethical implications of such cruel laughter.

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#### Authors Profiles:

Gerald David Naughton received his PhD in American Literature from University College Dublin (UCD), Ireland. He is an Associate Member of the Humanities Institute of Ireland, UCD, and he currently works as an Assistant Professor of American Literature at Gulf University for Science & Technology (GUST), Kuwait. His work to date has focused on transnational and comparative perspectives on American Literature.

. Email: <[naughton.g@gust.edu.kw](mailto:naughton.g@gust.edu.kw)>

Yulia Pushkarevskaya Naughton received her PhD in English Literature from University College Dublin (UCD), Ireland. She has published on contemporary Irish Literature, Comparative Literature, and cross-cultural pedagogy. Her research is informed by continental philosophy (Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault), Mikhail Bakhtin's theory, and Kristevian/Lacanian/Žižekian psychoanalysis. She is an Associate Member of the Humanities Institute of Ireland, UCD, and she currently works as an Assistant Professor. Email: <[naughton.y@gust.edu.kw](mailto:naughton.y@gust.edu.kw)>