The Cybernetics of Nabokov's "Beneficence"

Ben Peters
Columbia University

While cybernetics as a solidified scientific discipline did not emerge until the late 1940s, Vladimir Nabokov's early short story "Beneficence" can be read as one of its many rich artistic precursors. Originally published in Russian as "Благость" in 1924 Berlin, Nabokov's story presages the social issues of the twentieth-century European interbellum, a period that can be considered the historical culmination of the pre-cybernetics world. In this paper I intend to examine the themes of disembodiment and urban control developed by Nabokov in this short story. Starting with a historical backdrop of texts, ideas, and authors that resonate with these themes, I will offer a close reading of "Beneficence," looking at the way it responds with prescience to the same Foucauldian ideas of body, mind, and identity that would later emerge embodied in the formal discipline of cybernetics.

Cybernetics, simply put, is the study of information communication and control. Bearing a name coined by Norbert Wiener in 1947 from the Greek word for "steersman" (*κυβερνήτης*, related to our term *governor*), the field of cybernetics was envisioned as a way to "universal information homeostasis," or world peace. The internal logic of this science of peace depends on uniting important terms—like *information*, *signal* and *noise* from communication engineering, *feedback* and *control* from control engineering, *reflex* and *homeostasis* from physiology, *purpose* and *behavior* from psychology, *entropy* and *order* from thermodynamics, *teleology* from philosophy, and *extrapolation* from mathematics—into a full-service discipline combining human, machine, and natural behavior. Of all these terms, Wiener identifies *feedback* as the lifeblood of cybernetics. In his words, feedback is "a method of controlling a system by reinserting into it the results of its past performance." He continues, "if…the information which proceeds backward from the performance is able to change the general method and pattern of performance, we have a process which may well be called learning." This concept of feedback

gave way to the frightful merger of human and machine, of a learning cyborg, of intelligence and artificiality.

Historically, cybernetics—as a way of combining information, intelligence, and identity—would speed the closed culture of the Cold War, the blurring of intelligence with artificiality (hence, AI), and the post-modern preoccupation with disembodiment. Despite the pacifist tendencies of its early key thinkers like Wiener, cybernetics transmogrified into a state-driven agent of destruction, an architect of war technology. Early applications included anti-aircraft machine guns that would predict the flight of an enemy airplane and computers that calculated missile trajectories. Later applications developed into massive satellite surveillance projects and even generated Reagan's Star Wars project.

Although cybernetics was not popularized until after the Second World War, Europe in particular had already been developing a utopian information project much earlier. The idea of a well-ordered society can be traced back millennia, as can fertile legends of the horrific breaking down of social ordering mechanisms. As Marc Raeff develops in *The Well-Ordered Police State*, the early modern German territories saw a unification of material and moral progress.[1] In this sense the same controlling spirit of Prince Klemens Metternich's German police state could become incarnate in the metal and mechanical possibilities of cybernetics. Other early visionaries of social ordering by technology at the expense of nature can be found in the French founder of socialism Claude Henri de Rouvroy, Comte de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), who wanted industrial chiefs with an eye for utility and labor maximization to run society and who also envisioned the Panama canal project, an artificial bifurcation of land for the opening of a progressive maritime pathway. Other actors standing on a European intersection of society and science worthy of note could include, among others, John Locke and his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690, which takes up the theme of body-switching touched upon in the coffee scene of Nabokov's "Be-

[1] See Marc Raeff's excellent *The Well-Ordered Police State: Social and Institutional Change Through Law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600-1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP) for a fascinating read on the intellectual and institutional evolution of a controlled social structure that set the stage for World War I and Nabokov's reading of a sterile urban Berlin.

neficence"; André-Marie Ampère (1775-1836), whose discovery of electromagnetism roughly corresponds with that of Franz Mesmer's (1734-1815) treatment of patients with animal magnetism and early hypnosis; and Charles Babbage (1791-1871), whose philosophical and applied work on the programmable computer, analytic engine, and cryptology places him well in the tradition of cipher- and pre-cyber-visionaries. In short, this disjointed and sprawling list points to a much richer historical legacy of the slowly emerging European information project that, much like its inheritor the cybernetic tradition, would be utopian in its origins and critical in its ends. Thus, the tradition and the concern with body-machine blurring had already been well underway as Nabokov wrote his "Beneficence" in 1924 Berlin.

The 1920s, it seems, made much headway in artistically expressing the preoccupation with urban disembodiment, mass labor, and social engineering. Before Nabokov's short story, Yevgeny Zamyatin published perhaps the original dystopic science fiction satire, *We* ("*My*," 1920), criticizing rationalized labor and a mass scale communist censorship of ideas. This bleak world of transparent habitat and violated individual free will may have easily, if indirectly, informed and flavored Nabokov's short story. Also published in 1920 is the Czech playwrite Karel Capek's *R.U.R.* (*Rossum's Universal Robots*), a dark science fiction play that first popularized the word *robot* from the Czech "robota" for *forced labor*. Quick to follow Nabokov's short story were Siegfried Karcauer's 1927 *Ornament der Masse*, a work on visualizing and filming Berlin's architecture, layout and festivities, as well as his colleague, Walter Benjamin's, powerful, if incomplete, *Arcades Project* (published posthumously in 1940). Also of note is *Conditional Reflexes*, the seminal 1927 work by the Soviet scientist Ivan Pavlov, who founded the idea of classical conditioning, later employed in Watson's behaviorism, B.F. Skinner's pragmatism, and even Soviet labor policies. Interestingly, Pavlov's original idea of conditioning—the neurological association of certain stimuli to certain behavior—was inspired by the idea of a circuit board, in which synapse-like wires connect neuron-like circuits. Although Pavlov's work was not yet published, Nabokov intuited a similar vision of circuit psychology in Berlin life. It also may be worth pointing out that leading party political figures on both American and Eurasian

continents were promoting the idea and practice of social engineering, a frightfully cybernetic idea in which an authoritarian government treats its citizenry like a mass machine: odd pairs like Lenin and John Dewey in the 1920s, or Hitler and Bertrand Russell in the 1930s and 1940s, can be associated with this apocalyptic phenomenon.

For all these thinkers, the role of labor as a mass mechanical force and the role of the city as the contained context for labor are consistently capital themes characterizing the first half of the twentieth century. This thematic current—which I will call pre-cybernetic thought here—began well before the catalyzing world wars, and it would connect the conflicting urban and organic themes of Nabokov's "Beneficence" with the emergence of cybernetics as a recognized discipline following the Second World War. Nabokov's short story, in brief, participates in a powerful, though often overlooked, current of pre-cybernetic thought that revolved around problems of individual disembodiment and urban mass labor.

Let us now turn to Nabokov's text and contemplate the sculptor-narrator sitting on a wicker chair in his studio. This nameless narrator experiences a vision in which, he writes, "roughcast clay heads gradually floated out of the murk into the dusty haze. One of them (your likeness) was wrapped in a wet rag" (74). These lines contain in capsule form the material that structures the rest of the story: moist clay heads—wrapped in wet rags, cut off from their bodies—become an emblem of the narrator's desire to feel, to sculpt, and to touch a woman in silk referred to only as "you" in the short story. Yet he awakes from his dream to find himself alone, "surrounded by rubbish and shards of plaster of Paris, amid the dust of congealed plasticine" (74). Arising from this world of fragmented body parts reminiscent of a post world war apocalyptic landscape, he recalls finding "a small funeral mound of ashes and a golden cigarette butt" (74). The desiccated airy substance of ash, in contrast to the damp earth of clay, prefigures the mythological image of the phoenix that arises in the end of the short story, when his natural life force is magically reborn.

The material contrast of cold clay and ashes grown cold—one wet and supple, the other scorched and useless—is balanced by their common temperature. Coldness, especially in relation to bodily tem-

perature, is a recurrent motif in "Beneficence." References to the "cold wind," "cold shadows," and "chilly columns" help portray the atmosphere of the narrative as bleak, contained, and controlled, which in turn mirrors the cultural sentiment of Berlin during both the interwar and postwar periods. This image of a bleak and controlled city is also oddly parallel to the idealized, aseptic vision of cybernetics.

The narrator also recalls, "you burst into tears and I, forgiving everything, embraced your knees and pressed my wet eyelashes to the warm black silk," advancing the already familiar theme of touch and wetness. For the sculptor, living touch implies the wetness of clay and of tears as well as the physical body, such as embraceable knees and warm black silk. However, this animate wet embrace of two bodies is followed immediately by his observation, "I did not see you for two weeks." And although her presence is felt ephemerally throughout the remaining text, her body—the object of the sculptor's desire and creativity—is only rediscovered later in the body of a German lady, a doppelganger of the woman in silk roaming the streets of Berlin.

As the narrator rises from his wicker chair, he sees a world torn between the precise urban geometry of Berlin and the natural, vegetative organism of life bursting out from underneath the urban architecture. He writes, "I stood the pole in the corner. The tiled roofs of Berlin were visible through the window's broad span, their outlines varying with the iridescent inner irregularities of the glass; in their midst, a distant cupola rose like a bronze watermelon. The clouds were scudding, rupturing, fleeting revealing an astonished, gossamer autumnal blue." Here, the linear organization of life, e.g. "the pole in corner" and "the tiled roofs of Berlin," is followed by the inevitable distortion of this Cartesian order: "the irregularities of the glass," a cupola as a watermelon, and rupturing clouds overhead all defy the regulated vision of Berlin architecture (75). Interestingly, both the superimposed order of German architecture (i.e. the machine) and the vibrant disorder of nature are imperfectly filtered through the glass window. The human eye is prepared to process and to order the view of the Berlin cityscape, but fails to do so precisely due to the imperfection of glass as a filtering medium. The ripples of the window ensure that the eye, capable of perceiving imperfection, plays an unintended but important part in this first description of the

outside urban world. From the story's outset, the narrator's visual experience produces a cybernetic union: the human eye merges with the machine-like cityscape, through which the presence of the city's uncontrolled natural underside still seeps.

His visual memory of the woman in silk then extends into a disappointing auditory recollection, that of a telephone conversation. He recounts, "The day before I had spoken to you…Your voice, through the beelike hum, was remote and anxious…. I spoke to you with tightly shut eyes…. My love for you was the throbbing, welling warmth of tears. That is exactly how I imagined paradise: silence and tears, and the warm silk of your knees" (75). As telephone attempts to bridge physical distance, the narrator's longing for physical touch makes it painfully clear to him that audio proxy does not mean bodily proximity. The woman in silk remains disappointingly distant and evanescent; the hum of the machine's presence is the only constant interlocutor in the telephone conversation; and the sculptor's formulation of paradise asks for the opposite of what technological progress has provided him: he desires the silence and touch of her silk, rather than exchanging voices by means of a telephone.

"I spoke to you with tightly shut eyes" raises the recurrent theme of tears as an emotional and exceptionally un-mechanical function of the eyes.[2] Eyes express strong emotion through tears, which in turn interfere with the eyes' primary function as visual receptors. In tears lies the substance that distinguishes human from machine: warm liquid and emotion. Tears, like all other liquids, are also antithetical to the cool, dry digital world. The importance of tears as a hydraulic liquid mechanism is especially relevant to a sculptor's use of clay for body shaping. For the sculptor, as for Nabokov, visual and tactile experiences come interrelated like water and clay. They both produce beauty—one in tears and clay, the other in text—for the eye to absorb silently. Similarly, the eye is the common receptacle for the creative sculpting performed by the narrator as well as the writing performed by the author.

[2] It is also certainly worth noting here that Nabokov's synesthetic condition gave preference to the visual over the other senses. The fact that the sound of a letter would produce a corresponding color, and not the other way around, signals the same preference of layering seen here: as for Nabokov's narrator, the silent vision of the woman in silk is more stimulating than a live telephone conversation with her.

As Nabokov demonstrates, the eye functions as even more than a hydraulic mechanism because it is eminently and imperfectly organic and, therefore, human. In contradistinction to the input-only function of a camera, the eye is able to cry, blink, wink, express emotion and direction, dream or develop cataracts. As a vital sensory organ, the eye serves both as a visual input and as an output of emotion and tears. Yet, because tears distort and impede vision, the eye also becomes a site of a self-contradiction: when emotion overwhelms us, the underwater vision that results from tears signals our distinction from a digital machine. The body cannot be a perfect machine, for its emotions betray its function. The conflict between the disembodying cybernetic society and the human sculptor is set into motion. Here we see how the linear, rational, disembodied features of Nabokov's Berlin architecture are mapped onto the linear, rational, and disembodied physiology of the cybernetic organism. For Nabokov, the city and the body, the eye and the window contain the splendidly pre-cybernetic tensions of natural bodies artificially wedded to life in a disembodied, artificial city.

As the narrator ventures out to an unlikely rendezvous with the woman in silk, his vision is filled with images in conflict with nature. "Large, rustling, russet leaves waddled as they raced along the sidewalk" evokes an image in which personified leaves at once defy (by racing) and participate in (by following) the superimposed system of cement pathways (75). A little later he describes his surroundings as imposing a sense of artificiality. He observes "the massive gates. Wide-hipped buses squeezing through the portals and rolling on down the boulevard…I waited for you under an oppressive vault, between chilly columns, near the grate of the guardhouse window." The city architecture produces a sense of artifice and awkwardness in which the restrictive, complicated, and almost digital systems of pathways, buses, gates, portals, boulevards, vaults, columns, grates, and windows distance the human observer from his artificial surroundings.

In Nabokov's description, the passersby, like the city architecture, are transformed into uncomfortable automatons. "People everywhere: Berlin clerks were leaving their offices, ill-shaven, each with a briefcase under his arm and, in his eyes, …turbid nausea…. [T]heir weary, predatory faces, their high starched collars, flashed by endlessly" (75).

The flow of passersby is drone-like, each of them homogenized into a predaceous and sterile copy of the previous one—an exact vision of the conveyor-belt industry that prefigured the cybernetic military economy of the Cold War period. The fact that the passersby are "Berlin clerks" also speaks to the purely computational or functionary role that humans have in the Nabokovian vision of urban Germany. While the women are marked with more lively color, for instance "a red straw hat," the men huddle behind collars, briefcases, and the beginning of beards (75). Facial hair, like tears, signals at once the uncontrollable humanity that emerges unwarily from underneath the automaton face, like the watermelon cupola and the rupturing clouds above the rigid Berlin cityscape.

The narrator observes the cybernetic world around him as if from an abstracted and seemingly disinterested distance. However, a closer look at him reveals that he too participates in the systematic blending of man and machine. He writes, "I waited, leaning on my cane, in the cold shadow of the corner columns." The cane, a seemingly insignificant detail, evokes the image of a third, prosthetic leg, a cyborg-like attachment made to support his decaying body artificially in a corner, where he is threatened by the surrounding architecture. Both his place, via the corner, and his posture, via the cane, speak to his placement within a world of artificial structures.

Meanwhile the narrator, caught up in his fantasy, refuses to rely on his vision, "I deliberately did not look [for the woman in silk], cherishing the self-deception" (76). He denies himself sight, the sense that precedes the sculptor's creative work, knowing that by this he only drives himself farther into his cold dark corner, where he can naively dream of his visual and tactile encounter with his object of desire, an encounter that is forbidden to him in the cybernetic world. In this world, the body is censored, suppressed, as both the subject and the object of his fantasy—the sculptor and the sculpted model in silk—are rendered incorporeal. Like a voice on the telephone, the human body exists only in the distortion of dreams and distance.

As he waits there hopelessly to find a familiar female body in silk, the narrator becomes self-conscious of his heightened sense of sight and begins to almost tactilely absorb the visual details that surround him. He soon notices an older woman across the street

selling guidebooks and maps of Berlin. In observing the woman, he feels an affinity with her immediately, for “she too was waiting.” The two are bound by their common hope for something that is not meant to happen. He wants to meet the woman in silk, ostensibly to renew some sort of long-term amorous relationship, just as the older woman wants (as the narrator interprets it) to sell all her goods, thereby achieving a degree of long-term economic security (76). The similarity of their desires creates an immediate and unilateral visual connection between the two.

The narrator almost unwittingly describes the older woman selling goods in cybernetics-resonant terms. In a motion that mimics the punch card technology, which predated computer processors, “the woman got up and started pushing her postcards more firmly into their slots.” Yet the narrator observes that her ways and wares occasionally produce a sense of something uncontrollable, unexpected, and undeniably human. She is full of glitches, of comic oddities that make her refreshingly un-cybernetic: “the hem of her brown skirt was hiked up higher in front than in back, which made her look as if she were thrusting out her belly when she walked.” The description continues to include her comic “round little hat” and “worn duck bootees” (76). Though a seller of wares designed to systematize Berlin into a single controlled system of information (a guidebook and a map, both of which are sorts of analog calculators of space based on artificial coordinates), she is overcome by a chaotic, personified natural element whose wind “absently turns the pages” of her guidebook. The uncontrollable details of life betray the antiseptic vision of an urban landscape undergoing a cybernetic death.

Through his observation of the old woman selling goods, the narrator eventually finds shelter from the coldness of the city surroundings and from his torturous fantasy of the woman in silk. As he becomes more aware of the older woman, he becomes less aware of himself, which signals an important element in his affinity with her: there is no feedback, no interaction between the two. Rather than watching as a detached observer, he becomes engulfed by her experience. The two are merged into a single entity, unified by his visual engagement in her actions. Vision establishes a one-way link, not a circuit. This connection—an observer who does not influence

the observed—by definition is distinctly anti-cybernetic, for the cybernetic world depends upon feedback and interaction.

Yet, ironically, the life-instilling appearance of the old woman's "round, speckled face" can be perceived only through external perspective, in this case, that of the narrator.[3] Relevant here is Bakthin's observation about the "excess of sight"—that others can see about us what we cannot see about ourselves—and its inversed application here: that the narrator seemingly reveals himself in his visual dominance over her. The fact that there is no description of what she sees severs her from the visual circuitry that cybernetics requires; feedback, the fundamental tenet of cybernetics, is forever insufficient to gain self-knowledge, since the eye can never see but a fraction of itself and in seeing others is excluded from what others see in it. His visual surplus frames their connection in completely un-cybernetic terms: the physics of his visual energy fail as he finds a sublime source of human, unscientific energy in casting his eyes upon another.

[3] Somehow her "round, speckled face" suggests a sort of circularity that avoids cybernetic linearity.

Although not a circuit, a meaningful connection forms between the narrator and the older woman in the ritual of solitude and observation, rather than in the transmission and feedback of cybernetics. (By ritual I mean an event or object that *releases* rather than *creates* meaning in the interaction with another event or object.) This ritual meaning is articulated in the description of the older woman drinking from a mug of steaming coffee with milk, given to her by a soldier in green. The narrator becomes so engaged in her enjoyment of drinking coffee that, to him, she "disappeared totally into her coffee—exactly as I forgot about my vigil and saw only [her]." The drinking of the coffee becomes a warming of body for her and transcendent warming of soul for him. He adds, "she drank for a long time, drank in slow swallows, reverently licking off the fringe of skin, heating her palms on the warm tin. And a dark, sweet warmth poured into my soul. My soul, too, was drinking and heating itself, and the brown little woman tasted of coffee with milk" (77). The experience brings to mind images associated with ritual sacrament: slow, measured swallows; reverent attention to the process of drinking; and the savoring of sweet liquid, meant to replenish and restore the body and soul.

A communion involving liquid evokes, again, the theme of wetness and warmth, a restorative brew antithetical to the dry, cold, circuit-filled cybernetic world. So great is the drinking woman's outward transformation that, for the narrator, she nearly becomes the coffee with milk, embodying its taste and color. Much like a religious ritual, the coffee experience re-embodies the narrator, allowing him to break beyond the boundaries of his cold artificial surroundings. As with Nabokov's mother in *Speak, Memory*, Olga in *Bend Sinister*, and to some degree even Lolita in *Lolita*, the woman serves as a voiceless vehicle of redemption for the male protagonist. The narrator partakes in a transcendent visual communion through (i.e. not with) the woman. Visualizing her becomes a redemptive ritual that frees him from the world of cybernetics.

Yet, at the same time, the cybernetic motif of dislocated body parts frames the ritualized coffee experience. The soldier who offers the woman the mug of coffee is reduced to a green shoulder, then simply a green sleeve with a gleaming button. The beneficent exchange—freely offered coffee for freely offered postcards—is mediated through a glass window that recalls the narrator's studio window. Two of the three motions, "thrusting" and "a series of hasty nods," also fit the cybernetic model—they are rapid, deliberate, and clear actions—while the third, her smile, evades the cybernetic framework altogether. The pattern continues throughout: "Beneficence" at once employs and denies the terms that script a pre-cybernetic world.

In fact, the older woman's smile, though subtle, contrasts with the "squeamish, unkind grimace" of the German lady who so reminded the narrator of the woman in silk. The contrast between the smiling older woman and the woman in silk is completed in the German lady that reminds him of the woman in silk. The German lady is described in terms of the same body parts—"a shrug of the shoulder" and "tugged him away by the sleeve"—as is the soldier behind the iron grille, as if somehow the soldier, the German lady, and the woman in silk all merged into the same cybernetic creature—merely a conglomerate of parts, a cyborg. In the moment when the narrator sees the German woman's grimace, he remarks, "it was then I noticed that she resembled you." Next, his epiphany, "and I realized that the joy I had sought in you was not only secreted within you, but breathed

around me everywhere," uses the verbs "secreted" and "breathed" to suggest a type of universal liquid, or ether of life, felt only by those who can see beyond the artificial world of machines.

The narrator's most quoted line, "I realized the world does not represent a struggle at all, or a predaceous sequence of chance events, but shimmering bliss, beneficent trepidation, a gift bestowed on us and unappreciated," responds directly to the cultural milieu of cybernetics (77). The world between and after the world wars was envisioned in terms of binary struggle—good versus evil, us versus them, Soviet versus American—while "predaceous sequences of chance events" was presented as the primary problem cybernetics was meant to solve. Strikingly apparent here is the terminological similarity between the cybernetic effort to control warfare and Nabokov's revelation that the world does *not* represent "a predaceous sequence of chance events."

At last, after partaking of the coffee communion with the older woman, the narrator is freed both from his vigil and his fantasy of the disembodied woman in silk. On his way home, he senses that his eyes are omnivorously swallowing a world of color, texture, and emotional detail. "I captured and collected all of it," recalling "the bobbing of a girl's pigtail" and "the heavenly melancholy reflected in a horse's purplish, oval eye." Here the horse's eyeball is seen as a carrier of emotion rather than of a technological function (visual input), speaking again to the case of the blessed beast in every human tear. Taking in "the oblique plump raindrops…and cool coziness of my studio," the narrator finds a liquid coolness that compels him to sculpt. He writes, "[I] felt in my fingers the subtle tingle of my thought starting to sculpt." The narrator, and sculptor within him, is finally embodied, and his heightened sense of sight can now again feed his creative touch with clay.

The final scene depicts the kind of dreariness that recalls the first line of a cybernetic key text, Gibson's *Neuromancer*: "the sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel." In Nabokov, it is the television's distant relative, the streetcar, that "clanged past" as "the wind greeted me turbulently at every corner." The same elements (the dark, the wind, and the rain) that drove the narrator to hide in his collar in the shadowy corner of columns now

compel him to board a passing streetcar, to "dry… [his] rain-soaked hands," and to reflect. His surroundings have not changed fundamentally: he still lives in the cold artificial world in which the triumvirate of man, machine, and nature remains unchanged. The three are once again united as the external natural world communicates to him through the metal roof of the streetcar. But in the "knock, knock" of a "round, solitary chestnut" falling across the ceiling of the streetcar lies a message rejecting the world of cybernetics. The message comes as the chaos in the falling of a chestnut whose meaning the narrator can only decode in waiting for "the repetition of those meek, lofty sounds." In the chaos of uncontrolled messages and meaning—in the utterly mundane yet sublime falling of a chestnut—grows a new order of disorder, a realm of repetitive information, of seemingly meaningless noise that no human can control or systematize (cf. cybernetics). Its call, "knock, knock," has no answer, no feedback, no appropriate reply. Like the silence and silk of his imagined paradise, a chestnut sends a signal that cannot be repeated or returned. The narrator's hope that the chestnut's stroke of disorder will be repeated distinguishes human hope from the primacy and precision of machine calculation.[4]

In summary, Nabokov's "Beneficence" precedes a critical transition in social history toward cybernetic thought in the middle of the twentieth century. The story subtly encapsulates the very sinews and secretions that distinguish humans from a largely desiccated and sterile world that would populate the global imagination in a generation. Its key moment is the subversion of the cybernetic disembodiment through the interaction of liquid, warmth, and human bodies. Coffee and tears deny victory to the oppressive and artificial architecture of Berlin. The fragmented, oppressed body reemerges with the sound of a falling chestnut.

Nabokov's prescient response to the world of cybernetics is one of subtlety and silence. He replies to the call of cybernetics by not replying and, in doing so, breaks out of the system of re-

[4] It is worth noting that the narrator's search for a repetition of randomness is, as in the Borgesian sense of the "Library of Babel," a type of secondary order. Borges' concluding lines seem unerringly appropriate here, "If an eternal traveler were to cross it in any direction, after centuries he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder (which, thus repeated, would be an order: the Order). My solitude is gladdened by this elegant hope." The same could be said of the eternal streetcar rider

sponse and feedback that cybernetics demands. Nabokov's last line, "knock, knock…," points to the human inability to respond to the message of a falling chestnut and to the futility of deriving universal meaning in a world where the repetition of random events alone suffices. The unanswered message remains the stabilizer of our sanity as well as a forceful challenge to cybernetics.[5] The irreducible beauty of silence breaks the circuit of response that was filling the pre-cybernetic world of Nabokov's time.

It has been my intent to suggest how a larger historical pre-cybernetic current of thought has preceded and informed this early short story, written during the interbellum Berlin period. The story attests to Nabokov's awareness of larger issues of disembodiment that would emerge full force after Second World War. Yet, as a little historical digging has shown, while Nabokov may be prescient, he is not prophetic. There is a rich and largely untapped body of literature surrounding the post-Renaissance European engagement with technology, state control, and social engineering that, with Nabokov's "Beneficence," prefigure the twentieth-century concerns with disembodiment, human identity, and war that have been articulated well and warily in the science of cybernetics.

Nabokov's "Beneficence" richly articulates the concerns with control, urban isolation and disembodiment. Feedback, in my mind, has been an especially useful tool for examining the Nabokovian devices of imperfect glass and teary eyes as cybernetic metaphors for the intermediation and intermingling of body and machines. Both of these images recall the mechanism of feedback: for instance, the interference of liquids (i.e. glass and tears) upon the vision of a sculptor and an author. However, the key images of ritualistic coffee drinking and of a falling chestnut feature an absence of visual feedback, as discussed earlier. The short story illustrates that, beneficently, not all meaning, information, and action can be controlled, and that much of that dividend goes unattended. Life means unmeasured surplus; cybernetics, precise accountancy. In the end, it is Nabokov's distinctly

see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder (which, thus repeated, would be an order: the Order). My solitude is gladdened by this elegant hope." The same could be said of the eternal streetcar rider listening for the repetition of a chestnut's chaos.

[5] See Nabokov's "Clouds, Castle, and Lake" for a treatment of the sensitivity to messages as the bridge from artistic salience to insanity.

un-cybernetic vision of the world as “shimmering bliss, beneficent trepidation, a gift bestowed on us and unappreciated” that begs for more grateful attention and, perhaps, less systematic analysis than the cybernetic literary analyst can provide (77).

Works Cited

Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*. New York, NY: Vintage, 1997; 74-78.

Raeff, Marc. *The Well-Ordered Police State: Social and Institutional Change Through Law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600-1800*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1983.

Wiener, Norbert. *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society, 2nd ed*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1954 [1950].