

Research Article

Ada Bronowski*

On the Fear of the Void and Killing Babies in Pascal, Nabokov, and *Game of Thrones*

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Abstract: The article places *Game of Thrones* within a tradition of pessimism, reaching back to Blaise Pascal and coloured by Nabokov's vision of birth as a separation between two voids. This lineage provides a philosophical thread to analyse the motivations and actions of the protagonists of *Game of Thrones*, in particular their relation to child-killing. The void looms large in the world of *Game of Thrones* as the uncharted space beyond the wall. It is the awareness of the reality of this void and the horrors it harbours which is shown to propel those who have it, to go to the greatest lengths to preserve the life of a child.

Keywords: *Game of Thrones*, Vladimir Nabokov, Blaise Pascal, Anthony Burgess, the void, pessimism, cosmic-realism, massacre of innocents, horror vacui, horror genre, determinism, mono-focal perspective

*Tell me, my honourable Lord Eddard, how are you any different from Robert, or me, or Jaime?
–For a start, said Ned, I do not kill children.¹*

It is Cersei Lannister, wife of King Robert, who is speaking here to Eddard Stark, familiarly known as Ned, friend and Hand (prime minister of sorts) to Cersei's husband, King Robert. The exchange occurs early on in George R. R. Martin's novel *Game of Thrones*,² at a tipping point which shall precipitate Ned's demise, and Cersei's ascent.

We would be quick to assume the line separating good from evil is clearly demarcated: between those who kill children and those who do not, as Ned spells out "the difference" Cersei defies him to name. Ned's sardonic retort, "For a start," indicates that Cersei's challenge is easily met as far as he is concerned. And like the straight-forward, sensible man that he is, he begins with simple facts, a first set of truths: Robert, Jaime, and Cersei are child-killers. Robert killed the children of Rhaegar Targaryan, the heir to the throne which Robert usurped from him; as for Jaime and Cersei, they tried to kill young Bran Stark, Ned's son. Ned, by contrast, never has and never will lay a finger on a child, let alone murder one.³ But Cersei's challenge, "how are we different?," indicates that for her, a different set of truths apply, according to which the killing of children is not even remotely a factor of discrepancy between Ned and herself. There is heavy irony in her words since she insinuates that despite Ned's so-called honour, there is no actual difference between them, because they are all playing the game of thrones.

¹ Martin, *Game of Thrones*, 45.

² This is the first volume of the unfinished series by Martin, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, whereas the TV-adaptation, based on the whole series, is called *Game of Thrones*, constituted of eight seasons, the last two based on plans and notes from Martin for the last two volumes of his book-series, yet to be published.

³ When pressed to act, shortly after this conversation with Cersei – after Cersei will have murdered her husband, king Robert – Ned will refuse even "to drag frightened children out of their beds," let alone kill them as Renly, Robert's brother, urges him to do to Cersei's children (in the show, *Game of Thrones*, s1e7, "You Win or You Die").

* **Corresponding author: Ada Bronowski**, Department of Philosophy, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal, e-mail: ada.bronowski@gmail.com

Cersei patronises Ned when she calls him “honourable,” but it is not the irony of antiphrasis, calling honourable what is not, because Ned is indeed honourable. He is honour incarnate. Cersei knows it, everyone knows it. He is so compelling a paradigm of honour that it is as an embodiment of honour, that, though dead by the end of the first season, he is never once forgotten throughout the eight seasons of the TV-series by friends and foe alike. But no one – and certainly not Cersei – suspects the true depth of that honour. We, the audience of the TV-adaptation, will not understand it ourselves until much later, during the last minutes of the finale of season six (s6e10, “The Winds of Winter”), and the protagonists will not fully understand it until season eight. Indeed, Ned Stark’s deep sense of honour has been to accept to live under a cloud of dishonour throughout his life, lying to everyone from his beloved wife to his best friend, the king, in order to stay true to the promise he makes his sister on her deathbed: to protect her son. He will raise the child as his bastard son, Jon Snow, loading on both the child and himself, infamy and social disparagement.

The irony in Cersei’s words is that honour has nothing to do with reality, which means for Cersei, survival. That survival is nothing other than power is an underlying assumption that the continuation of their exchange makes explicit when Cersei adds: “when you play the game of thrones, you either win or die.” The “when” here is not an “if” and the real name of the “game” is life. For there was never a choice, neither for Cersei nor for Ned: the game is their lives from the moment they were born into the ruling families of Westeros. Cersei therefore assumes that Ned, like herself, is a player. His own fathering of a bastard child, thereby constituting the one stain on his honour, in fact all the better highlights his otherwise impeccable reputation, and is proof, in her eyes, that, like everyone else, it is power that motivates him.

In the TV adaptation, the conversation between Cersei and Ned (occurring in s1e7, “You Win or You Die”), is shortened compared to the book, but the implications of the exchange are powerfully played out. Ned had come to the meeting believing he had the upper-hand, with a noble moral high-ground. But he realises, just as Cersei insinuates, that honour is indeed neither here nor there; that he is losing the game of survival. The bewilderment, puzzlement, and slow realisation of this fact is portrayed in the superlative performance of the actor, Sean Bean, whose facial expressions cross the gamut of emotions from resolution to perplexity, to anguish. And so, the initial question rings more alarmingly difficult than it might have seemed at first blush. What is the difference between Cersei and Ned? And what does the alternative “kill or not kill children” come down to?

1 Lucidity

This article focuses on these questions as the expression of a clash between two worldviews which fuel the dynamics of Martin’s novels and the series *Game of Thrones*. On the one hand, a circumstantial pragmatics which focuses on short-term results, one murder after the other (here epitomised by Cersei, but she is not alone), on the other, a view of the world as constituted, and structured, by each individual born into it, such that no selfish aspirations can ever prevail over understanding and accepting this grander, interconnected, scheme. The clash is thus first and foremost a confrontation between a blindness to metaphysical order and an awareness of it. The blindness leads to an ethics based on self-centred gratification, whereas awareness leads to an ethics of duty not directly to others, but rather to one’s understanding of the greater order – not to oneself nor even to one’s loved ones.⁴ This understanding is the frame in which Ned Stark evolves – he is not alone. It engages a more complex plane of deliberation than the former worldview. Thus, Cersei cannot conceive of the motivations which prevented Ned from sitting the Iron Throne himself, whereas Ned understands perfectly well Cersei’s machinations; only it would be to step away from his duty to the preservation of the natural order – his metaphysical commitments – to stoop to put an end to those machinations.

⁴ This is encapsulated by the maxim in the series finale: “Duty is the death of love” (s8e6, “The Iron Throne”), which backs Jon Snow’s actions, see more below.

For Cersei, both she and Ned are engaged in a struggle for survival in the game for the throne. Cersei has just revealed to Ned that she aborted a child she had with Robert, to keep only the children she had from her incestuous relationship with her twin brother Jaime, “to keep the bloodlines pure.” In the TV adaptation of the exchange (still in s1e7), the detail about the abortion is left out for the sake of a more raw expression of the events, as Cersei tells Ned she never gave Robert the chance to get her pregnant. The passage from book to TV rubs out a fragility in the characterisation of Cersei which is present in the book: for it is one thing to suffer intercourse with, or rape, by a hated husband (and subsequently deal with the consequences), and another to refuse him sex. The TV-adaptation empowers Cersei early on in her history with Robert, rooting her domination over him and her independence well before our story begins.⁵ Cersei, self-professedly, uses her sexuality “as a weapon”;⁶ her husband, King Robert is well aware of her war-like stratagems, as he complains about her to Ned in their first meeting (s1e1, “Winter is Coming”), with his characteristic vulgarity but significantly, using warfare vocabulary: “the way she guards her cunt, you’d think she had all the gold of Casterly Rock between her legs.” Cersei has been consolidating her plan of attack for a long time, but what the radicalisation of her character in the TV-adaptation emphasises is her empowerment over biology. The move from aborting to preventing the biological process from initialising frames an economy of liquids which collapses biology into ontology. What is at stake is the organisation of reality according to who is in it, who constitutes the world by their presence. By taking control over biological processes, Cersei believes she takes control over ontology – what there is and who there is in the world – by regimenting who stays in it and who is killed out of it, using her own kind of weaponry. The difference between Cersei and Ned – a difference Cersei questions – is that whereas for her, the birth of a child can easily be cancelled out (through murder), for Ned that murder leaves a gaping hole in the fabric of the world. Each and every being coming into the world takes up space and restructures ontology once and for all.

And so, protecting or killing a child is a battlefield in which it is not good that combats evil, morality against immorality; it is rather a battle of metaphysicians. On one side, “ideologues”⁷ who think blood – understood both in terms of bloodlines and the blood spilt in murder – can endlessly renew, repair, and reground ontological structure, by filling the emptiness created by death. On the other side, are the lucid metaphysicians, who acknowledge that once a space is created, removing what it contained does not eliminate the empty hole, the gap in the ontological structure. Every birth, every child, changes the organisation of the world forever, by setting out new coordinates that govern the ontological structure. Saving the life of a child is, from this perspective, not a question of moral principles, but a question of understanding and accepting the fundamental question of metaphysics: is there something or otherwise nothing at all? And answering that if something is taken away, there *is* a nothing in its place, therefore nothing exists. And if so, how to face it?

The ideologues, like Cersei, answer that there is always something, the gap is always filled by something: you kill a child – your own child – so that another takes its place; you kill Ned’s child, Bran Stark (which is what Cersei and Jaime tried to do upon Bran’s chance discovery of their incestuous relationship, when Jaime hurls the boy from the top of a tower) so that your system of secrets can continue to thrive and your incestuous children erase the holes you leave behind. But the lucid metaphysician sees this as a blindness to reality. The nothing left where there was something – a now dead child – the hole in the fabric of reality that a death leaves behind, exists. These gaping holes are primarily negative, identified as the absence of life, and as such introduce horror and terror as looming threats for the lucid metaphysician.

It would be tempting to bring in an analysis from contemporary philosophy here, about the existence of immaterial objects, like holes, and reflect on the inter-dependence between the material and the

⁵ This loss of ambiguity is also noted and commented on in Frankel, *Women in Game of Thrones*, 41–2.

⁶ As she teaches young Sansa, Ned’s daughter (s2e9, “Blackwater”), whom she holds hostage after Ned’s murder: “tears are not the only weapon a woman has; the best one is between your legs.”

⁷ The term is taken from Blaise Pascal’s distinction between the deniers of the existence of the void for ideological reasons and the physicists, like himself, who prove, through scientific experiment the existence of the void, Pascal, “Expériences Nouvelles Touchant le Vide,” 53–76. See more below.

immaterial, considering the gaping hole as existentially dependent on a surrounding material host.⁸ But Martin, the creator of *Game of Thrones*, gives us an interpretative key which guards us from following a route which, within the fantasy genre, runs the risk of transforming metaphysical arguments for immaterial existence into arguments for the reality of ghosts and their haunting of the living.⁹ It is not that Martin does not draw on such fantasy tropes: there is, for instance, a ghost, or so it is rumoured, in the lugubrious castle of Harrenhal in which a number of the protagonists live through harrowing experiences. But Martin makes a point of dispelling the legend of the ghost: for when young Arya Stark – Ned Stark’s youngest daughter, who, having escaped incognito the capital, King’s Landing, after her father’s execution, is left to roam the land of Westeros as a lonely, nameless destitute child – finds herself a servant at Harrenhal, she moves around the castle so nimbly and silently that she becomes the ghost of the legends, and secretly prides herself in being what people think is the ghost. There are, in short, no real ghosts in *Game of Thrones*. But there are the living the dead, the Others, and the Wights, the animated corpses which the Others have the power to create. The Others come from the land “beyond the wall,” the land of “forever winter,” the uncharted space north of the North where space and time coincide.¹⁰ These living dead come from nowhere, but a nowhere which is somewhere, indeterminate in space and time. They are liminal creatures, incarnations of what is beyond the limits: of Westeros (they are beyond the wall), of life (they are dead but animate), of matter (they are empty but extended in three dimensions), of being something (they are not nothing but they are not something either, they are “other”). In short, rather than provide us with an ontology containing existing immaterial objects (an all too easy go-to solution within fantasy), Martin gives us an ontology rich with embodiments of liminality. It is not immateriality that he is concerned with, but rather with the reality of in-betweenness.

There is a remarkable conjunction between the protagonists who have, or gain, awareness and understanding of this ontological structure, which is co-constituted by this liminal space between matter and nothing, and the protagonists who will do everything in their power to prevent the killing of children. Ned Stark is again exemplary: his mantra, the Stark motto, “winter is coming” laconically encapsulates his breadth of vision, anticipating not only the dark cold season, but the confrontation with that void beyond the wall, from the land of always winter. Particularly significant also are those protagonists who go from a wilful ignorance of the void beyond the wall, to being ready to sacrifice their lives to face what that void has bred. This is the case of Jaime Lannister, Cersei’s brother, and Theon Greyjoy. Both start off by scoffing the fear of the void beyond the wall just as they both start off as child killers (though, through no fault of their own, they both fail in their attempted murders: Jaime throws Bran Stark out of a tower, but Bran survives the fall, and Theon tries to murder Bran and his little brother Rickon, but they flee, leaving Theon to kill two peasant boys in their stead); but both Jaime and Theon will undergo huge transformations (loosing body parts along the way, the former his hand, the latter, by castration); their woes and life experiences will bring them back to the North in the final season, because unlike the other members of their families, who remain in wilful blindness to the peril coming from beyond the wall, they understand it is real. Their awareness of the reality of the void and the imminent danger from the Others coincides with true remorse for their attempts at child-killing. Jaime will tell Bran that he “is sorry for what [he] did to him” (in s8e2, “A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms”), and Theon sacrifices his life to protect Bran from the Night King (the king of the Others): “it is the least I can do” (in s8e3, “The Long Night”).

Taking into account the existence of the void completely shapes one’s worldview. In *Game of Thrones*, this worldview is characterised by an indifference to one’s own death compared to the preservation of the

⁸ Hence the donuts and tunnels studied by Casati and Varzi, *Holes and Other Superficialities*.

⁹ Note that Jacoby, “Wargs, Wights, and Wolves That are Dire,” 126–8, also sets out Martin’s project as running parallel to contemporary metaphysical theories: the questions have common origins, but Martin deviates them from “laboratory case studies” to anchoring these questions in the realities of Westeros. Though Jacoby is pursuing a different question, that of consciousness, I am in agreement with his identification of Martin as concerned with a grounding metaphysics and as proposing an original, not random but purposely thought out metaphysics, tested out it in the world of Westeros.

¹⁰ See Leederman, “A Thousand Westerosi Plateaus,” 195: “winter is a spatio-temporal environment.”

grander order. This is why a character defending this worldview should be considered as a lucid metaphysician.

His task, which is for instance Ned's, is to accept the determinations that change the world forever after a child's birth, understanding that there is no returning to a prenatal state of the world. Accepting this much comes at a high price, that of re-adapting to the new ontological order. To protect that order is to protect the child. For a child's sake, Ned will accept death shrouded by ignominy; and to never be able to explain himself to his family. It will mean, for that child, his nephew Aegon Targaryan, heir to the throne, to accept to live as a castaway bastard, going by the lowly name of Jon Snow, bastard son of Ned.

It is worth briefly comparing Jon Snow's childhood with that of King Arthur, from the Arthurian legends: both are raised in ignorance of their high births, protected through secrecy from those who would seek to kill them. But unlike with King Arthur, the ignominious childhood of Jon Snow is not meant as a moral lesson, as it is for Arthur under the guidance of the wise Merlin, who raises Arthur as a humble squire, all the better for Arthur to become a just and merciful ruler. There is no moral lesson in the humbling of Jon Snow. His *il*-legitimation is only ever a means for survival; and survival is the only thing which counts. Thus, given the chance, he will refuse to seize his kingly destiny, in contrast to Arthur who is rewarded after his humiliation, when he alone pulls the sword from the stone, and thereby takes his rightful place as king. When Jon Snow is hailed King in the North briefly, after freeing the North from the unlawful domination of Ramsay, the bastard son of Lord Bolton, he reluctantly accepts the title only to soon enough renounce it, by pledging fealty to Danaerys Targaryan, who seeks to recover the throne of her father, and who, as queen-to-be of Westeros, demands subjugation from her vassals.

In the eyes of a lucid metaphysician, which is what Jon Snow becomes through his direct experiences with the void beyond the wall, power, and elevation are insignificant. Just as there are no moral lessons – no lesson on how to be good – in Ned Stark's or Jon Snow's ordeals, neither is there optimism nor hope for a better future. Such considerations are neither here nor there for them. It is in this perspective that ethical questions about what is right and wrong are derivative on the ontological order which must be upheld: facing the void, keeping the void at bay.

Game of Thrones thus gives expression to a pessimistic view of life, derived from an understanding of metaphysics as containing an existing void. It is a pessimism which is embodied by figures of wisdom from Ned to Jon Snow and finally Bran Stark who is the all-knowing Three-Eyed Raven. It is this pessimistic realism that disturbs the usual tropes of chivalric fantasies and heroic destiny-narratives that *Game of Thrones* belongs to in appearance. The work is thereby elevated to a level of philosophical insight that joins the ranks of the great realist-pessimist works of philosophy, which grapple directly with the existence of the void; works which, not by chance are, like *Game of Thrones*, mixed works of literature and philosophy. Of particular interest in putting into focus the connection between accepting the reality of the void and the significance of coming into the world, are Vladimir Nabokov and Blaise Pascal, who provide a theoretical background to the worldview offered by Martin.

2 Two kinds of voids, two kinds of horror

“The cradle rocks over an abyss.”¹¹ The first line of Nabokov's autobiographical work, *Speak, Memory*, sends a chill down the spine: both a foreboding of doom and a disorienting sense of vertigo. The abyss is on both sides of the cradle. It is not so much the fragility of a baby's life that is pinpointed by this enigmatic opening, as rather the passage the cradle represents from one abyss to another, from one kind of emptiness to another, before birth and after life. The abyss must take a plural. For the cradle is a bridge between two abysses of oblivion. We are more often prone to think of a singular abyss, the one that follows our death, the one Nabokov says, “we are heading towards.” But there is also the prenatal abyss, similar to the one

¹¹ Nabokov, *Speak Memory*, 18.

following our death in as much as the world was and will keep turning without us – only that in the prenatal abyss, the world moves along “without mourning our absence.” The prenatal world is not a world where we are yet to be born, in which our birth would be programmed, or foretold, as though history were set in stone from the dawn of time. It is a world free from the very idea of us.

In a famous parody of Nabokov, at the start of his own autobiographical work, Anthony Burgess reads the Nabokovian line as a truism: “if you require a sententious opening” he quips in a knowing nod to the happy few.¹² Burgess goes on to suggest that the oblivion that flanks our life is not an oblivion of inexistence but one of incapacitation. Burgess thus adds a moralising coating to Nabokov’s metaphysical, realist, assessment of the three stages of a man’s life: before-being, being, after-being.

Burgess turns Nabokov’s abysses of oblivion into “eternities of idleness” on both sides of a life. We must, therefore, in view of the evil of idleness, make good use of our life. Where Nabokov makes an observation about metaphysics, Burgess cannot but interpret the observation in terms of a moral injunction. That Burgess transforms Nabokov’s cosmic-realism into a moral statement about how we should occupy our time well, by being industrious as opposed to idle, resonates like the remnants of an unshakeable core Catholic upbringing. Eternity, death, the abyss, these are words that in the Christian heart, raise moral fears about deserts and punishments. Burgess was a lapsed Catholic with a problem with God, as the title of his autobiography signals (*Little Wilson and Big God*). In these very first lines, he gives an explanation for the source of his problem, namely that the requisite industriousness, that is promised recompense in the afterlife, is often too demanding a standard. The critique of Nabokov is based on the assumption that we are set on an eternal path towards salvation or damnation – subtly mocking Nabokov for pretending it can be avoided by keeping to perfunctory metaphysical observations. But whichever outcome (hell or paradise), the time we spend in our bodies is the time to do something about it. And indeed, Burgess enjoins: “there is no excuse for being idle now,” readying the individual to a life marked by the fall, but driven by the hope of redemption.

By contrast, Nabokov is placed in the position of the nihilist. However, even granting that position, the nihilistic Nabokov appears at cross-purposes with Augustinian Burgess – as is often the case in the many iterations of this kind of encounter. For the nihilist understands the believer perfectly well, but the believer always suspects the nihilist of not meaning what he says.¹³ And this is important, not only because Burgess is subtly suggesting Nabokov does not mean what he says about the emptiness of the oblivion beneath the cradle, but more importantly, because Burgess traduces the thought that it is what you do in this life, the decisions you make, the actions you take, that count. But this is not what Nabokov is saying. For Nabokov, nothing you do will ever matter more than your coming into the world. All subsequent actions are mere functions of your birth and have little to no moral importance. This is why the Nabokovian worldview appears as an anchor to grasp the peculiarity of the worldview put forward in *Game of Thrones*: not nihilistic but cultivating a lucidity which focuses the attention on the difference between the abyss before and the abyss after.

Burgess forces the opposition between the moral believer and the nihilist. He never names Nabokov in these lines, but he puts him surreptitiously in the position of the nihilist, all the better to deride him. In *Speak, Memory*, however, Nabokov is not a nihilist – nor is Martin in *Game of Thrones*. They are not advancing the age-old tune that “not being born is best,”¹⁴ but almost the opposite, that being born is everything.

Burgess trivialises a more complex metaphysical framework, aestheticised by the rocking to and fro of Nabokov’s cradle. The cradle, however, is no metaphor, though imagery is the only way to get close to what

¹² Burgess, *Little Wilson and Bog God*, 3.

¹³ For example, Friedrich Nietzsche and Oscar Wilde: Nietzsche, who spurns Saint Augustine’s “psychological falsity” in the *Confessions*, which are nothing but “vulgarised Platonism” (in *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 239: *Letter to Franz Overbeck, March 31st 1885*), is rebuked by Wilde, under the generic figure of “the Nihilist” as “dying for what he does not believe in” (in Wilde, *The Decay of Lying*, 75). And see more on this kind of deaf and dumb dialogue in Capitano Leopardi. *L’Alba del Nichilismo*, esp. chap.5.

¹⁴ Famously expressed in Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, l.1225.

is un-figurable, un-referenceable *par excellence*: the abyss, and the distinction between two kinds of abysses. The “two eternities of darkness” that flank the rocking cradle are descriptions of the void which are at once abstract and as concrete as they ever will be. It is the fear conjured through the vertigo effect which gives the most palpable, concrete grasp of these two voids. There is horror in the poised cradle – a *horror vacui*, a fear of the void, which arises in the subject who realises the existence and proximity of the void around him. This feeling of horror felt by the subject goes against a long tradition, whose roots reach at least the fourth century BC philosopher Aristotle, of identifying the horror in *horror vacui*, the horror of the void, as belonging, not to the subject, but to nature. For the Aristotelians, it is nature which feels the horror. Aristotle and the subsequent tradition argues against the existence of the void because nature cannot bear the void. Therefore, nature always fills up every space with matter and there is no void in the world (or in its representation).¹⁵ Nabokov is clearly positioning himself against this tradition.

Horror is ambiguous. The Aristotelian tradition, which extends into the Modern Era, to the seventeenth century debates on the existence of void, in which Blaise Pascal plays a crucial role (as we shall see below), interprets horror as being what is repelled and pushed out of the world. Horror inspires hatred, inspires total elimination. But the horror evoked by Nabokov is a horror we would perhaps wish to escape, but which we must face up to, in all lucidity. For it is there. We must own up to it, rather than hide away from it. There is nothing supernatural – that is to say, there is no fictionalising gimmick – in the representation of the void; it is presented, not in a work of fiction but in an autobiography.¹⁶ Incorporating the void as a looming presence in reality is thus a way to transform horror from a tool affiliated to a specific literary genre with its artificial rules, into a fixture of reality.¹⁷ Life is a horror film, as it rocks to and fro, from one abyss to the other. Nabokov himself operates the switch from horror film to reality, evoking in the following lines the home videos he watches of life before he was born, stopping on the baby-carriage which looks like a coffin.¹⁸ We shall come back to the role of the home-video further down, but let us note already its anticipatory role in the portrait of real life given in *Speak, Memory*: if the baby-carriage is already a coffin, then what can be hoped for, when it comes to the baby rocking in its cradle? Surely, the horror film has transferred from the video to the life of the child. This telescope effect is produced by apprehending the passage from the first to the second void.

Take salvation or damnation out of the picture, what is left is a history made up of singular beings that come into being out of one void, and pass away into another. Every single one of these beings contributes to the fabric of the world by simply being. History is thus the name given to the consequences of biological processes underwent in specific socio-cultural contexts. So, Nabokov is not highlighting the banal fact that life went on just fine and will go on just fine, with or without oneself in it. He is rather comparing the two kinds of void, before one’s birth and after, measuring them up against two kinds of horror.

The first kind of horror comes from reflecting on the prenatal abyss. A horror derived, not from what we have lost (not from mourning), but from the sheer multiplicity of possibilities that not being born would have allowed, and that our birth put an end to. The prenatal world is a world teeming with potentialities which had been very much open to realisation. Our birth destroys these forever and not even our death can recover them. The fact of being born imposes a physical footprint that changes the world forever, however minute the shoe size. The possibilities, still very real in the prenatal state of the world, vanish. Instead, a new set of configurations are put in place.

The second kind of horror is the horror of the post-mortem void, the gaping hole that we leave in this world that we had changed forever simply by having been in it. A horror which is not increased or decreased depending on how long we were alive. Killing an infant does not prevent anything – it is, at it were, too late,

¹⁵ See Thorp, “Aristotle’s *Horror Vacui*.”

¹⁶ Nabokov famously disparaged the appeal to the supernatural in literature, see Nicol, “Nabokov and Science Fiction.”

¹⁷ Todorov, *Introduction à la Littérature Fantastique*, describes horror as the result of the clash of normality with the monstrous; Nabokov resolves that clash here, by making the monstrous, the fearful, part of the setting of normality, it is everyone’s cradle that rocks above the abyss.

¹⁸ On the coffin as a horror trope and prop, see Morgan, *The Biology of Horror*, 3.

the world made room for someone, and that room remains, specific and individual, as a horror-inspiring emptiness at death.

In reply to Burgess, Nabokov's cradle rocking over the abyss is not a moral conundrum. Not: how to be good? Nor: how to use our time well? The morality of how one subsequently employs one's life is, in comparison to the world-changing effect of our arrival in the world, of little significance.

Hollywood gave us a happy-ending representation through the moral interpretation of the poised cradle, with Frank Capra's 1946 heart-warming *It's a Wonderful Life*. There, upright citizen, George Bailey (played by James Stewart), on the verge of suicide, is shown by the angel Clarence what life would have been, had he not been born: much worse than it is. So, feeling needed, loved, and consoled, the hero abandons his suicidal ideas. Morality joins metaphysics in a commentary on the unique marks you make in life by the very fact of your existence and the space you take up by being the person you are: the good that you do, the happiness you bring, the lives that you save. With the help of the simplistic Capra/Hollywoodian moral frame of good *versus* evil, the resolution follows from its own beautiful logic: a good man does good, improves everyone's life and gets duly rewarded for it. But what of the bad man? And who is to say who is good or bad? Hollywood endings are proverbially happy and correspondingly unrealistic.

3 The determinations of one's birth

The Nabokovian insight is deeper because it leaves aside moral sentimentalism. It focuses on one and only one decisive question – deriving all ethical judgements from it – namely: what possibilities an individual's birth puts an end to. It is not as an atheist that Nabokov contrasts Burgess' moralism. Nabokov appears rather as an heir of the French *moralistes* of the seventeenth century, in particular the philosopher Blaise Pascal, whose bleak portrait of humanity follows from lucid metaphysical accounts of the horror of existence – accounts which are not separate from the acknowledgement of a will of God.¹⁹ The underlying thought is that man is not able to change God's will during his allotted time on earth, hence a pessimism derived from cosmic-realism.

The wisdom gained by the end of *Game of Thrones* is the insignificance of our choices in life. These amount to details about how we fill our time. Not that nothing matters, but rather, that whatever we do, we end up doing what we were bound to do. Whatever the choice, it is the choosing itself that counts. This corresponds to a great theoretical shift within the adventure/thriller tradition which *Game of Thrones* relates to (in terms of the intrigues of the game). But Martin and the creators of the TV-adaptation, David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, shift the weight of what matters – what *really* matters – from a normative ethics which focuses on the consequences of one's choices, whereby making the right choice is all that is at stake (how to win the game), to a view of human action as a necessary manifestation of being in the world, but which neutralises the effects of singular choices.

The world of *Game of Thrones* redefines expectations from its protagonists, namely in that there are no expectations. No one is expected to be a hero: “there are no true knights,”²⁰ is a realisation which is passed on from one character to the other almost as a leitmotif. Undoubtedly, one of the reasons the unheroic

¹⁹ The connection between Nabokov and Pascal is attested across Nabokov's works, who makes numerous offhand allusions to Pascal, for example in Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, 45: “those mirrors of infinite space *qui m'effrayent, Blaise*” (the French spelling mistake in “*effrayent*” is in Nabokov's text), or Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor*, 60: “a few readers, those pensive reeds” – an even more subtle allusion to Pascal's famous “man is a thinking reed” in *Pensées* 113. See Grishakova, *The Models of Space*, 127–9 on the influence of Pascal generally on Russian *émigrés* writers, and Nabokov in particular; and on Nabokov's particular appeal to Pascal when it comes to describing fear and terror, see Johnson, “Terror: Pre-texts and Post-texts,” 51; and Nicol, “Nabokov and Science Fiction,” 13.

²⁰ Amongst many occurrences: see Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, 32, 52, where Sansa Stark is forced to conclude as much, and Sandor Clegane derides the hypocrisy of knighthood; in Martin, *A Feast for Crows*, 30, 31, where Brienne of Tarth, and then Jaime Lannister reflect on the false idealisation of the figure of the knight.

ending was so offensive to a mass audience is that people felt cheated out of their habitual expectations. Heroes should be crowned kings, not exiled, or killed off. But *Game of Thrones* is at odds with the chivalric tropes it references all the better to subvert them. Martin's series and the TV-adaptation sit decidedly within a tradition which is the opposite of mass audience expectations; the series thus belongs to a subversive tradition, one of whose founding fathers is Michel de Montaigne, one of the first great *moralistes*, philosophers of life, who writes in 1580: "I do not portray being, but passage. ... Each man carries within him the whole of the human condition."²¹ What Montaigne means, and which is illustrated in the world of *Game of Thrones*, is that there is no personal evolution, or personal adventure, but that a man's life is traversed by the events that cross his way. We pass through these as easy or difficult obstacles: we *are* not, we *happen* as we move through them.

This view of life as a passage rather than a self-determined, self-controlled arc is perhaps best expressed by the figure of the all-seeing, all-knowing Bran Stark, Ned's son, who, as a seven-year old boy is pushed from the top of a tower by Jaime and Cersei Lannister (the twin siblings whom he unwittingly caught in the middle of their incestuous tryst), and who, crippled after the accident, travels beyond the wall in order to become the Three-Eyed Raven, the embodiment of knowledge, gaining the capacity to see the past, present, and future through visions and tele-transportations. Thanks to these visions, we visualise scenes which took place years before the events of *Game of Thrones*. It is Bran's knowledge and the philosophy of memory as wisdom which he incarnates, which are ultimately rewarded, since it is he who shall be chosen to become king at the end. The crowning of Bran the Broken, as he is called, confirms that rewards in *Game of Thrones* go not to heroics on the battlefield, but to he who has the most complete understanding of the structure of the world, and hence of what matters.²²

As the Three-Eyed Raven, Bran Stark affirms at a number of occasions, and to various people who express regret or remorse about their past behaviour:

"Everything that you did brought you here."

"Being brought here" means doing what one was always meant to be doing, by virtue of being the person one is – being born the person that one is. There is, therefore, nothing to forgive and nothing to ask forgiveness for. Neither for Theon Greyjoy for the terrible things he did to Bran (trying to kill him) and to the Stark house (killing all the people who brought him up in that house), nor for Jon Snow, who apologises to Bran "for not being there when Bran needed him":

"You were exactly where you should have been" (s8e6, "The Iron Throne")

Bran says to Jon Snow, all-knowingly, alluding to an episode in which Jon did indeed save Bran's life (by killing the traitors who had captured and imprisoned Bran and his friends, in s4e5, "First of His Name"). But Jon does not know that he saved Bran, since he did not see Bran escape. It is precisely these unwitting contributions to the movement of history which emphasise passage rather than being in *Game of Thrones*. A similar consideration of the bigger picture motivates Bran's response to Jaime Lannister in season eight (in s8e2, "A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms"): no surprise, no revenge from Bran in meeting the man who threw him from the tower (in s1e1, "Winter is Coming"). Bran knows the entangled paths that have brought Jaime back to Winterfell (to face the Others), and that knowledge means he has nothing to forgive of Jaime.

Bran's wisdom as the Three-Eyed Raven is to see what was and will be. He is the hand that rocks Nabokov's cradle, peering into both sides of the abyss. The embodiment of the lucid metaphysician has a totalising view of the relation between being and non-being. That understanding – sight which goes beyond the perceptible world, symbolised by the three eyes of the raven – reduces to insignificant minutiae the

²¹ Montaigne, *Essais*, III. 2, with whom Pascal (whom we shall be mostly concerned with here) has a love-hate relationship, partly because Pascal considers that despite Montaigne's good intentions of "portraying passage," he fails and focuses on himself, see e.g. Pascal, *Pensées*, 780; and more in La Charité, "Pascal's Ambivalence toward Montaigne."

²² See Leederman, "A Thousand Westerosi Plateaus," 193: identifying Bran's knowledge as knowledge of the inalterability of the flow of time, constituting "a genealogical and geological history." It is because he has such a lucid grasp on the greater picture, that he also realises that however small in comparison, each individual life is a "precious and irretrievable part."

good or bad actions we fill our lives with. These are but distractions, in the sense that Blaise Pascal calls our everyday way of entertaining ourselves: “*divertissement*” or “diversions.” Whether business or pleasure, we devote ourselves to diversions which prevent us from thinking about reality and the human condition.²³ What we are avoiding through distractions is the terror we would derive from peering into the abyss: the world we destroyed by being born and the world we will leave behind in death.

The *horror vacui*, the horror of the void, that Nabokov fears but acknowledges, is met straight up by Pascal. For Pascal, the horror inspired by the void is a horror solely felt by man and not by nature. Man pretends to not see the gaping void that surrounds him by avoiding it through distractions. What makes Pascal a turning-point in the debate about the existence of the void is that his is not merely a metaphysical commitment: he corroborates his claim with a physical demonstration. In his 1647 text *Expériences Nouvelles Touchant le Vide* (New experiments regarding the Void), Pascal recounts his experiment, and interprets the criticism to its conclusion as the conjunction of two forms of blindness: on the one hand an anti-scientific stance, which refuses to admit the physical experiment because of pre-established expectations, on the other hand, the psychological need to hide behind distractions.²⁴ But the void exists, it is “poised between matter and nothing.”²⁵ Pascal thus counters the Aristotelian plenitude theory in a famous letter to the Jesuit theologian, Etienne Noël. In the letter, Pascal argues that there must exist a space, still free from the determinations of matter, but which, for all that, is itself distinct from nothing at all and has extension without matter.

Determined forms of life do not materialise out of nothing, but rather exist potentially in a space that has extension into three dimensions but no resistance (unlike matter), enabling matter to pass through it unimpeded (like the Others in *Game of Thrones*). Thus, the void, between nothing and matter, contains the possibilities for different realisations of matter. It is that virtual co-existence of different potentialities that makes the void incomprehensible and ungraspable to our limited intellectual capacities. We need fixtures and determinations and therefore, operate best within the world of material, perceptual experience.²⁶

But our limitations must not delude us into rejecting the existence of the void. The plenitude theorists, or “ideologues,” according to Pascal, are driven by a *horror vacui* at one remove from the void: the fear of encountering the void which they have decided in advance does not exist (“taking a hypothesis for an actual demonstration”).²⁷ They thus cling to a worldview in which everything is in material connection with everything else. This is the blinding ideology that induces them to “affirm what is absolutely contrary to experience.” But the real horror is to stare the void in the face, accept its unknowability.

Pascal describes the state of man as if stranded on “a terrifying desert island” with the void surrounding him. As he, Pascal, realises that he is thus stranded: “I do not know what I have come here to do,” “I am incapable of knowing anything,” Pascal “enters into terror” (“*j’entre en effroi*”), coining a phrase, grafted on the idiomatic expression used to describe a novice entering into the Church (once you are in, you cannot get out).²⁸ The image of the terrifying island is the image visible to the lucid philosopher whose gaze, wherever it falls, finds the void. It is an image that Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory* reignites, making palpably terrifying the abysses surrounding the cradle.²⁹

²³ Pascal, *Pensées*, chap. “Divertissement,” famously epitomised in the figure of “the king without diversion,” in *Pensées* 136 (extract, my translation): “If we gather all the good things that it is possible to possess in this world, being king is the finest position in the world; and yet ... if a king is without diversion and left to consider what he is, then this feeble happiness will not sustain him. He will necessarily reflect on what threatens him, rebellions, death and inevitable disease. If the king is without what we call diversion, then he is unhappy, more so than the lowliest of his subjects who plays and entertains himself.” Note the emphasis on “playing” which echoes compellingly in the play involved in the game of thrones.

²⁴ Pascal, “Expériences Nouvelles Touchant le Vide,” préface: “Au lecteur,” §58.

²⁵ Pascal, “Letter to Etienne Noël, 29th October 1647.”

²⁶ Pascal, *Pensées*, 199, entitled, “Disproportion of Man”: “anything extreme is out of our reach.”

²⁷ Pascal, “Letter to Etienne Noël.” The plenitude theory is defended by Pascal’s correspondent, Etienne Noël, who published, subsequently to his exchange with Pascal, a rebuke in the ironically titled, *Le Plein du Vide*, (The Fullness of the Void), see Magnard, “Pascal et le Sens du Vide,” 7.

²⁸ See Pascal, *Pensées*, 198.

²⁹ It is the terror that Pascal identifies which echoes throughout Nabokov’s works, giving a particular density to the semantics of his frequent use of the words “terror,” “terrified,” and cognates, associating them with infinite space and absence, see

Nabokov's cradle has an ancestor in Pascal's chair: Pascal is said to have always placed a chair to his left to cover the gaping void, and thus "to feel reassured."³⁰ Though the anecdote is most probably apocryphal, it caught the imagination and endured because it crystallises something in Pascal's philosophy: his acknowledging not only the reality but the proximity of the void. The terror and horror that such proximity affords consist in never being sure if one is not already falling, or always has been falling or bound to fall. It is the void which awakens in Pascal the "awed horror" ("l'effroi"), that he feels in contending with "the silence of infinite spaces."³¹

The Pascalian void deepens further Nabokov's abyss by giving a philosophical rooting to horror in literature and film. *Game of Thrones* fully embraces these philosophical roots, by giving a space to this real-yet-immaterial presence of the void, that is, to its in-betweenness: it is the north of the North, the land beyond the wall, it is the living dead that are born from the void, embodiments of the contradictory existing non-existents. The violence and gore associated with the cinematic horror genre get a justification here as manifestations and reactions to the terror of confronting this void full of oxymorons and impossible realities.

4 Don't look! Infinity ahead

Game of Thrones begins and ends with visions of infinite space, figurations of the void. In the prologue of the series (start of s1e1, "Winter is Coming"), three rangers cross to the other side of the wall and lose themselves in a landscape of snow and dark forest, before stumbling on a horrific display of severed body parts. In the epilogue of the series, the last scene of s8e6 ("The Iron Throne"), Jon Snow, the dutiful hero, turns his back on the known world, crosses to the other side of the wall, and walks into an infinite looming space; a similar landscape of snow and dark forest, vanishing towards the unknown. The series thus comes out of one abyss and returns its characters back into another: abysses which are represented by a dark forest in the snow, filmed like the forest in Paolo Uccello's painting, *The Hunt*,³² in which perspectival geometry frames unfathomable infinity. It is the founding principle of Renaissance mono-focal perspective to create the illusion of infinity in a finite space, thanks to a vanishing point which escapes the rationale of the frame, disappearing beyond the "window" of the story the painting tells.³³ The result is the representation of the unrepresentable, infinity within the finite. Mono-focal perspective is thus the triumph of the oxymoron. The subject of the scene is elevated to a plane of transcendence, transforming Uccello's *Hunt* into a foreboding quest, and Jon Snow's final retreat beyond the wall into an exodus with no happy ending in sight, disappearing into the second abyss.

The beginning and ending scenes of *Game of Thrones*, both striking and unsettling for the viewer, appear thus, through their use of perspective, as figurations of the Pascalian void and Nabokovian abyss. Nabokov speaks of "two eternities of darkness," two "identical twins"; similar spaces of non-existence, yet separated by the cradle. There is terror and awe in both, and it is perhaps why *Game of Thrones'* prologue enticed so many people to watch on, and why the ending was to many, a disappointment.³⁴ The adventures

Johnson, "Terror: Pre-texts and Post-texts," 51; Nicol, "Nabokov and Science Fiction," 13; and Sweeney, "Nabokov's Amphiphorical Gestures," 198.

³⁰ The anecdote is reported by the abbot Jean Boileau who insists on having been a direct witness to Pascal's setting out a chair for this purpose. The abbot doth protest too much, however, according to Sainte-Beuve, *Port-Royal*, t.2, 499, who argues that the anecdote belongs to a posthumously garnered mythology based on Pascal's documented obsession with and fear of the void.

³¹ Pascal, *Pensées*, 201: "the eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me." See on this internal terror, Pavlovitis, *Le Rationalisme de Pascal*, 3.

³² Painted between 1465–70, now in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, <https://www.ashmolean.org/hunt-forest>.

³³ See Alberti, *De Pictura*, I.19: "these lines [from the frame to the vanishing point] cut up the space as if up to an infinite distance." More on the symbolism of mono-focal perspective: Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 63–6, and especially on the oxymoronic effects of mono-focal perspective, Arasse, *L'Annonciation Italienne*, 11–5.

³⁴ *Game of Thrones* was one of the most popular TV-series ever to be made, but so dissatisfied was the audience at its ending that there was a petition launched on change.org to re-write season 8, with more than 2 million signatures amassed to date. As

into which the protagonists are propelled at the beginning, not least that of solving the mystery and destroying the force behind the massacre seen in the prologue, requires, by Hollywood rules, resolution and rewards at the end. To have Jon Snow – whose identity, by the series' finale, as true heir to the throne has been revealed, and whose true nobility of character has been proven in every way (making him the ideal king) – exiled, and seeing him cross over to that void, goes against those expected rewards. Disgruntled viewers notwithstanding (who expected Hollywood happy endings), the ending is a feat of logical consistency: both in terms of character and worldview. The characters follow through the determinations set down at birth and present *in nucleo* from the beginning, evolving within a worldview in which it is impossible to escape these determinations.

This logical consistency, far from a random choice by the showrunners, maliciously playing with audience expectations, is itself staged and explained in a remarkable dialectical exchange, worthy of a Platonic dialogue, which takes place in the final episode of the series (s8e6). It is the last exchange between Danaerys Targaryen, the Mother of Dragons, and Jon Snow. Danaerys is the last living daughter of King Aerys (the Mad King) whom the late King Robert (Cersei Lannister's husband) had rebelled against and whose entire family, Robert and his allies (including the Lannisters, and Ned Stark) had decimated. Danaerys, then an infant, together with her young brother, had been smuggled out of Westeros and saved. She has been seeking to regain her throne for the last eight seasons, believing she is the rightful heir. In the penultimate episode of the series (s8e5, "The Bells"), Danaerys mercilessly destroys the whole city and inhabitants of King's Landing, the capital of Westeros. In the final episode, she has finally arrived in the throne room, now a total ruin, where Jon Snow, whom she is in love with, despite now knowing he is in fact by blood, her nephew, and direct male heir to the throne, finds her:

D: It's not easy – Danaerys says – to see something that's never been before. A good world.

JS: How do you know it will be good?

D: Because I know what is good.

JS: What about everyone else who also think they know what's good?

D: They don't get to choose. Be with me. Build the new world with me. This is our *reason*. It *has* been from the beginning, when you were a little boy with a bastard's name, and I was a little girl who couldn't count to twenty.³⁵

Jon Snow then kisses her and stabs her to death. Talking more will not change Danaerys' mind. Danaerys – who appears here as a larger than life Thrasymachus from Plato's *Republic*³⁶ – is completely mistaken about "our reason." Her words are out of step not with the destruction she has sown, but with the ontological structure of the world – how the world really works – which she fails to recognise. She thinks not only that her actions and rule can build a new world, but also that she had something like a destiny, being marked from childhood, to effect such a change; and that Jon Snow is part of that destiny. But the reality is that she never was the heir to the throne. Jon Snow was and still is.

But Jon Snow, in contrast to Danaerys, has the lucidity to understand that what happened to him as a baby is determining for the whole of his life: he cannot go back and pretend he was not saved by the skin of his teeth from being murdered. Ned Stark passed him on as a bastard son of his, and called him Jon Snow, instead of his given name, Aegon Targaryen. Danaerys, who was also saved by the skin of her teeth, does not acknowledge that reality. Because she is an ideologue, as Pascal would call her, she is convinced she can reclaim her birth right and thus change the world. Jon Snow's lucidity drives him to put an end to her

mentioned, the TV-adaptation overtook the novels; whilst Martin was fully involved with the structure and plans for the last two seasons, criticism seems to have been loaded on the shoulders of the TV showrunners, David Benioff and D. B. Weiss. In the absence of the books, the ending was a true surprise.

³⁵ From s8e6, "The Iron Throne," written by Benioff and Weiss.

³⁶ Plato, *Republic*, bk.1, 339a: Thrasymachus stands up against Socrates to affirm that "what is right is what the strongest party says is right."

delusions about the importance of her actions. His is the lucid metaphysician, understanding how things were, are and will be; he knows it is impossible to go back in time.³⁷

The idea of changing the world, building a new world, is a mistake of metaphysical proportions, that of believing that more than merely being born alters the coordinates of the prenatal world. It is enough, and all one can do, to be born, for the world to change forever. To force a change leads merely to accelerating the coming of the second, posthumous abyss. Jon Snow actualises the determinations set at both their births. She, mad and delusional, raised on the hunger for revenge. He, raised far from the pettiness of the game of thrones, learning what the world is really like, with the void, looming beyond the wall – winter is always coming. It is not therefore, blood or hereditary titles which count in setting out these determinations, it is the concrete circumstances of birth, and what was done to save their lives as infants that matter. *Game of Thrones* is exceptional in playing against one another, the traditional tropes of chivalric customs against a historical materialism which overcomes the former: a confrontation which plays out not in blood-claims, biology or family titles, but in the unfolding of singular events.

The most important of these singular events are the circumstances of Jon Snow's birth – an event so important, whose every detail is so crucial, that we, the audience, examine those circumstances at three different occasions over the eight seasons, each time from a different viewpoint, in order to correct previous misunderstandings. It is the paradigmatic event of *Game of Thrones*, in which the preservation of an infant from certain assassination tests the lucid metaphysician, in this case, Ned Stark, to his very limits.

Through the prism of Pascalian pessimism and Nabokovian aesthetics, the first vision of the abyss in the prologue of *Game of Thrones* and the last in the epilogue appear strikingly similar. They are indeed Nabokovian “twins,” both opening on the “terrifying silence” of the infinite forest “beyond the Wall.” And yet the first and second abyss are also very dissimilar for the changes that have occurred in the “passage” (as Montaigne would have it) from the first abyss to the second. The struggle for survival of the characters of *Game of Thrones* is, as is well-known, astonishingly violent. The claim put forward here, is that these struggles rest on the realisation that being born is the first violence, a violence affecting the whole fabric of the world.

It is not surprising that the most important storylines which structure and hold up the series throughout, focus on the killing of babies, or what it takes *not* to kill a baby. But there are no massacres of the innocents – for there are no innocents: being born is already to take up room and re-stir the organisation of the world. The killing of a child is a source of horror because it creates voids before the new organisation has time to adjust to its alteration. Not by chance, in the last encounter between Jon Snow and Danaerys, just mentioned, the whole of the city is covered with the snow which has come from the North: snow is the harbinger of the void, coming from the land of always winter (at once a temperature, a mood, and a space) – winter has come.

“You’ve killed and burnt children; *children*, burnt alive!” Jon Snow tells Danaerys (s8e6). It is her response, enjoining him to “build a new world together” which ultimately drives him to put a knife in her heart, even though he loves her.

The indictment is not for the needless slaughter of innocents, it is for the delusion of building a world having destroyed its fabric – the “matter” as Pascal would say, constituted by all those lives. There is nothing to build from, where there is no matter. There is nothing to build over an abyss. Nabokov spoke of himself in those first lines of *Speak, Memory*, as a “chronophobic,” fearing and despising the movement of time, terrified by the possibility of going back in time to that prenatal world. And it is a chronophobic response in Jon Snow that moves him to kill Danaerys: for what she has done, by killing children, is to open the retrograde gate to the prenatal abyss. It is vertigo of an unbearable kind for Jon Snow – the lucid metaphysician – here faced with Danaerys, the blind ideologue. A confrontation which can only begin to be healed, by preventing further impossible retro-motion backwards in time. Danaerys has promised her army that they will pursue their mission of “destruction of the old world.” She is in full denial of the

³⁷ When Danaerys says that no one else “gets to choose” except for her, she confirms her belief that her choices can change the world. Her death is a retort to that presumption: not of changing the world but thinking she can choose to do so.

existence of the looming void, whereas Jon Snow sees only the void and is awed and terrified by what he sees.

5 Visiting the prenatal abyss

Nabokov relies on the magic of cinema to bring home the metaphysical point about the “frightening” prenatal abyss. He writes of his “chronophobia” when finding home-videos documenting life before his birth:

I saw a world that was practically unchanged – the same house, the same people – and then realized that I did not exist there at all and that nobody mourned my absence.

This is not a mere glimpse into the past, but a vertiginous view, inducing “panic,” “disturbance,” and “fear,” which turn the home videos, as suggested earlier, into horror films.³⁸ A view into a same but different, real but lost, world, whose multitudinous possibilities are within reach – within the frame of the film – and yet, in retrospect, condemned by the very fact of Nabokov’s viewing the videos. It is his approaching birth which will cut off all possibilities contained in the film but one. What is present however is a baby-carriage which is “empty” and looks like a coffin. An emptiness which is all the more “frightening” to Nabokov since it foreshadows both a determined future (his birth) and the future of his future: “the disintegration of my bones,” his death.

The rough home-video inside a polished work, as Stanley Cavell shows in a different context, has itself an in-between status which Cavell develops by exploring the French expression “*mise en abîme*”: literally, a “placement in abyss.”³⁹ This is no coincidence. In Nabokov’s description, the camera, by its very nature, has a meaning-giving power, and the objects it has kept alive are thus mirror images from one abyss to the other, signalling tragedy, signifying nothing. The empty baby-carriage is a symbolic object, empty here, adumbrating the coffin there, on the other side of the mirror; and in the middle, the cradle. The home-video contains everything but the self; the self, who is outside of the frame, watching the film – and the reader? He has in front of his eyes a horror film, finding himself like Pascal, staring the void in the face, and still being unable to fathom it. Like Nabokov, like Pascal, we are all locked out of the void, a world devoid even of the memory of ourselves.

A similar cinematic trick is normalised within the fantasy genre of *Game of Thrones* through the visions from the past which Bran Stark has thanks to his gift of tele-transportation. As the Three-Eyed Raven, Bran has visions he can transport himself into, visiting in this way any event in the past, and which we, the audience, visualise whilst Bran present within them, remains unseen by the protagonists of the event.

The vision that Bran goes back to repeatedly is the birth of his elder brother, Jon Snow. This birth is, as mentioned, a central, if not, *the* central scene of *Game of Thrones*, a scene which is deepened over three episodes and two seasons. Like Nabokov’s home-videos, it is a scene which takes place before the birth of the main spectator, Bran, and in addition, doubles up as itself a birth scene: thus affording Bran the possibility not only of getting the measure of his own prenatal abyss, seeing his father in a very different light from the man he knew, but also that of capturing how the world is changed completely by the birth of baby Jon Snow.

The scene is set in the desert landscape of Dorn, in the south of Westeros – another figuration of the void – where Bran’s yet-to-be father, young Ned Stark, defeats the Targaryen knights who guard Ned’s sister, Lyanna, during the time of Ned’s friend, Robert’s revolt against the Targaryans, at the end of which all Targaryans are killed (save for young Danaeris and her brother). The first time we arrive in this distant past is in season 6, episode 3, “Oathbreaker”: Bran is still but an apprentice of the old Three-Eyed Raven,

³⁸ Nabokov, *Speak Memory*, 18 (the beginning).

³⁹ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 204–7.

who is also present in the vision. In his innocent enthusiasm, Bran shouts out to his father before he is reprimanded by the old man and they leave the vision early, though not before seeing Ned turn as if he heard something. The second time is the finale of season 6 (episode 10, “The Winds of Winter”), when Bran revisits the scene on his own. He is in the room inside a tower. Ned is by Lyanna’s bed; she is lying in a pool of her own blood; she whispers something in Ned’s ear that neither Bran nor we can make out, and she hands Ned her new-born baby binding him in a promise to protect it. Bran infers that this baby is Jon Snow whom he, and us, had known until then as his half-brother, Ned Stark’s bastard son, of mother unknown. We now learn he is not Ned’s but his apparently disgraced sister. The third visit to the scene occurs, at the end of season 7, “The Dragon and the Wolf.” This time we hear Lyanna’s whispers, and all is revealed: the child’s true name is Aegon Targaryen, lawful heir to the throne, born from the wedded love of Lyanna Stark with prince Rhaegar Targaryen, heir to the throne, who was killed by Robert, who had raised his rebellion accusing Rhaegar of kidnapping and raping Lyanna, whom Robert was in love with and meant to marry. After successfully killing all (or almost all) the Targaryens, as revenge on losing Lyanna, Robert becomes king.

The revelation is a cataclysm: Robert’s rebellion was based on falsehood; Ned has known this from the beginning and has had to bear Robert’s laments over his lost love, Lyanna, knowing she never wanted Robert, but loved Rhaegar; Ned took upon himself the shame of having a bastard son; he lied to his beloved wife Catelyn, who made Jon Snow’s life miserable all through his childhood because he reminded her of what she thought was Ned’s betrayal; it is Catelyn who chases him away from Winterfell to the Wall, when Ned becomes Robert’s Hand in the capital, King’s Landing. Ned Stark, the most honourable man in the whole of Westeros, also had to lie to Jon Snow about his birth, and treat him like a base-born bastard, not allowing him to eat at the family table when they had guests, all the while knowing Jon Snow was his sister’s son and rightful heir to the seven kingdoms.

So, when Ned Stark promises to protect Lyanna’s baby, it is neither an obvious nor an easy promise. His whole life and the life of his family, even the family yet to be, change forever through this promise. Robert would kill the baby, as he killed Rhaegar’s other children: a little boy’s head smashed against a wall. Ned is on the side of those who will never kill a baby, not because he is sentimental or good (honourable is not the same as good-hearted) but because he understands all the implications of Jon Snow’s birth, he understands them because he is ready to pay the price and make all the sacrifices along the great chain of causes set in motion through Jon Snow’s existence.

As with Nabokov’s home-videos, Bran’s visitations to this seminal scene are not flash-backs to a past which directly connects to the present. The moment of suspension, which even the old Three-Eyed Raven is afraid of, when young Bran shouts out to Ned and Ned turns round, confirms that this scene is not a flash-back but a tipping-point, a “placement in the abyss” where other possibilities are still within reach: this surely is what the prenatal abyss must be like, the place of all possibles. If Bran could stop Ned, things could go differently. The desert landscape echoes the Pascalian void, poised between nothing and the necessities of matter. Could Bran have changed Ned’s course of action? Would Bran kill a baby?

After his short-lived youthful period of impatient learning and enthusiasm at his newly acquired powers, Bran becomes the demure Three-Eyed Raven. He gains a stillness and wisdom which turn him into a completely different person. “You died in that cave,” his friend Meera will tell him when he barely acknowledges her when they part, after she “almost died for [him].” He will, as his first act as king, in the finale of the series (s8e6), send Jon Snow back to the Wall “in order to keep the peace.” But being sent to the Wall means to take a vow never to marry and never to have children. Bran himself can never have children. As for Sansa and Arya, his sisters, there is no path open to them, by the end of the series, towards having a family. None of the protagonists who are left have the prospect of bringing children into the world.

Bran is the lucid metaphysician, who grasps in his mind’s eye the two abysses of oblivion flanking the baby’s cradle. But the fruit of his wisdom appears to be that of putting an end to the violence of bringing ever more children into the world. He is the last king of a kingdom in ruins and all that is left is to live out its disintegration in peace. No wonder the ending of *Game of Thrones* disappointed so many, it is a shocking ending: there is no hope, no promise of reconstruction and future thriving. The message of *Game of Thrones* is bleak. The abyss is waiting.

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- s8e5. "The Bells," written by D. B. Weiss and directed by Miguel Sapochnik.
- s8e3. "The Long Night" written by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, directed by Miguel Sapochnik.
- s8e2. "A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms," written by Bryan Cogman and directed by David Nutter.
- s6e10. "The Winds of Winter," written by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, directed by Miguel Sapochnik.
- s4e5. "First of His Name" written by D. B. Weiss and directed by Michelle MacLaren.
- s2e9. "Blackwater," written by G. R. R. Martin, directed by Neil Marshall.
- s1e7. "You Win or You Die," written by D. B. Weiss directed by Daniel Minahan
- s1e1. "Winter is Coming," written by D. B. Weiss and directed by Tim van Patten.