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Hopper "lost in an artist's dream": *Gas* (1940)

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While lost in an artist's dream, I would stare at the
honest brightness of the gasoline
paraphernalia against the splendid green of oaks.
(Nabokov, 153).

Edward Hopper (1882-1967), *Gas*, 1940



NEW YORK, MUSEUM OF MODERN ART (MOMA). HUILE SUR TOILE, 66.7 X 102.2 CM.
MRS. SIMON GUGGENHEIM FUND. 577.1943

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- 1 In Nabokov's *Lolita*, this oneiric evocation of a gas station on the American roadside follows European émigré Humbert's description of a cloudy landscape that reminds him of European painters Claude Lorrain's and El Greco's horizons. The gas station and the trees are distinctly American, but the painterly quality of Humbert's evocation still prevails to such a point that the image reads to us as a capsule *ekphrasis* of Edward Hopper's *Gas*. A traveller mesmerized by the filling pumps and the strange "honesty" of their shine set against the imposing green of the forest echo the tension in Hopper's *Gas* between a man-made outpost and the darkening wilderness. Later in the novel, Humbert and Dolores take another break on the side of the road:

We had stopped at a gas station, under the sign of Pegasus, and [Lolita] had slipped out of her seat and escaped to the rear of the premises while the raised hood, under which I had bent to watch the mechanic's manipulations, hid her for a moment from my sight" (Nabokov, 211).

- Under the flying horse, Humbert's partial view of the busy attendant along with his companion's momentary disappearance to the back of the premises completes the picture. In spite of the mass of scholarly articles and monographs devoted to Nabokov and painting, the possible connection between *Lolita* and Hopper's painting was not identified until 2013 by scholar Will Norman at a French Nabokov Society conference in Paris¹. Elsa Court later argued that Nabokov was probably aware of Hopper's painting due to the popularity of the American artist at the time (Court, 2016, 125). Americans truly discovered Hopper when the Whitney Museum organized the first major retrospective of his work in February and March 1950. Over 170 of his paintings were shown, including *Gas*. Nabokov, then a teacher at Cornell and deep into the composition of *Lolita*, was invited in March to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the *New Yorker* when the Hopper exhibition was receiving much attention (See in particular Coates, 1950, 73-74). A decade earlier, both the artist and the writer had driven through the American continent in the summer and each in their respective media captured the beauty of the American roadside—often from the vantage point of their automobile—in a manner that stands at odds with the stark realism of most photographic and painterly representations of the time. Hopper's *Gas* is a picture that strikes the viewer as a familiar and yet unreal scene of the American roadside while Humbert's *reverie* reads as the verbal rendition of that tension. To the viewer, it is as if the scene "grew stranger and stranger to the eye" (Nabokov, 152)—to borrow Humbert's turn of phrase—beyond our "shock of amused recognition" when we identify the minute reproduction of a roadside gas station with its three standard pumps, its rack of cans, its advertising pole and the partially cropped office. Unlike Stuart Davis' representations of lively and colorful gas stations in the 1920s and 1930s² or Walker Evans' boisterous pictures of the same subject, profuse with commercial signs plastered over the pumps and the garage (Evans, 1935, 1936), Hopper's bare representation of the filling station stripped of superfluous detail bypasses its utilitarian function and turns it into an estranged and imposing form of beauty. In spite of its precise depiction of its subject, *Gas* is the dream of an artist more than a realistic representation of American mobile culture in the 1940s.
- 2 The genesis of the painting suggests that *Gas* had been nurtured in the imagination of the artist for a long time. Hopper painted *Gas* during the summer of 1940, which he spent, like most summers since 1934, in Truro, Massachusetts, where Hopper and his wife Josephine

had acquired a summer house overlooking Cape Cod Bay. During his first years on Cape Cod, his biographer records, Hopper would go take drives, finding inspiration in his new surroundings and sketching small charcoal drawings and watercolors out of the window of his car (Levin, 1998, 77). In the years before 1940, the artist struggled to find new subjects. Although gas stations materialized on every street corner in the 1930s, it is not until that summer of 1940 that Hopper finally applied himself to the task. In the sketchbook entry for *Gas*, Josephine notes that he had wanted to paint one for years (Levin, 1995, 278). However, the gas station has no real-life counterpart. *Gas* was not painted from nature or "from the fact," as Hopper used to phrase it—it was "improvised" (Goodrich, 132). Although Hopper would often paint from life and his studies were usually produced on location, he said to his biographer that "he had made [*Gas*] up from memories of different places" in the Truro area. He was 58 when he painted *Gas*. His biographer recounts that "as old age and infirmity made traveling about more difficult, he adapted, by transforming his surrounding through the filter of his imagination" (Levin, 1998, 10). The preparatory sketches for *Gas* separately focus on the man-made objects and the surrounding environment; it is only in the later studies that the three-pump station and the wilderness are merged to compose the unique setting we find in the completed work (Levin, 1995a, 278).

- 3 The painting of a late twilight atmosphere, the precise moment when the decline of natural light subtly enhances the different sources of artificial light, is not derived from some true-to-life observation but is imagined by Hopper. Yet this choice derives from practical difficulties rather than artistic intention. The setting for the painting is twilight, Josephine notes in her entry for *Gas*. She records Hopper's frustration that he could not observe the glow of those round-headed pumps at dusk. Saving energy, the gas attendant of the Truro station would not light his pumps until it was pitch dark (Levin 1995b, 328)³. The traffic on the road, and the busybodies who usually hang around a gas station, may have been other impediments to the depiction of that perfectly still painting. "He's painting in the studio entirely now," Jo Hopper writes. "Lots more comfortable—but much harder to do," she adds (Levin, 1995b, 328).
- 4 Added to the imagined elements in the painting is the appearance of a solitary man who has no model in real life. He only appears in the final studies. However, the man represented here is not just a figment of Hopper's imagination. In reference to one of the final studies, he is identified by the artist's wife as "the son of Capt. Ed Staples burnt in train wreck returning from Cleveland Mus. Show" (Levin, 1995a, 278), a quip that refers to Hopper's creation of an imaginary character twelve years earlier. *Captain Ed Staples* (1928) is the name of a painting that was destroyed in a train crash in 1929 while being returned from an exhibition. For Hopper to give names to his paintings remains exceptional. The man he painted in *Captain Ed Staples*, a man wearing dark trousers and a dark vest over a white shirt, is in fact, according to Josephine's diary, "dreamed up by E. himself" as a composite figure "conjured up from all the seafarers that E. had met there and in Gloucester" (Levin, 1995b, 213). The same imaginary character reappears in a number of other paintings. Josephine later sees him as an avatar of "Ed" Hopper himself, as he often appears as the companion of the woman that Hopper would draw with Josephine as a model, or in front of their own house (Levin, 1995b, 213).
- 5 In *Gas*, then, his being identified as the heir of the fictional character might be Hopper's playful comment on the passing of time and the survival of later generations but it also adds a layer of remoteness and mystery to this intriguing presence. The solitary figure

may read as a proto-postmodern cameo appearance, an intrusion of the artist himself—or his imaginary son—to enhance the artist's unique vision of a gas station at dusk. The singular absence of car or client and the unusual and silent perspective, which anticipates that of *Nighthawks*, emphasize the solipsism of the figure. The house itself betrays no sign of life; its lit interior looks unusually blank to the eye, devoid of any life-imparting realistic detail. Besides being obviously outnumbered by the three lit pumps, the man is somehow also dwarfed by their imposing stature. A quick comparison with Evans' photograph *Gibson Motor Company Gas Station with Attendant Leaning on Pump, Reedsville, West Virginia* (1935) shows how Hopper has magnified their size. Evans' photograph shows a man leaning against a similar round-headed pump that is approximately his own height. In a disconcerting reversal of proportions, the human figure in *Gas* is partially concealed and dwarfed by the majesty of the three filling pumps. Are they the representation of a new Pygmalion myth where the trio of totemic machines surmounted by neon-bright halos become more human and imposing than the men who created them? Besides their size, what makes them look so domineering is their pure form and color. Although Hopper includes the "gasoline paraphernalia" such as a rack of oil cans that stands between two of the pumps and slightly unbalances the otherwise perfect triad, the worn signs of everyday use, the decaying paint of the various price tags or greasy spots to which the viewer is accustomed are pared down to their minimum in pure Hopper fashion. Even Humbert, awoken from his painterly reverie, finally registers the "stationary trivialities" that "find themselves in the traveller's field of vision: that green garbage can, those very black, very whitewalled tires for sale, those bright cans of motor oils, that red icebox with assorted drinks, the four, five seven discarded bottles" (Nabokov, 211). None of those find their way into Hopper's *démeublé* painting. Even the water can that was sketched to the side of the left pump on one of the preparatory drawings has disappeared (Robbins, 2013, 178; Levin, 1995a, vol. III, 278). It looks as if the honest brightness of Hopper's oils had absorbed the triviality of stationary items and turned them into pure aesthetic objects. The gas station, which had by the end of the 1930s become a humdrum component of motorized America, looks fresh from all the current associations. Something that had become so familiar that people had stopped paying any real attention to it is suddenly defamiliarized.

- 6 Gas stations are also associated in our imagination with noises that are either literal—oil tins, starting engines and screeching tyres, fragments of conversations—or visual—a jumble of tags, advertising logos displayed on stickers or wooden signs. But Hopper's painting focuses on a minimum of signs, shapes and even colors. The poster-free and immaculate whiteness of the house's façade is painted a similar hue as the electric neon light of the pumps' round tops, while the creamy-painted light that streams from the interior looks strangely similar in tone to the beige color of the middle pump. No sign is visible or readable except for the word "Mobilgas" at the top of the signpost, which echoes the minimalist title of the painting itself, *Gas*. But even the brand name and the signpost are stripped of their advertising function. While the bottom of the post is painted the exact same rutilant color as the pumps up to the horizontal line where the fuel tanks stop, its upper part is made of shifting tones of gray that dissolve into the slightly lighter hues of gray forming the sky. The sign itself rises just over the canopy of the trees so that the winged red Pegasus seems about to dart off into heaven, while the spotlight that illuminates it merges with the rosy departing light in the horizon above the trees. If the mundane roadside appears dematerialized, it is due to this multiple and unnatural fusion with the surrounding nature. The pole pierces the sky while a small

portion of it is conspicuously brushed by the tip of a branch reaching through. The tawny-colored weeds have been cut by the tracing of the road and those left on the side of the station are wind-blown, so that they seem to be reaching out towards the other side, "scarred but still untamed," to carry further the analogy with Humbert's musing over the disfigured wilderness in *Lolita*⁴ (Nabokov, 153).

- 7 Joseph Anthony Ward remarks that *Gas* is one of six Hopper paintings done after 1939 that "deal with the close proximity of dense threatening forests and oblivious defenseless houses" (194). In *Gas*, a strip of forest stretches across the entire picture from left to right, becoming darker with the road that leads out of the picture. But the threat of those ever darker trees is attenuated by their encounter with the foregrounded lighted tree on the side of the station. All of this fits with what Ward describes as Hopper's "realism of possibility not of probability": "The combination of arrangement, illumination, stillness, and bareness that he paints are seldom to be found in life, though the paintings are lifelike" (Ward, 174). If the painting looks both real and unreal, it is because through all those transformations of a common subject into a mysterious encounter of the natural with the material, our reading of the picture becomes dynamic. An element of time enters our contact with the painting, not only due to the capture of that transient moment when day turns into night but also because, as we discover the painting, we first identify a familiar scene before being intrigued by its diffuse mystery. The simplified look and yet emphatic presence of the pumps on that deserted road is paradoxically what makes them complex and enhances the mystery of a natural landscape intruded upon by the realm of the human.
- 8 Through his unique treatment of his subject, Hopper turns everyday icons of modern American life into new symbols that draw from ancient mythology (Pegasus) and native imagery (a triad of red totemic icons) more than from 20th-century mass culture. The new dimension of those tawdry items and their dialogue with the wilderness, added to the clutch of night falling onto the picture, provokes all kinds of questions. No wonder Humbert is hypnotized into a dream. Wim Wenders claims that the attendant in *Gas* is closing up after a black car full of gangsters stopped by, that the innocent man has seen horror for the first time in his life (Devillers, 2012). As in many other paintings by Hopper, *Gas*, as a painterly reverie more than a copy of reality, turns into an unfolding narrative. Although a lifelike picture, the iconic gas station thus isolated and stylized is recast by Hopper's brush into an evocative, dream-inspiring symbol that takes us back to the roots of mythic America and away from 20th-century commercial culture.

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Iconography

EVANS, Walker, Gibson Motor Company Gas Station with Attendant Leaning on Pump, Reedsville, West Virginia (1935), Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

---, *Gas Station*, Reedsville, West Virginia, 1936, Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

HOPPER, Edward, Captain Ed Staples, 1928. Oil (28 x 36 in.). Destroyed by fire, 1929.

---, *Nighthawks*, 1942, Oil on canvas (33^{1/8} x 60 in.), Art Institute of Chicago, Ill.

DAVIS, Stuart, *Town Square*, 1925-1926, Watercolor, gouache, ink and pencil on paper, (15 1/2 x 22 7/8 in.), The Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey.

---, *Landscape with Garage Lights*, 1931-1932, Oil on canvas (32 x 41^{7/8} in.), Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, Marion Stratton Gould Fund. Art.

NOTES

1. Will Norman, “A Taste for Freedom: *Lolita* and the Existentialist Road-Trip,” Nabokov and France Conference, 31st May 2013, École Normale Supérieure, Paris. It was then transcribed in Norman’s book, *Transatlantic Aliens*, where the author remarks in passing that the sentence in *Lolita* forms an “image itself derived more or less directly from Hopper’s ‘Gas’” (Norman, 2016, 144).

2. See for instance Stuart Davis, *Town Square* (c. 1929, Whitney Museum of Art), *Garage Lights* (1931-1932, Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester).

3. “Ed is struggling. It’s a hard time to put one’s mind on painting – and he’s seen it all so often around here. He’s doing a filling station—at twilight, with the lights over the pumps lit. And when we go to look at them—around here, they aren’t lit at all. They’re not wasting Elec. til it’s pitch dark, later than Ed wants”, Levin, *An Intimate Biography*, 328)

4. This forms the second part of the sentence describing Humbert as lost in an artist’s dream: “while lost in an artist’s dream, I would stare at the honest brightness of the gasoline

paraphernalia against the splendid green of oaks, or at a distant hill scrambling out—scarred but still untamed—from the wilderness of agriculture that was trying to swallow it (*Lolita*, 153).

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