

Intrusion, Fusion, and Illusion:

Vladimir Nabokov and the Artistic Rearrangement of Reality

by

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Abstract

This essay examines several methods by which Vladimir Nabokov subverts the conventional novelistic form and, in turn, the notions of reality that inform it. One of his strongest criticisms of much art is that it perpetuates what is to him a deficient view of reality, a view that underestimates or even denies the artistically ordered nature of the physical world. As an alternative to this stance, he presents art as the supreme ordering force in life, suggesting that the realities created by individual artworks can achieve even greater legitimacy than everyday reality.

Nabokov uses several formal and stylistic techniques to accomplish his end; perhaps the most manifest of these is his frequent intrusion into his own texts, effected through autobiographical tokens, anagrammatic self-references, and other linguistic devices. Nabokov's intrusive tactics combine with several thematic elements, including allusions to chess, entomology, and pre-existing literature, to emphasize the calculated artifice of his novels. The self-contained systems of thematic patterns and verbal relationships in Nabokov's often highly contrived fiction, which are unique to each book—though their referentiality often crosses the boundaries demarcated by the dust jackets—support his case against the notion of a single reality that can exist in the physical world and in art alike. An important feature of Nabokov's work in this regard is what I call the normalization of coincidence, which occurs to stress the specific reality of each invented world.

The issue of authorial intrusion raises several questions about the widespread and weighty notion of the Death of the Author; thus, after introducing Nabokov's authorial presence in chapter 1, I will address Barthes's seminal essay and some other aspects of poststructuralist theory in chapters 2 and 3. Nabokov's fiction undermines many of Barthes's ideas and serves as a starting point for observing the limitations of the approaches of Barthes, Foucault, and other prominent twentieth-century theorists, which are often based largely on linguistics and social philosophy rather than the discipline of art criticism.

Chapter 3 continues with a discussion of the importance Nabokov places on the fact that authors of fiction are artists, not only assemblers of words. For him, this leads to a critique of traditional mimetic art, which is the subject of chapter 4; Nabokov presents the notion that every work of art should create its own reality with its own set of logical principles, instead of conforming to the average reality that he disdains.

Nabokov's stance on autobiography—in general and his own—illuminates his bent on patternmaking and pattern-finding in art and life. I discuss this propensity in chapters 5 and 6, focusing on its pervasiveness and effects in the former, and on several manifestations of it in the latter. The epilogue considers Nabokov's work with respect to some historical schools, acknowledging the ultimate impossibility of confining Nabokov to any particular one. Finally, I submit a connection between Nabokov's artistic enterprise and his view of human consciousness, mortality, and emotion.

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Short Titles

Lo: Vladimir Nabokov. *Lolita*. New York: Random House, 1997.

PF: ---. *Pale Fire*. New York: Berkley, 1984.

SM: ---. *Speak, Memory*. New York: Putnam, 1966.

SO: ---. *Strong Opinions*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973.

TT: ---. *Transparent Things. Nabokov: Novels 1969-1974*. Ed. Brian Boyd. New York: Literary Classics of the US, 1996. 487-562.

“Death”: Barthes, Roland. “The Death of the Author.” Trans. Stephen Heath. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. V. Leitch, W. Cain, L. Fink, B. Johnson, J. McGowan & J. Williams. New York: Norton, 2001. 1466-1470.

“Work”: ---. “From Work to Text.” Trans. Stephen Heath. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. V. Leitch, W. Cain, L. Fink, B. Johnson, J. McGowan & J. Williams. New York: Norton, 2001. 1470-1475.

Introduction: Authors, Readers, and Aesthetic Bliss

Vladimir Nabokov has said that a function of all his novels is “to prove that the novel in general does not exist” (SO 115). For him, this task is partly a vehicle for an argument against the existence of several other categories as well, among which what he calls “everyday reality” (94) or “average reality” (118) is a chief target. Nabokov is neither a nihilist nor an idealist, however. His novels call, rather, for a modification of traditional views of reality through the proposition of a metaphysics that is still materialistic, but also *artistic* in that it suggests life can only be understood through art.

Part of Nabokov’s dismemberment of the novel-in-general’s existence involves a critique of many novels that do exist: ones that follow realistic conventions of form, character, plot, and chronology; simply put, he queries not only the average reality to which he refers, but also pieces of art that perpetuate that notion of reality. His own work effects the apotheosis of art as a realm that is superior to the traditionally real one, suggesting, even, that the former can become more real than the latter. Thus, he finds pieces of art that are bound by conventional notions of reality deficient both in originality and in their metaphysics. The primary purpose of this paper is to explore Nabokov’s artistic alternative to such works and to the picture of reality they reflect. To that end, what follows is chiefly a study of his style, focusing on Nabokov’s frequent self-references, the manifest artifice of his pieces, various types of patterns and puzzles he weaves through them, the resulting normalization of coincidence, and Nabokov’s unique manipulations of the novelistic form.

The glorification of art comes, in Nabokov’s case, with the glorification of the artist. It would not necessarily have to—Flaubert, Joyce, Eliot, and many others, not to

mention Aristotelian philosophy and its advocates, have sought the elevation of art simultaneously with the invisibility of the artist—but Nabokov’s work involves the author’s constant presence, and his view of art is one that gives great credit to the individual artist. Sheer fame is not the motivation for this view; on the contrary, Nabokov’s intrusion into his works serves largely to call attention to their artifice. Of course, as he repeatedly insisted, it also contributes to his private joys as an author.

The heavy focus on the role and status of the author in Nabokov’s books makes one wonder about the role of his audience. Many a reader has recoiled at Nabokov’s apparent aloofness, but it does not come at the reader’s expense. In his brief essay “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*,” he makes the curious declaration, “[f]or me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (*Lo* 314-315). This desire personalizes his claims about the realm of art and echoes that of his narrator, Humbert Humbert, who also seeks a certain aesthetic bliss and tells us of it rather bluntly, but whose attainment of that bliss requires the transgression of his milieu’s social and moral laws, a conflict that complicates his quest from the start. The author’s method is at once more noble and more stealthy: lurking beneath his esoteric tone is the suggestion that the bliss in question is there for the willing reader as well. In fact, Nabokov’s novels call for an interaction between author and reader that most critics have underestimated, perhaps because of Nabokov’s many author-centric assertions, and perhaps because it is simply difficult to speak about. Other analyses of Nabokov’s work are based on variants of reader-response theory and accord too much authority to the reader. An aim of this essay is to explore the

extent and nature of the author-reader interaction in Nabokov's novels, an issue that flows readily and necessarily from a consideration of the roles of author and of art.

The term "interaction," with respect to the relationship between author and reader, carries significant problems, mostly because it suggests a two-way communication that simply does not exist with respect to a work of fiction. Clearly the interaction in question, then, is not reciprocal. The reader cannot inform Nabokov, and yet she must wrestle not only with the text, but with its creator. Also, because of Nabokov's role as author of the texts, he is the initiator of the interaction and controls it to a large extent. As any assertion of authorial control is at odds with the tenets of the poststructuralist movement that flourished during the latter half of Nabokov's career, it will be helpful to include a brief critique of post-structuralist views of literature. I have selected the specific post-structuralist writings to which I refer partly because they are influential examples and partly because they directly address the author-function; in no way are the selections or my analysis exhaustive.

It is important to note that Nabokov despises didacticism in literature, and that his interaction with the reader is not a moralizing project. At the same time, passing off his work as solely aesthetic is a simplistic mistake that ignores the intricacy of Nabokov's fiction, not to mention the biting anti-totalitarian critiques in *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*. While any attempt to extend meaning from Nabokov's novels to the outside world draws preemptive disavowal from his own statements, the fact is that his fiction references a vast number of artworks and social and cultural phenomena, establishing an association that exists regardless of those statements. Furthermore, the

measure of self-containment that Nabokov's work does display through intra-narrative connections and through its rejection of symbolism is itself meaningful.

Nabokov's own almost monomaniacal pursuit of aesthetic bliss also limits the definition of his interaction with the reader. Any proper study of that relationship must properly focus on the author's role, and so the interaction can be broadly defined as everything the author puts in a book and that the reader actually engages. This definition rightly makes one wonder about the uniqueness of Nabokov's interaction with his readers, because every piece of writing allows for such interaction. It is because the words of Nabokov's books actually confront the reader with stylized appearances of himself that the reader must interact with more than the text. The establishment of this relationship augments the significance of other elements of the text, or, rather, highlights the fact that other portions, too, are part of the grand encounter. Moreover, Nabokov's interaction with the reader serves not only as a channel through which to pass the notion of reality his works espouse, but also as evidence of the notion itself, because of the way it contributes to Nabokov's constant emphasis on the artificiality of his works.

This study acquiesces, as it were, in Nabokov's absorption in his texts and the bliss they afford, insofar as my attention is fixed on the intricacies of his style. The reader can only claim as much authority as s/he earns through toilsome contention with the text; the more s/he does so, the more like the author s/he becomes. We should remember the etymological link between author and authority, both of which derive from the Latin word meaning creator. In reading, there is no forbidden fruit offering likeness to or usurpation of the creator's status; we must eat from every tree in the novel's garden,

and no sort of death awaits: neither for the eater of the fruit, nor, as Barthes would have it, for the one who put it there.

I will begin by examining Nabokov's intrusion into his own works, moving into a discussion of the meaningfulness of the resulting interaction with the reader. The second half of this essay will consider more deeply the methods by which Nabokov guides this interaction, including his manipulation of form and normalization of coincidence. The study's frequent and sometimes sudden transitions between books are not a mark of skittishness; rather, they render how the features in question pervade Nabokov's entire canon. Throughout the latter portions of the study I will describe and probe the metaphysical stance that that I term, summarily, Nabokov's fusion of art and life.

Chapter 1: Nabokov and the Intrusion of the Author

Nabokov's art draws practically unceasing attention to the author himself.

Reading *Bend Sinister* or *Pale Fire*, one cannot help seeing the man hovering over his writing lectern with an impish mien or outright chortle, plotting his next anagram, giving the go-ahead to another alliteration, importing a dodo-in-Paris phrase that turns out to be quite in place. Readers of Nabokov will know what I mean, but let me provide a few examples.

Early in *Lolita*, Humbert's first wife announces the presence of another man in her life. Humbert narrates, "these are ugly words for a husband to hear. They dazed me, I confess. To beat her up in the street, there and then, as an honest vulgarian might have done, was not feasible. Years of secret sufferings had taught me superhuman self-control" (27). The humor of this utterance mounts if we consider that they are part of an address to a criminal jury consisting of women, but the punning is just beginning. Little time elapses before Humbert's wife reveals that the driver of their taxi is the man in question, at which point the cab pulls up at a café where the adulterous couple explains to Humbert their love and future plans. At the close of a paragraph peppered with Humbert's snide comments about the Russian cab driver's aspirations and matter-of-fact treatment of the situation, the former asserts, "I can swear that he actually consulted me on such things as her diet, her periods, her wardrobe and the books she had read or should read. 'I think,' he said, 'she will like *Jean Christophe*?' Oh, he was quite a scholar, Mr. Taxovich" (28). That final epithet is not only humorous, but, coming from a non-Russian narrator in a book by an author we know to be Russian-born, calls the latter to mind—it is almost impossible to read such a passage without thinking of its creator. A page later,

after the Russian has left his rival's dwelling with his new trophy and her belongings, an excerpt exemplifying Nabokov's narrative style contains an additional taxi-pun:

I stomped to the bathroom to check if they had taken my English toilet water; they had not; but I noticed with a spasm of fierce disgust that the former Counselor of the Tsar, after thoroughly easing his bladder, had not flushed the toilet. That solemn pool of alien urine with a soggy, tawny cigarette butt disintegrating in it struck me as a crowning insult, and I wildly looked around for a weapon.

Actually, I daresay it was nothing but middle-class Russian courtesy (with an oriental tang, perhaps) that had prompted the good colonel (Maximovich! his name suddenly taxies back to me), a very formal person as they all are, to muffle his private need in decorous silence so as not to underscore the small size of his host's domicile with the rush of a gross cascade on top of his own hushed trickle.

(30)

Once again, the Russian-specific comments by a non-Russian narrator, the extravagant description of a base act, including the co-existence of words from different linguistic registers ("stomped," "soggy," "toilet," etc. occurring with "cascade," "underscore," "crowning," "domicile," "decorous," etc.), and the gimmicky pun, are index fingers fixed on Nabokov himself. Dispersed among the 22 nouns/entities in this excerpt are no fewer than 19 modifying adjectives, and several adverbs and other modifiers add to the characteristic linguistic extravagance of the description. The international references ("English toilet water," "former Counselor to the Tsar," "oriental tang," "middle-class Russian courtesy," "as they all are") highlight Nabokov's international experience and are members of a long list of geographical references and puns, some of which are based

on stereotypes, that he makes in his novels. Nabokov himself asserts the artistic delight of this passage in “On a Book Entitled Lolita,” where he includes Taxovich/Maximovich as one of the figures that he “pick[s] out for special delectation” (316).

Another passage that calls attention to the author occurs near the end of *Transparent Things*. In the middle of an unassuming paragraph begins a string of comments on typesetting and punctuation: “On the printed page the words ‘likely’ and ‘actually’ should be italicized too, at least *slightly*, to indicate a *slight* breath of wind inclining those characters (in the sense of both signs and personae)” (553). One might be able to lend this comment less weight, if not for its successor a few short paragraphs later: “We have shown our need for quotation marks” (554) and, a few pages later, in a passage littered with parenthetical additions, “a case of the hotel’s Dôle (which Monsieur Wilde did not recommend, in parentheses)” (556). These comments are practically self-referential, forcing the reader to think of the act of writing, more specifically, the writing of the piece at hand, and, in turn, the author of said piece.

Far more concrete instances of Nabokov’s intrusion abound. Earlier in *Transparent Things*, the narrator reports the purpose of one of the protagonist’s flights to Europe as “to look up Mr. R. and another American writer, also residing in Switzerland” (536). Nabokov by this time considered himself American both by technical citizenship as well as by felt identity, repeatedly emphasizing his American-ness, but lived in Montreux, Switzerland from 1960 to 1977.

Other frequent self-references, many anagrammatic, corroborate the previous one. Several pages later, we read how the protagonist, Hugh Person, an editor by trade, “queried the middle word in the name of an incidental character ‘Adam von Librikov’

because the German particle seemed to clash with the rest; or was the entire combination a sly scramble?" (541). Sly scramble, indeed; "Adam von Librikov," of course, is an anagram for Vladimir Nabokov. He does not always so generously expose these tidbits: the roster of *Lolita*'s classmates features the entry "Miranda, Viola," a partial anagram for "Vladimir," with a small remainder (*Lo* 52). Gavriel Shapiro notes that *mirando* is Italian for "wonderful" (16), and so Nabokov even adds a value claim as to his identity.

In *Pnin*, the narrator mentions a list of Russian émigré writers who frequent a certain summer villa; one of the names on the list is "Sirin"—Nabokov's pen name for his Russian works (117). At the same summer home, the guests at one point find themselves admiring a school of butterflies, yet ignorant as to everything but their beauty. One of the guests laments, "Pity Vladimir Vladimirovich is not here. . . . He would have told us all about these enchanting insects" (128). Indeed he would have: Nabokov was a lepidopterist of professional caliber; he wrote about butterflies extensively in his non-fiction, and frequently included entomological references in his novels.

Many critics have compared the fictional author in *Transparent Things*, Mr. R., to Nabokov. The first introduction of him reads, "Mister R. . . . wrote English considerably better than he spoke it. On contact with paper, it acquired a shapeliness, a richness, an ostensible dash, that caused some of the less demanding reviewers of his adopted country to call him a master stylist" (504). Nabokov claimed to write English considerably better than he spoke it, complained about his spoken oafishness, actually (*SO* 34); moreover, several reviews of his American works feature the terms "master stylist," "master prose stylist," or "one of the century's greatest prose stylists."¹ Nabokov has also confirmed the common view that the diegesis of *Transparent Things* is the work of Mr. R. himself,

¹ e.g., the back cover of the Vintage edition of *Lolita*.

meaning that every reference to that character is actually part of a slew of self-references by Mr. R., the author of Hugh's account. The comparison adds intrigue to a section that states, "Our Person, our reader, was not sure he entirely approved of R.'s luxuriant and bastard style; yet, at its best ('the gray rainbow of a fog-dogged moon'), it was diabolically evocative. . . . How good to have *that* type of talent!" (542). Regardless of the ultimate validity of the Nabokov-R. comparison, it commands enough attention, especially through the similarity of the two writers' styles, to make the reader consider Nabokov in Hugh's appraisal of R.'s style. These are but a few examples showing how the presence of the author in Nabokov's novels ranges from veiled to ostentatious; for better or worse, one cannot be rid of him.

Nabokov's self-proclaimed and often referenced role as a writer is that of an impersonation of an "anthropomorphic deity" (*Bend Sinister* 169) controlling the text, and this notion, along with a qualified analogy between authorship and deity, serves this study well. Many readers and critics treat authors in the paradoxical manner in which they treat God: realizing that "this all must have gotten here somehow," but wallowing in the sense Flaubert describes as "a kind of astonishment. 'How has that been done?' [the audience] must say, and they will feel crushed without knowing why" (quoted in Wood 12). Earlier, Flaubert says that "The author in his work must be like God in the universe: present everywhere, and visible nowhere" (11-12). But he was speaking solely as an author, not telling critics how to treat the creator of a piece of literature. Would a deist say that, because God stands in such a relation to his work, God has died? Furthermore, while many choose to deny the existence of God, and so to justify ignorance of His

intentions or continued interaction with His creation, no one can deny the material existence of the author—even the New Critics acknowledge, gritting their teeth, the author as the cause of a text. Sustaining the metaphor, I would say that the most prominent critical schools of the last forty years, and certainly of Nabokov’s later period, practice “authorial deism,” in which the author is a watchmaker who constructs and winds his work, and then leaves it to its own devices and at the mercy of all who will engage it.

Nabokov’s writing prohibits even this approach. Reading a page of his would be like exploring the Himalayas and repeatedly finding natural rock formations spelling “GOD”—or, in the spirit of Nabokov’s anagramming, “ODG.” It is fair to wonder what about Nabokov’s presence is peculiar to him, and to reference other authors/artists of his time who wove themselves into their works. Alfred Hitchcock, whose lifespan overlapped with Nabokov’s almost perfectly and with whom Nabokov very nearly collaborated on a project,² was fond of inserting himself into his films in the form of cameos or silhouettes. In *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, John Fowles appears as a stranger on a train, beard and all. Many other writers have pulled comparable stunts, but there are aspects of Nabokov’s intrusion that make it distinctly Nabokovian. In Fowles’s case only a few self-references occur in the entire 450-page novel; these address the reader and are downright conversational. By the time one arrives at the next such reference, the previous one has nearly been forgotten. The constancy of Nabokov’s intrusion, then, is characteristic, and suggests that it is not for the reader’s enrichment or

² See David Gates, “Nabokov and Hitchcock: the collaboration that never was,” *Tin House*, Winter 2001: 2, no. 2.

caution, as Fowles's could be said to be, but rather to prevent the reader at all times from forgetting whose work s/he is reading.³

There is also a difference between mere presence and sheer control. When Nabokov claims the role of anthropomorphic deity, he surely means he plays it through more than anagrammatic and autobiographical references, techniques he was not the first to employ. These are trademarks of Nabokov's, but what stamps his writing as distinctly and unerringly Nabokovian is found not simply in isolated references, but in more general categories: his syntax, his diction, his hidden structures, his organization, his style, his *signature*. In a move whose actual goal it is to show what *replaces* Nabokov in his writing, Michael Wood makes a somewhat murky distinction between the author's "style" and his "signature" (22-23), a distinction that is helpful even though it disregards other ways in which Nabokov may be present in his work:

A literary signature would then be the visible shorthand for a literary person; a style would be a more complex but still legible trace of that person's interaction with the world. Writers usually have more signature than style, I think. Signature is their habit and their practice, their mark; style is something more secretive, more thoroughly dispersed among the words, a reflection of luck or grace, or of a moment when signature overcomes or forgets itself. (23)

Wood is appropriately cautious about his very subjective classification, but it is worth considering. The lengthy quote from *Lolita* above would probably be an example of what Wood considers Nabokov's signature, a section calling the author to mind, as I

³ Joshua Miller has pointed out to me that, more recently, Dave Eggers and David Foster Wallace have made good use of authorial intrusion; countless other names could be mentioned as well. The task of this paper is neither in the first nor last instance to characterize the intrusion of various authors; I pick out Hitchcock and Fowles as well-known examples and to mention simple instances of other types of authorial intrusion or self-reference.

argued (although at the time I called it representative of his *style*). Let us consider one more, from *Transparent Things*:

In another no less ominous nocturnal experience, he would find himself trying to stop or divert a trickle of grain or fine gravel from a rift in the texture of space and being hampered in every conceivable respect by cobwebby, splintery, filamentary elements, confused heaps and hollows, brittle debris, collapsing colossuses. He was finally blocked by masses of rubbish, and *that* was death. Less frightening but perhaps imperiling a person's brain to an even greater extent were the "avalanche" nightmares at the rush of awakening when their imagery turned into the movement of verbal colluvia in the valleys of Toss and Thurn, whose gray rounded rocks, *Roches étonnées*, are so termed because of their puzzled and grinning surface, marked by dark "goggles" (*écarquillages*). Dream-man is an idiot not wholly devoid of animal cunning; the fatal flaw in his mind corresponds to the splutter produced by tongue twisters: "the risks scoundrels take." (530, all italics Nabokov's)⁴

The alpine pun ("Toss and Thurn"), relating to "avalanche" and the Swiss setting of the story, the mixing of different linguistic registers ("colluvia," "debris," and "rocks," all indicating piles of stones), the informative, even cold, tone in the treatment of a subject that would seem to require great tact and sensitivity, and the introduction of foreign phrases, are all elements of Nabokov's signature. That signature also penetrates even deeper than syntactic, semantic, and lexical, right down to the play of sounds and graphemes, as in "collapsing colossuses," "verbal colluvia in the valleys," "filamentary

⁴ In the ascription of the italics to Nabokov, the conventional possessive pronoun technically indicates origin, not ownership (and is here relevant only to "*that*," as the other italicized words are so simply because they are French), but it handily foregrounds the author's authority.

elements” and the 23 sets of double-letters in this excerpt, not including the “m-m” of “Dream-man,” which, as an invented hyphenated compound, is also characteristic of Nabokov.

We might even say that many of the autobiographical and other self-references, the *Lolita* passage, this one from *Transparent Things*, and other sections exhibiting what Wood calls signature conjure up the writer at the same time as or before we think about the writing. Presumably it is for this reason that Wood speaks more fondly of style:

It’s not that style is always or simply better than signature. The signature may be wonderful and the style quite modest. But the style will always be stealthier, and in Nabokov’s case the style is intricate and haunting and powerful, while the signature can be dazzling to the point of weakness. . . . Style is more impersonal in Eliot’s and Flaubert’s sense: we think about the writing before we think about who wrote it. (23-24)

Wood seems to prefer the impersonal a priori, along with Eliot, Flaubert, and a host of others, and to slap signature on the wrist for its evocation of the author, almost as though, while glad for the beauty of the signed passages, he finds it naughty of Nabokov to have included so many of them. What is more, in his preference of the impersonal style, defined basically as the absence of signature, Wood implies that the best kind of writing is that which cannot be conclusively identified with a specific author, a kind that, stripped of the dust jacket, would essentially be of no one and intended for no one—as if the ideal were for there to be only one kind of writing, “writing,” and, correspondingly, only one scale of style. In this I hear echoes of Oscar Wilde’s claim that “[b]ooks are well-written or badly written. / That is all” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 21), a statement that makes

sense to the extent that "people are either good or bad; that is all" makes sense—we know there is variation within these two categories, and that the line between them is dotted at best. Interestingly, the second clause of the same preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is "To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim" (21). It makes sense that proponents of the latter claim would assert the superiority of style over signature; we see something like this reflected in the writings of poststructuralist critics as well, though, unlike Wilde, they are not fundamentally motivated by an artistic concern.

Signature poses a problem for the ideal proposed by Wilde and Flaubert: signature, specifically Nabokov's, reveals *both* art and the artist. Perhaps authors "should know by now" that they are to be invisible in their work, but the fact is that they are not, and it is important to note that in Nabokov's case the stroke of his signature is even more ubiquitous than Wood would have us believe. That is, passages that could reasonably be labeled signed under Wood's definition occur so often that one cannot attentively read a Nabokov novel without having before one's eyes or in recent memory a sample of Nabokov's signature.

Chapter 2: Nabokov and the Persistence of the Author

Barthes would not only dislike the effects of a signature like Nabokov's (too much attention on the author), he will not even allow for authorial deism (high awareness of an author's *style* might lie between the two). His *Death of the Author* is modeled on Nietzsche's *Death of God*, which hardly accommodates the present or past existence of God as a real entity. What is at stake for Barthes is most apparent in the clinching line of his seminal work, where he declares that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" ("Death" 1470).⁵ He does not explain why there can be no coexistence of the two; what is more, he does not justify the implication that the reader needs to be born, which would mean that s/he is yet unborn, that s/he has some right to be a reader, and, in Barthes' argument, that the reader holds the right to control the text as one. Earlier in the same paragraph, Barthes claims the following outright, of a specific sentence written by Balzac: "No one, no 'person,' says it: its source, its voice, is not the true place of the writing, which is reading" (1469). Interestingly, he refers to the sentence as "the Balzac sentence," slipping into a suggestion of that man's ownership of it, or indicating, at least, that it is more Balzac's than anyone else's. Here Barthes's claim that reading is the "true place of the writing" seems most relevant, and only questionably derived from the evidence he goes on to present. He continues:

Another—very precise—example will help to make this clear: recent research (J.-P. Vernant) has demonstrated the constitutively ambiguous nature of Greek tragedy, its texts being woven from words that each character understands unilaterally (this perpetual misunderstanding is exactly the 'tragic'); there is,

⁵ Throughout this paper, I do not make the distinction Barthes and some others uphold between *author* and *Author*, mostly because this is not a theoretical work about the author-function in general, but rather an examination of Nabokov's techniques.

however, someone who understands each word in its duplicity and who, in addition, hears the very deafness of the characters speaking in front of him—this someone being precisely the reader (or here, the listener). (1469)

Even if recognition of the duplicity of words and of the obliviousness of characters is diagnostic of “the true place of writing,” there is no reason, from Barthes’s example, to conclude that the author has no such awareness. Barthes himself must know this—someone had to do the “weaving,” and that the result is tragic is no coincidence. A competent and thoughtful author in all likelihood will be more aware of these circumstances than almost any reader; many an author will be rubbing his or her hands with glee over them. In fact, the “tragic” necessarily begins with the author and the author’s emphasis on the category; if the reader were the person on whom it depended, works could not be classified as tragedies or comedies until they had been read or performed.

Again, if the recognition of the duplicity of words and of the obliviousness of characters really defines “the true place of writing,” then at the very least we should say that authors and readers together form the locus of writing; this is indeed a popular, and in many senses accurate, assessment. But Barthes’s concluding assertion that the birth of the reader requires or demands the death of the Author shows his more radical stance, one that delights in power-transferring as an automatically honorable and progressive practice. Here Barthes’s claim sounds more like a prescriptive political ideal than a descriptive linguistic theory, and seems to be motivated more by a desire to let power rest with many, whether they deserve it or not, than by a concern for good textual

interpretation.⁶ In the context of a political analogy, he prefers a democracy potentially consisting of clowns over an aristocracy.

“From Work to Text,” a later essay by Barthes, contains the historical observation that the advent of democracy brought a cultural shift of emphasis from writing to reading (as seen in the goals of the education system, for instance), where both had originally been the rights of a privileged class. Barthes’s desire is to close the historically established gap between writing and reading by uniting them in “a single signifying practice” (“Work” 1474).⁷ This phrase again suggests the collaboration of author and reader, but is undermined by his advocacy for the former’s death. His model ends up looking more like communism than democracy, certainly not capitalist or even representative democracy: “[T]he Text participates in its own way in a social utopia; [. . .] the Text achieves, if not the transparenence of social relations, at least of language relations: the Text is that space where no language has a hold over any other” (1475).

This notion is problematic for Nabokov as a person and as an author, and for us as his readers. Having lost his father, countless other relatives and friends, his country, and, in an important sense, a language, to the Russian Bolshevik regime, he knew the destructive capabilities of a group of people bent on eliminating the authority of a few. This is not to say that Nabokov was a Tsarist or that he favored monarchy in general—his father, of whom he speaks highly, was a liberal political philosopher, and Nabokov found the democratic system of the United States attractive enough to become a citizen—but it

⁶ Of course, Barthes does not care much for the deciphering of texts anyway, “meaning” is to him anathema.

⁷ Throughout this paper, I do not make Barthes’s distinction between “work” and “Text,” except when citing that particular essay of his.

is clear that Nabokov despised Russian Communism and wanted nothing to do with the Bolsheviks.

The idea of the text empowering a mass of readers, then, echoes communist ideals with which Nabokov would be uncomfortable at best, even though he remains largely indifferent to political matters. Nabokov once listed “public interest” as one of his two least favorite terms, and his propensity for topics and techniques that could be considered arcane—lepidoptery, chess problems, multilingual puns—aligns with the following response to an interviewer’s question about the contribution of his art to society: “I don’t give a damn for the group, the community, the masses, and so forth” (*SO* 33).⁸ The alternative, though, is not only the Nabokovian self for which many readers accuse the author of caring exclusively. Rather, as Nabokov says in response to the same question, “[A work of art] is only important to the individual, and only the individual reader is important to me,” and though he later mentions that he is “all for the ivory tower, and for writing to please one reader alone—one’s own self,” he does so to set up the assertion that he does write for others also. Furthermore, the conversational tone of much of his fiction—not in the sense of being colloquial, but in the sense of the narrator interacting with the reader—confirms his concern for reading as a response to someone else’s writing (the gerund as well as the noun).

In addition to the political one, Barthes also addresses both familial and theological metaphors for the Author-text (/–Text) relationship: “We know now that a text

⁸ Later in the same interview (conducted for *Playboy* magazine), Nabokov indulges us—without being asked—in his “second favorite fact”: “The fact that since my youth—I was 19 when I left Russia—my political creed has remained as bleak and changeless as an old gray rock. It is classical to the point of triteness. Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of art. The social or economic structure of the ideal state is of little concern to me” (34-35).

is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the message of the Author-God)” (“Death” 1468). Elsewhere, Barthes writes,

The work is caught up in a process of filiation. [. . .] The author is reputed the father and the owner of his work [. . .] As for the Text, it reads without the inscription of the Father. [. . .] Hence no vital respect is due to the Text: it can be *broken* (which is just what the Middle Ages did with two nevertheless authoritative texts—Holy Scriptures and Aristotle); it can be read without the guarantee of its father. (“Work” 1473, italics Barthes’s)

Both origin and ownership are at issue here. Barthes claims that the former becomes irrelevant, and that the latter thus belongs to an ill-defined combination of the reader and language itself. Nabokov’s emphasis on his own presence in and control over his works would alone be enough to confirm his abhorrence of this stance, but he also provides some more direct evidence. While Nabokov refuses to speak much about academically constructed schools of any sort—art, criticism, philosophy—he does, in an interview, denounce the concept of *écriture* as an “intolerable vulgarism,” adding, “(French weeklies, please note!)” (*SO* 158).

I have mentioned that Barthes’s emphasis on the reader sounds almost political, since he is not concerned with textual meaning (although he is not nearly as socially minded as his contemporary, Foucault, who also wrote on the Author-function), but it is also, like Wood’s definition of style, impersonal:

The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is

without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.

(“Death” 1469, italics Barthes’s)

Thus Barthes subverts even the reader’s role in that s/he serves only the text, even though the latter, he says, is also not due any “vital respect.” The impersonality of the reader also confuses Barthes’s concluding claim that rings almost as a reader’s rights rallying cry. The same sentence even contains a socially charged phrase (“the arrogant antiphrastical recriminations of good society”), but turns out to indicate, essentially, a stepping stone for “text’s rights” or “language’s rights.” This move corresponds to the poststructuralist apotheosis of language—Barthes would cringe at my use of the term “apotheosis,” but for all his derision of metaphorically theological approaches in literature and criticism, that is exactly what he does with language.

As he and other poststructuralists justifiably point out, words may acquire unintended meanings after publication, and the author, far more often than not, will not be present to indicate a desired meaning. But there is clearly method to the selection and order of the words, sentences, and sections of a text, and a text’s elements will not appear in an unintended order except by sabotage, publisher’s error, or printing catastrophe—all faults that we as readers would find grave; importantly, we would consider the result something other than the author’s work, and demand to have the real thing.⁹ The process and result of lexical selection and ordering are what truly constitute the author’s style—

⁹ There have been schools of art that emphasized non-method in the assembly of materials, notably, the Dadaist school. This, of course, is a method in itself, but even with such an approach the final order is fixed. Hypertext allows the reader to choose the order, to a certain extent, but this is actually the point of hypertext, not a loophole through which one can undermine the intentions of a hypertext author.

pre-interpretive processes over which language wields as little control as the set of all the world's possible ingredients does over the preparation of a meal.

In fact, we could loosely analogize the author of a novel to the writer of a recipe, where the reader is one who follows it, with whatever result. The result may vary from reader to reader and from time to time, but it depends on the recipe as assembled by the author. If the reader does not follow the recipe in any way, s/he might as well be reading another book, or, perhaps, no book at all. As for the recipe—the text—its existence is powerless and pointless without an author and reader. Powerless, because it could not assemble itself and cannot change itself, pointless, because it does not exist for its own sake, but only to the extent that humans engage its meaning. The same is the case for language in general, which only changes and “means” through varying use and shared use, respectively, by human beings. Writers of dictionaries are in effect historians, not prescribing meanings, but simply recording the contexts in which people in the past have used words, and it is an elementary linguistic and semiotic observation that words have meanings only and exactly as human use and consciousness ascribe meaning to them. I should qualify the recipe analogy by pointing out that the assembler of a recipe is usually unknown and rarely relevant to the understanding of the recipe. Nabokov's recipes are a special case, then, because they actually contain elements that prescribe awareness of the author.

With regard to texts, many (including Barthes) would argue that they have no meaning at all, or that there is no such thing as meaning. Words have connotations and denotations, though—referents, in poststructuralist theory, and however the signifier may obfuscate the original referent, signifiers are of significance, in both the common and

literal senses, only through their connotation or denotation of concepts. Moreover, what is the fundamental difference between “funk” and “ukfn” if not that the former carries meaning while the latter does not?¹⁰ As texts are combinations of meaningful elements of language (i.e., words), then, they can have meanings, and as the meanings of these clusters exist only by human consciousness, meanings of texts are accessible to humans.

¹⁰ If speakers began using “ukfn” to refer to a concept or entity, it would acquire meaning; in fact, it may already have a meaning in a language other than English. Here is a good place to assert my sensitivity toward the differences between the written and spoken word, and toward written and spoken signs in general. While the written word exists physically in a way that the spoken word does not except when uttered, it does not therefore acquire meaning apart from human consciousness.

Chapter 3: Nabokov and the Artistry of Authorhood

The awareness that language is ultimately subordinate to human beings—an awareness arrived at by recognizing that language is limited to its use, and the fact that there is no naturally occurring entity that is language in the way that there are naturally occurring entities that are humans—frees us to focus on the roles and interaction of author and reader. Nabokov has apparently already reached this conclusion when he says that the pleasures of writing

correspond exactly to the pleasures of reading, the bliss, the felicity of a phrase is shared by writer and reader: by the satisfied writer and the grateful reader, or—which is the same thing—by the artist grateful to the unknown force in his mind that has suggested a combination of images and by the artistic reader whom this combination satisfies. (*SO* 40)

This statement not only portrays the ideal interplay between author and reader, centered in the shared engagement of words, phrases, and themes, it also foregrounds the fact that literary writing is a form of art, a notion with which Nabokov was obsessed, as he reveals in his interviews and writings. While the matter of the artistic quality of written fiction may seem clear, the connection is apparently neither obvious nor very important to poststructuralists, and recent literary theorists in general have often ignored it.¹¹

It makes sense that many literary theorists have focused on writing as their field of inquiry, since that is of course the medium in literary art, but they have not hesitated to cross certain categorical boundaries. Foucault, for instance, mentions other modes of writing like placards and laundry lists, and others have helpfully addressed writing as a

¹¹ Academic writing is not entirely devoid of language that refers to literature as art, but this connection was rarely analyzed productively with respect to the fiction of Nabokov's era, and is conspicuously absent from the most prominent theoretical pieces of the second half of the 20th century.

form of communication or as a technical discipline. Thus, these theorists have crossed the right boundaries in terms of linguistic theory—since all these modes employ language, written language, at that—but the wrong boundaries when it comes to literary theory, since they employ and prescribe the same guidelines for considering artistic and non-artistic writing.¹²

Specifically, most studies of the author-function, and most calls for the death of the author, obscure the role of the author-as-artist. Not all instances of writing are art, but literature is art, if we allow (as we should) that there is good art and bad art.¹³ Foucault comes closest to recognizing the author-as-artist when he acknowledges that his consideration of the author-function has disregarded other genres (1631). Among these genres, though, he mentions not only the artistic ones of painting and music, but also technical fields, expanding the scope of his inquiry to other modes of discourse—again, making a helpful generalization—but disregarding another relevant generalization that considers certain kinds of writing in the context of art. Indeed, St. Jerome’s criteria for determining authorship, which Foucault critiques, would be guilty of the same categorical oversight, if they claimed to speak to the context of modern literary criticism.

Barthes, too, appears at first to uncover this quality of literature in his seventh and final approach to the Text, mentioning the pleasure (*plaisir*) of certain works and the pleasure (*jouissance*) possible with Texts, but his essay ends a paragraph later (“Work to Text” 1475). In his earlier “The Death of the Author,” he does recognize the actual object of his theory when he says that what he has hitherto called literature should

¹² How to draw this line is not the subject of this paper, but we can see, if we start with extremes, essential differences between a novel, a national constitution, and a shopping list, differences demanding that the various modes be talked about differently. I recognize that my recipe analogy similarly ignores these distinctions, but it does so only temporarily and for the sake of illustration, not linguistic theory.

¹³ To distinguish between “good” and “bad” art is neither the intent of nor a necessity for this project.

actually be called writing (1469). But he fails to acknowledge that literature may have other qualities than writing at large, more specific or downright different, and to warn his readers to consider this distinction. In a very relevant passage, he goes so far as to call it inoperative altogether:

Leaving aside literature itself (such distinctions really becoming invalid), linguistics has recently provided the destruction of the Author with a valuable analytical tool by showing that the whole of the enunciation is an empty process, functioning perfectly without there being any need for it to be filled with the person of the interlocutors. (1467)

I have already addressed the linguistic claims referenced in this excerpt. The notion that enunciations function without being “filled with the person of the interlocutors” is accurate, but not at issue. Few people would posit the necessity of such a filling; what an utterance must contain is not a person but a sense, or multiple senses, and these, as I argued, are never innate in a word, but are supplied by people who share a language.

“Leaving aside literature itself” should be absurd to anyone concerned with the study of that category. The linguistic science is itself a “valuable analytical tool,” for the analysis of literature, but only that: someone acting solely as a linguist has as much to say about a literary piece as a scientist of acoustics does about a symphony. The failure to make this observation has allowed critics to go on disregarding the aspect of literature that is its “artness” as they continue the artless application of linguistic theory to works of art.¹⁴ Both critics and lay readers must somehow take into account the fact that they are interacting with a piece of art, and Nabokov’s fiction constantly underscores this need.

¹⁴ Foucault is less a linguistic theorist than a social and philosophical one, but his failure to limn Venn’s circles around the right entities when he engages in linguistic and literary criticism is still important to note.

While Wood surely esteems Nabokov as an artist, and correctly asserts that language is “stealthier” (19) than Barthes makes it out to be, even he does not let the idea of literature as art lead to any theoretical conclusion. Wood is right in suggesting we should think about the writing before we think about who wrote it, but Nabokov’s work labors to prevent us from *never* thinking about who wrote it. In giving his fiction this quality, Nabokov is not only, not even mostly, concerned that he receives credit for his work; more important to him is that people recognize that the text was written by *someone*, that it was invented by someone, that it is invented, not real—that it is sheer art.¹⁵ For this most fundamental aspect to be clear, the author must travel that progression in reverse, creating a trail of crumbs for the reader to trace—a slightly more subtle form of some Brechtian stunt in which Nabokov might have literally written “THIS IS ART” on every page.

Nabokov valued the awareness of his fiction’s inventedness enough to structure his novels in a way that specifically points to this aspect; alternatively, one could say that he was so concerned with his novels’ artness that it emerges even in their structures. In a brief article proposing a model of reading *Ada*, Samuel Schuman responds to R.J.A. Kilbourne’s suggestion that it be read chiastically (that is, as a form reflected across a center axis and, thus, readable from either endpoint towards the middle) by proposing an even more drastic method: that the novel be read all at once. With a vast and, in most cases, sequential, medium like writing this is, of course, impossible—at least until one has read it so many times that one is simultaneously aware of practically every part.

Schuman cites an interview in which Nabokov says, “I think that the audience an author imagines, when he imagines that kind of a thing, is a room filled with people

¹⁵ Nabokov’s treatment of the “imaginary” and the “real” is a major subject of the next chapters.

wearing his own mask” (*SO* 18, quoted in Schuman 126). I posit that he does not mean a crowd of people who look like him in the sense of sharing his appearance, but who look like him in the sense of looking in the same manner as he: sharing his *view*. Such a reader would see what the author sees—this idea also recalls the interaction to which Nabokov refers in his statement about the pleasures of reading—involving a simultaneously panoramic and focused inspection of the work. Again, this is an insurmountable task, in practice, but Schuman is gentle in his expectations: “If, in rereading the first paragraph, we have a clear recollection of the conclusion and the middle, then, I think, we ‘get’ it” (126).

Fittingly, this is how Nabokov wrote his novels, as explained in his statements and by his actual notecards: “I don’t write consecutively from the beginning to the next chapter and so on to the end. I just fill in the gaps of the picture, of this jigsaw puzzle which is quite clear in my mind, picking out a piece here and a piece there and filling out part of the sky and part of the landscape” (*SO* 16-17, quoted in Schuman 126). Schuman omits another statement by Nabokov that is even more to the point:

Since this entire structure [of an unwritten novel], dimly illumined in one’s mind, can be compared to a painting, and since you do not have to work gradually from left to right for its proper perception, I may direct my flashlight at any part or particle of the picture when setting it down in writing. I do not begin my novel at the beginning. I do not reach chapter three before I reach chapter four, I do not go dutifully from one page to the next, in consecutive order; no, I pick out a bit here and a bit there, till I have filled all the gaps on paper. (*SO* 32)

Here we see one of at least three relevant ways in which Schuman's reading is helpful. Implicitly, it provides an example of how an awareness of the author's technique supports a method of reading. It is not necessary to say that a reader should know from the outset, based on Nabokov's practice, to read a book in a certain way—even knowing that Nabokov wrote non-sequentially, one does not necessarily know in what order he wrote the various components, nor is there a valid logical argument that suggests the right way to read a book is in the order it was written. We rarely have access to an author's methods, but this instance shows that considering them can be helpful when we do.

A related contribution of Schuman's article and of Nabokov's pertinent statements is their expansion of the notion of viewing a piece of literature as a unified whole—being able to successively focus on a detail in the lower left corner and on the entire picture with great speed and precision. This idea emphasizes the pleasure that exists in reading, but it also speaks to issues like Wood's distinction between style and signature. If there is any part of a work of art that displays signature, then the near-instantaneous scrutiny of the entire work will emphasize these parts as much as any others, and the author will be present in the reader's mind to whatever extent the author inhabits the signed passages.

Finally, Schuman's approach highlights the fact that an author of fiction is rightly viewed as an artist. Culture has endorsed the synonymy of painting and art, acknowledging also the artistry of music, dance, poetry, and a few other modes. But by publicizing his very method of writing and the corresponding connection between his fiction and visual art, a form everyone recognizes as art, Nabokov provides a constant reminder of the artistic quality of fiction—his way of scrawling "THIS IS ART" across each

page. He is motivated in part by his general glorification of art and the artist, but this has to do, in turn, with his distrust of the traditional boundaries between the imaginary and the real, in a sense, his metaphysics.

In the absence of these considerations, Nabokov might well have shunned the anagrammatic and other self-references, if not, perhaps, for the aesthetic bliss he derived from them. He once declared, like many authors, that he took great care to keep his characters beyond the limits of his own identity (*SO* 13). Thus, it is important to note that even “autobiographical” references in Nabokov’s novels are stylized, tailored in part to point toward the “artness” of the works containing them, and in part to be components of that art. Nabokov’s features do not map onto Mr. R.’s with a one-to-one correspondence; for instance, the latter is German and excruciatingly obese. As Wood puts it, the autobiographical effect is “a literary effect not a confession” (14). An understanding of Nabokov’s concept of autobiography is essential to an understanding of his view of the author’s role, and I will return to his treatment of autobiography after more thoroughly analyzing his emphasis on artifice over mimesis and the corresponding primacy of the imaginary over what he calls average reality.

Chapter 4: Nabokov, Exhaustion, and the Weight of Artifice

Even before he died, Nabokov's later works were being characterized as members of a class of "literature of exhaustion." The term was introduced by John Barth in an essay in which he speaks mainly of Jorge Luis Borges and peripherally of Samuel Beckett and Nabokov;¹⁶ John Stark has written a book with the title *The Literature of Exhaustion*, whose three sections are on Borges, Nabokov, and Barth himself, with credit to the latter for the term. The extension of the sequence would be to write about all four men in the same volume; perhaps this is that work, although I refer only to criticism by the two Johns.

For both of them, the term "literature of exhaustion" refers to a set of works by writers who observe that the possibilities of the conventional novel have been depleted. Rather than let this observation cripple them, these writers create works that are "about" the impossibility of original literature but are, of course, themselves new and original works—a paradox that shows the novel is not at all a genre only of the past, but must be written differently to be worthwhile. Pieces of literature of exhaustion often show formal originality and are definitively nonrealist. In fact, the works of the three writers discussed in Stark's book form a strong critique of realist fiction; this aspect of Nabokov's canon is relevant to the analysis of his presentation of the role of the author as artist and of art in general, and to the nature of the author-reader interaction in his works.¹⁷

¹⁶ John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," in *The Friday Book* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1984), 62-76.

¹⁷ While Nabokov does dislike the school called Realism and most works belonging to it, my use of the terms mimetic, realist, realistic, and conventional is not limited to that school; Nabokov admires some works that many critics include in the category of Realism, for instance, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. He critiques not a specific school of art but specific features of many artworks, as I will show.

The word exhaustion in the title phrase not only implies the depletion of the possibilities of the conventional/realist novel, but also indicates a specific technique within literature of exhaustion whereby authors employ formal structures or thematic entities that involve infinite repetition or the possibility thereof, exhausting possibilities with a single fell swoop that does not require the painstaking repetition itself: simply showing that the repetition or expansion is possible to an infinite degree makes the point well enough, and through this move writers bypass, as it were, the need to use or demonstrate each specific possibility.

I can provide no better examples than the ones Barth gives from Borges's canon. "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" features a secret society that convenes to write a massive fictitious encyclopedia through which its writers define an entire hypothetical world. This world, since Borges does not limit the volumes of the encyclopedia or delineate its full contents, can be thought of as containing an infinite set of entities. Any conceivable or unconceivable entity might be in the *First Encyclopedia of Tlön*, as it is called, and it is the absence of an exhaustive list that clinches the infinitude of possibilities. Furthermore, the world in which the encyclopedia makers live is itself an imaginary world, conjured up by Borges, and this layering also suggests the possibility that the sequence of inventing worlds could recur ad infinitum. Finally, the very fact that the world in which these infinite possibilities exist is an imaginary realm asserts the primacy of the imaginary over the real.

A more straightforward and more jarring example is Borges's "Library of Babel," which describes a storehouse containing works of every possible combination of spaces and characters, thus, every novel ever written, and every novel yet unwritten—and not

only that, but every possible human utterance, suggesting the exhaustion of the fictitious and the real alike.

With respect to Nabokov, my interpretation differs in part from Barth's, who holds that the literature of exhaustion is a response to the depletion of the possibilities of the novel as a form, and characterizes pieces of literature of exhaustion as the way writers rise above this realization. There is no reason to think that Nabokov would have preferred to write conventional novels, but could not because he found that category exhausted. On the contrary, he considered conventional fiction to be poor art, deficient in that it lacked both inventiveness and timelessness. In other words, his own work was not merely a response to such literature's exhaustion, but to its inherent defects. Nabokov's novels fit into the category of literature of exhaustion in part simply because they happen to share similar features with the works of Borges and Barth, who may well have been responding to the exhaustion of the novel as a form. Nevertheless, it is not unhelpful to include Nabokov in the discussion of these writers, because the critical work that treats this category describes its features well, and the idea of the exhaustion of the novelistic form serves in those works, as here, as a starting point for the discussion of the stylistic and formal aspects of the literature in question.

Principal among these aspects, and even more so in Nabokov than in Borges, is the literature's emphasis on artifice. The theory of art behind these works differs entirely from the classical one that views the production of art as a mimetic task—a skillful rendering of the natural world. The aesthetic of fiction in this tradition was its faithfulness to traditional, fundamental principles of reality. Writers like Borges, Nabokov, and Barth, however, shun this aesthetic. Many modernists had already initiated

a shift in focus from subject to form and style, but still often produced mimetic fiction. Nabokov's novels specifically mount an attack against mimesis in art, suggesting not only that the so-called real world makes for a less interesting subject than invented ones do, but that everyday reality itself is to be mistrusted.

His stance differs somewhat from that of Borges, a staunch believer in idealism, the school of metaphysics that holds reality to exist only in human minds. According to idealism, objects and phenomena become real if and only if they are perceived; what can be considered reality in general is that which a community of humans agrees they perceive similarly. Borges's dislike for realist fiction, then, stems from his opposition to metaphysical materialism, to which most writers and readers hold.

Several of Nabokov's statements seem at first to identify him with such a philosophy. In one interview, he says, "I tend more and more to regard the objective existence of *all* events as a form of impure imagination" (*SO* 154, italics Nabokov's¹⁸). In other places, he or his characters speak of inventing reality altogether. But it is important to understand that Nabokov uses the word "reality" rather loosely, practically always puts it in quotes, and even calls attention to those quotation marks. Elsewhere he states quite simply that everyday reality does not exist (*SO* 94). Here, too, the term is qualified, this time by the word "everyday." Qualifiers like this and like the quotation marks indicate that Nabokov believes in reality, just not the way it is typically defined. The qualifiers also emphasize the deficiencies of the term, and it will be helpful in what follows to keep in mind that the notion of reality, both as word and concept, is difficult to discuss.

¹⁸The interview responses were submitted in print.

Nabokov's pre-occupation with and avid enjoyment of positive science also point to his belief in a world that exists regardless of whether we perceive it or not. His deep respect for nature, though, has to do primarily with what he considers its artistic qualities (see, e.g., *SM* 124-125, 166-167). Nabokov holds the mimicry and colorful designs and rituals displayed by flora and fauna to be artistic in essence, sometimes helpful for a practical purpose, but often enough existing for sheer beauty or simply to make possible the bliss of discovering them. Thus we can begin to understand Nabokov's view of life and art: the former existing independently of art, but best understandable through the latter.

Traditional works of mimetic fiction perpetuate the common notion that direct examination of the physical world, with the aid of rational thinking, suffices for a full understanding of it. To Nabokov, this stance obscures the potential for the discovery of beauty in art and life, and it is for this reason that he finds the popular approach disdainful. Accordingly, Nabokov uses his own fiction to subvert that notion of reality and the schools of art that correspond to it. A good introductory instance of this subversion can be found in *Pale Fire*. John Shade is the author of the poem that comprises the second section of the novel. Charles Kinbote is the author of the edition containing the poem, the foreword, and the commentary. Shade's poem is deeply autobiographical, dealing with the death of his daughter, with his travels, and with other personal events. Because of this, as Stark points out, the section reads similarly to the way a realist work might read; it "purports to tell the truth" (69). Accordingly, the reader is inclined to treat the information contained in it as true in the sense that, in the novel, it "actually happened."

As the commentary turns out to be connected loosely, at best, with the poem itself, and as the reader learns to mistrust its author, Kinbote, the commentary begins to read more and more the way a non-realist novel might. Rather than drop the book at this point, the reader shifts her epistemological tactic to figure out what really happened in the life of Kinbote, who, just as he uses/misuses Shade's poem to relate his own life, also uses his own account to obscure the poem and whatever its original meaning might have been. It is worth noting that the poem contains a great deal of information about Shade and practically none about Kinbote, while the commentary contains both. Since we have nearly a thousand lines of what we may consider reliable information about the former, and our only information about the eccentric Kinbote comes from that man himself, deciphering Kinbote and, to a lesser extent, his relationship to Shade, becomes a far more interesting and engaging process.

Furthermore, Shade's work is an instance of mimetic poetry, and even Kinbote recognizes the shortcomings of this mode. Whether the following comment of Kinbote's is in character or comes in a moment when Nabokov intrudes to make a point, it is certainly a statement with which the latter would agree: "'Reality' is neither the subject nor the object of true art which creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the average 'reality' perceived by the communal eye" (94, quoted in Stark 82). This statement takes a versatile swipe at idealism as well as the common view of reality. The phrase "perceived by the communal eye" is idealist language, calling to mind the criterion that particular philosophy uses for the determination of an entity's reality. At the same time, the placing of "reality" in quotes (as in Nabokov's interviews) indicates that the reality in question is the deficient one acknowledged by the general public.

It is noteworthy that of the three occurrences of the term in Kinbote's claim, only the one referring to the reality art creates is left out of quotation marks, implying that art's reality is more legitimate than the other kind to which Kinbote refers. The notion of art creating reality also forces us to acknowledge that the qualities of Nabokov's art are not merely derived from how he sees nature. He does indeed consider art to be a realm—a faculty, rather, or a state—that allows us to go beyond the confines of physical reality and achieve the aesthetic bliss of which he is the famous advocate.

Even though the possibilities of the imagination are endless, Nabokov does not employ Borges's technique of creating worlds with infinite possibilities in his stories, contrary to the argument many critics make about the connection of Borges's works to Nabokov's. Instead, Nabokov's subversion of conventional novels takes a different form: quite literally so; rather than let plots suggest infinite possibilities, Nabokov writes his stories in different forms altogether, that is, in the forms of texts other than novels. Nonetheless, he frequently uses other literature as subject matter, often through well-placed literary allusions. Authors throughout history have referred to each other's work, but Nabokov does so to make a special point, described by Stark as the point that "authors make literature, above all, from other literature, not from life" (82). The "above all" makes Stark's statement a bit too strong, for the very reason that Nabokov's fiction is chiefly derived from his own imagination, not that of others. Still, Nabokov's use of existing literature highlights the fact that his subject matter is invented, whether by him or by a predecessor, and not real. Thus we find extensive allusions to Wordsworth and

Pope in *Pale Fire* and to Shakespeare in *Bend Sinister* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, not to mention a vast number of less sustained references.¹⁹

Nabokov's extension of the use of literature from subject matter to form itself is even more important, and creates a tighter link between his work and the literature of exhaustion. Nearly all of Nabokov's American novels are, within the novels themselves, in the form of some literary piece other than a novel. The most obvious example is *Pale Fire*, which mimics the form of the critical edition. *Lolita* also fits into this category, as it consists of Humbert's memoirs and a fictitious foreword. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* imitates the form of the biography, but may even be, additionally, a fictional work by the subject of that biography. *Bend Sinister* begins and ends with the writer in his study, discussing the very act of writing that he is just completing. *Invitation of a Small Warrior* consists of a doctor's account of his patient's life.

The inclusion of other literary forms within the novels also makes for a certain layered effect that accomplishes multiple purposes for Nabokov, at once highlighting the artifice of his novels and asserting the primacy of imagination over reality. One can understand the mechanism of these layers fairly easily by considering what Stark refers to as Chinese boxes—textual equivalents of the physical containers that, on opening, reveal further boxes that decrease in volume with each successive layer. Stark quotes a statement by Ana Maria Barrenechea that originally regarded “*Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*,” but might apply more pointedly yet to Nabokov's pieces: “The story is constructed like a Chinese Box: unreal worlds included one within the other and then, in turn, within the earth” (Barrenechea 38, quoted in Stark 12-13).

¹⁹ Books, of course, are real, and to a certain extent the material conveyed in an existing book is real, whether it was invented or not. If anything, this furthers Nabokov's contention, which I will address later, that imagined material can become more real than that which is traditionally considered real.

The simplest example is *Pale Fire*, which consists of a lengthy fictitious foreword to a 999-line poem followed by the poem itself, 150 pages of eccentric pseudo-literary commentary, and a seemingly erratic index. The commentary is so narrative-like in structure and content that it can reasonably be seen as “the story” of *Pale Fire*, but one could also take the poem as the main text. At the same time, the commentary is so un-narrative-like that one would not even consider treating it the way one would a traditional account. A simplified order of the resulting layers has Nabokov as the outside layer, followed by Botkin/Kinbote, who is the commentator and whom some critics separate into two layers. The commentary itself forms the next layer, then comes the poem, “Pale Fire,” and, finally John Shade, the author of the poem, who, as Stark states, “belongs inside his poem rather than outside it because he has written an autobiographical work that reveals, and in a sense controls, him” (64). Critics disagree about the legitimacy and order of some of these layers, but none disagrees about the essentially layered nature of *Pale Fire*.

Bend Sinister provides a helpful example of another type of Nabokov’s layering technique. It contains the story of Adam Krug, alternately narrated in the first and third persons, where both grammatical persons seem to refer to Krug. In the ultimate scene, the protagonist has finally reached lunacy in the face of his unraveling fate, but the he/I emerges as the voice of a writer in the act of creating the narrative one has just been reading, and this writer decides simply to remove the protagonist from the situation and end the book: “Well, that was all. [. . .] I knew that the immortality I had conferred on the poor fellow was a slippery sophism, a play on words. But the very last lap of his life had been happy and it had been proven to him that death was but a question of style” (358).

This writer could still be Krug, inventing a story in which he is the main character, or he could be some other fictional writer. The writer could also be Nabokov himself, in which case he would be “Nabokov the character” in the book by “Nabokov the author.” Any of these would form a layer beneath Nabokov, the author.

The layered structure of Nabokov’s novels indicates one of the fundamental differences between them and both realistic and science fiction or fantasy novels, whose artifice is unquestioned. Conventional novels tend to treat the accounts they contain as if they were true, and some even assert that the events they describe are a “true story.” Traditional works of science fiction and fantasy differ critically from Nabokov’s in that, while both are clearly invented, in the former the gap between their own reality and the reality outside the books is demarcated only by the cover. In other words, once one opens the book and begins to read, the information is presented as fact; there is only one layer of reality within the book.²⁰

In this sense, realistic novels and traditional science fiction/fantasy novels are more closely related to each other than either is to the type Nabokov creates, because Nabokov’s contain multiple layers of reality. Within the physical book bearing the word “Lolita” on the cover, there is the layer that is the novel, *Lolita*—this layer corresponds to that of conventional works of fiction—but there is also the layer that is Humbert’s account, preceded by the foreword attributed to “John Ray, Jr., Ph.D.” These two actually form another layer that is a published edition of Humbert’s memoirs, “Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male,” edited by Dr. Ray at the request of Humbert’s lawyer, who supposedly received the publishing rights according to

²⁰ There are science fiction and fantasy novels that use framing devices as well; in fact, some critics discuss Nabokov’s *Ada* as science fiction. I am talking about the conventional sci-fi story, which may no longer exist, but at least in Nabokov’s time typically contained only one layer of reality in the sense relevant here.

Humbert's last will. The layered structure of Nabokov's novels causes heavy distrust of the information the narrators provide, because it emphasizes that not even the novels themselves pretend to be carriers of real events—whether or not the characters telling the stories claim that the events are real, as they often do, is not relevant to this issue.

The forms of Nabokov's novels make it such that every one of them contains, or is even "written by," at least one fictional author. This feature doubles Nabokov's method of calling attention to the artifice of his works by writing himself into them. That is, he not only writes himself into his works to call attention to authorship and artifice, he writes even more authors, fictional and historical, into them to call even more attention to these themes. This practice emphasizes the imaginative nature of the texts while allowing Nabokov to comment on the extent to which reality may be trusted.

The writers/narrators within Nabokov's novels are all artists, mentally unstable, or otherwise of questionable trustworthiness when it comes to the authenticity of narrative accounts. In the case of the artists, the accuracy of their accounts is uncertain because they are inventors by trade; the other narrators are unreliable because they are deluded, eccentric, or socially deviant. Some of the narrators, like Humbert Humbert, fit into both categories. Novice readers of Nabokov find themselves gradually discovering in each novel that the narrator fits into one of the above categories, or increasingly wondering who the narrator is and if he will fit into one of those categories.

Thus, there are at least two significant ways in which the technique of writer-within-the-novel calls the reality of the accounts into question: first, the sub-layers are not offered as real even within the novels, and, second, the characters responsible for these

sub-layers are untrustworthy. Both factors make a strong case for the interrogation of reality in general, or, more accurately, of the nature of reality.

Everyday reality is also juxtaposed to the product of imagination within the lower layers of Nabokov's works. What makes Lolita magical as a character—not only to the reader, but to Humbert himself—is actually the image that Humbert creates of her. Even he sees what she is outside of his idealized representation, often referring to her as an obnoxious schoolgirl with banal interests and a trite way of speaking. Moreover, he recognizes that Lolita is to him a phenomenon more than anything else. On the very first page of his account, he states, “there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child, in a principedom by the sea” (9). He does not mean that no such person would have existed, or even that he would not have met her—after all, he visits the Haze residence before he knows of her. Rather, the glorified version of Dolly Haze, Lolita, would not have existed if not for Humbert's psychological need for such a figure; that version is thus not only glorified but invented.

Within the novel, though, the invented version is of vastly greater importance than the real. This fact alone supports Nabokov's case against realism, but it is worth considering another facet of the interaction between the real and invented realms. Page Stegner argues that the flaw of Humbert and other Nabokovian protagonists is their inability to distinguish between reality and imagination (305), but Humbert does seem able to distinguish between the two realms and between the two aspects of Lolita, as seen in his derision of her habits. Asserting Humbert's ability to identify the real, John Stark defines his actual error as the attempt to transform this reality into something else (an idealized version), and places it in the context of Nabokov's anti-realist project:

Setting aside conventional morality and trying to see his actions in the context of the fictional world that Nabokov creates, one can see that Humbert makes a mistake but not a heinous one. . . . He could, however, have committed a more serious sin: trying to make the imagination to conform to reality, the sin of the realistic novelists. (70)

That offense belongs to the realistic novelists in the sense that the events they portray, which are largely imagined, fit the rules of reality as it is commonly conceived—a notion that displeases Nabokov both because of the ways it limits the work of the imagination, as well as because he finds the notion of reality that is the source for realistic works misguided.

Chapter 5: Nabokov and the Art of Autobiography

Here it is necessary to consider Nabokov's notions of biography and autobiography, because they elucidate his opinion of the proper use of real information in art and of the connection between art and life in general. Nabokov's stance on autobiography seems very mixed. We have already seen some of the many ways he uses information from his own life in his novels, and presumably he does not find his own use of such information inappropriate. But the idea of including autobiographical material in one's fiction seems to clash with Nabokov's general distaste for realistic fiction. Another look at *Pale Fire* will help to reconcile this apparent conflict.

Stark helpfully combines a passage from the beginning of the poem "Pale Fire" with the quotation from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* from which the poem derives its name. I quote Shade's lines first:

And from the inside, too, I'd duplicate

Myself, my lamp, an apple on a plate. (15)

Literally, Shade is speaking of how he likes to create and gaze upon reflections in his window not only from the outside, as the waxwing of the poem's first line apparently did, but also from inside his house. On a deeper level, the language of the excerpt hints at that which Nabokov considers lacking in Shade's conception of art: in his choice of subject matter, Shade selects only real elements from his own life. Here is the related Shakespeare passage:

The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction

Robs the vast sea; the moon's an errant thief,

And her pale fire she snatches from the sun. (IV.3.439-441)

Many critics interpret these lines as referring to Kinbote's theft of Shade's poem (see, e.g., Sharpe 85). Stark offers the alternative that they actually indicate Shade's robbery of his own life, which occurs by the direct transfer of his life into his poetry. We might even say that his physical death described near the end of Kinbote's commentary occurs because of Shade's autobiographical methods, since it is arranged by Nabokov, and that the latter thus shows the futility of Shade's method and passes judgment on mimetic fiction as a school that is too limited in its scope. The verdict is strengthened by the fact that Shade's poem not only fails to provide him eternal life, but is even subverted for the sake of another life story—Kinbote's fictional and more intriguing one.

The critical difference between Shade's and Nabokov's uses of autobiographical information seems to be that Shade attempts to include it in an unaltered form, and in a structure similar to that of conventional narratives—chronologically ordered, etc. Nabokov's autobiographical references, on the other hand, are scrambled, often literally, and always for some specific literary purpose, be it aesthetic bliss or the emphasis of artifice. Again, there is significance to Wood's point that "the autobiographical effect is stylized, a literary effect not a confession" (14).

Any consideration of Nabokov's views on autobiography would be deficient without a segment on his own autobiography and his many interviews, in which he often speaks explicitly on the topic of "fact" in his fiction. In a 1969 interview with *Vogue*, for instance, he affirms quite plainly that "[r]aisins of fact in the cake of fiction are many stages removed from the initial grape" (SO 155). This statement is one of several confirming the claim that autobiographical information should—and does, in Nabokov's work—arrive altered in a piece of fiction. The statement is less comprehensive and less

important to the study of Nabokov's art, however, than a claim he makes in his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, after describing a set of related events separated by several years.

Nabokov recounts the story of his father's friend, General Kuropatkin, who was in the process of showing young Vladimir a match trick when he was told of his assignment to the supreme command of the Russian Army in the 1904-05 war with Japan. He had to abandon the matches immediately, leaving Nabokov disappointed with the trick and without hopes of a better one. I must intersplice Nabokov's description, on the previous page, of another relevant image Nabokov had encountered that year:

With hearty relish, the English illustrated weekly *Miss Norcott* subscribed to reproduced war pictures by Japanese artists that showed how the Russian locomotives—made singularly toylike by the Japanese pictorial style—would drown if our Army tried to lay rails across the treacherous ice of Lake Baikal. (*SM* 26)

Fifteen years after both events, on his flight from St. Petersburg to southern Russia, Nabokov's father participated in a sequel to the match trick event. A heavily bearded and poorly dressed man passing him on a bridge asked for a match, at which point they recognized each other—the second man was the old general in disguise. Nabokov mentions in a half sentence his hopes for Kuropatkin's welfare before describing what is to him the more important point:

What pleases me is the evolution of the match theme: those magic ones he had shown me had been trifled with and mislaid, and his armies had also vanished, and everything had fallen through, like my toy trains that, in the winter of 1904-

05, in Wiesbaden, I tried to run over the frozen puddles in the grounds of the Hotel Oranien. The following of such thematic designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography. (27)

Nabokov here states outright the primacy he assigns to the exposition of thematic patterns, but he also renders it in his construction of the preceding pages and, on a larger scale, of the entire book. He has, after all, just followed and even combined, conceptually and linguistically, several thematic developments: his own toy trains falling through the ice at the same time as the English magazine was running pictures of “toylike” Russian trains crashing through Lake Baikal, General Kuropatkin and the matches connected to each other and across time, almost all the entities literally or figuratively either having “been trifled with” or “fallen through” or both. The whole autobiography, in turn, is arranged not chronologically but thematically, obeying as well as furthering Nabokov's stance toward that genre and toward artistic writing in general.

It is worth noting the aspect of these connections that is mainly linguistic. For instance, Nabokov heightens the effect of the connection between the Japanese pictures and the young Nabokov's trains significantly by using the word “toylike” in his description of the trains in the former. The dashes setting it off from the main clause further emphasize the contrived nature of that part of the description; thus, the depth of the connection is largely artificial. Rather than discount the connection, this fact suggests that Nabokov finds linguistic and other artificial links at least as real as traditionally realistic ones. Moreover, the fact that he considers the tracing and even creation of such designs to be the true end of biography, that is, writing about life—not just of writing in

*Nabokov patterns in the book: Taking this information about the style of *Invitation to a Beheading**

general—points to a belief that artificial connections, which are the hallmark of his art, can supercede the traditionally real realm in importance.

A crucial observation about *Speak, Memory* is that Nabokov tells us very little about himself as a non-writer, and shares very few feelings other than those associated with aesthetic responses. He does speak a little about historical events, though not chronologically, but even glosses over the murder of his father; what the reader learns about, mostly, are Nabokov's fancies and convictions with regard to his pastimes— hunting butterflies, composing chess problems, writing books. This accords with another statement in the same interview response as the raisin analogy: “The best part of a writer's biography is not the record of his adventures but the story of his style” (SO 154-155).

The entirety of *Speak, Memory*, then, represents the best part of his biography, in at least two ways. The first is the fact that Nabokov talks explicitly about his style and about what activities and events shed light on his writing. The second is that the autobiography is written in basically the same style as his novels. The diction of his sentences carries the same combination of lightness and inventiveness and is equally demanding and pleasing as that in his fictional works, and the thematic and linguistic relationships Nabokov establishes between parts of the book reflect a similar design as his novels.

It would not be unsafe to say that a large number of his appearances in his own autobiography are stylized, even altered, “raisins of fact in the cake of fiction,” a conclusion supported by the physical impossibility of remembering such details as Nabokov portrays in the book. Taking this information about the style of *Speak, Memory*

and the distance with which Nabokov describes himself and his past, and combining it with the book's original title, *Conclusive Evidence*, affords us a worthwhile observation. The first title, Nabokov explained, referred to "conclusive evidence of my having existed" (*SM* 11). But if that book is a piece of such evidence, then any book written by Nabokov is—any book by Nabokov is his autobiography, or at least an integral part of it, according to his definition, because they all tell the story of his style.

It is the case that any book at all, by anyone, is conclusive evidence of its author having existed, but Nabokov's works actually tell us about that existence, as he would have us know about it. In the case of *Speak, Memory*, we read of actual events in Nabokov's existence, but in his other works, as well, we learn the aspects of it that indicate but are not bound to his existence: the metaphysical and artistic tenets he proposes, and his style. The effect of his self-references is still bound to his existence, and this is, among other things, an important way in which Nabokov's work undermines Barthes's ideas about the Death of the Author. Nevertheless, while many historical and fictional writers, including *Pale Fire*'s John Shade, have based their clamoring for immortality on the testimonial quality of writing, Nabokov's art is less keen on life after death than on pleasure in purity, a certain extra-temporal purity of structure—the structure of sentences, that is, diction, and of the whole, that is, form.

We have observed John Shade's doomed quest for immortality based on his autobiographical poetry. He also writes about another, more concrete, lunge at immortality at the end of Canto 3 in the poem. The lines relate his voyage to meet a Mrs. Z, who claimed, just as Shade, to have seen a vision of a "tall white fountain" before being resuscitated by a surgeon. Shade associates the visions, which share other features

as well, with the possibility of attaining immortality, and he hopes that he and Mrs. Z. will together discover how to claim the eternal life of which they captured a glimpse. When Shade calls on the author of the article in which he read of Mrs. Z., however, the author casually reveals that it had contained a misprint: it should have said “mountain,” not “fountain.” The following passage contains Shade’s response and subsequent epiphany:

Life Everlasting—based on a misprint!
 I mused as I drove homeward: take the hint,
 And stop investigating my abyss?
 But all at once it dawned on me that this
 Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
 Just this: not text, but texture, not the dream
 But a topsy-turvical coincidence,
 Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
 Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
 Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind
 Of correlated pattern in the game,
 Plexed artistry, and something of the same
 Pleasure as they who played it found. (36-37)

Here Shade has hit upon the essence of Nabokov’s conception of both life and art. Through the discussion of *Speak, Memory* I have already hinted at the primacy of “pattern in the game” of Nabokov’s fiction. Shade’s lines, though, are not just about fiction, but about life; they describe Nabokov’s substitute for immortality—not a cheap

substitute based on the unattainability of the other, not the next best thing, but, to Nabokov, the actual thing. Shade says outright that it is not the dream (which was about immortality and represents that goal) that is the real point, but the fact that two people in different parts of the world had the same dream around the same time, making sense of a situation that, in the absence of either person's vision, would be nonsensical.

Significance for Nabokov lies in patterns: fundamentally, not incidents or "incidence," but *coincidence*. That "co-," with the possible exception of "link," may be the single most important syllable in the entire excerpt from Shade's poem. In Nabokov's novels, many circumstances are less important themselves than the fact that they have analogues in other parts of the books; other events are significant primarily because they synthesize entities that have no other connection than a textual one. Critics have variously interpreted this practice as furthering the argument for infinite levels of reality in Nabokov's invented worlds, furnishing clues to some deep meaning, or parodying literary conventions of using handy coincidences to advance the plot. The last purpose is occasionally relevant in Nabokov's works, for instance, when Charlotte Haze dies in a car accident before Humbert needs to follow through on killing her (*Lo* 97), but the vast majority of the coincidences in question are verbal, sometimes even graphological. This goes, of course, for many of the anagrams that link the names of people and/or places in the novels, or between the novels and the physical world, and for many of the spoonerisms and other word plays that establish such connections. For both types of coincidences—plot-related and thematic/verbal—I maintain that they form yet another marker of the artifice of Nabokov's work.

As to their purpose, Page Stegner and several other critics argue for the explanation that the coincidences emphasize the infinitude of levels of reality in Nabokov's worlds. Stegner cites a few examples from *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*; one of his will serve here as typical of a non-plot-related set of coincidences. In that book, the number 36 appears repeatedly in various forms, although sporadically enough that one must search for some of the instances. Sebastian dies at age 36 in 1936, in London he lives at 36 Oak Park Gardens, a fact that the narrator mentions twice, and the number of his supposed room at the St. Damier hospital is 36 (Stegner 289). The telephone number of the doctor who is at Sebastian's deathbed is 61-93, an anagram for the latter's death year.

There does not seem to be any special significance to the number 36 other than the fact that it comes up so often; in other words, the number does not symbolize something outside of the book. I disagree with Stegner's assertion that Nabokov's thematic patterns "are almost symbolic of the infinite levels of reality in Nabokov's illusory world" (289). Rather than suggest infinity, they actually seem to confirm the tightness of the artistic piece, even a self-containment that is in accord with Nabokov's professional perfectionism. If the repetition of the 36 symbolizes anything, it is patternness in general; the case of the 36 is a prototype—using numbers instead of words, to make it easier for the beginner—of the kind of patterns Nabokov likes to create, and of the pleasure the author and reader can derive from their discovery.

In Shade's above lines, "text," "dream," and "nonsense" correspond to each other syntactically, while "texture," "coincidence," and "web of sense" form another group. Four of the six terms are essentially neutral, but "nonsense" and "sense," of course, are

pejorative and positive, respectively, and the threefold “not ____, but ____” structure projects these connotations onto the corresponding concepts. I have already begun discussing coincidence in Nabokov’s work and will continue to do so, but the value of texture, which Shade sets against text, merits a closer look

Van makes a similar distinction between text and texture in *Ada* (defining the latter as more tangible, in a positive way), as Nabokov confirms in an interview with *Time* (SO 121). The importance of the distinction can be seen in the painterly qualities of some of Nabokov’s descriptions, especially in *Ada*, and of his art in general. Schuman’s article talks about Nabokov’s writing in *Ada* being like visual art in its arrangement; Stark develops a detailed analysis about a particular passage in which Nabokov rejuvenates the worn love triangle theme through his birds-eye description of a scene with three characters in bed. In other words, Nabokov turns the traditional plot motif into an actual spatial arrangement. The description of the scene consists largely of spatial relationships rather than dynamic interaction between the characters; in fact, it relates the movement of the viewer’s/reader’s eye: “the top sheet and quilt are tumbled at the footboardless south of the island where the newly landed eye starts on its northern trip” (*Ada* 319, quoted in Stark 78). Stark mentions somewhat peripherally that the concept of space in this passage consists of a string of artificial constructs, thus highlighting the artificiality of geography and other sciences. Contrary to Stark’s assertion, this judgment is not negative, given Nabokov’s view of artifice, and contributes to Nabokov’s metaphysical arguments about the nature of reality.

A reference to El Greco’s Cretan dream expands the geographical description to a painterly one that is finally sealed by the phrase, “unsigned and unframed” (*Ada* 320,

quoted in Stark 78). The context is now an artistic one, lending texture to space, just as texture is added to time throughout the novel. The contrast is to photography, which one character uses to blackmail the protagonists. Nabokov projects her evil onto her technique, as her “photographs realistically depict nontextured space and are also therefore inferior to painting. Nabokov would probably also argue that they are analogous to realistic novels, because they lack texture . . .” (Stark 78). Thus Nabokov adds texture to pattern in his novels as a key feature of reality as it should be perceived, and he allows John Shade to make this realization in the passage from *Pale Fire*, where the syntax certifies the connection from “texture” to “coincidence” and the value-conferring “web of sense.”

Chapter 6. Nabokov and the normalization of coincidence

The coincidental relationships in Nabokov's works, like the 36's in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, clearly do not depend on traditional logic; they do not come into being on the basis of logical necessity, and the independence from traditional logic as the controlling force points to the author as the controlling force. Not only do the stories appear more contrived on the basis of the coincidences, it is also evident that the author specifically wrenches the diegesis and connections within it away from the control of traditional logic.

The resulting worlds are such that the events transpiring in them are no longer coincidental in the usual sense. As Van says in *Ada*, "some law of logic should fix the number of coincidences, in a given domain, after which they cease to be coincidences, and form, instead, the living organism of the new truth" (275, quoted in Stark 112). Nabokov's novels construct such domains, where the coincidental events are simply elements of the books' contrived realities. The ubiquity of so-called coincidences then renders Nabokov's re-ordering of reality through art, and foregrounds the fact that he is not merely creating fiction in a traditionally realistic manner, but creating new realities.

While Stark concludes, based on Nabokov's use of coincidences, that Nabokov prefers the patterns in art to those in life (112), it would be better to say that he prefers calling attention to patterns, period, which is a one-step process in art, but a two-step process in life. In other words, coincidences in fiction come into existence by being written (the relevant sentences could thus be considered performative utterances), whereas real-life connections exist independently of whether anyone notices and documents them or not; an extra step of verbalizing them is necessary if anyone but the

original observer is to appreciate them. Rather than shun real life and its connections, Nabokov simply asserts that their value is, to a large extent, contingent on an artist's depiction of the connections. We have already seen, through the example of *Speak, Memory*, that artistic renditions of connections can inform reality in a way that has more productive potential than the effect of real life on art. Given this and the pattern-driven structure of Nabokov's art, his work suggests that even real-life coincidences, when frequent and well-noted, are less coincidental than they are indicative of the patterned nature of all reality. By extension, his fascination with patterns and his appreciation of their beauty represent his critique of the imperceptive traditional treatment of reality, which obscures reality's art-like patterns and, in turn, its beauty.

The use of mirrors and doubles is one of Nabokov's common patterning and coincidence-rendering techniques. Typically he presents them as negative because they fairly accurately reproduce non-textured images of the real world; hence, Shade's doomed attempt to mirror his own life in his poem. The mirrors thus combine Nabokov's anti-mimetic tendency with his pro-pattern project, as many of the instances of mirrors and doubles also accomplish the purpose of emphasizing the patterned artifice of his novels. This is especially the case in the commentary portion of *Pale Fire* as Kinbote gradually describes the person of Jakob Gradus, Shade's eventual assassin. Mary McCarthy points out that degree—the Russian translation of gradus—is a synonym for shade (McCarthy 74, quoted in Stark 107); also, the revolutionary organization of which he is a member is called the Shadows, and both terms refer to a sort of reflection of an object. Another character's name is the killer's spelled backwards, Sudarg of Bokay, and that man is a mirror maker by trade.

Stark contents himself with concluding that Shade “dies in the wilderness of mirrors in which he lives” (107); I would extend the conclusion to point out that it is Shade’s actual reflection that kills him—not only Gradus, the mirror-character, but also Shade’s poem, which is the realistic reflection of the poet’s life. Shade’s assassin adds more force to the above argument that Nabokov disdains Shade’s typical use of unaltered autobiographical data as subject matter. Still, the point of patterns for patterns’ sake, which Shade briefly glimpses in the above lines, and the pleasure available for those who identify them—i.e., Nabokov and his readers—is an even greater point of the mirror relationship between Shade, Gradus, and Sudarg of Bokay.

A scene in *Ada* pits mirrors directly against another technique. The scene features a card game where one player cheats using a mirror. Van still wins the game because he also cheats, using sleight of hand instead. Stark points out that Nabokov favors the work of the illusionist as “superior to any realistic tricks with mirrors” (107). This notion resonates with Nabokov’s focus on playfulness over mimesis itself, but Nabokov clearly appreciates both sleight of hand and mirrors as weapons in his artistic arsenal: “those apparatuses—the baffling mirror, the black velvet backdrop, the implied associations and traditions—which the native illusionist, frac-tails flying, can magically use to transcend the heritage in his own way” (*Lo* 317).

Nabokov is also exceedingly interested in the mirror-like but crucially different reflecting strategy that is mimicry. Of course, Nabokov’s fascination with it has to do with his interest in the biological world, but even this interest suggests a paradoxical circularity inherent in Nabokov’s co-existing appreciations for the physical world and for non-mimetic art. In the chapter of *Speak, Memory* devoted mainly to lepidoptery, he

explains his attraction to mimicry by the fact that “[i]ts phenomena showed an artistic perfection usually associated with man-wrought things” (124).

The link between art and illusionism lives on here as Nabokov concerns himself less with the aspect of mimicry that is reflective than with the aspect that is deceptive. This distinction helps us come to terms with the conflict we would expect based on the conceptual and etymological similarity between mimicry and mimesis. To Nabokov, the fascinating thing is not that the markings on a certain butterfly wing look exactly like knots on a tree branch, it is that the butterfly is *not* part of the branch, but fools the observer into thinking so. In other terms, it is not the butterfly’s perfect mimesis that Nabokov lauds, but the fact that it manages so perfectly the ploy of being something other than what it appears to be. There could be few better analogies to the nature of Nabokov’s fiction, in which *Pale Fire* only appears to be a critical edition, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* only appears to be a biography, Krug only appears to be a character in the conventional sense, and Kinbote only appears to be an exiled Zemblan king.

The analogy of natural to artistic design increases in felicitousness when we consider Nabokov’s summarizing statement of his love for nature: “I discovered in nature the *nonutilitarian* delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception” (*SM* 125, italics mine). Obviously the mimicry practiced by fauna is in fact utilitarian; it serves, typically, to hide from or deter predators. What Nabokov emphasizes is that the intricacy of mimicry exceeds that necessary for survival. The fact that a predator cannot even appreciate all the subtleties and detail of a mimicking design suggests the additional, nonutilitarian aspect that entails both beauty and the bliss of the beholder.

The same analogy is helpful for answering two opposing critical fallacies about Nabokov's work: that it is exclusively aesthetic, and that it is deeply moral. Like the markings on a bird or insect, the features of Nabokov's fiction are neither purely utilitarian nor purely aesthetic; even if one were the primary aspect, the other would be a by-product of which Nabokov would have to be aware and of which the work could not be rid. As the calculated precision of his work casts doubt on the characterization of any part as a mere by-product, it is legitimate to consider both the beautiful as well as the meaningful aspects intrinsic to Nabokov's novels.

Nabokov's view of the ubiquity of patterns and designs in nature informs our understanding of his attitude toward traditional conceptions of reality, and offers an interesting footnote to his dislike of mimetic art. Nabokov's positive science approach²¹ to nature confirms his materialist (as opposed to idealist) metaphysics and, accordingly, his belief in the existence of reality independent of communal perception. His problem lies with people who view the real world—nature, human interaction, chronological awareness, etc.—as not patterned, as not demanding its viewers to seek out those aspects that are pleasing in an artistic sense. John Stark appropriately acknowledges Nabokov's dislike for mimetic art, but claims that it indicates the author's lack of interest in science and nature. Given Nabokov's appreciation of both those realms, though, and knowing his emphasis on the patterned makeup of nature and life in general, we might say that Nabokov sees traditional mimetic fiction as *not mimetic enough*, because it fails to render the art-like ordering forces present in the physical and chronological world. In

²¹ "Positive science" refers to the principle that ascribes high epistemological power to the scientific method; it is closely linked to metaphysical materialism and is, at best, severely mistrusted by metaphysical idealists.

Nabokov's view, then, appropriate perception of the real world requires a specific lens, and that lens is art.

In the realm of nature, insects especially exhibit another process common in Nabokov's fiction that speaks to his stance on reality and mimetic art: metamorphosis. Critics have already discussed it extensively, but a few of its facets are worth noting here. Alfred Appel states in *The Annotated Lolita* that the characters, the book itself, the author, and the reader all simultaneously undergo changes that are crucial to the understanding of the book (Appel, 340, quoted in Stark 102). Perhaps most important is the way the worlds within the novels metamorphose: "If the world continually changes guises, or can be made to do so by a writer [. . .], a realist cannot describe it, much less explain it. It will take an equally Protean art to explain it, an art that, with puns and other verbal and technical tricks, transforms itself constantly before the eyes of the reader" (Stark 102). It is the reader, in turn, onto whom these changes are projected, in that the attentive reader, along with the author, is the living human being (unlike the characters) who actually witnesses the changes. The theme of metamorphosis can also be combined with that of opposites—related to mirrors—to mount another anti-realist assertion, because the instability of some of the opposites in Nabokov's novels, such as Ada the scientist and Van the artist, calls into question the notion of dialectics.

The consideration of dialectics and opposites in general leads us into a foundational and far-reaching metaphor for Nabokov's artistic project, one already hinted at in the lengthy excerpt from Shade's poem. It is even clearer in the next portion of the poem:

No furtive light came from their involute

Abode, but there they were, aloof and mute,
 Playing a game of worlds, promoting pawns
 To ivory unicorns and ebon fauns; . . . (37)

Nabokov's zeal for chess problems is particularly well documented in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, where the title itself bears reference to the game, *Pale Fire*, *The Defense*, and *Speak, Memory*. In the latter book, Nabokov discourses at length on the nature of the chess-problem art and on his affinity for it. After cataloguing several distinct schools, he says the following, already hinting at the connection between his composition of chess problems and his composition of novels: "Deceit, to the point of diabolism, and originality, verging upon the grotesque, were my notions of strategy" (289). He goes on to assert, "I was always ready to sacrifice purity of form to the exigencies of fantastic content, causing form to bulge and burst like a sponge-bag containing a small furious devil" (290). While Nabokov says he tried, in the construction of chess problems, to conform to classical rules whenever possible, it is clear that in the context of literary forms, he displays not only a readiness but an eagerness to sacrifice—first, simply by subverting the traditional form of the novel, then, by metamorphosing the various forms he parodies.

The promotion of pawns in chess consists of a metamorphosis, too, but the more relevant aspect of that game is a dialectical one: ivory and ebony, a player and an opponent. The game of chess pits the pieces of one side against those of another, or, rather, the player on one side against the one on the other. This circumstance seems to conflict with Nabokov's apparent dislike for dialectics in fiction, but the resolution of this problem—along with the heart of the chess-fiction connection—lies in the following

declaration: "It should be understood that competition in chess problems is not really between White and Black but between the composer and the hypothetical solver (just as in a first-rate work of fiction the real clash is not between the characters but between the author and the world)" (290). There is still a dialectic, then, but not the traditional one between characters; one of the effects of Nabokov's mirroring and doubling devices is distraction from the real conflict through the deceptive insinuation that the contest is between the doubles. It would be a reasonable extension of the chess-fiction metaphor to say that traditional realistic novels correspond to the traditional game of chess, in terms of the conflicts they typically explore, while Nabokov's novels correspond to chess problems.

Not all authors have viewed fiction this way, of course, but Nabokov's view helps explain the presence of the puzzles he includes in his novels. In large part he creates them for the same ecstasy he experiences in the formation of chess problems, but he does so also to emphasize the author-world interaction as supreme over that between the characters. Since the latter obviously is part of the novel, is part of the problem, it need not be said that the interaction between and development of Nabokov's characters is meaningless. They simply do not exist for their own sake—a point that readers of Nabokov, especially those concerned about the non-aesthetic relevance of his work, have regularly struggled to make.

We can gain even more insight into Nabokov's view of the author-reader interaction, and indeed his role as author, by considering his discussion of a particular chess problem that he does not explicitly relate to writing. Nabokov says that the problem was meant for the expert solver, because an unsophisticated one might discover

the simple solution without clawing through “the pleasurable torments prepared for the sophisticated one” (291). Rather than think of the final solution as a reward for those torments, Nabokov actually thinks of the arduous process itself as the reward for having engaged in the problem at all.

A similar view of the puzzles in his fiction elucidates another purpose of the many false trails and round-about references: the pleasure of wrestling with the words, of verifying allusions, of delighting in felicity of diction—in short, the pleasure of reading, which Nabokov likens to that of writing. In combination with his understanding of patterned beauty in the world, though, the effect of the games is more than pleasure; it actually includes a greater understanding of life itself and art itself. The pleasure of Nabokov’s novels thus serves as motivation for pattern-finding in general—a process whose results may be uncertain, except for one: the finder will, metaphorically speaking, be better traveled for it.

The chess analogy also emphasizes an aspect of Nabokov’s fiction that critics often overlook and even argue against. Every chess problem has a solution, and a single solution at that; Nabokov mentions the frequent and necessary struggle to avoid a dual solution (290). That sentence is conspicuously absent from Page Stegner’s lengthy quote that contains sections preceding and following it (288); the void, whether it does so intentionally or not, typifies the widespread assumption that Nabokov’s fictional games have no ultimate answer, and thus encourage not only the search along infinite paths, but the assertion of infinite answers. The fact is that a large number of Nabokov’s patterns do have legitimate connections, and a large number of his puzzles do have knowable solutions.

Michael Rosenblum asserts that there are right answers to many of the questions in Nabokov's novels, and the corollary that there are therefore also wrong answers (222). He goes on to say that the novels thus serve as opportunities for readers to demonstrate and hone their reading skills, and that the novels do not really seek to provoke errors. This claim reflects the reader-centered approach for which Nabokov does not care, and undermines the notion, gleaned from his discourse on chess problems, that Nabokov sees great value in leading readers down false paths. Nevertheless, Rosenblum's analysis is helpful because of its encouragement about the accessibility of the right solutions, and because of the specific examples he cites.

With respect to the mysterious narrator of *Transparent Things*, Nabokov says that "one is almost embarrassed to furnish" the solution (*SO* 195, quoted in Rosenblum 222). Unlike Rosenblum, Nabokov goes on to do so anyway, repeatedly naming Mr. R. The former does catalogue the answers to some problems that others have treated as unsolvable; for instance, he cites the stolen Dôle, the head-waiter's eye patch, and the oil-soaked rags from the end of *Transparent Things* as evidence that it is the dismissed waiter who starts the final fire that kills Hugh. While it is a stretch to arrive at Rosenblum's conclusion that a main purpose of connected details in Nabokov's novels is to "show us what we are looking for in more conventionally opaque works" (223), it is safe to say that Nabokov would have us be more attentive to patterns in general, including when reading other literature. The lines following Shade's earlier quote continue to emphasize textually distant coincidences within a work and spatially or temporally distant coincidences in life:

Kindling a long life here, extinguishing

A short one there; killing a Balkan king;
 Causing a chunk of ice formed on a high-
 flying airplane to plummet from the sky
 And strike a farmer dead; hiding my keys,
 Glasses or pipe. Coordinating these
 Events and objects with remote events
 And vanished objects. Making ornaments
 Of accidents and possibilities. (37)

The idea of coordinating certain events and objects with other “remote events and vanished objects” takes on special significance in *Transparent Things*, where, because of the novelette’s brevity, it is less difficult than in many other novels to actually catalogue the connections. A good example is the shuttlecock-dog pair—dropped and young, respectively—that Hugh sees on his first visit to Villa Nastia and that appears again at his last, when the shuttlecock is picked up and the dog is senile. A certain inspector of benches, present at the beginning and end, also contributes to the connection, all of whose elements are made simpler by their proximity in the book; we might thus consider *Transparent Things* a prototype of sorts of Nabokov’s novel-designing.

The more-than-anagrammatic connection between Julia Moore and Giulia Romeo (545), the curious note “(no relation)” on the name Jack Moore (501) before the reader even knows of Julia, and other flashbacks and –forwards with respect to characters and incidents emphasize the primacy of such patterns even over time; Nabokov subordinates that traditional ordering force to thematic unity, as is most explicit in *Speak, Memory*.

Rosenblum phrases the nature and importance of the various connected elements well: “These details are not . . . somethings which *stand* for something else, but elements within a pattern, somethings which *go* with something else” (223, italics mine). Implicit in this statement is not only the subversion of symbolism, but the championing of form over information, an effect that Nabokov’s novels repeatedly achieve, both through the ubiquity of patterned coincidence, as well as through the formal experimentation discussed earlier.

The verbs here that happen to indicate signification and relationship in English—“stand for” and “go with,” respectively—also highlight the dynamic nature of Nabokov’s correlative fiction: it does not simply stand, it *goes*. The use of these verbs is especially interesting because it plays with the common sense evaluation of form and content, by which the former is traditionally static, while the latter is dynamic. In Nabokov’s fiction, form attains almost to the status that subject matter traditionally occupies, and is as dynamic as content ever was.

Epilogue: Tradition, Art, and Consciousness

While Nabokov detested being associated with literary or philosophical schools, and often pointed out the difficulty of establishing any such claim, many critics have tried, and their analyses are helpful when considered cautiously. Rosenblum submits that one should read Nabokov in the way a structuralist might, presumably because of the “play of similarities and differences” (Rosenblum 231) and because of the self-contained systems of Nabokov’s fiction. The structuralist tenet that meaning comes from the differences between signs in a signifying system, rather than from the identification of signs with objects in the real world, also seems to accord with Nabokov’s practice, but far too many principles of structuralism conflict with Nabokov’s view to allow his alignment with that school. The notion that imaginative space is ordered by binary oppositions, for instance, conflicts heavily with the stance of his novels.²²

Without dogmatically fixing Nabokov into a school, I would offer that Nabokov’s artistic enterprise is historically and aesthetically comparable to John Donne’s. The purpose of this comparison is not to declare Nabokov’s indebtedness to Donne—Nabokov would surely not make the same comparison—only to mention the interesting commonalities of their roles and works. The similarities are striking: puns, witty conceits, and the mixing of linguistic registers are the most notable shared technical features. Corresponding to the latter quality, though, is also the mixing of other realms—in Donne’s case, unprecedentedly large leaps across Aristotle’s metaphysical taxonomies, and the fusion of the erotic and the theological.

²² For a compelling attempt to align Nabokov with a specific artistic tradition see Page Stegner’s book *Escape into Aesthetics* (New York: Dial, 1966), in which he compares Nabokov’s style to impressionism because of that school’s emphasis on the subjectivity of reality.

Nabokov's fusion of the real and imaginary realms mirrors Donne's practice, and the metaphysical implications of his work recall the very name of the school Donne spawned. Both writers' literary contexts and critics are also worth noting: Ben Jonson, for instance, championed the values of harmony, clarity, and optimal simplicity in Donne's day, and responded to the latter's work by declaring he should be hanged—for undermining rhythmic conventions. While Nabokov praised a certain measure of harmony in art (usually when discussing chess problems), he despised the idea that art should be simple (*SO* 33). Furthermore, whereas many of Donne's contemporaries viewed metrical and topical deviance as the subversion of not only poetic but social order, Donne apparently saw no such implication. His response in such works as "The Canonization" prefigures Nabokov's stance toward most of his critics: "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love" (line 1). One can easily picture Nabokov uttering the same sentence, altered only to replace "love" with "write," and authorial freedom is certainly also implicit in Donne's poem.

Nabokov exceeds Donne in his opposition to the classical notion that *ars est celare artem*, "the art is to conceal the art," held by many a critic and artist alike, including Ben Jonson. Oscar Wilde modified the principle to *ars est aperire artem et celare artificem*. The motto of Nabokov would more aptly be *ars est aperire artem et artificem*, "the art is to reveal the art and the artist"—importantly, only a stylized rendition of the latter, for the greater purpose of ensuring scrutiny of the former—and his work embodies that effect with marvelous efficacy.

Aristotle's aphorism, "wit is educated insolence," could hardly fit Donne and Nabokov better, each being exceedingly witty, highly educated, and insolent in many

respects. Their styles have earned them many enthusiasts, but one thing is worth noting: a throng of metaphysical poets followed Donne, while none has imitated Nabokov with any notoriety. Some critics have included John Barth with Nabokov in the literature of exhaustion, and Barth may see himself as employing similar tactics, but his fiction is more like that of Borges in its evocation of infinite recursiveness. The lack of Nabokov imitators may come from an actual inimitability based on that man's unique biographical and linguistic situation, and is worth investigating further. There is a sense in which the writings of a true imitator of Nabokov would look nothing like his, because they would have to defy comparison.

For Nabokov, the importance of the techniques I have discussed extends as far back as the very onset of human consciousness. He claims that the nearest approximation of that moment is "the stab of wonder that accompanies the precise moment when, gazing at a tangle of twigs and leaves, one suddenly realizes that what had seemed a natural component of that tangle is a marvelously disguised insect or bird" (*SM* 298). Knowing the essential status of mimicry and deception in Nabokov's stance on art, one can conclude that the proper appreciation of art is to him synonymous with consciousness itself. Accordingly, failure to recognize the unique realities of art and the artistic realities of the physical world entails nothing less than the atrophy of human consciousness. The aim of preventing of this process, or, rather, reversing it, contributes momentarily to the public aspects of Nabokov's art.

The private facet of his propensity for patternmaking comes from more than fascination; he perceives it as essential to his survival. In the closing chapter of *Speak*,

Memory he discourses on his personal love, specifically that for his wife and son: “Whenever I start thinking of my love for a person, I am in the habit of immediately drawing radii from my love—from my heart, from the tender nucleus of a personal matter—to monstrously remote points of the universe” (296). These radii manifest themselves in his art as the expanding layers of reality and as the distant but unseverable textual links between remote points in his written worlds; they trace their lines, as well, along the many self-references and the more affected portions of his work.

Nabokov’s techniques, then, address what are arguably the most fundamental qualities of the heart and mind, respectively: love and consciousness. They are instruments of aesthetic bliss, they are tools for teaching perspicacity to readers, and they are his one method, as a mortal and acutely sensitive artist, “to fight the utter degradation, ridicule, and horror of having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence” (*SM* 297). Whether or not Nabokov was victorious through his works is his business; as for his readers, Nabokov’s stories continue to demand sensation, thought, and wonder, on a plane that leaves no danger of stifling or exhaustion.

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