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*'Conventions are conventions.....': Some thoughts about the techniques of direction and misdirection – with particular reference to genre features - in the novels of Vladimir Nabokov, and an assessment of their intentions and effects.*

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'Conventions are conventions.....'

Some thoughts about the techniques of direction and misdirection - with particular reference to genre features - in the novels of Vladimir Nabokov, and an assessment of their intentions and effects.

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10. MAY 1998

'Conventions are conventions.....'

Some thoughts about the techniques of direction and misdirection - with particular reference to genre features - in the novels of Vladimir Nabokov, and an assessment of their intentions and effects.

The thesis deals with the development of Nabokov's treatment of a number of the more common routes and courses which are traditionally supplied by the author to ease the passage of the reader through fiction. It attempts to show how these marked paths and familiar signposts - 'melodrama,' 'totalitarian novel,' 'biography,' 'erotic confession,' 'critical edition,' 'family chronicle,' 'mystery story,' and 'autobiographical confession' - emerge in the books as equally misguiding and misguided. The satisfactory application of such labels is demonstrated as becoming progressively more difficult as the novels proceed, with a rising degree of sophistication, to incorporate distinctive combinations of genre features usually considered as mutually exclusive. Further inquiries into the manner of fictional orientation and location encouraged by this regular disappointment of apparently familiar leads and landmarks, however, is increasingly seen to disclose the underlying procedures and desires of the reader to place and confine narrative. The manner in which Nabokov's reader is repeatedly obliged to return to a non-metaphorical 'first base' by way of these false trails, which seemingly point towards an authoritative text, and there to re-examine his own imaginative input is also traced.



.... Dull work recounting all this. Bore me to death.  
But yearn as I may to reach the crucial point quickly,  
a few preliminary explanations seem necessary.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Despair*.

Work in all you know. Make them accomplices.

James Joyce, *Ulysses*.

"A Shape for.....Expectations?"

There was no knowing what would come since this strange entrancing delight had come. If a chest full of lace and satin and jewels had been sent her from some unknown source, how could she but have thought that her whole lot was going to change, and that to-morrow some still more bewildering joy would befall her? Hetty had never read a novel: if she had ever seen one, I think the words would have been too hard for her: how then could she find a shape for her expectations? They were as formless as the sweet languid colours of the garden at the Chase, which had floated past her as she walked by the gate.<sup>1</sup>

These lines from George Eliot's *Adam Bede* mark an admirably concise and intriguingly ambivalent registration of something approaching a positive aspect to the business of reading fiction - a feature by no means common in the nineteenth century novel where its followers are usually given short shrift. One immediately thinks of the banality of Emma Bovary's correlating romances. Indeed, it is something of a truism to note that, in the Victorian novel, to follow fiction is, for the most part, and particularly for women, to incur damage. Here though, there is a suggestion that, for a Hetty, fiction might perhaps have served her well; not only to alert her to immediate concerns (all those seductions in woods and chases in the writing of the period!), but also as a significant contribution to a fuller apprehension of her situation. In short, a reader's knowledge may have helped Hetty both to a more accurate understanding of her place in the scheme of things in general, and also in the specific - namely, the schemes of figures far more familiar with available scenarios and developments than she - in particular, those of one Arthur Donnithorne, landed (and implicitly, therefore, literate) gentleman.<sup>2</sup>

As such, it might be interesting to reflect further on that conception of the novel which holds to the resilient and flexible definition intimated by



George Eliot; "a shape for....expectations": something that we can construe, not just in simple terms of constraint, but also as a guide; not as purely limiting, but also as helping to direct those forces we bring to bear upon the piece. It is this suggestive and infinitely replicative pose, with each of these elements encasing the other, that the reader might most usefully come to see as underpinning the novels of Vladimir Nabokov addressed in this study - for we are obliged to bear in mind that we can only ever formulate our expectations by default, that is, once we have seen them shaped. In short, anything approaching a true comprehension of those desires and hopes can only develop retrospectively, which is to say, once they have been *disappointed* - and which, of course, in its turn, leads to new dreams, new expectations.... So, as we shape fictions, we have come more and more to be shaped by them. This is not to settle for the commonplace observation that as more novels have come to be issued, so this has entailed the repetition of more and more plots - more and more possible variations being used up - rather, it is to emphasise each element as demonstrably active, continually performing, ceaselessly making over the other. Although fiction's resources are then far too rich ever to be completely exhausted, the insistence and persistence of certain patterns, their seemingly compulsive reappearances, nevertheless, do point to the difficulty of producing fresh and forceful work in those particular areas. (How soon did those Victorian seductions pall?)

In his short foreword to the edition of Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* he produced in 1958, Nabokov drew attention to this perennial problem for the writer, on a somewhat smaller scale, during his discussion of the actual mechanics of translating this short novel:

When Lermontov started to write, Russian prose had already evolved that predilection for certain terms that became typical of the Russian novel. Every translator becomes aware, in the course of his task, that, apart from idiomatic locutions, the 'From' language has a certain number of constantly iterated words which, though readily translatable, occur in the 'Into' language far less frequently and less colloquially. Through long use, these words have become mere pegs and signs, the meeting place of mental associations, the reunions of related notions. They are tokens of sense, rather than particularisations of sense.....<sup>3</sup>

A similar fate, it may be argued, has befallen many of the more general assumptions and broader habits that accompany us as readers when we turn the first page of a novel, or, because they are so deeply allied, when we look at - if you like, when we write - a life: "through long use, (their) words have become mere pegs and signs, the meeting place of mental associations, the reunions of related notions....tokens of sense, rather than particularisations of sense...." The result, for the fiction, is old recapitulations and broad outlines; and, for the life, the narrowest of confines:

Once upon a time there lived in Berlin, Germany, a man called Albinus. He was rich, respectable, happy; one day he abandoned his wife for the sake of a youthful mistress; he loved; was not loved; and his life ended in disaster.

This is the whole of the story and we might have left it at that had there not been profit and pleasure in the telling; and although there is plenty of space on a gravestone to contain, bound in moss, the abridged version of a man's life, detail is always welcome.<sup>4</sup>

These are the opening paragraphs from *Laughter in the Dark*, an early work by Nabokov (it was first issued under the title of *Kamera Obskura* in 1933), which was quite extensively revised by the author for its second appearance in English in 1938<sup>5</sup> - in turn, effectively marking it as his first full length work in that language. As such, it also affords an amenable site

to begin this study of the novels written in the following four decades that go to make Nabokov's English canon.

It is a remarkable, yet very typical, beginning to one of his narratives because of the manner in which it appears momentarily to foreclose itself before opening out again - and it is, of course, all the more striking for this reason.<sup>6</sup> It also immediately pushes to the fore the differences between the deadeningly conventional (all too literally so!) and the ever-renewable vitality available to those who would seek out details, those who refuse to settle for "the abridged version" and look for what is full, unique and expansive. In addition, actions of this order directly challenge the agency which curtails, limits, and enforces habit, and which Nabokov holds up as the principal force against which all writing must contend - time. Again, this is not simply time in the sense of struggling against posterity, of overwriting the worn texts of the past - though to measure up against those is difficult enough - it necessitates a more fundamental engagement with boundaries and limits, with a book's very status *in* time. In his short essay, "Good Readers and Good Writers", Nabokov takes particular care to stress this as perhaps the chief difficulty we have to take on in order to come to terms with a piece of fiction.

Curiously enough, one cannot read a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader. And I shall tell you why. When we read a book for the first time the very process of laboriously moving our eyes from left to right, line after line, page after page, this complicated physical work upon the book, the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, this stands between us and artistic appreciation. When we look at a painting we do not have to move our eyes in a special way even if, as in a book, the picture contains elements of depth and development. The element of time does not really enter in a first contact with a painting. We have no physical organ (as we have the eye in regard to a painting) that takes in the whole picture and then can enjoy its details. But at a second, or third, or

fourth reading we do, in a sense behave towards a book as do towards a painting.<sup>7</sup>

What the author laments is the fact that the initial reading of a novel is an imaginative experience inevitably prescribed by the dictates of linear time. As the reader progresses through the narrative he collates and orders the material presented to him in order to endow it with significance; a process of selection and evaluation which is shaped not just by recollections of previous experiences within our own lives, but for us, if not for a Hetty, further guided by memories of other fictions, which serve as echoes, analogies or even anti-theses to present happenings. Such business, of gathering and assigning meaning, is a fundamental human activity; indeed, the urge to choose and so construct significance as we live through time, is the process by which essentially we run our lives. So a dichotomy is immediately raised between an initial interpretation which is decried in the fictional world of *Laughter in the Dark* as insufficient, and yet which in 'everyday' life, a life in time, is surely the only one we can ever advance.

Questions such as these are, one feels, deliberately provoked by Nabokov within his fictions in order that he may propose, with humour as well as gravity, an answering vision, both of fiction and of life, that accepts the necessity of a first reading but rejects it as binding.

To be sure, there is an average reality, perceived by all of us, but that is not true reality; it is only the reality of general ideas, conventional forms of humdrummery, current editorials.<sup>8</sup>

I tend more and more to regard the objective existence of all events as a form of impure imagination - <sup>9</sup>

The reasoning behind comments such as these is based on the premise that although man is limited to an initial apprehension within time, the action of memory and imagination in constructing meaning is one that is never wholly concluded. That is to say, the initial reading ensures the recognition of a situation which possesses sufficient clarity and enough of a sense of termination to ensure that an interpretation of the next action can take place: for without a definition that appears certain - as 'definite' - there could only be inactivity and stagnation. Nevertheless, whilst licensing future decisions, that interpretation of event, experience or emotion is one that remains unfinished, as open, in order to admit the possibilities of future re-interpretation, of re-reading. If this were denied, if a reading was conclusive, then memory, those reserves of past meanings by which we determine future meanings, would begin to fossilize, and in turn ensure an ever-increasing crudity and uniformity of future experience. Without the ability to see meaning as animate,<sup>10</sup> as something that is always being worked upon in part by the imagination, then there is no richness of experience, no sense of variability, and man is dominated by time - shadowed by the synopsis on Albinus' gravestone - rather than living in continuum, in *expectation*. Nabokov put such views more aphoristically whilst reading out a selection of unused material prepared for *Pale Fire*:

'Time without consciousness - lower animal world; time with consciousness - man; consciousness without time - some still higher state.'<sup>11</sup>

In a first reading of a fiction, however, one's sense of the possibilities of meaning to shift and alter is a response that struggles against the most

prosaic of facts, that the book comes to an end in both time and space. As such, the satisfaction derived from an initial reading lies largely in *concluding* it, deciding upon connections and inter-relations to tie down meaning unequivocally. Moreover, because the novel does end in time (the time we take to read it) and space (the final word), there is a tacit encouragement to the reader to somehow ratify the illusion of certain definition in life in the fiction.

Whilst it is clearly possible during the course of a judicious first reading to note references and shadowings that may reflect considerable discernment on the part of both author and reader, and which may make the most discreet and subtle of contributions to a conclusive reading; for the most part, such an interpretation is unavoidably dominated by the urge to make sequential sense of this progression through linear time towards the inherent comfort and security offered by a conclusion. For, even if a novel points out the uncertainty and complexity of experience, it crucially remains a final statement. Consequently, the sense of meaning as potential, what Nabokov talks of as the element of "development" in his comparison of literature with painting, is largely absent. In a first reading, because the reader is endeavouring to construct a coherent and conclusive meaning that coincides with the end of the book, such a feeling of development, the implication of meaningful existence outside of the book's position in time and space, is extremely difficult to convey. Indeed, it is interesting to note that when discussing the impression he wishes to convey at the end of his novels, Nabokov continues to make use of a comparison with painting, an art form that significantly establishes all its connexions and relevances within an entity which refutes linear time by presenting all its meanings at all times.



I think that what I would welcome at the close of a book of mine is a sensation of its world receding in the distance and stopping somewhere there, suspended afar like a picture in a picture.....<sup>12</sup>

A painting exists *within* time rather than passing through it, and as such has the capacity to stop time - in Nabokov's words "suspend" it - to invite a closer scrutiny of other meanings - the meanings we traditionally label 'deeper' - that refer directly to itself *outside* of time. In short, the painting offers the opportunity to reassemble and shape meanings from its component details continually, without being imprisoned in time or the notion of final definition (which is death). This is "the game of worlds"<sup>13</sup> that in life is only played through the ceaseless activity of memory, which continually remakes the past through the establishment of new links and predominances. For Nabokov, the process of making these connections and experiencing the accompanying feelings of charm, captivation and, above all, surprise at one's capabilities, represent man living at his fullest.

The cradle rocks above the abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness..... Nature expects a full-grown man to accept the two black voids, fore and aft, as stolidly as he accepts the extraordinary visions in between. Imagination, the supreme delight of the immortal and the immature, should be limited. In order to enjoy life, we should not enjoy it too much.

I rebel against this state of affairs. I feel the urge to take my rebellion outside and picket nature. Over and over again, my mind has made colossal efforts to distinguish the faintest of personal glimmers in the impersonal darkness on both sides of my life. That this darkness is caused merely by the walls of time separating me and my bruised fists from the free world of timelessness is a belief I gladly share with the most gaudily painted savage.<sup>14</sup>

Now, to attempt to incorporate a sense of "development", of the relevance that extends here "towards the free world of timelessness" and in *Laughter in the Dark* to "the free city of the mind" [5], leads to fundamental problems for a writer. Most obviously, he is obliged to endeavour to depict his material in a fashion that implies its potential to gain newer and greater significances in the future. Each event, each image should ideally occupy a place within the text that is, (paradoxically) animate and unconfined. In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov gives his readers an explicit illustration of what this means and of its implication. He relates an incident in which a family friend, one General Kuropatkin, showed the young author a trick involving matches which was unfortunately interrupted by a messenger causing the matches to be forgotten. Nabokov goes on:

This incident had a special sequel fifteen years later, when at a certain point of my father's flight from Bolshevik-held St. Petersburg to southern Russia he was accosted by an old man who looked like a gray-bearded peasant in his sheepskin coat. He asked my father for a light. The next moment each recognised the other. I hope old Kuropatkin, in his rustic disguise, managed to avoid Soviet imprisonment, but that is not the 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 1904-5, 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.<sup>15</sup>

Given that an autobiography functions, like any fiction, as the construction of a meaning for a life, what Nabokov is intimating is that one's experiences are never bound down. Everything matters, is of equal importance, and it is up to you, as reader, to determine the scale and the balance. The consequences of this for writing fiction include the rebuttal of the notion of plot as meaning

- so insistently upheld as the mainstay of nineteenth-century realism à la George Eliot - since there is always a possibility in the future that the match theme may be taken up again. We are left with the sensation of innumerable courses that could be taken, a feeling often experienced by Nabokov's leading characters or directly expressed by a narrator.

When I try to analyse my own cravings, motives, actions and so forth I surrender to a sort of retrospective imagination which feeds the analytic faculty with boundless alternatives and which causes each visualised route to fork and refork without end in the maddeningly complex prospect of my past.<sup>16</sup>

Van sealed the letter, found his Thunderbolt pistol in the place he had visualised, introduced one cartridge in the magazine, and translated it in to its chamber. Then, standing before a closet mirror, he put the automatic to his head, at the point of the pterion, and pressed the comfortably concaved trigger. Nothing happened - or perhaps everything happened, and his destiny simply forked at that instant.....<sup>17</sup>

In Nabokov's novels, plot, in the Victorian sense of leading towards meaning (usually moral revelation) cannot thrive, instead there are only *ways of forming plots*. It therefore follows that our only awareness and vitality lies in our consciousness of the ability to make those plots. In short, we only live through self-consciousness. Witness Nabokov's response to the question "What distinguishes us from animals?"

Being aware of being aware of being. In other words, if I not only know that I am but also know that I know it, then I belong to the human species. All the rest follows - the glory of thought, poetry, a vision of the universe.<sup>18</sup>

The effect of this upon the fiction is to encourage a tone and style capable of presenting material with intensity but also parity, rather than one facilitat-

ing the decisive weighing up of details which make plot. Hence the description of the match theme incorporates a reference to another incident involving toy trains which is itself sufficiently developed to be capable of slightly shifting the focus from the matches. That reference may be developed or it may not - it remains as potential future material, and also, of course, one that mocks attempts to tie it in with a consistent, 'serious' interpretation. The result is a tone that does not flatten or deaden material. Rather, it is akin to the effects of deep-focus photography in the cinema, which provides "a greater freedom for the spectator who may choose at any one instant in the same shot the elements that intrigue him, and.... [observe] how much events and characters can gain in ambiguity, because the significance of each moment of the action is not arbitrarily stressed."<sup>19</sup> To develop this analogy further, deep-focus photography requires far more light than is customarily used in film-making and so too with Nabokov: his prose endeavours to register everything as sharply and brightly as possible - most notably (and literally) in *Ada*.<sup>20</sup> *Ada* is shot through with a strong sense of mirrored and reflected light, particularly in the environs of Ardis Hall. The adolescent *Ada*'s attempts to confine its movements are a particularly fine example of this.

The shadows of leaves on the sand were variously interrupted by roundlets of live light. The player chose his roundlet - the best, the brightest he could find - and firmly outlined it with the point of his stick; whereupon the yellow round light would appear to grow convex like the brimming surface of some golden dye. Then the player delicately scooped out the earth with his stick or fingers within the roundlet. The level of that gleaming *infusion de tilleul* would magically sink in its goblet of earth and finally dwindle to one precious drop.<sup>21</sup>

The vitality and sense of animation within this description is of course encouraged by the fact that Nabokov is expressly addressing himself to the question of rendering light, but nevertheless, there is within the prose as a whole an extremely precise focus on the specific that floods event and emotion with illumination. The unquestionable highlight of one of his earliest pieces, *King, Queen, Knave*, is a chapter dedicated to a journey through Berlin by a short-sighted man who has broken his spectacles, whilst the following excerpts from *Laughter in the Dark* demonstrate Nabokov's facility to treat vastly differing emotions and scenarios with equal vividness.

She took a cheaper room. Half-undressed, her little feet shoeless, she would sit on the edge of her bed in the gathering darkness and smoke endless cigarettes.... The winter seemed colder than winters used to be; Margot looked about her for something to pawn: that sunset perhaps.

"What shall I do next?" she thought. [27]

He took the umbrella out of her hand; she pressed still closer to him. For a moment he feared that his head might burst, but then suddenly something relaxed delightfully as though he had caught the tune of his ecstasy, this moist ecstasy drumming, drumming against the taut silk overhead.... When they came to a halt at her front door, he closed the wet, shiny, beautiful thing and gave it back to her. [30]

In the cool room with the red-tiled floor, where the light through the slits of the shutters danced in one's eyes and lay in bright lines at one's feet, Margot, snake-like, shuffled off her black skin, and, with nothing on but high-heeled slippers, clicked up and down the room, eating a sibilant peach; and stripes of sunshine crossed and recrossed her body. [82]

In the first extract, Nabokov's vocabulary points towards a general emotional response on the part of his reader that accompanies a common novelistic situation, that of the acutely isolated woman abandoned by an exploitative lover. However, the intercession of the notion of pawning a sunset crystallizes the

vague and general into a specifically hard and sharp image that endows a banal scenario with a momentary flash of life.

In the second extract, Albinus' instant of happiness is echoed by the rhythm of the rain and Nabokov's repetition of "ecstasy" and "drumming", but what truly clarifies that happiness is the manner in which that, in its turn, invests the umbrella with a new, almost magical, identity. The attention paid to the perception of the umbrella gives it a meaning that matters as much as Albinus' "ecstasy."<sup>22</sup>

Finally, the third extract presents the reader, again through the agency of rhythm (this time developing slowly) and a rapt attention to detail (be it a nude body or "a sibilant peach"), with a picture as it is composed in front of him. Every element is placed for that moment with an identical and inestimable significance as it is held by the attentions both of the light, and critically, of course, the perceiver.

Common to all these pieces is a language that startles readers unfamiliar with such sumptuous and glossily detailed prose and so forces them to confront a mind continually engaged in the business of recognition, giving sunset, umbrella, and brief tableau, meaning. Margot's materialism, though extensive, could not, we feel, stretch to the imaginative transformation required to pawn her sunset. Similarly, Albinus, who we are told on the novel's first page is "not a particularly gifted man" [5], probably lacks the inventiveness to see such enchantment in an umbrella dedicated to the practical task of keeping him dry; whilst Margot Peters as Edward Hopper nude could only be ascribed to a mind and voice considerably removed from any figure within the novel itself. Axel Rex perhaps comes closest in the novel itself to portraying such a voice and mind.

The stage manager whom Rex had in view was an elusive, double, triple, self-reflecting magic Proteus of a phantom, the shadow of many-coloured glass balls flying in a curve, the ghost of a juggler on a shimmering curtain.... This, at any rate, was what Rex surmised in his rare moments of philosophic meditation. [130]

Again, like the deep-focusing camera, it is a mind that endeavours to have no biases, no emphases, only a consistent application to the rendering of a reality that disturbs us precisely because of the thoroughness of the attention it bestows upon everything - its consistency, not its lack of discrimination. This is the other and more intriguing aspect of Nabokov's stress on all aspects of an experience, the "divine details,"<sup>23</sup> for in doing so he eschews the marking of significances that we are used to in fiction in the same way as the deep-focus camera challenges our assumptions of value by refusing to concentrate on the leading figure or on foreground detail.

Within the medium of the novel, a good example of a significance so marked for the reader is the incident involving Tess' misplaced letter to Angel Clare in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. The letter goes astray and contributes markedly to the reader's impression of the book as a course of events governed by an indifferent and hostile fate, the Aeschylean "President of the Immortals."<sup>24</sup> Because of Tess' expressed concern about the letter and its possible effects on her husband-to-be the reader is convinced of its importance, and throughout the rest of the novel there is a residual unease and distinct sense of 'if only.....' In *Laughter in the Dark* too, there are references to an unkind governing fate; as "the Cupid" attending Albinus is described as "left-handed, with a weak chin and no imagination" [11], and use too is made of the literary device of the letter as confession. In this instance, a letter written by Margot, ostensibly for her lover, Albinus. is

intercepted by the latter's wife and so serves to break up the art dealer's marriage. Like Hardy, Nabokov marks for us the significance of the letter by showing his character's concern over its destination. This culminates in Albinus' desperate attempt to head it off, an endeavour which is expressed with a characteristic emphasis on the particular in order to ensure its validity.

He ran out, rushed downstairs, jumped into a cab and while he sat on the very edge of the seat leaning forward (winning a few inches that way), he stared at the back of the driver and that back was hopeless. [56]

However, the importance of that letter, which has apparently occupied centre-stage for the course of a chapter, is thrown into doubt by Margot's reflections on the subject, which effectively conclude that same chapter.

When she had sent off the letter she had anticipated a far more trivial consequence: he refuses to show it, wife gets wild, stamps, has a fit. So the first suspicions are roused and that eases the way. But now chance had helped her and the way was made clear at one stroke. [58]

Whether the letter arrived or not turns out to be immaterial, as Margot would have ensured the collapse of Albinus' marriage sooner or later: not only is there no feeling of "if only...", despite markings that lead the reader to that expectation, but the question is raised of how we assess the significance of that letter in this light, and where we place it within our general linking together of incidents to forge plot. And all we can do as a consequence is to deem its significance momentary and fleeting - so helping to further denude the novel of any sense of plot as theme.



Another example of a similar denial of the system of establishing priorities of value to make plot is provided when Axel Rex and Margot are left alone together at an ice-hockey match. This, their first free meeting since Rex abandoned her, one would expect to be of some importance to the development of the novel, as they discuss Margot's new rôle as Albinus' mistress.

'.....Do you understand what a very awkward moment you've chosen for coming?'

'Nonsense. Do you really believe he's going to marry you?'

'If you upset things he won't.'

'No, Margot, he'll not marry you.'

'And I tell you he will'

Their lips continued to move, but the clamour around drowned their swift quarrel. The crowd was roaring with excitement as nimble sticks pursued the puck on the ice, and knocked it, and hooked it, and passed it on, and missed it, and clashed together in rapid collision. Shifting smoothly this way and that at his post, the goal-keeper pressed his legs together so that his two pads combined to form one single shield.

'...it's dreadful that you've come back. You're a beggar compared with him. Good God, now I know you're going to spoil everything.'

'Nonsense, nonsense, we'll be very careful.'

[107-108]

As we can see, the conversation is not promoted to the foreground in a manner we might perhaps expect of such a scene, and instead, the ice-hockey match is presented with as much vitality - if not more - as Margot and Rex's exchange of views. The exact attention of Nabokov's prose rhythms towards capturing the chaotic vagaries and uncertainties of the game thus point to the only consistency we can detect in Rex's "Proteus of a phantom"; that of a fixed and continual attention to the problem of rendering meaning at each instant of apprehension. Indeed, at times, it appears less exact than exacting, almost as if the reader is being presented with a consciousness that feels itself obliged to register every nuance due to a genuine fear that any exclusion of intonation or actuality would limit and deaden experience - and, consequently, one's sense

of self as a maker of experience. Certainly, such intimations are discernible in Nabokov's comments on the preparation of his fictions.

All I know is that at a very early stage of the novel's development I get this urge to garner bits of straw and fluff, and eat pebbles. Nobody will ever discover how clearly a bird visualizes, or if it visualizes at all, the future nest and the eggs in it. When I remember afterwards the force that made me jot down the correct names of things, or the inches and tints of things, even before I actually needed the information, I am inclined to assume that what I call, for want of a better term, inspiration, had been already at work, mutely pointing at this or that, having me accumulate the known materials for an unknown structure.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, it is also of value to note that at moments we have become accustomed to accepting as emotionally significant and affecting - the break-up of a marriage; reunion with one's beloved; physical suffering and pain - the figures in Nabokov's novels never fail to demonstrate their self-consciousness.

'Margot,' he whispered hoarsely, 'Margot, what have you done? I left home before I could possibly get it. The postman....he doesn't come until a quarter to eight. It's now - '

'Well, that's no fault of mine,' she said 'Really, you are hard to please. It was such a sweet letter.'

She shrugged her shoulders, picked up the book, and turned her back on him. On the right-hand page was a photographic study of Greta Garbo.

Albinus found himself thinking: 'How strange. A disaster occurs and still a man notices a picture.' [56]

She closed her eyes and opened her mouth, leaning back on the cushion, one felted foot on the floor. The wooden floor slanted, a little steel ball would have rolled into the kitchen....there she was (my Lolita!), hopelessly worn at seventeen, with that baby, dreaming already of becoming a big shot and retiring around 2020 A.D. - and I looked and looked at her, and knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else.<sup>26</sup>

Was it time for the morphine yet? No, not yet. Time-and-pain had not been mentioned in the *Texture*. Pity, since an element of pure time enters into pain, into the thick, steady, solid duration of I-can't-bear-it pain; nothing gray-gauzy about it, solid as a black bolé.....

Touch? A giant, with an effort-contorted face, clamping and twisting an engine of agony. Rather humiliating that physical pain makes one supremely indifferent to such moral issues as Lucette's fate, and rather amusing, if that is the right word, to constata that one bothers about problems of style even at those atrocious moments.<sup>27</sup>

In part, this awareness of oneself as maker of experience is encouraged by the literary frame within which Nabokov places a Humbert or a Van Veen, that of autobiographical confessions, as rereadings of experience. Nevertheless, the reader's continual contact with figures consciously placing themselves in a particular locale at each given moment forces him to acknowledge his own interest in positioning and fixing that same figure within the confines of plot, constructing for him the series of limitations that we have come to understand as character, and which, in the end, narrow down to that final plot occupied by Albinus' corpse.

Like the notion of defining plot then, the building-up of character may be seen as a concept that serves only to prevent the emergence of the sense of "development" and future possibility which Nabokov insistently claims as the prerogative of the best fiction. Hence the musing that prefaces *The Gift*.

I wonder how far the imagination of the reader will follow the young lovers after they have been dismissed.<sup>28</sup>

Such speculations counter the inevitable implication of a series of thoughts and a number of actions being held within physical confines, of being, quite literally, *bound*. This provides the tacit invitation to the reader to set his course for a correspondingly binding interpretation, one which is also followed within the mundane world of the everyday, according to Humbert Humbert.

I have often noted that we are inclined to endow our friends with the stability of type that literary characters acquire in the reader's mind. No matter how many times we reopen *King Lear*, never shall we find the good king banging his tankard in high revelry, all woes forgotten, at a jolly reunion with all three daughters and their lapdogs. Never will Emma rally, revived by the sympathetic salts in Flaubert's father's timely tear. Whatever evolution this or that popular character has gone through between the book covers, his fate is fixed in our minds, and, similarly, we expect our friends to follow this or that logical pattern we have fixed for them.... Any deviation in the fates we have ordained would strike us as not only anomalous but unethical. We would prefer not to have known at all our neighbour, the retired hot-dog stand operator, if it turns out he has just produced the greatest work of poetry his age has seen.<sup>29</sup>

The notion that literary figures possess "a stability of type" is one that embraces most reader's formal understanding of the nature of characterisation within the novel on its most basic level: namely as either "fixed" personalities from the outset, where character is then innately displayed through action, exemplified in the Dickensian villain such as Gradgrind; or, as figures more or less wholly determined by upbringing and environment, typified by Pinkie in Greene's *Brighton Rock*, whose conduct is directly shaped by the alliance of these factors. A more sophisticated view of character can also be accommodated within Humbert's terms too; that of a figure moving towards "stability" through the course of the fiction. A good example of this is provided by Jane Austen's eponymous heroine, Emma Woodhouse, whose actions are in part determined by innate qualities, her capacity for self-delusion ("a disposition to think a little too well of herself"<sup>30</sup>), and partly by her environment, her wealth and her indulgent father ("the power of having rather too much her own way"<sup>31</sup>). As the novel progresses, however, the reader is encouraged to see Emma as journeying toward a more objective and tolerant world-view, a development that is eventually confirmed or "fixed" in her marriage to Mr. Knightley at the end of the book. As such, we can read the

novel as a move towards surety, toward the full realisation of character, and plot such a move through the narrative. Hence Emma's various and often contradictory responses to Mr. Knightley can be accounted for by the reader's adoption of the "logical and conventional pattern" that people in love and who don't recognise that fact may behave in a rather haphazard and blundering manner; that is to say, we fashion Emma's stability for her.

In short, what all three of these methods of character presentation endeavour to do is to invite their reader to tie down the author's prose, place it, and then confine it within a critical framework. No matter how much a reader may enjoy the struggle to establish a final interpretation then, reading, and particularly the first reading, emerges as fundamentally a process of *reduction*: we seek one definitive plot and one consistent persona for each character. *Laughter in the Dark*, however, rather than ending with the confirmation of this amenable pursuit and capture, begins from just such a position; as those first two sentences baldly state the most limited and reductive of all the novel's readings - declaring the piece not only caught, but mounted and labelled too - as "the melodramatic tragedy of romantic intrigue."<sup>32</sup>

Once upon a time there lived in Berlin, Germany, a man called Albinus. He was rich, respectable, happy; one day he abandoned his wife for the sake of a youthful mistress; he loved; was not loved; and his life ended in disaster. [5]

Where does the hunter of the definitive go from here?

Similarly, the analogous concern to keep character as confined and as "stable" as possible is also taken to its logical extreme within this piece by Nabokov's insistence on the two-dimensional rigidity of his figures. Albinus, Margot, Rex, Paul; they are all finite readings and are usually portayed in

terms that direct the reader towards the stereotype. The following extract is characteristic of the manner in which the cliché and the stylistic reduction that is caricature, is continually evoked, as Albinus and his brother-in-law Paul face each other to discuss the facts and consequences of the former's infidelity.

'Paul, just a word,' murmured Albinus and he cleared his throat and went into the study. Paul came in and stood by the window.

'This is a tragedy,' said Albinus.

'Let me tell you one thing,' exclaimed Paul at length, staring out of the window. 'It will be exceedingly lucky if Elisabeth survives the shock. She - '

He broke off. The black cross on his cheek went up and down.

'She's like a dead woman, as it is. You have... You are... In fact, you're a scoundrel, sir, an absolute scoundrel.'

'Aren't you being rather rude?' said Albinus, trying to smile.

..... 'All this is extremely painful. Can't you think it's some dreadful misunderstanding? Suppose - '

'You're lying!' roared Paul, thumping the floor with a chair, 'you cad!..... How could you do such a thing? This is not mere vice, it's...'

'That's enough,' Albinus interrupted almost inaudibly.

A motor-lorry drove past; the window panes rattled slightly.

'Oh, Albert,' said Paul, in an unexpectedly calm and melancholy tone, 'who would have thought it...?'

He went out. Frieda was sobbing in the wings. Someone carried out the luggage. Then all was silent.

[62-63]

That the exchange is hackneyed and stale verges on the understatement, and, clearly, the reader is being confronted with the sort of dialogue that pervades the b-movie. Significantly, however, the entire conversation is so unremittingly awful that one's response is not in the final instance as clear-cut as the recognition of parody would imply. Albinus' attempt to assume an air of worldly sophistication in order to play this 'scene' falls flat - he is left "trying to smile." Paul, on the other hand, begins the exchange as the outraged orthodox guardian of morality before going on to deliver parting lines,

'Oh, Albert, who would have thought it?' that we would not be surprised to hear from the supporting actor in a second-rate scenario, so obviously are they designed to reinforce the audience's notion of the inevitability of the leading figure's course of self-destruction. As such, Paul's shift of rôle is one that is anything but "unexpected" to anyone, despite the description being apparently marked for the reader with just such a term. So, what are we left with? A situation portrayed as artificial, as explicitly theatrical (complete with maid "sobbing in the wings"), that the characters within it cannot sustain, that they cannot bring to life. Does this mean that the figures are too 'inadequate' to even animate the cliché, or that they are sufficiently 'adequate' not to comply with the clichéd situation? The only thing we are allowed to state with certainty about Paul and Albinus' 'characters' is thus our own uncertainty about them; that a definitive reading is being resisted and the whole notion of character moving towards "stability of type" has been inverted by Nabokov. Instead of wresting "the logical and conventional pattern" from an initial instability, we have moved from the most fixed of positions, the ossification of caricature, towards active conjecture, towards the conscious manufacture of our own fiction for a brief moment in order to appreciate what the aged Van Veen (naturally discussing his beloved Ada) calls "the rapture of .....identity"<sup>33</sup> - the pleasure of making identity.

The notion of 'making identity' is perhaps most effectively entertained by Nabokov in his presentation of Margot, a figure who we seem to be invited to 'read' along the lines that Martin Amis indicates in his classification of the novel as a "black farce", alongside two other early works, *King, Queen, Knave* and *Despair*.

Then, too, there is the uniformity of the women characters, all of whom - and appropriately so for the purposes of these fictions - are clichés of puerility, lust and greed (Margot is the smartest by some distance).<sup>34</sup>

Such a summary is clearly the result of the logical interpretation of descriptions that mark Margot in just such terms.

.....he [Albinus] told her how a picture could be restored with the aid of garlic and crushed resin which converted the old varnish into dust and how, under a flannel rag moistened with turpentine, the smokiness or the coarse picture painted over would vanish and the original beauty blossom out.

Margot was chiefly interested in the market value of such a picture.

He told her about the war, and the cold mud of the trenches, and she asked him why, being rich, he had not wangled himself into a post behind the lines. [66]

The very way in which she had drawn her shoulder-blades together and purred when he [Albinus] first kissed her downy back had told him that he would get exactly what he wanted, and what he wanted was not the chill of innocence. As in his most reckless visions, everything was permissible; a puritan's love, priggish, reserved, was less known in this new free world than white bears in Honolulu.....There was something delightfully acrobatic about her bed manners.... [59-60]

And I can tell you exactly what it was I wrote: 'Darling Albert, the wee nest is ready, and birdie is waiting for you. Only don't hug me too hard, or you'll turn your baby's head more than ever.' [56]

Margot Peters, as possessor of "a vulgar, capricious feminine voice" [51], would hence appear to be typecast.

However, such a picture is moderated by the overlay of patterns of imagery that go some way to scumble the hard lines of the caricature. The most obvious of such appellations is the consistent reference to her as a child, particularly in chapter six, where the reader is encouraged to note "her childishly upturned face" [41]; "slim girlish figure" [42]; "the childish stamping of her footsteps coming up the stairs" [43]; and the manner in which



"She pulled up her stocking like a child, made the garter snap, and showed him the tip of her tongue" [44]. Moreover, that such a conception of Margot is not limited to Albinus, who in the aforementioned chapter sees her in the mirror, "a schoolgirl in her Sunday dress" [44], is made plain by Nabokov in the way that Paul, who we are promptly informed is "very observant", recalls her as "a schoolgirl in red for whom he had held open the door" [51]. Later in the narrative, Margot and Albinus are seen together, and the former is marked by a voice that we cannot help viewing as objective as it belongs to complete strangers.

An Englishwoman who was lolling in a deckchair beneath a mauve sunshade reading *Punch* turned to her husband, a red-faced, white-hatted man squatting on the sand, and said:

'Look at that German romping about with his daughter. Now, don't be so lazy, William. Take the children out for a good swim.' [81]

Now, to term somebody "childish" is something that does not carry the pejorative weight that Martin Amis' adjective, "puerile", does; or, rather, its implication leads to a more favourable interpretation of the character. Margot's naivete and her capacity to see anew and to wonder, as demonstrated in the examples below, once more threaten the surface consistency that, as readers, we have been encouraged to expect from the apparent type casting.

'You do live in style,' she said, her beaming eyes roaming over the hall with its large rich pictures, its porcelain vase in the corner and that cream-coloured cretonne instead of wallpaper. 'This way?' she asked and pushed open a door. 'Oh!' she said.  
He laid one hand round her waist and with her he looked up at the crystal chandelier as though he himself were a stranger. [43]

A year later she had grown remarkably pretty, wore a short red frock, and was mad on the movies. Afterwards she remembered this period of her life with a

strange oppressive feeling - the light, warm, peaceful evenings; the sound of the shops being bolted for the night; her father sitting astride on his chair outside the door, smoking his pipe and jerking his head; her mother, arms akimbo; the lilac bush leaning over the railing; Frau von Brock going home with her purchases in a green-string bag; Martha the maid waiting to cross with the greyhound and two wire-haired terriers.... It grew darker.... The street, with the upper storeys of the houses still bathed in yellow light, grew quite silent. Only, across the way, two baldheaded men were playing cards on a balcony, and every guffaw and thump was audible. [18-19]

The charge of "childishness" then, could perhaps be read in a manner that denies our right to judge Margot. For a child is an undefined being: it has not fully developed, and only when that development is fully terminated can we realistically offer some form of judgement. Are we to see Margot in a similar light? As a creature that in part eludes censure (and certainly a definitive interpretation) because she herself is by no means a definite human image, an adult? Certainly, the suggestion ("'You're a child yourself,' said Albinus, stroking her hair" [128]) is enough to disturb the stereotype of a fixed reading.

Another, and rather more oblique, means deployed by Nabokov to further complicate the reader's endeavours to 'stabilise' Margot's character is the ascription to her of reptilian, principally snake, imagery. Once again, such descriptions come not merely from the central figure of Albinus, but also directly from the narrator, together with more marginal figures whose opinions encourage us to see such a 'marking' as the possessor of some objectivity.

Margot lay there, her body curved and motionless, like a lizard. [56]

Margot was still curved on the couch in the same posture - a torpid lizard. [56]

Margot, snake-like, shuffled off her black skin [her bathing-costume], and, with nothing on but high-heeled slippers, clicked up and down the room... [82]

Margot slowly drew herself up higher and higher, like a snake when it uncoils. [139]

'Don't ask me, just buy what you like.'  
'But don't you see, Albert...' said a vulgar, capricious feminine voice.  
With a shudder Paul hung up the receiver as though he had inadvertently caught hold of a snake. [51]

('A lovely creature, unquestionably,' thought Lampert, 'but there is something snakelike about her.') [115]

With extraordinary distinctness he [Albinus] pictured Margot and Rex - both quick and alert, with terrible, beaming goggle eyes and long, lithe limbs.... their sinuous path burned in him like the trace which a foul, crawling creature leaves on one's skin. [202]

Such imagery, for all its prevalence, operates on a more sophisticated and discreet level than the comparisons of Margot with a child, in so far as it refers the reader more to a world of literature, a direct world of fiction, than to what Nabokov calls the "average reality" of a fixed reading. The literary prototype such imagery calls to mind (apart from the Fall) is Keats' *Lamia*, itself drawn from the earlier literary creations of Ovid, Spenser, Marlowe and Burton, a figure who appears as "A virgin purest lipped, yet in the lore / Of love deep learned to the red heart's core."<sup>35</sup> This description could easily be applied to Margot, the "schoolgirl" innocent with "something delightfully acrobatic about her bed manners" [60-61]. Keats' "cruel lady,"<sup>36</sup> like his *Belle Dame Sans Merci*,<sup>37</sup> is of course a figure of considerable destructive power (again, a possible view of Margot), but critically one whose destructiveness is presented as an inevitable result of her other-worldly or demoniac nature.<sup>38</sup> Whether we can elevate the all too worldly Margot to such a position is doubtful.<sup>39</sup> However, despite an element of bathos perhaps on Nabokov's part, there remains the fact that a certain other-worldly, or indescribable aspect of Margot's 'character' is intimated by the application of such terms.

It is not too surprising then that, in her discussion of the general pattern of thesis, antithesis and synthesis which she detects in many of Nabokov's novels, Carol T. Williams is obliged to admit the difficulty of achieving a definitive reading of Margot's character.

.....each character has three aspects....Margot is sympathetic even as she destroys Albinus' marriage because of his selfishness, and even during the anti-thesis she receives some of the sympathy due to an innocent egoist; she tries to be faithful to Albinus, the narrator says, but, however sensual, her love for Rex is real. On the Riviera, Rex plays his cruel-comic tricks on Albinus, and in Switzerland Margot is only his passive accomplice: Nabokov slowly turns his lens from her, so that *one's final impression of Margot is mixed.*<sup>40</sup> [My italics.]

While pointing out the more obvious shifts in presentation that we can detect on a first reading, the critic is forced to recognize that the character resists even a formulation as sophisticated as this, which permits so wide a variation in consistency - indeed, to the point of contradiction - albeit still along a prescribed critical path.

Interestingly, Nabokov himself expressed considerable reservations about his efficacy in avoiding the most facile and immediate of available readings of his novel; the dominant, though debased, three-cornered pattern of popular melodrama, as the conversation Alfred Appel Jr. recorded with him for his book, *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*, makes clear.

"It's my poorest novel," he says, "The characters are hopeless clichés." but isn't that part of their characterisation? "Yes, perhaps, but I've succeeded all too well. They are clichés nonetheless, except for the novelist [one Udo Conrad, and the only figure to demonstrate a vision capable of grasping more than the immediate in the novel]. He's all right."<sup>41</sup>

Appel then goes on to claim:

One might agree with Nabokov, who is surely correct on one point: his imitation of "the silver ghost of romance.....that special brand of romance" (40) was so successful that *Camera Obscura*, unlike his other émigré novels, was immediately translated into four languages and optioned to a movie producer. At last count it had been translated fourteen times, more than any novel save *Lolita*.....the broad ordonnances of the plot recommended it to three other film producers, and *King, Queen, Knave*, another upended love triangle, is now headed for the screen (directed by Jerzy Skolimowski, with Gina Lollobrigida as Martha, David Niven as Dreyer).<sup>42</sup>

Appel's argument, in a nutshell, that "the 'universal appeal' of *Laughter in the Dark*.....suggest(s) that Nabokov's own attitude towards its popular ingredients was not sufficiently highlighted by irony or parody,"<sup>43</sup> is not without force, nor, of course, should the author's own reservations be ignored out of hand. However, not only should we remain mindful that Nabokov's initial works in English were not composed without certain hesitations,<sup>44</sup> but it might also be fruitful to consider that Nabokov here took on, as it were, the diversion of the reader from one of the most well-trodden and smooth-worn of routes to literary resolution. The very ease with which one may journey, seemingly frictionless, along the clearly marked and gently banked paths of melodrama dulls the reader's senses, making him, like the long-haul motorway driver, less receptive, not only to details of incidental scenery, but, sometimes, to other signs: those that point to routes petering out, breaks in their surface, or simply offer the possibility of pleasant diversion.

Perhaps some of Nabokov's efforts to prevent the followers of *Laughter in the Dark* from 'going with the flow,' might be termed oversubtle, but, if they do seem so, as they appear to Appel, and, with hindsight, even to Nabokov himself, then we must realise and stress that they do so only when measured

against the urgency and fervour of the audience's desire to complete the journey through the book, to make it over to melodrama, and, of course, in so doing, end expectation. It is the far more onerous yet invigorating task of going against the popular will, and of alerting a public to the exact scale of a commonplace hunger for certainty - together with the possibly monstrous distension that may result from its blind pursuit - which survives as the admonitory edge to Nabokov's *oeuvre*, and quells any possible charges of dilettantism that might have been levelled at this selective taking of fictional pleasures. Certainly, the work we shall be looking at next, *Bend Sinister*, alerts us to these dangers - not only by describing their wholesale application to a society,<sup>45</sup> but, by inscribing, with enormous care, an artistic form which endeavours to refute any element of novelistic pandering to that desire.

.. 'Sabotage' operations directed against such finalised and resilient literary orders as melodrama (those triangles are not called 'eternal' without reason, after all), or the equally monolithic 'totalitarian' novel, may then demand not only a considerable weight of charge, but, in order to dispel those familiar outlines, a most fastidious placement. Even then, as the popular reception of *Laughter in the Dark* would appear to indicate, it remains extremely difficult for the writer: firstly, to solicit from his audience a level of discernment that recognises, and acknowledges as necessary, the extraordinary thoroughness of a treatment of the most ordinary materials; and, secondly, to avoid the re-enaction of the procedures which established and standardised those structures in the first place.

We have already pointed to a variety of the author's approaches to individual facets of these central problems in *Laughter in the Dark*, many of which are taken up again and developed further in Nabokov's works of the next

four decades. In particular, he demonstrates an especial fondness for the production of effects that seek to push the 'given' boundaries of the literary. Hence his dealings with genre, as the flattened, regular shapes of fiction, and the manner in which stiff two-dimensional characterisation proves to be a recurring theme and starting point - with the other early triangular melodrama, *King, Queen, Knave*, advertising the insubstantiality of its players in its title.

Now, to seek to present the figures within a fiction as unique, and hence deny the main objective of a first reading, namely the construction of an etiology for the novel, is hardly a rare occurrence in fiction. However, Nabokov commonly begins from the most unpromising and hackneyed literary arrangements, and strives to animate and celebrate a uniqueness which becomes all the more valuable because of the difficulty with which it has been disclosed. Indeed, that uniqueness aspires to extend further than the inevitable closing-off provided by any kind of label. *Invitation to a Beheading*, in particular, thrives on resistance to the reduction of its leading figure to the level of mere 'character.' Consequently, the only truly 'characteristic' human experience for Nabokov emerges as the recognition of making an event, but always allied to it is the realisation that event is never curtailed. It is a process that Nabokov rarely outlines to the reader directly by having his characters go through any model experience, but occasionally - particularly at moments of extreme emotion - the sensations accompanying such activity are made explicit. Intriguingly, the author's methods of presentation in such instances is extremely consistent. His favoured technique is an overt depiction of a solitary mind trying to grapple with extreme feelings and emotions, moments which as human beings we would like to think of as being able to demand from us all our mental energies. However, at precisely these instants, Nabokov always shows the mind

as refusing to be confined to what we feel should be the most pressing of concerns, and reaching out towards something else - something we would, if asked, deem irrelevant, or perhaps even feel ashamed of. Yet it is this involuntary impulse, rather than what we *rightly* feel, which serves to define our uniqueness all the more effectively - precisely because we *don't* wish it. Hence Humbert's awareness of the steel ball that would roll to one side of Mrs. Dolly Schiller's floor or the horrible feeling of mental activity outstripping grief that Albinus experiences as he tries to mourn for his daughter, only to find that he cannot restrict the workings of consciousness to so important an activity.

He walked along the white, soft, crunching pavement, and still could not quite believe what had happened. In his mind's eye he pictured Irma with surprising vividness, scrambling on to Paul's knees or patting a light ball against the wall with her hands; but the taxis hooted as if nothing had happened, the snow glittered Christmas-like under the lamps, the sky was black, and only in the distance, beyond the dark mass of roofs, in the direction of the *Gedächtnis-kirche*, where the great picture-palaces blazed, did the blackness melt to a warm brownish blush. All at once he remembered the names of the two ladies on the divan: Blanche and Rosa von Nacht. [124-125]

A similar occurrence is also noted and, as one would expect of a philosopher, questioned, by Adam Krug in *Bend Sinister*.

In a casual flash, for no reason at all, he recollected a way Olga had of lifting her left eyebrow when she looked at herself in the mirror.

Do all people have that? A face, a phrase, a landscape, an air bubble from the past suddenly floating up as if released by the head warden's child from a cell in the brain while the mind is at work on some totally different matter? Something of the sort also occurs just before falling asleep when what you think you are thinking is not at all what you think. Or two parallel passenger trains of thought, one overtaking the other.<sup>46</sup>



It is important to note that this sort of writing and the experience it endeavours to depict is not stream of consciousness in the Joycean sense, because, as its title indicates, stream of consciousness presents the indirection of the mind in a linear fashion, that is, in a form which invites a reading of it within time and space. Nabokov, rather than showing consciousness as a unique and partly random agency along linear paths, instead seems to be trying to depict thought at the very moment it takes place. He seeks to do so by presenting a figure's main preoccupation together with the incomprehensible element conceived alongside of it - the "parallel passenger train of thought" - and which resists the processes of synthesis and amalgamation that would make definition complete. This manner of writing is Nabokov's attempt to solve the problem of giving expression to thought, to the activities of consciousness, in as uncircumscribed a way as is practically manageable: for to present thought in prose is to fix it within the pages of the novel, and the only means of implying some sort of release or development from that fixity is to qualify it; not with another thought, but an aspect of the original thought that prevents it from petrification. Needless to say, Nabokov puts the whole thing far more concisely and elegantly.

I remember a cartoon depicting a chimney sweep falling from the roof of a tall building and noticing on the way that a sign-board had one word spelled wrong, and wondering in his headlong flight why nobody had thought of correcting it. In a sense, we all are crashing to our death from the top story of our birth to the flat stones of the churchyard and wondering with an immortal Alice in Wonderland at the patterns of the passing wall. This capacity to wonder at trifles - no matter what the peril - these asides of the spirit, these footnotes in the volume of life are the highest forms of consciousness, and it is in this childishly speculative state of mind, so different from commonsense and its logic, that we know the world to be good.<sup>47</sup>

Nabokov, in calling these free and wayward elements of thought "footnotes", points to the manner in which they exist in the same instant as the 'major' thought, but are never wholly allied to it. They remain adjuncts, operating on the periphery of definition, but necessary to prevent definition from being closed and restrictive. Hence the sense of possibility that can bring to life even the banal scenario outlined in the opening sentences of *Laughter in the Dark* - a potential of "depth and development" that the novel's second paragraph takes pains to inform us about.

Once upon a time there lived in Berlin, Germany, a man called Albinus. He was rich, respectable, happy; one day he abandoned his wife for the sake of a youthful mistress; he loved; was not loved; and his life ended in disaster.

This is the whole of the story and we might have left it at that had not there been profit and pleasure in the telling; and although there is plenty of space on a gravestone to contain, bound in moss, the abridged version of a man's life, detail is always welcome. [5]

If the problem of depicting the operations of consciousness as always existing in continuum, that is, as forever unresolved, can only be resolved by the sort of direct presentation attempted by Nabokov in the quoted extracts, then further difficulties obviously ensue: namely, that a verbal representation of the individual (and therefore, unique) consciousness must couch itself in a language whose full range of meaning is, in the final instance, incomprehensible to all but that self. Moreover, to reveal thought together with its "footnote", its simultaneous "aside", through language is to limit oneself essentially to variations on the oxymoron, the device best suited to convey intensity and animation without too overtly cramping the implications and extent of meaning. It is this innate conflict within a form that makes the oxymoron quite an apposite term for what often appears to be happening within

Nabokov's fictions; as what is stated there, as clearly as the author can manage, is the existence of consciousness as an agent whose operations are anything but clear to us. The problem remains the same: how can one portray the essential ambiguity of perception and maintain its key qualities of flexibility and expectation, by the imposition of limitations and boundaries?

As such, Nabokov's audience is led to a situation where there can never be a 'correct' reading of 'character' or of 'plot', only an immense number of potential plots and possible moments of 'stable' character. In *Laughter in the Dark* in particular, we are also reminded that man's faculty to re-interpret the material happenings of a life and see more than the standard configurations is a quality that does not necessarily result in satisfaction or, for want of a better term, happiness, as is evident when we consider the musings of Elisabeth, the wife Albinus has deserted for Margot.

The greater part of the day she sat in one of the rooms or sometimes even in the hall - in any place where the heavy mists of her thoughts happened to overtake her - and pondered over this or that detail of her married life. It seemed to her he had always been unfaithful. And now she remembered and understood (as one learning a new language might remember once seeing a book in that new tongue when one did not yet know it) the red stains - sticky red kisses - which she had noticed once on her husband's pocket handkerchief. [78]

Again, when Albinus is finally informed of Margot's true relationship with Axel Rex, and at last constructs a more accurate interpretation of events, Nabokov employs an image that points directly to the notion of 'reading' a text.

He had the obscure sensation of everything's being suddenly turned the other way round, so he had to read it all backward if he wanted to understand. It was a sensation devoid of any pain or astonishment. It was simply something dark and looming, and yet smooth and soundless, coming towards him; and there he stood, in a kind of dreamy, helpless stupor, not even trying to

avoid that ghostly impact, as if it were some curious phenomenon which could do him no harm so long as this stupor lasted. [157]

Reading or interpretation then, in Nabokov's work, does not lead to a moral revelation or harmonious conclusions of the type we arrive at in an *Emma*, a *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, or an *Adam Bede*, in so far as the mind itself, as determiner of moral standards, of notions of 'happiness,' is always in the foreground of these fictions. Even life and text, so rigorously separated in the Victorian novel, here enter a more involved relationship. Although still acutely consciousness of the damage their confusion may cause (as many of the later pieces depict graphically), Nabokov recognises *fully* that life has come to partake of textual paradigms - for good or ill. It is the saturation of his fictions with this mode of understanding, a way of looking with the same kind of care as that with which, ideally, we should approach the novel - thus *demanding* that those moments at which the mind is at its most lucid and self-aware are rendered in terms of text - which serves as a kind of watermark for Nabokov's work. It distinguishes a writing which not only strives to keep a sense of expectation and to draw attention to the shapes imposed upon it, but, in addition, which also *has* considerable expectations - of its audience. Nabokov's consistent refusal to compromise, or in any way diminish, those demands during his examinations of other, easier, public options is probably the hidden subject of, and certainly the reason for, this study.

### Footnotes

1. George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, [Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1980] 181.

2. In point of fact, one of Donnithorne's first actions in the novel is to recommend a recent purchase to his godmother, "a volume of poems, *Lyrical Ballads*...." [*Ibid.* 109].

3. Vladimir Nabokov, Foreword to Mikhail Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*, Trans. and Ed. Vladimir Nabokov in collaboration with Dmitri Nabokov [The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, rep. 1984] xiii-xiv.

4. Vladimir Nabokov, *Laughter In The Dark*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1961] 5. Future references to the text will follow in parentheses.

5. The various, pupal forms of *Kamera Obskura*, *Camera Obscura*, and *Laughter in the Dark* are thoroughly discussed by Jane Grayson ("this, the most completely reworked of the novels") in her exemplary *Nabokov Translated: A Comparison of Nabokov's Russian and English Prose*, [Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977]. See in particular 23-58.

6. Perhaps the most startling demonstration of such techniques in operation within Nabokov's *oeuvre* is to be found on the second page of *Invitation to a Beheading*, where the reader's first attempts to settle down with the text are most brusquely interrupted.

So we are nearing the end. The right-hand, still untasted part of the novel, which during our delectable reading, we would lightly feel, mechanically testing whether there were still plenty left (and our fingers were always gladdened by the placid, faithful thickness), has suddenly, for no reason at all, become quite meagre: a few minutes of quick reading, already downhill, and - O horrible!

[*Invitation to a Beheading*, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1960) 10.]

7. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1980] 3.

8. Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1974] 118.

9. *Ibid.* 154.

10. At the same time, of course, Nabokov is well aware of the rider that meaning cannot be consciously recognised as fluid and wholly subjective, as to do so would deny communication on the most basic level. Indeed, one of the short stories collected in *Nabokov's Dozen*, 'Signs and Symbols', explicitly points out the dangers of adopting just such a position in its depiction of "referential mania", the affliction which torments the tale's central figure.

His inmost thoughts are discussed at night fall, in manual alphabet, by darkly gesticulating trees. Pebbles or stains or sunflecks form patterns representing in some awful way messages he must intercept. Everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme..... He must be always on his guard and devote every minute and module of life to the decoding of the undulation of things.

[Vladimir Nabokov, *Nabokov's Dozen*, (Heinemann, London, 1959) 65.]

11. *Strong Opinions* 30.
12. *Ibid.* 72.
13. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1962] 63.
14. Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1967] 19-20.
15. *Ibid.* 27.
16. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, Ed. Alfred Appel Jr. [McGraw-Hill, New York and Toronto, 1970] 15.
17. Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1969] 445.
18. *Strong Opinions* 142.
19. Peter Cowie paraphrasing André Bazin in his *A Ribbon of Dreams: The Cinema of Orson Welles*, [The Tantivy Press, London, 1973] 46-48.
20. For a more extensive discussion of the importance of the light motif in *Ada*, see chapter seven, 'Sun and Shade', in Bobbie Ann Mason's *Nabokov's Garden: A Guide to "Ada"*, [Ardis, Ann Arbor, Mi. 1974], especially 129-141.
21. *Ada* 51-52.
22. The exact siting of this incident is, needless to say, additionally determined by other intermeshing forces. The careful psychological placement, (and the sly nod to Freud, the "Austrian crank with a shabby umbrella" of *Strong Opinions*), and the purely literary echo as Margot's wishful earlier picture of "herself as a screen beauty in gorgeous furs being helped out of a gorgeous car by a gorgeous hotel porter under a giant umbrella" [19] is here ironically fulfilled, act as just two of the many subliminal co-ordinates within the novel.
23. Ross Wetzsteon, "Nabokov as Teacher" in *Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1971] Ed. A. Appel Jr. and C. Newman, 245.
24. Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, [Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, rep. 1979] 489.

25. *Strong Opinions* 31.
26. *The Annotated Lolita* 279.
27. *Ada* 586-587.
28. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1963] 8.
29. *The Annotated Lolita* 267.
30. Jane Austen, *Emma*, [Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, rep. 1979] 37.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Dabney Stuart, *Nabokov: The Dimensions of Parody*, [Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge and London, 1978] 98.
33. *Ada* 220.
34. Martin Amis, "The Sublime and the Ridiculous: Nabokov's Black Farces" in *Vladimir Nabokov: A Tribute*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1979] Ed. P. Quennell, 82.
35. John Keats, *Poetical Works*, [Oxford University Press, London, rep. 1966] Ed. H. W. Garrod, 165, ll. 189-190.
36. *Ibid.* 168, ll. 290.
37. According to Andrew Field, Nabokov himself published a Russian translation of Keats' *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* while at Cambridge. (See Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life In Art* [Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1967] 66.) However, whether the author's youthful rendition matched up to the version produced by the futurist poet, Alexis Pan, which has been described in at least one quarter as "a very miracle of verbal transfusion" is open to question. (See Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* [New Directions, Norfolk, Conn. 1959] 29.)
38. Margot's destructive side is, in point of fact, displayed within the novel as too banal and casually horrifying to be of anything but this world. The following occurrence at one of Albinus' dinner parties makes this (unfortunately) all too plain.
- Margot flitted from place to place and one of the minor poets followed her like a shaggy dog. She suggested burning a hole in his palm with her cigarette and started doing so and, though perspiring freely, he kept smiling like the little hero he was. [95-96]
39. Such an action is of course performed by Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, whose vision of Dolores Haze as "not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac)" [*The Annotated Lolita* 18] is clearly marked by Nabokov as overwhelmingly subjective and certainly not shared by any other figure within the fiction.

40. Carol T. Williams, "Nabokov's Dialectical Structure", in *Nabokov: The Man And His Work*, [University of Wisconsin Press, London, 1967] Ed. L. S. Dembo, 174.

41. Alfred Appel Jr., *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*, [Oxford University Press, 1974] 262.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Certainly, Nabokov listened to and altered a small number of passages in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* according to the emendations offered by Edmund Wilson. (See *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters: 1940-1971* [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1979] Ed. Simon Karlinsky, especially 49-50.) *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is not treated extensively in this study of the English fiction largely because most of its procedures (principally, the use it makes of the templates of biography and literary criticism) are discussed in other chapters where Nabokov redeploys similar tactics (often with greater surety than the perhaps overly hazy *Real Life*).

45.

My aloofness is an illusion resulting from my never having belonged to any literary, political or social coterie. I am a lone lamb. Let me submit, however, that I have bridged the "aesthetic distance" in my own way by means of such absolutely final indictments of Russian and German totalitarianism as my novels *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*.

[*Strong Opinions* 156.]

46. Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, rep. 1972] 158-159.

47. *Lectures on Literature* 373-374.



*Bend Sinister: "A Shrivelled World."*

Nabokov informs the reader in the introduction to *Bend Sinister* that his novel is a "fantasy," and its strange title, "an attempt to suggest an outline broken by refraction, a distortion in the mirror of being, a wrong turn taken by life, a sinistral and sinister world" [viii]. As such, the novel is clearly concerned with opposing perspectives; a 'distorted' view and one (implied or actual) of a world prior to the act of distortion. The distorted world provides the ostensible setting of the novel, an imaginary East European dictatorship which characteristically acts to bear down and reduce other perspectives, as evinced in the interpretation of *Hamlet* propounded by one Professor Hamm.

As with all decadent democracies, everybody in the Denmark of the play suffers from a plethora of words. If the state is to be saved, if the nation desires to be worthy of a robust new government, then everything must be changed; popular common sense must spit out the caviar of moonshine and poetry, and the simple word, *verbum sine ornatu*, intelligible to man and beast alike, and accompanied by fit action, must be restored to power. [96-97]

The inference is only too apparent: if such sentiments were to be carried out, then the result would be a world without distinction, bringing about the uniformity of "man and beast alike." Directly opposing this restrictive perception, which would deny nuance, subtlety, and the critical space between word and meaning that admits the perceiver's imagination, is an alternate view of Shakespeare which is couched in notably antithetic terms to that of Professor Hamm.

Nature had once produced an Englishman whose domed head had been a hive of words; a man who had only to breathe on any particle of his stupendous vocabulary to

have that particle live and expand and throw out  
tremulous tentacles until it became a complex image  
with a pulsing brain and correlated limbs. [106-107]

Whereas Shakespeare's world is described as expansive, opening out to both  
recognise and rejoice in the inherent subjectivity of perception, the  
environment of *Bend Sinister* is one constructed on the principle of denying  
the individual the right to select and form his life through the workings of  
an independent imagination. The consequence of this refutation for the novel  
as a whole is to make it, for the most part, an extremely constrictive and  
restrictive reading experience. The following sentiments are a sample of many.

Think of the millions of unnecessary books accumulating  
in libraries. The books they print!.....things in  
foreign languages which nobody can read.....Less books  
and more commonsense - that's my motto. [118]

Whatever I have thought or written in the past, one  
thing is clear to me now; no matter to whom they  
belong, two pairs of eyes looking at a boot see the  
same boot since it is identically reflected in both...  
[134]

We believe that the only true Art is the Art of Discip-  
line. All other arts in our Perfect City are but sub-  
missive variations of the supreme Trumpet-call. [149]

Richard F. Patteson has called *Bend Sinister* "a novel of closures,"<sup>2</sup> and  
this seems an apt recognition of the sense of confinement and claustrophobia  
Nabokov has managed to instil into the book. Indeed, if one was to locate a  
moment and direction that is any way representational of the text as a whole,  
then a good choice would perhaps be the observation made whilst Adam Krug,  
the philosopher-hero, waits (in vain) for his son to be returned from police  
custody. . . .

A filing cabinet concealed the entrance Krug had used some minutes before. What looked like a curtained window turned out to be a curtained mirror. [191]

Windows in *Bend Sinister* always turn out to be mirrors, and the effect of this continual limitation of scale and ambition upon the reader is to engender a sense of frustration which seems to underlie the rather virulent, if not petulant, critical reception the novel has garnered. Page Stegner, for example, begins his discussion with the observation, "Nabokov's least known and least available novel, *Bend Sinister* seems also to be his least popular among those who do know it."<sup>3</sup> Diana Trilling in a review for *The Nation* condemned it as "dull 'fanciness' in which there were only three good moments and one instance of literary imagination in all its two hundred-odd pages."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, P. N. Furbank described it as "artistically perverse and unbalanced,"<sup>5</sup> whilst Julian Moynaham called it "perhaps Nabokov's only morbid book."<sup>6</sup> Such remarks seem in part the inevitable response to coming up repeatedly against unquestioning reflection, "this crazy-mirror of terror and art" [xii], whose cumulative effect, however, eventually forces Nabokov's reader to acknowledge that these fictional layers echo "the silence of a shrivelled world." [82]

That failure and its attendant frustration provide one of the overriding concerns of this novel is clearly evident from the manner in which the whole piece turns on the inability of Adam Krug to recognise that his affection for his son David - something which in a truly human society should serve as an indicator of a man's strength and value - becomes, in this distorted world, a weakness to be exploited. Through David, Krug's freedom to act independently of the political constraints imposed by the dictatorship can be threatened, a

fact that the philosopher is incapable of registering, and yet of which the reader is made both explicitly and continually aware.

'I want to be left alone.'  
'Alone is the wrong word!' cried Maximov,  
flushing. 'You are not alone! You have a child.' [80]

The drab colour the future took matched well the grey world of his widowhood, and had there been no friends to worry about, and no child to hold against his cheek and heart, he might have devoted the twilight to some quiet research. [136-137]

Krug's failure to see through the mechanical and inept deceptions practised upon him by government agents, Mariette Bachofen and Peter Quist, or to recognise the possibility of aid offered by the student Phokus [158], who is later disclosed as the "leader" of "the little group of anti-Ekwilist conspirators" [195], all provide overt demonstrations of how misconceptions dominate. And, ironically counterpointing Krug's errors, the philosopher is himself repeatedly associated with a Professor Martin Krug,<sup>7</sup> whose title, "Vice-President of the Academy of Medicine", is in the end amusedly and resignedly granted to him by the narrator [202].

Significantly, however, Krug's opinion of himself is one that recognises the innate attraction of the distorted view, and consequently places him between the two expansive and restrictive poles.

he.....knew that what people saw in him without realising it, perhaps, was not an admirable expansion of positive matter but a kind of inaudible frozen explosion (as if the reel had been stopped at the point where the bomb bursts) with some debris gracefully poised in mid-air. [154]

It is characteristic of Nabokov's careful placing of Krug that his creature avoids judgement by either of these two scales. Moreover, that the philosopher does escape being pinned down by perspective is dramatically underlined when the narrator appears to recall Krug from a world he admits to having invented, and so circumvents any conclusive reading. As such, the novel clearly illustrates Nabokov's own views on the possibility of trying to fix a definite reality or interpretation.

Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information; and as specialisation. If we take a lily, for instance, or any other kind of natural object, a lily is more real to a naturalist than it is to an ordinary person. But it is still more real to a botanist. And yet another stage of reality is reached by a botanist who is a specialist in lilies. You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you can never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it's hopeless.<sup>6</sup>

These comments provide an extremely useful gloss on the most notable demonstrations of misapprehension within the novel, which are given not by Krug, but rather by the new government, headed by one of his former schoolmates, Paduk. It is Paduk's unchecked opinions masquerading as definitive judgement which have provided his party with its ideological base, by taking up the hare-brained philosophic system known as "Ekwillism". As outlined by its creator, Frederick Skotoma, Ekwillism seeks to promote human harmony by advancing the notion that each individual should be endowed with equal amounts of the apparently finite resource of "world consciousness" [67]. Hitherto, due to its unequal distribution, there had been incompatibility, and, of course, distinctiveness, both of which would be eliminated by Skotoma's theory of 'balance'.

As a flight of fancy, such a scheme is harmless and, in part, amusing. Under the aegis of Paduk, however, the theory is made monstrously literal.

He [Skotoma] died soon after his treatise appeared and so was spared the discomfort of seeing his vague and benevolent Ekwilism transformed (whilst retaining its name) into a violent and virulent political doctrine, a doctrine that proposed to enforce spiritual uniformity upon his native land through the medium of the most standardised sections of the inhabitants, namely the Army, 'under the supervision of a bloated and dangerously divine State [67]

The dictator's interpretation of Skotoma's philosophic speculations enables him to implement a system which is not only overtly totalitarian, as is evident throughout the novel, but also innately restrictive. In his failure to appreciate that Skotoma is engaging in an imaginative act, a speculation, Paduk denies the freedom of imagination, even the flawed imagination of a Skotoma, to envisage or create something that has no direct relevance to the world in which its creator lives.

This freedom, to define one's own criteria through the independent creation of the mind, is viewed as paramount by Nabokov, and is stressed in most of his writings on fiction in an endeavour to pre-empt any efforts on the part of the reader to impose his own standards or offer value judgements.

Even in his worst writings Gogol was always good at creating his reader, which is the privilege of great writers. Thus we have a circle, a closed family-circle, one might say. It does not open into the world. Treating the play as a social satire (the public view) or as a moral one (Gogol's belated amendment) meant missing the point completely. The characters of *The Government Inspector* whether subject or not to imitation by flesh and blood, were true only in the sense that they were true creatures of Gogol's fancy.<sup>9</sup>

*Despair*, in kinship with the rest of my books, has no social comment to make, no message to bring in its

teeth. It does not uplift the spiritual organ of man, nor does it show humanity the right exit.'<sup>o</sup>

My favourite author (1768-1849) once said of a novel now utterly forgotten: '*Il a tout pour tous. Il fait rire l'enfant et frissonner la femme. Il donne à l'homme du monde un vertige salutaire et fait rêver ceux qui ne rêvent jamais.*' *Invitation to a Beheading* can claim nothing of the kind. It is a violin in a void.'

That Paduk negates this kind of mental activity, and with it the life it normally bestows, is encapsulated in his replies to two queries Krug makes during the latter's first interrogation (or rather the first version of the interrogation that we receive).

'In what prison or prisons are they [Krug's imprisoned friends] kept?'  
'I beg your pardon?'  
'Where is Ember, for instance?'  
'You want to know too much. These are dull technical matters of no real interest to your type of mind.'  
[131]

Paduk's response to Krug's initial question is one of surprise and bewilderment, for the simple reason that the philosopher's inquiry is founded on a system of values that he, and the regime he embodies, is incapable of recognising. The resultant misapprehension is at once underlined and compounded when Krug's second and even more literal attempt to 'get through' to Paduk is curtly rebuffed, and of course with it, the renewal of his offer of those values that recognise others apart from oneself. Indeed, Paduk's response actually encompasses more than a mere dismissal: it attempts to supplant Krug's values completely - those which truly make an interest "real" - and to replace them with his own: in short, to decide Krug's life for him. It is just such a blindness to the possible existence of other codes of practice and

standards that is evident in Marthe's aghast response to Cincinnatus C.'s declarations of individuality in the earlier *Invitation to a Beheading* ("Me, I'm stupid maybe, and don't know anything about the laws, but still my instinct told me that every word of yours was impossible, unspeakable..."<sup>12</sup>), and which serves in the later *Speak, Memory* as the bonding agent for an extremely unpleasant grouping.

.....a kind of family circle has gradually been formed, linking representatives of all nations, jolly empire-builders in their jungle clearings, French policemen, the unmentionable German product, the good old church-going Russian or Polish *pogromshchik*, the lean American lyncher, the man with the bad teeth who squirts antiminority stories in the bar or the lavatory, and at another point of the same subhuman circle, those ruthless paste-faced automatons in opulent John Held trousers and high-shouldered jackets, these *Sitzriesen* looming, at all our conference tables, whom - or should I say which? - the Soviet State began to export around 1945 after more than two decades of selective breeding and tailoring.....<sup>13</sup>

Another means adopted by Nabokov to convey the notion of an all-pervasive impercipience at the centre of the dictatorship is the limited use of a very distinct tone of voice. This, above all, portrays Paduk's actions and views as extremely mannered and overtly stylised. Thus, in the aforementioned interview, this tyrant proceeds to drum his fingers on the desk; "they all drum" we are then informed [131] as a register of an overpowering (again, as befits *Bend Sinister*, in the most literal of senses) banality. Earlier, for instance, the note of tedious predictability is sounded when the reader is casually informed "Obviously the Toad [Paduk's school nickname] had decided to make his revolution as conventional as possible" [30], a view which is confirmed by Paduk's later inquiry, "whether his apartment were warm enough (nobody of course, could have expected a revolution *without* a shortage of coal)" [132].



The result of totalitarianism on its practitioners and its contribution to any semblance of human distinctiveness is caustically summarised by Nabokov's description of the Roman games.

Orpheus was acted by a criminal and the scene ended with a bear killing him, while Titus or Nero, or Paduk, looked on with that complete pleasure which 'art' shot through with 'human interest' is said to produce. [139]

Paduk's interchangeability with any other dictator reinforces the stress on an adjective that is applied to him the first time he is introduced to the reader, namely, the *commonplace* [60]. The same descriptive term also adorns the short essay entitled "Good Reader and Good Writers," which prefaces Nabokov's *Lectures on Literature*.

To minor authors is left the ornamentation of the commonplace: these do not bother about any reinventing of the world; they merely try to squeeze the best they can out of a given order of things, out of traditional patterns of fiction. The various combinations these minor authors are able to produce within these set limits may be quite amusing in a mild ephemeral way because minor readers like to recognise their own ideas in a pleasing disguise. But the real writer, the fellow who sends planets spinning and models a man asleep and eagerly tampers with the sleeper's rib, that kind of author has no given values at his disposal: he must create them himself.<sup>14</sup>

If we are to view one of *Bend Sinister's* major concerns as the depiction and examination of the "shrivelled" and the "commonplace," then it is clear from the extract that the "minor reader" is adopting a position analogous to that of Paduk - albeit that the latter's heightened artificiality provides the most extreme demonstration of the effects of assuming "a given order of things" through the presumption of a finite reading. Interestingly, in his

foreword, Nabokov warns the reader of the danger of taking up a similar stance; in short, of not reading *properly*.

.....automatic comparisons between *Bend Sinister* and Kafka's creations or Orwell's clichés would go merely to prove that the automaton could not have read either the great German writer or the mediocre English one.  
[viii]

The comparison with Orwell is, as Nabokov recognises, a tempting one for a reader to make, in so far as *Bend Sinister* appears initially to be a fairly straightforward dystopian novel operating within similar areas to works such as Zamyatin's *We*, or *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Furthermore, given the tremendous popularity of the latter, it is hard for the modern reader to keep in mind that Nabokov's novel predates *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by two years; a difficulty exacerbated by the manner in which their protagonists are both worn down by the actions of the state and consequently forced to grant it a form of legitimacy through their own personal guarantee of subordination to it. However, whereas Winston Smith's final statements, "He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother,"<sup>15</sup> only serve to make the reader's rejection of the political system therein absolute; the conclusion of Nabokov's work is characteristically far more ambivalent. Adam Krug, whose wife dies at the novel's outset, is rescued from the further grief that would accompany his acceptance of the death of his only child by the direct intervention of what Nabokov describes in his introduction as, "an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me."

It was at that moment, just after Krug had fallen through the bottom of a confused dream and sat up on the straw with a gasp - and just before his reality, his remembered, hideous misfortune could pounce upon him - it was then that I felt a pang of pity for Adam and slid towards him along an inclined beam of pale light - causing instantaneous madness, but at least

saving him from the senseless agony of his logical  
fate. [210]

Clearly the reader is being denied the overt didactic message posed by the fate of Winston Smith, and is instead confronted with something altogether more challenging. For, although *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ends with the central character's enforced capitulation, the purpose of such a defeat is clear, namely to direct the reader, by the use of irony, towards a moral condemnation of the regime - and it is just such a condemnation that we feel drawn to making at the end of *Bend Sinister*. But, rather than permitting us to do so, Nabokov abruptly disengages the reading public from the text to allow it to become an exchange between the author and what he calls "his favourite character" [135]. And, to confirm this separation further, the reader is also informed that any set of values he may have formerly attributed to Krug are no longer relevant, for the philosopher is now insane. Nowhere in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* does anything approach this blunt rebuttal of the reader's involvement, because for Orwell's argument to possess any appreciable value, that is, for it to have a moral imperative, the reader must believe in the actuality of the author's world. Once this trust is broken, then the novel's didactic function, in effect the confirmation of those standards the reader is encouraged to understand he shares with Orwell, simply falls apart.

It is the absolute security of such a trust that makes *Nineteen Eighty-Four* a 'popular' novel in the true sense of the word. The opening sentence, "It was a bright cold day in April and the clocks were striking thirteen"<sup>16</sup> hauls the reader into a world that possesses both elements, and exaggerations of, a recognisable world, but which yet remains wholly consistent within the confines it has set itself. Of course, all novels in the final instance create

their own fictional space, but the dystopian novel is wholly dependent on the consistency and reliability of the author-reader relationship. It is a genre whose intention is above all to seek to procure judgement, and if any doubts are shed upon such a purpose, then the complete accord between reader and author's opinions is thrown into jeopardy and confusion. For, if the reader should feel in any way that the judgement he has arrived at is not *wholly* shared by the author, then the possibility of one or the other being wrong, being different, obviously arises. It is just such a possibility, of there being uncertainty and inconsistency in the world of fiction (and, by implication, the everyday) that the dystopian novel can never admit to, as it consistently looks for the endorsement of its distinctive values. In effect, the reader condemns a dictatorship *within* the fiction by submitting to the apparently more benign, but equally autocratic, dictates of the author.

The appeal of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as such is one fundamental to the problem of reading any text: namely it encourages us to assimilate and evaluate, in order to attain the certainty and finality that accompanies judgement. And yet, this apparent movement towards definition, which Orwell's book indulges, can only represent at best a certainty of opinion, which is a far different matter from any definitive truth. It is this leap that the "minor reader" in all of us may be capable of making which Nabokov's book is designed to forestall. *Invitation to a Beheading* seeks to extend its study of the "commonplace" mentality in a far more thoroughgoing fashion than Orwell by revealing a sensitivity to the authorial danger of imposing a regimented view of one's own, of enforcing one's own reading. Consequently, Nabokov refuses to "shrivel" his own perception to "ornamenting" the notion that political totalitarianism is the substantive danger, when it is merely a symptom of the restrictive mentality.

Time and space, the colours of the seasons, the movements of muscles and minds, all these are for writers of genius (as far as we can guess and I trust we guess right) not traditional notions which may be borrowed from the circulating library of public truths but a series of unique surprises which master artists have learned to express in their own unique way.<sup>17</sup>

The contrast between the artist's world of "unique surprises" and that of Paduk, in which "posters have been put up all over the village inviting the population to celebrate spontaneously the restoration of complete order" [77], is absolute.

Strangely enough, the very sharpness and degree of this opposition weakens *Bend Sinister* if we endeavour to read it as a coherent narrative. Once one has grasped the notion of the work playing off viewpoints against each other, *Bend Sinister* seems relatively consistent, precisely because it is exploiting the implicit trust evoked by the dystopian novel. It is this largely unconsidered union of author and audience and a resultantly blinkered narrative direction which Nabokov continually attempts to disrupt and betray: by the employment of dreams and fantasies which break up linear time;<sup>18</sup> intertextual games, and recurrences that seek to affirm another mode of organising material;<sup>19</sup> and, above all, by an insistence on the sterility of the restricted view in his creation of Paduk. However, these methods can only begin to hope to work when the novel is being read for the third or fourth time - and thus approached more like the painting we discussed in the previous chapter - something which the novel's deliberate and dazzling reflections of frustration do not encourage. If the sales figures of *Laughter in the Dark* point to the debatable 'failure' of that particular bid to expose the shop-worn vulgarity of melodrama, and argue instead that the thinness of such narratives - so insistently stressed by Nabokov - is an integral part of their appeal - for these

are the pieces that literally leave little to the imagination; then by the same yardstick, this later literary endeavour must be argued as an overwhelming success. The samples given earlier of *Bend Sinister's* 'popular' reception bear witness to the difficulties its audience found unable to either forgive, forget, or absorb in sufficient measure to return the book to its self-designated fictional fold as a 'totalitarian' novel. It would seem in fact then, that *Bend Sinister* often works too well to be considered within the normal literary order, and instead appears to be aspiring to the status of the series of "unique surprises" that predate utterance.

Indeed, these imaginative splinters and parings are often particularly forceful and striking, and again, the creation of Paduk furnishes the opportunity for a number of startling, and sometimes quite brutal, comparisons, not just in order to bring out the figure's lack of depth, but also to doubly underline the author's pointed rejection of the sort of well-rounded fictional standards most famously advanced by E. M. Forster. Hence the dictator is said to possess "a sort of cartoon angularity,<sup>20</sup> a cracked and soiled cellophane wrapper effect, through which, nevertheless one could discern a brand-new thumbscrew" [71]. Similarly, the obsessive self-concern that underlies totalitarianism makes itself felt in the sterility of Paduk's warped sexuality [See ix; 77; 133], the implied homosexuality of one of his aides, Dr. Alexander, [32-33; 51], and the peculiar imagery the dictator employs in his speeches [85-86].<sup>21</sup> This conformity to rather traditional literary methodologies - an adherence to blunt devices and harsh analogies, together with the information given to the reader about Paduk's physical appearance, which have resulted in his nickname, "toad" [59-60; 127-128] - would seem to ensure the most orthodox of literary productions. And yet; despite the payment of supposedly requisite attentions, the expected image most steadfastly refuses to be realised; substi-

tuting in its place, a figure who fails to conform to any "traditional notions" of what such a personality would be like - or more accurately, the dictator would seem to represent *all* the traditional notions of narrow-minded evil drawn out to the nth degree. The result, Nabokov implies, is that Paduk effectively destroys himself ("in a word, he was a little too repulsive to be credible" [128]) - a fact that Douglas Fowler criticises in his chapter on the novel in his *Reading Nabokov*.

Paduk is not clearly realised as a character, and..... that blurriness seems to proceed from an authorial insistence that Paduk be misshapen in ways that include too many of Nabokov's own anathemas, and from a failure to fuse the disparate elements in Paduk's character - his sexual inversion, obsessive fixation, and intellectual mediocrity.<sup>22</sup>

While it is certainly true that the portrayal of the dictator incorporates qualities that Nabokov is himself repelled by,<sup>23</sup> what Fowler fails to perceive is that the lack of cohesion and singularity he discerns in the figure is, quite simply, intentional. Paduk is not acceptable to any reader, despite persistent efforts to endow him with some form of consistency and veracity, precisely because he so patently lacks any resource himself. The element of melodrama in comparisons of the sort previously cited - that "brand-new thumbscrew" is unquestionably commonplace theatrics - contributes further to this dulling process, as the hand is deliberately overplayed. Such an image has immediate force but lacks the more lasting resonance we witness in the deft, though more self-conscious, interweaving of similar 'commonplace' and 'shrivelled' themes in Cincinnatus C.'s outburst against the representatives of the equally restricted world of *Invitation to a Beheading*.

I do not know the words I must choose to make you understand why I was so tormented. Such words do not come in the small size that fits your everyday needs.<sup>24</sup>

What the ugly and sustained spotlighting of Paduk's artificiality succeeds in quite brilliantly is scuppering the "traditional" juxtapositioning of the freethinker and the totalitarian 'thinker' that we have come to expect of the dystopian novel. As we see the more restrained, though, at root, similar, procedures by which such designations are normally engineered so crudely caricatured here, then so commonplace considerations are, once again, denied us.

Interestingly enough, the characterisation of Krug also offers the reader difficulties of assimilation and of forming a distinct and specific image, to the extent that Nabokov proceeds to re-introduce his leading figure three-quarters of the way through the novel, and deploys much the same terminology he has used before. Compare the conflation of the first two descriptions to form the third:

He saw Krug, the ponderous dandruffed maestro, sitting there with a satisfied and sly smile on his big swarthy face (recalling that of Beethoven in the general correlation of its rugged features)... [27]

The person whose name has just been mentioned, Professor Adam Krug, the philosopher, was seated somewhat apart from the rest, deep in a cretonned armchair, with his hairy hands on its arms. He was a big heavy man in his early forties, with untidy, dusty, or faintly grizzled looks and a roughly hewn face suggestive of the uncouth chess master or of the morose composer, but more intelligent.....  
Under this was a dead wife.... [41-42]

He was a big heavy man of the hairy sort with a somewhat Beethovenlike face. He had lost his wife in November. He had taught philosophy. He was exceedingly virile. His name was Adam Krug. [174-175]



Indeed, Nabokov, to use Fowler's term, deliberately "blurs" any distinctive and cohesive picture of Krug by refusing to endow his character with the definite values that the traditional dystopian novel requires its hero to possess.

He was constantly being called one of the most eminent philosophers of his time but he knew that nobody could really define what special features his philosophy had, or what 'eminent' meant or what 'his time' exactly was, or who were the other worthies..... so that he finally began regarding himself (robust, rude Krug) as an illusion which was highly appreciated by a great number of cultured people (with a generous sprinkling of semi-cultured ones). It was much the same thing as is liable to happen in novels when the author and his yes-characters<sup>25</sup> assert that the hero is a 'great artist' or a 'great poet' without, however, bringing any proofs (reproductions of his paintings, samples of his poetry); indeed, taking care *not* to bring such proofs since any sample would be sure to fall short of the reader's expectations and fancy.  
[153-154]

Despite the careful placement of Krug and Paduk at differing ends of almost any scale one would like to impose upon the novel, the actual methods used to convey the distinctions between them are, in fact, surprisingly similar - and their intention is identical. Whereas Paduk is "not clearly realized" because, through over-reduction, he has effectively cancelled himself out; Krug appears "blurred" because Nabokov endeavours to extend those qualities of openness and expansiveness that we occasionally witness in the philosopher as far as they can be taken. As such, if we see Paduk as the overly stylised figure of the cartoon, then Krug offers an equally shadowy counterpart; an outline ('krug' is Russian for 'circumference'), rather than the fully rounded figure we would perhaps prefer to oppose Paduk. Even in *Bend Sinister's* most notable demonstration of the expansive vision in operation,<sup>26</sup> namely the discussion of the "dream-play" *Hamlet*.<sup>27</sup> Krug seems to withdraw as a realised creation and the spiralling, free-ranging conversation takes over.<sup>28</sup> Critically, however, this

does not discredit the 'value' or 'merit' - heavy-handed terms for such a playful and joyous exchange - of the conversation itself. Witness the result of the philosopher's opening remarks upon the translator of Shakespeare.

Krug's anecdote has the desired effect. Ember stops sniffing. He listens. Presently he smiles. Finally, he enters into the spirit of the game. [101]

The contact that is established through Ember's willingness to enter into a world outside that of his own selfhood, an imaginative construct that is not his creation, together with the humour that is only possible through the emergence of newly forged, shared values within the conversation, are a significant rebuttal of the totalitarian world so conspicuously devoid of "spirit". It is precisely in keeping with this sort of effort, to maintain the independence and freedom that enables one to enter the "spirit of the game", that Nabokov should prevent Krug from accepting the restrictive role of a "traditional" figure, because traditional confines cannot hope to frame something essentially non-verbal. Consequently, the only literary means of representing that spirit must show it operating *externally*, between people, and therefore the best an author can hope for is to mimic the manner it radiates outwards, its communication and transmission. Hence Nabokov's repeated use of implication. The worth of Krug's friend Maximov and that of his wife Olga can only begin to be encompassed by suggestion rather than statement.

Common sense with him was saved from smug vulgarity by a delicate emotional undercurrent, and the somewhat bare and birdless symmetry of his branching principles was ever so slightly disturbed by a moist wind blowing from regions which he naively-thought did not exist.  
[76-77]

Ember evoked her ample being, her thirty-seven resplendent years, the bright hair, the full lips, the heavy chin which went so well with the cooing undertones of her voice - something ventriloquial about her, a continuous soliloquy following in willowed shade the meanderings of her actual speech. [27]

In his foreword, Nabokov significantly points out the worth of the work by stressing an action that is both abstract and expansive in its implications.

The main theme of *Bend Sinister*, then, is the beating of Krug's loving heart.... [x]

It seems that the movement of the novel is toward promoting the validity of the emotional depths fiction can imply, and the response it is capable of eliciting from its reader, without striving to establish the traditional medium through which this is usually accomplished; that is, the "commonplace" realistic character. Hence the difficulties the reader has in imposing any distinct sequential meaning upon the text, and the manner in which Nabokov deliberately confuses any search for limited coherence, what Krug calls a "leading idea, its secret combination" [137], by the interposition of an authorial voice. The opening chapter in fact provides an interesting example of the author's technique. The typographically separated paragraphs from which it is formed represent emotional modulations, principally those of grief, that can be applied to Krug or viewed as alternating and shifting perspectives of author and character, or even, as Andrew Field maintains, read as independent "prose poems."<sup>29</sup> At the same time, this does not detract from the depth of feeling noted by Frank Kermode, who described the passage as "a self-consciously superb evocation of grief, a sort of virtuoso development of Rossetti's woodspurge."<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, it is the final intercession of the

narrator, to inform the reader that Krug "and his son and his wife and everybody else are merely my whims and megrims" [x], that provides the most potent demonstration of the stress placed upon an emotional reality; for we are told that the author's response to his own creature, "a pang of pity" [210], causes him finally to shatter the fictional artifice and return Krug to the realm of complete freedom he has only previously glimpsed as paradox or oxymoron, "an unfathomable mode of being, perhaps terrible, perhaps blissful, perhaps neither, a kind of transcendental madness which lurks behind the corner of consciousness and which cannot be defined more accurately than this" [56].

This authorial response, which is significantly delayed by a nerve-straining and extremely black description of the death of Krug's son in a Freudian experiment, is one that explicitly admits the vitality and reality, of the feelings it emotes. Moreover, the intercession also points out an awareness of scale and the nature of perception that lies at the heart of the novel, in so far as, by "saving" Krug, the author admits that the gap between the confines of the fictional form and the "unfathomable" depth of its emotional response is now too great. To continue further would be to grant Krug's pain an existence that is insupportable in the same way that the death of Mira Belochkin is to Timofey Pnin.

One had to forget - because one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender, young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol in the heart, into the gentle heart that one had heard beating under one's lips in the dusk of the past.<sup>31</sup>

What takes place in *Bend Sinister's* conclusion is extremely peculiar, because the reader witnesses an author appearing to administer himself some sort of

moral lesson about the power of fiction making, yet doing so without indulging in self-congratulation over his skill of characterisation. Indeed, as we have seen, the author consciously and conspicuously underplays or overstates methods of characterisation precisely for this reason. And so, what is the reader left with at the end?

Well, that was all. The various parts of my comparative paradise - the bedside lamp, the sleeping tablets, the glass of milk - looked with perfect submission into my eyes. I knew that the immortality I had conferred on the poor fellow was a slippery sophism, a play upon words. But the very last lap of his life had been happy and it had been proven to him that death was but a matter of style. [217]

Significantly, a "*comparative paradise*," a state which recognises both the necessity of the urge to endow value and the essential arbitrariness of its targets. It is a sense of proportion and suitability that this philosophic novel notes in some of Krug's reflections and conversations with his young son.

Dr Livingstone mentions that on one occasion, after talking with a Bushman for some time about the Deity, he found that the savage thought he was speaking of Sakomi, a local chief. The ant lives in a universe of shaped odours, of chemical configurations. [139]

'Billy brought a bone today. Gee whizz - some bone...'  
'Is it the dark Billy or the little fellow with the glasses?'  
'The glasses. He said my mother was dead.'  
'...What did you answer?'  
'When?'  
'When Billy said that stupid thing about your mother?'  
'Nothing. What should I have said?'  
'But you knew it was a stupid remark?'  
'I guess so.'  
'Because even if she were dead she would not be dead for you or me'  
'Yes, but she isn't, is she?'  
'Not in our sense. A bone is nothing to you or me but it means a lot to Basso.' [143]

If *Bend Sinister* can in the final instance be said to possess a message, it is the cultivation and recognition of the supremacy of the imagination and, equally important, the love, in this novel a marvelous respect for what is fitting, that must attend it.

And what agony, thought Krug the thinker, to love so madly a little creature, formed in some mysterious fashion (even more mysterious to us than it had been to the very first thinkers in their pale olive groves) by the fusion of two mysteries, or rather two sets of a trillion mysteries each; formed by a fusion which is, at the same time, a matter of choice and a matter of chance and a matter of pure enchantment; thus formed and then permitted to accumulate trillions of its own mysteries; the whole suffused with consciousness, which is the only real thing in the world and the greatest mystery of all. [168]

### Footnotes

1. Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, rep. 1972] ix. Future references to the text will follow in parentheses.
2. Richard F. Patteson, 'Nabokov's *Bend Sinister*: the Narrator As God', *Studies in American Fiction* 1977, 5.
3. Page Stegner, *Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, [Byre and Spottiswoode, London, 1967] 76.
4. Diana Trilling, 'The Nation' CLXIV, June 14, 1947, 772.
5. P. N. Furbank, 'New Novels', *The Listener*, April 14, 1960, 678.
6. Julian Moynaham, *Vladimir Nabokov*, [University of Minnesota Pamphlets on Modern Writers No. 96, 1971] 23.
7. See 5; 125; 132; 193; 202.
8. Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1974] 10-11.
9. Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*, [New Directions, New York, rep. 1978] 41.
10. Vladimir Nabokov, *Despair*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1966] 8.
11. Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1960] 7.
12. Ibid. 184.
13. Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1967] 264-265.
14. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1980] 2.
15. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, [Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, rep. 1974] 239.
16. Ibid. 5.
17. *Lectures on Literature* 2.
18. The musing Krug accurately foresees the future awaiting his son [183], before forcibly restraining thoughts, which may develop in any direction, with the self-rebuke, "I must not imagine things" [183]. The irony of this, as the saying goes, speaks for itself. Indeed, as Susan Fromberg Schaeffer has done in her article, "*Bend Sinister* and The Novelist as Anthropomorphic Deity" (*The*

*Centennial Review*, Spring, 1973, 115-151), it is quite possible to read Krug's dreams as linked by images which recall the objects lying upon the author's writing desk, and so further establish the flickering narrative's proximity to that most open and timeless of states, that before enunciation.

19. There are numerous isolated examples of this technique, ranging from a parallel drawn between a nurse and Dr. Azureus [see 4 and 36] and a grocer's parody of a railway engine [16] later undertaken by David [167], to the fate and importance of a porcelain owl [113; 122; 181]. More extensive recurrences include the frequent appearance of "Bervok" apples and the prevalence of the tunnel theme [see 57; 58; 91; 137; 142; 165; 210].

20. The oversimplification that constitutes caricature is not surprisingly an anathema to Nabokov, who makes perhaps his most unpleasant creation, Axel Rex in *Laughter in the Dark*, a cartoonist.

21. A fact noted by Douglas Fowler in his *Reading Nabokov*, [Cornell University Press, London 1974] 44.

22. *Ibid.* 31.

23. Almost uniquely among Nabokov's fictions, *Bend Sinister*, at times seems to lay itself open to a reading that in part intimates a distinctly personal testimony, as the book that tries, and fails, to contain the author's anger at the death of his brother, Sergey, in a Hamburg concentration camp in 1945. Certainly the novel as a whole contains a virulence in its attacks on philistinism, from Freudian [195-197] to totalitarianism [146-149], that, for such an oblique writer, is often surprisingly explicit, emotional and occasionally, quite melodramatic. There are, as I have mentioned in the main body of the chapter, stylistic reasons for such a strand, but an incident like the account of the break for lunch during the drive Krug undergoes after learning of his son's murder has a undernote of fury and clenched teeth at inanity that is all the more terrifying for the banality of its target.

The Royal Gorge, one of nature's wonders, cut by the sand-laden waters of the turbulent Sakra river through eons of time, offered scenes of splendour and glory. We try very hard at Bridal Ranch to understand and appreciate the attitude of mind in which many of our guests arrive from their city homes and businesses, and this is the reason we endeavour to have our guests do just exactly as they wish in the way of fun, exercise, and rest. [197-198]

Against this however, we might also bear in mind the warning proffered in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, that "it is far too easy to talk of a dead author behind the backs of his books." [*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, New Directions, Norfolk, Conn., rep. 1959, 7]

24. *Invitation to a Beheading* 130.

25. Typically, Nabokov himself has already deployed what amounts to a number of "yes-characters" in the debating chamber sequence where comments of the order of "Pure Krugism" [40] are passed.



26. Excluding, of course, the novel itself; Nabokov perpetually implies the existence of a larger frame that may encompass all throughout his fictions.

27. *Nikolai Gogol* 54.

28. The obvious literary comparison the conversation invites is with Stephen Dedalus' performance in the National Library in *Scylla and Charybdis*, and it is perhaps not altogether inapposite to apply Nabokov's comments on that particular episode in *Ulysses* to his own set of variations:

The discussion in this chapter is one of those things that it is more amusing for a writer to write than for a reader to read, and so its details need not be examined.

[*Lectures on Literature* 326.]

29. Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art*, [Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1967] 44.

30. Frank Kermode, "Aesthetic Bliss", *Encounter* 14, June 1960, 85.

31. Vladimir Nabokov, *Prin*, [Heinemann, London, 1957] 135.

*Phin*: "A disarming, old-fashioned charm"?

"The most delightful of Nabokov's novels,"<sup>1</sup> "the most immediately engaging of Nabokov's novels in English....the one that most harks back to the warmer and more openly sympathetic style of such early works as *Mary* and *Glory*."<sup>2</sup> If *Bend Sinister* is among the least popular of Nabokov's texts, *Phin* has perhaps one of the strongest claims to be considered the most well-liked. Comments along similar lines are by no means difficult to find, and the novel is often cited as an excellent introduction to the rest of Nabokov's oeuvre. And yet, as we shall see, the work is at least as well calculated, or, more pejoratively, as 'cold', as its predecessor. Indeed, it is, arguably, a far more devious piece than *Bend Sinister*, which breaks out from growing unease at sensations of narratorial entrapment, and breaks off from inflicting pain; in *Phin*, we are flatly told that "Harm is the norm."<sup>3</sup> Such a disquieting remark would appear to sit uneasily with genial critical verdicts of the kind just cited, but, despite the apparent absence in its pages of the more explicitly confrontational tactics we observed in *Bend Sinister*, *Phin*, in its own quiet way, is a rather disquieting book.

As with many of Nabokov's rule-bending texts, a useful inway into *Phin* is to carefully break one of the critical rules - of not using one literary text to inform a reading of another - a practice which is particularly rebuked and, of course, repeatedly performed, in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.<sup>4</sup> The lines that follow, however, are taken from *The Gift*.

But careful: I like to recall what my father wrote:  
'When closely - no matter how closely - observing  
events in nature we must, in the very process of  
observation, beware of letting our reason - that  
garrulous dragoman who always runs ahead - prompt us  
with explanations which then begin imperceptibly to  
influence the very course of observation and distort

it: thus the shadow of the instrument falls upon the truth.'<sup>5</sup>

The memory that the young writer, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, draws upon as he walks through the pinewoods outside Berlin is one that, precisely because of the neatness of its expression and inclination towards the aphoristic - "the shadow of the instrument falls upon the truth" - clearly invites its reapplication to the world which both Fyodor and his creator believe to be paramount, that of art. And, equally inevitably, the most immediate recipient of such a transference could scarcely help but be the world that the reader finds himself in at that instant, that created by the book he is holding in his hand, *The Gift*. In entertaining such thoughts, the reader is at once taken out of the forest clearing he resided in a few moments earlier to be reminded that this is a tale, "the instrument", its teller. Then, with considerable affection, he is promptly recalled, and once more invited to accompany a narrator who lays claim to a poet's eye.

Give me your hand, dear reader, and let's go into the forest together. Look: first at these glades with patches of thistle, nettle or willow herb, among which you will find all kinds of junk: sometimes even a rugged mattress with rusty, broken springs, don't disdain it! Here is a dark thicket of small firs where I once discovered a pit which had been carefully dug out before its death by the creature that lay therein, a young slender-muzzled dog of wolf ancestry, folded into a wonderfully graceful curve, paws to paws.<sup>6</sup>

This sort of incident, and it is to be remembered that Nabokov has confessed that "some of my best concerns are microscopic patches of colour,"<sup>7</sup> enacts a pattern consistently found in much of his best writing: of a presentation, a denial and a re-presentation. In fact, it forms a central pulse, not merely in

the two brief paragraphs above, but, in much of his fictional output as a whole, and nowhere more so than in *Pnin*.

Our initial interpretation of this book is that it is the most densely and minutely constructed of biographies. Certainly, the choicest epithets bestowed by its early critics - "as tight as cunning as a guided missile"<sup>8</sup> "as complicated as a pet snake"<sup>9</sup> - all pointed to the intricacy of its design and highlighted its use of the biographical form.<sup>10</sup> Until the seventh and final chapter the reader is encouraged to see the novel simply as a collection of verifiable anecdotes and reported conversations, the accumulation and ordering of which will delineate the personality of émigré professor, Timofey Pavlovich Pnin. Occasional doubts as to the reliability and impartiality of the biographer are, however, raised by the latter's intrusions into the narrative ("Some people - and I am one of them - hate happy ends. We feel cheated.... Doom should not jam." [25]) - which eventually culminate in physical appearances within the textual milieu itself - and, most immediately noticeable, by the mannered idiosyncrasy of his expression.

Technically speaking, the narrator's art of integrating telephone conversations still lags behind that of rendering dialogues conducted from room to room, or from window to window across some narrow blue alley in an ancient town with water so precious, and the misery of donkeys and rugs for sale, and minarets, and foreigners and melons, and vibrant morning echoes. [31]

The audience for earlier works like *The Eye* and *Despair* - or, more likely and more numerous, those familiar with *Lolita* - faced with lines like these immediately begins to register that "the shadow of the instrument" may already be obscuring "the truth," as the length and detail of this most fanciful portrayal of a town discloses a narrator striving to sweep his reader away

from the immediate subject and towards his own interests and the sound of his own creative voice. These implications of narratorial self-concern allied with an apparent tinge of romanticism thus threaten to blur the 'true' image of the exiled Russian scholar at the very moment that the teller professes to be developing it. Other incidents offer subtle intrusions on the reader's willingness to believe in the objectivity of biography (most notably the double perspective on Pnin which will be discussed later) but, unlike *The Gift* or *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, stress is placed on event rather than the collation of event. "One is presented the whole to begin with, or so it appears, and the tendency to settle comfortably into the easy chair of reportage is encouraged."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, whereas a creature like Sebastian is ostentatiously depicted as unknowable, masked behind his fiction ("I fail to name any other author who made use of his art in such a baffling manner - baffling to me who might desire to see the real man behind the author"<sup>12</sup>), the guileless Pnin, existing as "witness and victim" [24] is from the outset a figure inviting laughter, commiseration and, perhaps gradually, tender regard. As Pnin suffers, reminisces and peruses his "erratic surroundings (unpredictable America)" [13], however, the reader would do well to realise that he or she is being directed, albeit gently, with considerable guile towards the "secret" V. outlines at the conclusion of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*

namely: the soul is but a manner of being - not a constant state - that any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations.<sup>13</sup>

The possibility of "consciously living" in a "chosen soul" is perhaps one of the fundamental sources of fiction's potency, but it is obviously not without its darker, more predatory, aspects - "any soul may be yours."

To the discriminating, however, such activity may perhaps take on more than the apparent accession of characters, or, as is our first thought with *Pnin*, the encouragement of a relatively straightforward identification with a solitary figure - "Poor Pnin" [19]. With care - and that most critical proviso cannot be overstressed - it may yet entail the development of an additional element of vision, capable, in its turn, of throwing into relief new aspects and combinations of our perception. To fully enter into a fictional world must, in a sense, involve putting oneself at risk; it is to experience a peculiar type of diastole, a heart leap away from the self to a heightened consciousness of its potential. In following a soul's undulations the reader *actively* retraces those moves made by the figure's creator, not to mimic but to re-make a life.<sup>14</sup> The importance to Nabokov of the agency - consciousness - which performs such a task may be judged from his vehement opposition even to the momentary suspension of its workings:

Sleep is the most moronic fraternity in the world, with the heaviest dues and the crudest rituals. It is a mental torture I find debasing.....I simply cannot get used to the nightly betrayal of reason, humanity, genius. No matter how great my weariness, the wrench of parting with consciousness is unspeakably repulsive to me. I loathe Somnus, that black-masked headsman binding me to the block.....<sup>15</sup>

Significantly, apart from negative expression typified by the above, the only other means Nabokov advances to evaluate the possibilities of this consciousness is to render it in terms analogous to those we employ to depict the fictional world itself, as if to reinforce the belief that only art can offer it

meaningful expression. Hence his most renowned critical statement unavoidably, rather than wilfully, skirts tautology:

a work of fiction exists only in so far 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.<sup>16</sup>

It may then be considered a measure of the author's private sense of the worth of such a response that his reader is never allowed to attain such a state with ease.

I work hard, I work long, on a body of words until it grants me complete possession and pleasure. If the reader has to work in his turn - so much the better. Art is difficult.<sup>17</sup>

The methods by which Nabokov seeks to highlight the value of a more extensive, creative vision are exquisitely demonstrated in his structuring of chapter six as the pivot of *Pnin*. The previous chapter has displayed an apparently 'new' Timofey Pnin at "The Pines," the closest approximation to his homeland in the novel, where, amongst his fellow émigrés, he casts aside the awkwardness and apparent eccentricity that has marked him as a "freak" [32] and "a joke" [140] at Waindell College. Indeed, Pnin is so at ease and in accord with the other guests in these surroundings that conventional expression is almost discarded as superfluous:

As not unusual with firm-principled exiles, every time they met after a separation they not only endeavoured to catch up with a personal past, but also to sum up by means of a few rapid passwords - allusions, intonations impossible to render in a foreign language - the course of recent Russian history, thirty-five years of

hopeless injustice following a century of struggling  
justice and glimmering hope. [125]

The contrast with Pnin's involvement with the "special danger area" [14] of the English language is absolute, and, as if to underline this brief period of visible ascendancy, he demonstrates the truth of his earlier claim, "I was champion of *kroket*" [106], even "evoking cries of admiration from the on-lookers" [130]. His quickthinking practicality in making a hat for Gramineev, the artist, [126-127] and his perspicacious treatment of *Anna Karenin* [129-130] engender feelings of respect as opposed to easy pity, and it is with an increased knowledge of what surely constitutes the 'real' Pnin that we come to the account of the "house-heating" party that forms the backdrop to the penultimate chapter.

As in earlier episodes, Pnin's self-assurance, so often mis-applied, makes for broad comedy and occasionally offers hints of a pedantry that anticipates the figure of Kinbote, later, of course, a colleague in *Pale Fire*.<sup>18</sup>

The pink shelves which he had found supporting several generations of children's books were now loaded with three hundred sixty-five items from the Waindell College Library.

'And to think I have stamped all these,' sighed Mrs. Thayer, rolling her eyes in mock dismay.

'Some stamped Mrs. Miller,' said Pnin, a stickler for historical truth. [163-164]

Nonetheless, here we inhabit a world in which books are at least employed and enjoyed, rather than either maligned, as in *Bend Sinister* ("Think of the millions of unnecessary books accumulating in libraries. The books they print!"<sup>19</sup>), or, even more disturbing, catalogued according to the number of their pages rather than their contents, as in *Invitation to a Beheading*.<sup>20</sup>



The focus of the chapter, however, is Pnin's involvement with the flint-glass punch-bowl that he has received as a present from Victor Wind, who is portrayed as Pnin's surrogate son throughout the novel (his ex-wife's new husband, Dr. Eric Wind, a psychiatrist, "says he is the land father and you, Timofey, are the water father" [55]). The bowl's value is emphasised throughout the chapter: in terms aesthetic ("My what a lovely thing!" cried Betty" [153]); materialistic ("Gosh, it must have cost a fortune....Ten dollars - nonsense! Two hundred I should say. *Look* at it!" [158]); but above all, personal:

The bowl that emerged [from its wrapping paper] was one of those gifts whose first impact produces in the recipient's mind a coloured image, a blazoned blur, reflecting with such emblematic force the sweet nature of the donor that the tangible attributes of the thing are dissolved, as it were, in this pure inner blaze, but suddenly and forever leap into brilliant being when praised by an outsider to whom the true glory of the object is unknown. [153]

During the party Pnin learns from Dr. Hagen that he is about to lose his job, where he will be effectively replaced by the narrator, "a prominent Anglo-Russian writer" [140]. It is hence with this uppermost in our minds that we see Pnin washing the crockery, glass and silverware of a house-warming party that has come to belie its name, for once again Pnin the exile, "battered and stunned by twenty-five years of homelessness" [140], has been denied respite.

He groped under the bubbles, around the goblets, and under the melodious bowl, for any piece of forgotten silver - and retrieved a nutcracker. Fastidious Pnin rinsed it, and was wiping it, when the leggy thing somehow slipped out of the towel and fell like a man from a roof. He almost caught it - his fingertips actually came into contact with it in mid-air, but this only helped to propel it into the treasure-concealing

foam of the sink, where an excruciating crack of broken glass followed upon the plunge. [172]

The paragraph ends there, allowing the reader to recall all the stress placed from the beginning of the novel on Pnin's lack of physical dexterity.

His life was a constant war with insensate objects that fell apart, or attacked him, or refused to function, or viciously got themselves lost as soon as they entered the sphere of his existence. He was inept with his hands to a rare degree... [13]

The Clementses were playing Chinese checkers among the reflections of a comfortable fire when Pnin came clattering downstairs, slipped, almost fell at their feet like a supplicant in some ancient city full of injustice, but retrieved his balance - only to crash into the poker and tongs. [43]

A terrible clatter and crash came from the stairs: Pnin, on his way down, had lost his footing. [107]

Clearly, the signs as to the fate of the bowl are not particularly favourable.

However, the narrative proceeds thus:

Pnin hurled the towel into a corner and, turning away, stood for a moment staring at the blackness beyond the threshold of the open back door. A quiet, lacy-winged little green insect circled in the glare of a strong naked lamp above Pnin's glossy bald head. He looked very old, with his toothless mouth half open and a film of tears dimming his blank, unblinking eyes. Then, with a moan of anguished anticipation, he went back to the sink and, bracing himself, dipped his hand deep into the foam. A jagger of glass stung him. Gently he removed a broken goblet. The beautiful bowl was intact. He took a fresh dish towel and went on with his household work. [172-173]

Peculiarly enough, the only other scene in the novel with an effect analogous to this one is Pnin's reverie involving his first love, Mira Belochkin, who perished at Buchenwald during World War II. Clearly though, the reader's

discomfort at such a scene is almost inevitable given the subject matter, and the manner in which even the implications for future action of accepting the existence of concentration camps (and so granting a type of legitimacy to them) is made clear.

if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible. [135]

Nevertheless, it remains highly significant that the worst tragedy imaginable, representing "the destruction of the assumption that human beings are loving creatures,"<sup>21</sup> is equalled by the reader's horror of the possibility of the more mundane tragedy of the bowl being broken in the world of Nabokov's art. This is the keen edge ground out of such supposedly levelling processes; at one and same time there is the audience's realisation of art's manifest insufficiency in such cases, and, working against it, is a disturbing reminder of just what kind of pain art can co-opt and what sort of disparities fiction is capable of making us believe as equivalences. The resultant uneasy, heady blend of revulsion and wonder thus manages to approach the feelings that the writing signally acknowledges as out of bounds with not only a surprising exactitude but, yet more surprising, with something that can only be termed a peculiar sort of tact.

There is, it would seem, in the dimensional scale of the world a delicate meeting place between imagination and knowledge, a point, arrived at by diminishing large things and enlarging small ones, that is intrinsically artistic.<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly, with the punch-bowl, it is the threat of *further* grief being inflicted upon a Pnin now lacking even the tenuous security of employment that forces home to the reader that such concurrent misfortunes, only too easily possible in a 'human' world (as opposed to the inhumanity of the concentration camp), are unacceptable events in our 'art' world - appearing as they do to belong to, and indeed mark out, a 'real' world of truly private grief.

'Why not leave their private sorrows to people?  
Is sorrow not, one asks, the only thing in the world  
people really possess?' [52]

The bowl, "one of the very few magical objects in a very meagre life,"<sup>23</sup> has had such a distinctive accent given to it in the text, as a thing "melodious" [172], "beautiful" [172] and "perfectly divine" [157], that to destroy it would in essence take Pnin out of the novel to relocate him in a world of "private sorrow", which the reader could not penetrate. This seemingly theoretical point is made most plainly in an earlier version of the chapter, which first appeared under the even plainer title of 'Pnin Gives A Party' in *The New Yorker* of November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1955.<sup>24</sup> After informing us that "Victor's beautiful bowl was intact," the final paragraph proceeds thus:

Pnin rubbed it dry with a fresh towel, working the cloth very tenderly over the recurrent design of the docile glass. Then, with both hands, in a statuesque gesture, he raised the bowl and placed it on a high, safe shelf. The sense of its security there communicated itself to his own state of mind, and he felt that 'losing one's job' dwindled to a meaningless echo in the rich, round inner world where none could really hurt him.<sup>25</sup>

In the novel, the same episode concludes more discreetly with Pnin at work on a letter to the objectionable Hagen, so marking - albeit obliquely - that an identical "sense of....security" has likewise been established. However, given that the punch-bowl exists ultimately only as a means of representing the bond of love between Victor and Pnin, both versions make it equally clear that the intricacy and beauty of art alone is capable of bearing such emotional weight, and transmitting even a part - at best a *semblance* - of that communion to others.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, although much of chapter four, which deals with Pnin's meeting with Victor, is an extremely deft parody of the interplay between over-anxious 'father' and unconcerned 'son', (or rather the lack of it, as the continual stumblings into awkwardness and mutual misinterpretation demonstrate), the extent of Pnin and Victor's compatibility and sympathy at a deeper imaginative level is brought out only through the agency of art. Critically, the method employed is one that points again to art's limitless resilience and its irreducible depths, back to its facility to present something in another form: in this case, the re-presentation of life that constitutes our dreams. Thus Pnin's fantasy at the end of the chapter takes up that of Victor's which acts as its opening.

Generally he did not reach that crucial flight episode when the King alone - *solus rex* (as chess problem makers term royal solitude) - paced a beach on the Bohemian sea, at Tempest Point, where Percival Blake, a cheerful American adventurer, had promised to meet him with a powerful motor-boat. [86]

Pnin saw himself fantastically cloaked, fleeing through great pools of ink under a cloud-barred moon from a chimerical palace, and then pacing a desolate strand with his dead friend Ilya Isidorovich Polyanski as they waited for some mysterious deliverance to arrive in a throbbing boat from beyond the hopeless sea. [109-110]

Had such an ineffable "treasure" [172] as the punch-bowl been broken, Pnin, the character, would have been obliged to develop responses that the reader could not hope to comprehend: for, by the presentation of such strong feelings through metaphor, (and, what is more, the most protean type of metaphor, those that thrive as representative forms in themselves), that emotion has become peculiarly distinct. The images of the punch-bowl and the connecting dreams<sup>27</sup> evokes a bond between Victor and Pnin, which, precisely because the very nature of that bond can only be conveyed and apprehended through artistic means and figures, becomes at once private, "uniquely Pninian", and complete, that is, universal. Such feelings as these cannot be represented through the common medium of biography, and this is tacitly admitted by Nabokov's preservation of the bowl.

Indeed, in his account of the final paragraphs of the punch-bowl scene, one critic, Charles Nicol, even goes so far as to claim direct opposition between character and creator. "Stupendous Pnin.....confronts chance, fate, Nabokov with all his energy in his zig-zag soul, and drags his punch-bowl back from Hades," and points to "the little green insect" [172] in the frame as "an emblem of entomologist Nabokov.....the signature, the evidence of Nabokov's presence in the scene."<sup>28</sup> However, although this argument has its merits, for it is certainly the case that insects often appear at crucial moments in Nabokov's work to suggest a benevolent guiding force behind the fiction,<sup>29</sup> it does rather overestimate the independence of Pnin, who is, after all, the product of a creator who has categorically stated, "My characters are galley slaves."<sup>30</sup> What Nicol's comments unquestionably do disclose is a more fundamental confrontation rather closer to hand, that of a reader seeking to come to terms with a prose which is capable of giving the illusion of writing against itself.

As such, it is perhaps of more value to regard this scene as a dress rehearsal for the final one in which Pnin is seemingly finally granted leave to drive out of the novel, despite the pursuit of the erstwhile narrator, now firmly placed within the work.

I hurried past the rear truck, and had another glimpse of my old friend, in tense profile, wearing a cap with ear-flaps and a storm coat; but next moment the light turned green, the little white dog leaning out yapped at Sobakevich, and everything surged forward - truck one, Pnin, truck two. From where I stood I watched them recede in the frame of the roadway, between the moorish house and the Lombardy poplar. Then, the little sedan boldly swung out past the front truck and, free at last, spurted up the shining road, which one could make out narrowing to a thread of gold in the soft mist where hill after hill made beauty of distance, and where there was simply no saying what miracle might happen. [191]

In a manner somewhat reminiscent of the earlier comparison made between telephone calls and street cries in ancient towns [31], the reader is here faced with a tone which manages to comfort and reassure, and yet also contributes, through its overt romanticism, a rather disturbing fairy-tale gloss. It gives Pnin exactly the kind of limited, ambivalent, freedom which is capable of taking him to *both* the hoped for place of "miracles" and to Wordsmith University. Such a freedom is limited because it can only exist through the artist's chosen mode of representation, be it the definite geographical placing of the biographer ("truck one, Pnin, truck two"), or the ambivalent mask of imagery favoured by the artist ("where hill after hill made beauty of distance"), that is to say, it is wholly dependent on language.

Thus, the final vision of Pnin establishes the position which William H. Gass outlines through a succinct analogy in his *Fiction and the Figures of Life*:

On the other side of the novel lies the void. Think, for instance, of a striding statue; imagine the purposeful inclination of the torso, the alert and penetrating gaze of the head and its eyes, the outstretched arm and pointing finger; everything would appear to direct us to some goal in front of it. Yet our eye travels only to the finger's end, and not beyond. Though pointing, the finger bids us stay instead, and we journey slowly back along the tension of the arm. In our hearts we know what actually surrounds the statue. The same surrounds every other work of art: empty space and silence.<sup>31</sup>

Pnin's apparent 'liberation' from the novel then can only be judged and evaluated in terms derived from the text and the development of character presentation therein. Indeed, the work as a whole is very much concerned with the differing modes of rendering character at the novelist's disposal, in a manner akin to Sebastian Knight's first book.

I should like to point out that *The Prismatic Bezel* can be thoroughly enjoyed once it is understood that the heroes of the book are what can be loosely called 'methods of composition.' It is as if a painter said: look, here I'm going to show you not the painting of a landscape, but the painting of different ways of painting a certain landscape, and I trust their harmonious fusion will disclose the landscape as I intend you to see it.<sup>32</sup>

Certain shifts from "one method of composition" to another can actually be distinguished: principally, that between a movement away from Pnin's initial promise as a biographical account of the 'real' Pnin and towards an amalgamation of differing accounts of a character as presented through the filter of the narrator's consciousness. Andrew Field cites a 'notable example of this when referring to the narrator's use of the "bizarre details" [155] proffered by Eric Wind concerning Pnin's sea journey to America, which "he had certainly to transpose....in order to arrive at a version so unflattering to Wind."<sup>33</sup> This latter technique, which strives to portray Pnin by the type of montage



and the perspectives we associate with Cubism ("Van Gogh is second-rate and Picasso supreme" is one of the dictums of Lake, Victor's art teacher [96]) is, however, also seen to be of only partial use. This is because a stress on external characteristics precludes the sort of effects achieved in the punch-bowl scene, effects which are also unattainable for the omniscient narrator, who is forced to depend more on exposition than image. And of course, chapter six marks the renunciation of any pretensions to omniscience for the narrator of the work.

After the adoption and rejection of such methods, together with others, (notably the theme of "the fantastic recurrence of certain situations"<sup>34</sup> [159]), what the reader is eventually left with at the end of *Pnin* is a description that does far more than merely limit the exactitude of the biographer's details in order to accentuate the image-making power of the artist. Newly disclosed now is a portrayal that has outstripped both easy sympathy - the "dear, absurd little man," the "type-hero, in this case The Eternal Refugee, to stand with (and be much more interesting than) Oblomov"<sup>35</sup> - and patronising attentions - "finally, it establishes itself as belonging to a tradition ... the little man ... innocence ... beset by circumstances, but ... eyes of a child ... tender ... rich humanity ... pathos ... clown ... "<sup>36</sup> Like Gass' statue, *Pnin* is finally established as self-referential: his life is proscribed by a text created by a narrator who himself finally admits his inability to understand. It is fitting, therefore, that the most apposite comments on the figure of *Pnin* are made casually, as if in passing, during the narration. On one occasion, in passing judgement on the Clementses, the only couple in the novel in whose opinions we feel any measure of faith, there is indirect observation:

It should be said for both Lawrence and Joan that rather soon they both began to appreciate Pnin at his *unique Pninian worth*,..... [39. My italics]

And later, whilst addressing the reader directly, the narrator remarks:

Pnin and I had long since accepted the disturbing but seldom discussed fact that on any given college staff one could find not only a person who was uncommonly like one's dentist or the local postmaster, but also a person who had a twin within the same professional group..... I recall the late Olga Krotki once telling me that among the fifty or so faculty members of a war-time Intensive Language School, at which the poor, one-lunged lady had to teach Lethean and Fenugreek, there were as many as six Pnins, besides the genuine and, to me, *unique article*. [148. My italics]

In this way the figure of Pnin takes on the status enjoyed by the punch-bowl and the connecting dreams. This is not the status of symbol, but rather of something actual, present in a collatable 'biographical' world - the America where one consumes "vanilla ice cream, which contained no vanilla and was not made of cream" [107], and where to carry a bottle of vodka invites the rejoinder "I hope the Senator did not see you walking about with that stuff" [155] - and yet which is also capable of intimating a world of image, "where art is the norm." Douglas Fowler, although erring in his later claim that the punch-bowl is allowed to survive because Nabokov "has nothing else to offer Pnin"<sup>37</sup> (and so overlooking its existence as image, a representative that is potentially everything *and* nothing), touches on this final mode of vision in his rejection of the idea of Nabokov as Symbolist.

Symbols lead us out of and away from, and seek to connect a work of art to a source of emotional or intellectual energy outside itself, whereas Nabokov's micro-motifs are usually self-contained, self-referential, and lead us back to, back within. These micro-motifs are derived from the same cells and tissues of which the larger work is created..... Nabokov's art is

terminal. It delights in itself. It teaches us nothing we can paraphrase. It does not persuade. And it leads back only to itself.<sup>38</sup>

It could be argued, therefore, that the direction of the novel is away from Pnin as external person, provider of material for the biographer (and so claimed by him - "my poor Pnin"<sup>39</sup> [145]) and towards the self-referential figure whose merit can only be summarised by reference to his "unique Pninian worth" [39]. The reader finally becomes compelled to view Pnin, like the punch-bowl, as art-object - from Pnin as man to *Pnin* as novel, as artifice.

Significantly, however, the adoption of such a view when re-reading the novel does not limit *Pnin* to a manifesto upon the difficulties of rendering fictional realism, in the same way that the reader's eventual discovery of the extent of the narrator's involvement in Pnin's life, the solution of the novel's 'puzzle,' also fails to curtail the novel's effectiveness. Although we may concur with Fred Moody, who sees the final vision of the narrator imprisoned in his own fiction listening to yet another version of the anecdote that began the work as "an authorial administration of justice that carries with it a profound moral judgement,"<sup>40</sup> the bulk of *Pnin* has to be viewed as de-creative, in so far as it points out the weaknesses of various fictive approaches. This is, of course, highlighted by the ineffectiveness of the narratorial shift between a limited, external view of Pnin and an internal omniscient portrayal, a dual perspective which does not succeed in 'pinning' Pnin.

Now, to make points about the difficulty of producing a truly objective portrayal of another human being is hardly one of the more novel authorial attainments; where *Pnin* undoubtedly does break new ground is at a stage removed from that traditional conflict. If there is a key to the success of the book, it would surely have to be sought in the simple fact that all these

devices, fictive procedures and biographical accounts, are being applied to a character who we are never left in doubt is fictitious. Pnin's 'reality' is only that which Nabokov deigns to give him in the text: he does not 'live' off the printed page. And yet, contrarily enough, this, in a way, a failure of literature to literature, does not make Pnin matter less. Instead, the audience finds itself pondering the question that if this collection of various modes of representation cannot successfully evaluate a fictitious figure, then surely there has to be something more? Moreover, if this is the case in a purely literary world, that imagination cannot hold the avowed product of imagination, then correspondingly how much greater the disparity between our conception and the actualities, more readily verifiable as objective, existent in the society of the everyday, where we perforce employ much the same methodologies?

And as a further consequence - one repeatedly seen in Nabokov's prose - early and seemingly casual lines from the novel proceed in retrospect to reverberate in hitherto unexpected ways. Thus: "I do not know if it has ever been noted before that one of the main characteristics of life is discreteness." [20] Although perhaps a little more polite than *Bend Sinister* - its rebuke a little more discreet - this book, too, has begun to slip away from us.

What remains in the text is the unaccountable Pnin, "the genuine and....to me unique article" [148], and an indication of the inviolable magic of fiction that the best of Nabokov's work may momentarily reveal.

There are three points of view from which a writer can be considered: he may be considered as a storyteller, as a teacher and as an enchanter. A major writer combines these three - storyteller, teacher, enchanter - but it is the enchanter in him that predominates and makes him a major writer.<sup>41</sup>

The notion of the writer as "enchanter" serves simultaneously as justification for, and force behind, the kind of patterning we discussed earlier in the chapter as a characteristic Nabokovian method, of expression, retraction and resonant restatement: not as a tease or mere game, but as education, an attempt to convince you of the worth of the world of "aesthetic bliss" that is finally Pnin's world. It is a technique - of a plus meeting a minus which yet results in something; of writing, of overwriting and of something entirely new emerging from the palimpsest - that is perfectly in keeping with Nabokov's insistent claims that art and magic are analogous practices. After all, in what other fields can things be produced from what should be - look closely now - nothing? What better way to convince an audience of the merits of imponderables, items that cannot be tabulated? In more ways than one perhaps, it is a business of charm and of *charming*.

Pnin, despite his many shortcomings, had about him a disarming, old-fashioned charm, which Dr. Hagen, his staunch protector, insisted before morose trustees, was a delicate imported article worth paying for in domestic cash. [10-11]

The frailty of that bargain to translate abstract charm into hard cash is tellingly underlined, not so much by the use of the adjective "delicate," but that it is here attributed to the man who will eventually inform Pnin that he will have to leave Waindell. Like the length of the pause before we hear the fate of the punchbowl, such a moment, marking the incipient downfall of the "staunch protector," draws our attention to the existence of penalties which that "charm" must seek to ward off and dispel. "The history of man is the history of pain" [168] or, as "objective" Pnin puts it earlier, "Russian metaphysical police can break physical bones as well." [42] The result is that

although *Pnin's* 'message' is celebrated as supremely inexplicit outside a world of art, that call for a more developed mode of perception becomes all the more valuable for its seeming futility, all the more to be cherished for its surely inevitable destruction. It skirts a real edge and from it derives an urgency and vitality, passed on to the reader, which reproduces the glory - the title of a book in itself of course - of the creative charge that grips an author and is conveyed so fervently by Nabokov in the short piece entitled 'Good Readers and Good Writers.' For finally, and as we see with *Pnin*, this is no longer a matter of mere charm, the charm has become the matter:

The art of writing is a very futile business if it does not imply first of all the art of seeing the world as the potentiality of fiction. The material of this world may be real enough (as far as reality goes) but does not exist at all as an accepted entirety; it is chaos and to this chaos the author says 'go!' allowing the world to flicker and to fuse. It is now recombined in its very atoms, not merely in its visible and superficial parts.<sup>42</sup>

## Footnotes

1. G. M. Hyde, *Vladimir Nabokov: America's Russian Novelist*, [Marion Boyars, London, 1977] 158.

2. Laurie Clancy, *The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*, [Macmillan, London, 1984] 115.

3. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin*, [Heinemann, London, 1957] 25. Future references to the text will follow in parentheses.

4. Laurie Clancy draws our attention to this contradiction in his brief discussion of the overlapping methods employed by opposing biographers of Sebastian Knight:

Although V. is sternly critical of Goodman's quoting chunks of Sebastian's novels as a way of making autobiographical points, he himself is frequently forced to employ the same tactic.

[See Clancy 86-87.]

Similarly, this short homily proceeds to haunt the text:

Beware of the most honest broker. Remember what you are told is really threefold: shaped by the teller, re-shaped by the listener, concealed from both by the dead man of the tale.

[Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, (New Directions, Norfolk, Conn. 1959) 52.]

5. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1963] 313.

6. Ibid.

7. Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1974] 182.

8. Hilary Corke, 'New Fiction', *The Listener*, Sept 26<sup>th</sup>, 1957, 484.

9. Charles Nicol, 'Pnin's History', *Novel*, Spring, 1971, 197-208.

10. See particularly H. Grabes, *Fictitious Biographies: Vladimir Nabokov's English Novels*, [Mouton, The Hague and Paris, 1977] 46-54; Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life In Art*, [Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1967] 114-140; Donald E. Morton, *Vladimir Nabokov*, [Frederick Ungar, New York, 1974] 83-103; Dabney Stuart, *Nabokov: The Dimensions of Parody*, [Louisiana State University Press,

Baton Rouge and London, 1978] 133-161; Paul Grams, 'Pnin: The Biographer as Meddler' in *A Book of Things About Vladimir Nabokov*, Ed. C. R. Proffer, [Ardis, Ann Arbor, Mi. 1974] 193-203 and Nicol *op. cit.*

11. Stuart 134.

12. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* 114.

13. *Ibid.* 204

14. As Nabokov states quite baldly in 'Good Readers and Good Writers':

Since the master artist used his imagination in creating his book, it is natural and fair that the consumer of a book should use his imagination too.

[Vladimir Nabokov, 'Good Readers and Good Writers' in *Lectures on Literature*, Ed. Fredson Bowers, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1980) 4.]

15. Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1967] 108-109.

16. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, Ed. Alfred Appel Jr., [McGraw-Hill, New York and Toronto, 1970] 316-317.

17. *Strong Opinions* 115.

18. See Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1962] 268.

19. Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, rep. 1972] 18.

20. Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1960] 49.

21. Stuart 154.

22. *Speak, Memory* 166-167.

23. Fowler 145.

24. Vladimir Nabokov, 'Pnin Gives A Party' in *The New Yorker*, November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1955, 46-54.

25. *Ibid.* 54.

26. It is typical of Nabokov's intricate structuring of the novel that Joan Clements' praise of the bowl should reveal how even the glassware of Jack Cockerell, "one of the greatest, if not the greatest mimic of Pnin on the campus" [36] fails to match up to Pnin's gift, in the same way as his grotesque parodies fail to reduce Pnin's status to the reader:



'Look at this writhing pattern. You know you should show it to the Cockerells. They know everything about old glass. In fact they have a Lake Dunmore pitcher that looks like a poor relation of this.' [158]

It is perhaps not too fanciful to see Cockerell in the end as nothing but 'a poor relation.'

27. Such a device is one Nabokov is particularly attuned to from his inquiries into the structures of two of his favourite novels, *Anna Karenin* and *Ulysses*. See *Lectures on Russian Literature*, [Ed. Fredson Bowers, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1982] 175-188, and *Lectures on Literature* 326-330 respectively. Of the two; Joyce's "double dream" offers the more intriguing comparison, not just because it illustrates the existence of a similar empathy between a false 'father' and 'son', but also because *Ulysses* offers teasing hints at uncovering a master author who has made the dreams coalesce (Macintosh ≈ Joyce?), in the same way that Nabokov does in *Pnin* (Nabokov ≈ the unnamed narrator?). [The bazaar contents of the Bloom/Dedalus dream may even perhaps be alluded to in the rather mystifying excursion taken by *Pnin's* narratorial voice on 31.]

28. Nicol 207.

29. See, for example, *Invitation to a Beheading* 188-191, and, of course, the conclusion of *Bend Sinister* 216-217.

30. *Strong Opinions* 95.

31. William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, [Vintage Books, Random House, New York, 1972] 49.

32. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* 95.

33. Field 135.

34. This has been admirably treated by Stuart, [144-159] and, particularly with reference to the squirrel motif, by Julia Bader in her *Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov's English Novels*, [University of California Press, Berkeley and London, 1972] 89-92, and Nicol *loc. cit.*

35. Pamela Hansford Johnson, 'New Novels', *The New Statesman*, September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1957, 361.

36. Kingsley Amis, 'Russian Salad', *The Spectator*, September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1957, 403.

37. Fowler 146.

38. Op. cit. 137.

39. According to Andrew Field's latest installment in his attempt at Nabokov annexation - the bookjacket humbly describes him as "the acknowledged authority on Nabokov in much the same way as Leon Edel on Henry James,

Richard Ellmann on James Joyce and Carlos Baker on Hemingway" - "My Poor *Pnin* was the original title for the novel." See Andrew Field, *V N: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, [Queen Ann Press, Macdonald and Co., London, 1987] 295.

40. Fred Moody, 'At *Pnin*'s Centre', *Russian Literature TriQuarterly* 14, 1976, 71-83. The manner in which the novel aspires to get closer and closer to a 'real' *Pnin*, only to end up confirming his departure is, in point of fact, very reminiscent of a work Nabokov was engaged upon editing at the same time as the bulk of *Pnin* was composed, Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of our Time*. His translation, produced in collaboration with his son Dmitri, first saw light of day in 1958, whilst a completed *Pnin* had appeared the previous year. The Foreword to the Lermontov volume is among Nabokov's most illuminating critical pieces and has been somewhat neglected in recent studies. In it, Nabokov stresses the involute nature of Lermontov's novel - comparing it with a late poem by the same author, which he christens 'The Triple Dream' - before pointing out

that the structural trick consists in bringing Pechorin gradually nearer and nearer until he takes over; but by the time he takes over he is dead.

[Vladimir Nabokov, Foreword to Mikhail Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*, Trans. and Ed. Vladimir Nabokov in collaboration with Dmitri Nabokov (The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, rep. 1984) viii.]

Although it culminates in a figurative, as opposed to a literal, death, *Pnin* clearly possesses a similar profile to Lermontov's account, albeit one constructed on a rather more subdued (a mock-heroic?) scale.

41. *Lectures on Literature* 2.

42. *Ibid.* 5.

Lolita: "Are you bothered by Romantic Associations?"

The question which forms the starting point for this consideration of *Lolita* is asked by Charlotte Humbert, née Haze, of a Humbert Humbert momentarily puzzled by the plans of his second wife to pack his step-daughter off to boarding-school and convert her room for a 'live-in' maid. The seemingly mystifying context is, however, promptly clarified when we are immediately informed that the room provided the site for Charlotte's "first surrender"<sup>1</sup> - terms that speak rather less of euphemism and are consequently denied the capitalisation afforded to those sugary and coy "Romantic Associations." At the same time as marking an emphasis, the placing of those capital letters also suggests a wider field of reference, particularly on a second reading; namely, their application to Humbert's written account of his involvement with the Haze household on a literary and stylistic level. We shall see later that Humbert is at times less "bothered" than plagued by certain habits of the nineteenth century artist *manqué* - after all, this is a twentieth century text that effectively culminates in a duel<sup>2</sup> - but I will venture to suggest that this deliberate 'misreading' of Charlotte's inquiry - in so far as the primary intention of the line has been clearly specified - might offer itself as a more fitting, if obviously not accurate, paradigm for the book than other misreadings that have been less willing to announce themselves as such.

Of all Nabokov's novels, *Lolita* has, from the outset, been subject to more interpretations, more conflicting opinions, and more articles than any other, most of which have been significantly characterised by an almost compulsive yoking together of often uneasy opposites. Thus, in his reflections on the most popular fiction of 1958, Orville Prescott of *The New York Times* pointed to the existence of a rather unusual, if not unholy, alliance as the agency

behind the sales figures that established the book as the year's second biggest seller.

Vladimir Nabokov's celebrated study of degeneracy..... seems equally to delight determinedly literary intellectuals and ordinary devotees of depravity.....<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, in the greeting accorded the novel's British debut the following year, Kingsley Amis was apparently compelled to register the breadth of the work's appeal by means of another, rather unlikely, pairing.

Few books published in this country since the King James Bible can have set up more eager expectation than *Lolita*, nor, on the other hand, can any work have been much better known in advance to its potential audience.<sup>4</sup>

Whether these reviewers comments are misplaced is something which we can scarcely verify now, but, inadvertently, their union of what we normally see as exclusives or contradictions - the 'intellectual' and the 'depraved', the sacred and the profane - the status of these as misreadings, 'mis-placings' in themselves, partakes of the practices of much of Nabokov's fiction. Interestingly, while Amis is surely correct in his observation that the period of the book's non-availability (it effectively took four years to cross the Channel) had gone no little way towards bestowing upon *Lolita* what is euphemistically called a 'reputation,'<sup>5</sup> by limiting his attention to the setting up of audience expectation as the reason for the work's popular success, he does the book considerable disservice by his failure to perceive that this concern is far more an integral part of the book's internal construction than it is a mere adjunct to its external appearance in the marketplace. If there ever proves to be a 'key'

to the artistic success of *Lolita*, it must surely lie in its ability to keep that one step ahead of its pursuers.

If we return to the fictions examined in the previous chapters then the trait most obviously common to all is a willingness - indeed, delight is not too strong a word - to dress the texts in the colours of assorted fictional genres. Thus the melodramatic décor of *Laughter in the Dark*; the utilisation of the language and customs of the anti-totalitarian or 'dystopian' novel in *Bend Sinister*, and the guile with which *Priglasenie* weaves itself around, and eventually beneath, the poles of biography and college novel. In all these instances, the reader is drawn into preliminary subterfuges which facilitate an examination of the assumptions and tacit contracts that he 'normally' (that is, for the most part, unthinkingly) enters into when engaging himself with such works. The reader who strives to enforce conventional habits of reading, the truly uniform, on Nabokov's fictions is more likely to see his expectations disappointed, to find himself 'misplaced' - unless, that is, he should somehow seek to persevere with a discredited alliance. For the reader to persist in this, seemingly unlikely, alternative; of supporting a detected disguise, and wilfully avoid acknowledging that his sensibilities have in some way been worked upon by the author - in short, that the old habits have indeed died at all - is, however, not as unsurprising or as rare as one might at first think.

Why would such an interpretation be upheld, rather than allowed to fall away? Clearly the most obvious explanation is the simple impercipient of a reader who neglects traces of irony and parody and responds only to the 'bared' elements of genre fictions, the archetypal situations that are unavoidably embedded in the text. However, at this juncture we might perhaps admit the existence of a more involved alternative hypothesis of reading that effects a similar denial, but which stretches and grasps rather more of what

the author would seem to have intended. Such a schema does involve the recognition of lexical and literary devices fissuring the text, whilst seeking to assign to it cohesion and structure, criteria that make the piece familiar on the reader's terms. Accordingly, the body of work is more fully assimilated and reconstituted than the prose at the disposal of the more ingenuous interpreter. Although the piece is then made manageable, with the reader going so far as to admit that some of the procedures and patterns of thought he or she commonly adopted are here subject to parody and irony, it still stops well short of taking up the attendant possibility that holding all the fictional strands may in fact be denied us, that we may never 'catch up' with the book. Moreover, that the process of reading works towards a fully satisfactory categorisation or classification which, in point of fact, would only replicate the original text, carries with it, in its turn, implications that may well lead to the sort of collapse the follower of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* was greeted with as that fiction drew to a close.

The end, the end. They all go back to their everyday life (and Clare goes back to her grave) - but the hero remains, for, try as I may, I cannot get out of my part: Sebastian's mask clings to my face, the likeness will not be washed off. I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows.<sup>6</sup>

The image of the mask that imperils its wearer by refusing to come away is very apposite to *Lolita*. Indeed, at one point Humbert asks "Is 'mask' the keyword? [55] It may well turn out to provide the most lastingly accurate analogy for the plight of those of us - that is, the majority of the critical intelligences brought to bear on this book - who endeavour to perform, to a greater or lesser degree, some type of recuperation, to maintain both the text

and our credulity. Certainly this second model representing something of our interaction with the work gets closer - even if by default - to addressing where *Lolita's* peculiar genius lies. Our lesson is not that the readings we seek so assiduously are always reductive, but in the cunning which obliges us to acknowledge the full extent of the, and I use the word advisedly, *perversity* of our position. The ingenuous, in a sense, may be behaving like a petulant audience who refuse to comply with Prospero's final request to employ our "good hands" to release him from his rôle, whilst the ingenious produce paraphrase and aspire to transcription. The ridiculousness of such persistence in folly, together with the accompanying and almost immediate awareness that the reader has nonetheless chosen a place, and therefore assumed some form of responsibility for his alignment with the text in question, speaks for itself.

Such evident resolve, better call it, resolution, on Nabokov's part, although common to all of his fiction - and arguably at its most rigorous in *Pale Fire* - undoubtedly carries its most potent charge in *Lolita*. This is largely because of the capital its author makes of an additional strain of fictional genre which supplements the many others he employs within its pages and which necessitates some comment - together with the registration of at least one denial.

"I am not concerned with so-called 'sex' at all" [136]

This, of course, is the factor which, above all others, has ensured the book's notoriety: what in *Speak, Memory* Nabokov talks of as "the police state of sexual myth,"<sup>7</sup> and what the general reader of the mid-1950's apparently deemed pornographic, an ill-founded difference of opinion that Nabokov continually, and for the most part fruitlessly, tried to correct, as evinced in

his acerbic response to the probings of *Playboy* interviewer, Alvin Toffler in 1964:

A.T.: *Many readers have concluded that the Philistinism you seem to find the most exhilarating is that of America's sexual mores.*

V.N.: Sex as an institution, sex as a general notion, sex as a problem, sex as a platitude - all this is something I find too tedious for words. Let us skip sex.<sup>8</sup>

What Nabokov so patently objects to, not only here but within any purportedly mimetic form, is the platitudinous treatment of any human concern, and, needless to say, of all available topics, those which are the most specific of all are liable to suffer the most stultifying and demeaning attention. Or, to be more strictly accurate, those private concerns have been at once extended and distended by their wholesale application to almost every other sphere of activity. The consequence for the artist who educes his material from such a world is the ever-present and most seductive option of falling back on what amounts to a generalised sexual gloss, no matter that the subject may not even require its embellishments or that its resources cannot help but prove insufficient when sexual issues are in fact to the fore. Both of these benumbing predilections, especially when arrayed in a particularly resplendent combination of tawdriness and glamour are tendencies gleefully pounced upon by Nabokov. (The lustre of shiny cellophane that enveloped Paduk<sup>9</sup> is recalled when our narrator informs us of "women utterly indifferent at heart to the dozen or so possible subjects of a parlour conversation, but very particular about the rules of such conversations, through the sunny cellophane of which not very appetizing frustrations can be readily distinguished." [39]) Indeed,



such tendencies are so deeply embedded within the very structure of *Lolita* that any selection of incidents of explicit disavowal seems to imply something of a wilful uprooting and distortion of context. The published interviews, however, teem with succinct and specific examples: firstly, of the omnipresence of a lifeless sexual nuance; and secondly, of the tacit devaluation it thereby impresses upon the artistic currency available to purchase more vital images of human sexuality.

The list is long, and, of course, everybody has his *bête noire*, his black pet, in the series. Mine is that airline ad: the snack served by an obsequious wench to a young couple - she eying ecstatically the cucumber canapé, he admiring wistfully the hostess.<sup>10</sup>

I was appalled by the commonplace quality of the sexual passages. I would like to say something about that. Clichés and conventions breed remarkably fast. They occur as readily in the primitive jollities of the jungle as in the civilized obligatory scenes of our theatre. In former times Greek masks must have set many a Greek dentition on edge. In recent films, including *Laughter in the Dark*, the porno grapple has already become a cliché though the device is but half-a-dozen years old. I would have been sorry that Tony Richardson should have followed that trite trend, had it not given me the opportunity to form and formulate the following important notion: theatrical acting, in the course of the last centuries, has led to incredible refinements of stylised pantomime in the representation of, say, a person eating, or getting deliciously drunk, or looking for his spectacles, or making a proposal of marriage. Not so in regard to the imitation of the sexual act which on the stage has absolutely no tradition behind it. The Swedes and we have to start from scratch and what I have witnessed up to now on the screen - the blotchy male shoulder, the false howls of bliss, the four or five mingled feet - all of it is primitive, conventional, and therefore disgusting. The lack of art and style in these paltry combinations is particularly brought into evidence by their clashing with the marvellously high level of acting in virtually all other imitations of natural gestures on our stage and screen. This is an attractive topic to ponder further, and directors should take notice of it.<sup>11</sup>

As we shall see, within the pages of *Lolita*, Nabokov manifestly draws upon an awareness of the proximity of such a potentially limiting vocabulary (and the synonymous habit of thought Nabokov terms *poshlost'*<sup>2</sup>) to go much further than the provision of the essentially doctrinaire delights granted by a satirical critique, a theme we have already consistently observed in earlier work - most notably *Bend Sinister*. Consequently, the amusements - and there are many - afforded us by the outbursts of what, to momentarily adopt the language of *poshlost*, we might care to call Humbert Humbert's 'coruscating scorn', are tempered by the realisation that he too relies just as heavily upon the implementation of equally restrictive, and, though more beguilingly elaborate, arguably even more harmful, frames - actual and linguistic - in which he imprisons his young charge.

Given that the book pivots on the pervasiveness of the urge to restrict and limit, the slide that we scarcely notice between recognition and possession in Humbert's yearning exhalation, "this Lolita, my Lolita" [42], the suitability of employing the vestments (divestments?) of an intensely blinkered fictional form becomes apparent, a point made with abundant clarity in the afterword of Nabokov's novel.

.....in modern times the term "pornography" connotes mediocrity, commercialism, and certain strict rules of narration. Obscenity must be mated with banality because every kind of aesthetic enjoyment has to be entirely replaced by simple sexual stimulation which demands the traditional word for direct action upon the patient. Old rigid rules must be followed by the pornographer in order to have his patient feel the same security of satisfaction, for example, fans of detective stories feel - stories where, if you do not watch out, the real murderer may turn out to be, to the fan's disgust, artistic originality (who for instance would want a detective story without a single line of dialogue in it?). Thus, in pornographic novels, action has to be limited to the copulation of clichés. Style, structure, imagery should never distract the reader from his tepid lust. The novel must consist of an alternation of sexual scenes. The passages in between must be reduced to sutures of sense, logical bridges of the simplest design, brief expositions and explana-

tions, which the reader will probably skip but must know they exist in order not to feel cheated (a mentality stemming from the routine of "true" fairy tales in childhood).....

Certain techniques in the beginning of *Lolita* (Humbert's journal, for example) misled some of my first readers into assuming that this was going to be a lewd book.... [315]

Although we may wish to question whether even the most rigorously dedicated of "lewd" writers can confine his or her attentions towards securing *only* that one solitary goal of "simple sexual stimulation" without infringing on other issues, it would appear that it is by and large agreed that such reductive singlemindedness of attention is the nearest we have to any sort of consensus for measuring or evaluating pornographic/erotic/sexual fiction. (On the difficulty of securing exact demarcations, see the justified hesitations that pervade Maurice Charney's *Sexual Fiction*,<sup>13</sup> or more suggestively, the problem of the "general neckline" cited in Nabokov's afterword [316].) Consequently, it is the consciousness of dealing with an inordinately limited *topos* that overwhelmingly dominates any critical discussion of the nature of the "pornographic", be the voice male, or female.

In most erotic writings, as in man's wet dreams, the imagination turns, time and time again, inside the bounded circle of what the body can experience.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the pornographic imagination inhabits a universe that is, however, repetitive the incidents occurring within it, incomparably economical. The strictest possible criteria of relevance applies: everything must bear upon the erotic situation.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, it is significant that of the "lewd" fictions which have experienced a recognised promotion to a 'serious' literary domain, most would appear to have done so in spite of, rather than because of, their sexual content. Thus

detailed docketing and a Defoe-like materialism has played a not inconsiderable rôle in granting Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* the status of an 'Oxford Classic,'<sup>16</sup> whilst Penguin Books now publish George Bataille's *Story of the Eye* accompanied with what one can hardly resist describing as covering essays from Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes. Even if our selection should fall upon a pair of books whose 'literary' merit is far less overt (or, and what amounts to the same thing, which have been favoured with less *critical* licence), then we are still obliged to admit that the performance of a similar recuperation for Frank Harris's *My Life and Loves* and the anonymous *My Secret Life* - both, like *Lolita*, purportedly autobiographical confessions - will be presented as largely dependent upon matters incidental rather than sensual. It is certainly the case that most of the pleasure afforded by the first of these two resides almost wholly in the largely involuntary amusement of Harris's rampaging ego, whilst Walter Kendrick has tersely outlined the direction that would-be rescuers of our second author will probably follow; "For him, the value of his recollections lay exclusively in sex; for posterity it lies in practically everything else - the minutiae of daily life that 'Walter' provided without thinking twice of it."<sup>17</sup>

To judge from these examples, it would appear that the writing of a pornography that demands the paradoxical title of 'pure' is a far more difficult exercise than we might have hitherto suspected. In point of fact, what we could be said to be dealing with - no matter how misplaced the term may seem - is an ideal. Thus, when in the final section of a fascinating essay, Susan Sontag endeavours to claim for the "Pornographic Imagination" a wider existence than as a form of "psychic absolutism,"<sup>18</sup> we might perhaps counter that a composition of such singlemindedness is not attainable in any case. Nonetheless, given the attitude manifested in previous Nabokov novels towards the

notion of a single reading dictated by the author, we must surely note that the definitively restricted reading of a pure pornography can be perceived, in an obvious sense, to mark the greatest challenge to an author who continually strives after more expansive implications.

To dedicate a fiction expressly to countering this particular finite reading, however, entails a considerable magnification of perhaps the most difficult problem faced in any attempt to turn elements of a genre fiction back upon themselves, that of repetition. Whereas the occasional air of subtlety we have alluded to in *Laughter in the Dark*, and the problem of portraying the mundanity of evil within the pages of *Bend Sinister*, can be traced as issues that have arisen predominantly out of an over-attention to the practices, of thought and linguistic formations, that are being parodied; in the instance of the purportedly erotic, the danger of being drawn into repetition is far more obvious and insistent,<sup>19</sup> an allure which the better writers of the genre detect even within the original idiom.

I imagined indeed, that you would have been cloy'd and tired with the uniformity of adventures and expressions, inseparable from a subject of this sort, whose bottom or ground-work being, in the nature of things, eternally one and the same, whatever variety of forms and modes, the situations are susceptible of, there is no escaping a repetition of near the same images, the same figures, the same expressions, with this further inconvenience added to the disgust it creates, that the words *joys, ardours, transports, extasies*, and the rest of those pathetic terms so congenial to, so received in the *practise of pleasure*, flatten, and lose much of their due spirit and energy, by the frequency they indispensably recur with, in a narrative of which that *practise* professedly composes the whole basis.....<sup>20</sup>

If this is the case for the production of such work, then correspondingly how much more onerous the task of the would-be parodist, in so far as the pervasive monotony of such texts tends to demand of him a similarly fixed

attentiveness. In short, the scope for a truly cutting irony is severely restricted, and that which does emerge is inordinately difficult to sustain, as is borne out by a piece such as Terry Southern's *Candy*, where all the punches are telegraphed. In a sense, the possibilities for relentless satire on pornographic concerns are denied by the intrinsic relentlessness of the form itself, which effectively renders the notion of parody obsolete.<sup>21</sup> The impression of claustrophobia often described as emanating from the fiction of De Sade, for example, makes a consistent and concerted attack against it almost utterly ridiculous. How would one begin to undercut the invariable and obsessive voice of *120 Days*? Is there any point in an author competing with that, especially one who champions

the supremacy of the detail over the general, of the part which is more alive than the whole, of the little thing which a man observes and greets with a friendly nod of the spirit while the crowd around him is being driven by some common impulse to some common goal..... In a sense, we all are crashing to our death from the top story of our birth to the flat stones of the churchyard and wondering with an immortal Alice in Wonderland at the patterns of the passing wall. This capacity to wonder at trifles - no matter what the peril - these asides of the spirit, these footnotes in the volume of life are the highest forms of consciousness.....<sup>22</sup>

It is, then, largely in order to avoid any compulsion to emulate such writings, and instead, if anything, to ensnare their followers, that Nabokov's deployment of the lore of "lewd" books is highly selective and generally broadens out into other fictional terrain. This is typified by John Ray's Foreword where a number of its more salient features are susceptible to interpretation as referents to more than one particular type of fiction. The most obvious example of all is the one we come across on the very first line: the



full heading affixed to Humbert Humbert's account of his "tangle of thorns" [11].

*Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male...*<sup>23</sup>

The alternative title is a clear echo of a commonplace labelling<sup>24</sup> for erotic fiction, ranging from the 1740's (Duclos) to Timothy Lea's tawdry 1970's series of books and films, but at the same time it is in part redolent of that highly charged, yet somehow hazy, first person voice we meet in the Romantic outpourings of Werther, René, and of course, in Rousseau's *Confessions*. Similarly, the very existence of a foreword hearkens back to the protective fiat of 'objective scientific merit' that has so often acted as a traditional disclaimer for the prurient, something which Nabokov seems to have relished detecting in one of the works often cited as a possible source for *Lolita*; the anonymous memoir which forms the appendix to Volume Six of Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, which has recently been granted independence under the title *The Confessions of Victor X.*<sup>25</sup> It is significant that in his reply to Edmund Wilson thanking him for the loan of the volume Nabokov should employ the language of rhetoric (he talks of the finale as "rather bathetic"<sup>26</sup>), a choice that would seem to indicate that a prime source of his enjoyment lay in detecting the devices that shore up the façade of purported objectivity - in short, the pleasure of tripping up the restricted code of the psychiatric report.

Now, we might ourselves state that such a delight is in itself something of a restricted one, available only to those capable of fathoming such a cipher and reassessing its basis. However, the years immediately prior to the

publication of *Lolita* provide an irrefutable example of the mass 'decoding' of a work packaged for minority or selective consumption<sup>27</sup> - though not necessarily to savour the irony of lapses in scientific neutrality - the Kinsey Reports of 1949 and 1953. The sales figures of these works, in a sense, the initiators of the now familiar phenomenon of the best-selling 'sociological' survey - a development in the further trivialisation of our time<sup>28</sup> - make it clear that the public which so readily received them must have been capable of reading *through* the adumbrated vocabulary in which they were couched. This is a point quite rightly picked on by Lionel Trilling in his discussion of the first Report.

The Report says of itself that it is only a "preliminary survey," a work intended to be the first step in a larger research; that is, nothing more than an accumulation of "scientific fact," a collection of objective data, a "report on what people do, which raises no question of what they should do," and it is fitted out with a full complement of charts, tables, and discussions of scientific method. A work conceived and executed in this way is usually presented only to an audience of professional scientists; and the publishers of the Report, a medical house, pay their ritual respects to the old tradition which held that not all medical knowledge was to be made easily available to the lay reader, or at least not until it had been subject to professional debate: they tell us in a foreword for what limited professional audience the book was primarily intended - physicians, biologists, and social scientists and "teachers, social workers, personnel officers, law enforcement groups, and others concerned with the direction of human behaviour." And yet the book has been so successfully publicised that for many weeks it was a national best seller.

.....[To] the public which receives this technical report, this merely preliminary survey, this accumulation of data....nothing is more valuable, more precisely "scientific," and more finally convincing than raw data without conclusions; no disclaimer of conclusiveness can mean anything to it - it has learned that the disclaimer is simply the hallmark of the scientific attitude, science's way of saying "thy unworthy servant."<sup>29</sup>

The sort of discrete relinquishment of impartiality and a limited audience we can detect in the Kinsey Report (that list of would-be readers culminates in



the scarcely selective grouping of "others concerned with the direction of human behaviour") is something John Ray's foreword takes up and pushes just a little further to culminate in its own low-key appeal.

*Lolita* should make all of us - parents, social workers, educators - apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world. [8]

Nonetheless, one could hardly lay claim to the design of the disclamatory preface attached to *Lolita* being susceptible to the readings of only the social scientist or the (proto) pornographer, particularly when, in this instance, according to its editor, it heads off an unrevised and apparently self-revelatory manuscript. Such tactics are also to be found in works whose sexuality, though often as feverish, is far less graphically rendered; in particular, those doomed Romantic pairings of Werther and Charlotte, Adolphe and Ellenore, and the young Chactas and Atala, any one of whose stylised presentation would seem to offer quite a marked contrast with the baser couplings we are obliged to endure in the pornographic. What is more, as we read *Lolita*, we become more and more aware that the interrelationship between the foreword and the text which it sets off, operates in a far more involved fashion than the straightforward denial of authorship we are accorded in either the Goethe, who wishes to avoid identification with his character, or the pornographer, who is keener to avoid literal identification and possible prosecution! In point of fact, it increasingly assumes the shape of an elaboration of the more self-conscious and ironic modifications that High Romanticism is subjected to in works like *Eugene Onegin* and *Adolphe* - the latter of which also parallels Nabokov's text in its provision of both foreword and postscript, in turn acting both to

emphasise and pull the reader away from the more voyeuristic sensations generated by the texts. Indeed, what we have come to talk of as one of the distinguishing features of Romanticism, a burgeoning disassociation of self, is so persistently initiated and withdrawn in *Lolita* as almost to constitute the book's very heartbeat until the final imposition of that "remoteness of tone"<sup>30</sup> which commences with the text's final paragraph, and which is more patently confirmed in the afterword.<sup>31</sup>

Although we shall return to the developments *Lolita* seems to represent on the sensibilities and techniques initiated in the Romantic novel, the strategy of proffering indices of one fictional genre, only to smudge and smear such signals through the prompt intrusion of selections from additional literary lines, is tellingly deployed throughout the text. As such, the reader is aroused not so much by what evidence there is within the book of any hankering after the erotic, but rather by the somewhat peculiar sensation of seeing it compromised. Instead of providing the reassurance and reparation that comes with the "security of satisfaction" [315] Nabokov points to as the dried kernel of latterday pornography, *Lolita's* lines swell and arch and double back upon themselves, as if struggling, not to mirror, but just to retain a grip on its material. If we follow the course of a paragraph taken from Humbert's Journal - itself a pretext adopted by writers as disparate as Goethe and Gogol for purposes other than the pornographic cited by Nabokov in the afterword [315] - we may witness something of its range.

*Friday.* I wonder what my academic publishers would say if I were to quote in my textbook Ronsard's "*la vermeillette fente*" or Remy Belleau's "*un petit mont feutr  de mousse d licate, trac  sur le milieu d'un fillet escarlatte*" and so forth. I shall probably have another breakdown if I stay any longer in this house, under the strain of this intolerable temptation, by the side of my darling - my life and my bride. Has she already been initiated by mother nature to the

Mystery of the Menarche? Bloated feeling. The Curse of the Irish. Falling from the roof. Grandma is visiting. "Mr Uterus (I quote from a girls' magazine) starts to build a thick soft wall on the chance a possible baby may have to be bedded down there." The tiny madman in his padded cell. [49]

The allusions that open the paragraph are, for once, indubitably erotic. It is significant, however, that they are couched in a manner that bars convenient access to its sexual material; in so far as the referents are in another language from the bulk of the text, located in poetic rather than prose conventions, and even then still remain sufficiently arcane to prevent identification by the vast majority of those who helped to make *Lolita* a best-seller. (The Belleau poem in particular, according to Appel's annotation on 359.)

Should the reader have chosen then to consider Humbert's speculations in the light of the only "textbook" he has any evidence of, that providing documentation of the nymphet *genus* in his hands, as opposed to the second volume of the "comparative history of literature for English-speaking students" [34] that Humbert is in fact referring to (and now knows he will never write), the abrupt reminder that follows, in which his only voice of authorship is subject to repeated mental collapse, must come as something of a shock. In turn, however, this shift is immediately modified by the phrase "intolerable temptation", which restores us to the environs of erotic fantasy, a commonplace world in which one succumbs to "temptation," and the sexual availability of a landlady and her daughter for a "lodger-lover" is taken for granted. (Humbert names himself as such within a page of meeting Charlotte Haze [40]). (Do we already hear "mamma still talking to Mrs Chatfield or Mrs Hamilton, very softly, flushed, smiling, cupping the telephone with her free hand, denying by implication that she denies those amusing rumours, rumour, roomer...."? [53]) Even the reintroduction of this, our initial note, still fails to curtail the

reverberations of the sentence, as it once more stops, ("my darling") re-considers, ("my darling") and then confirms a move into the fevered Romantic extremities of Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabel Lee", ("my life and bride") - another major referent to the work as a whole. Needless to say, as readers of such a piece, our efforts to register the modulations and disparities of tone within its structure are conducted with the principal aim of harmonising rather than parsing. As a result, the sort of tie-ins we are able to make to specific genre conventions are shaped with little of either the finality or exactitude which such an outline inevitably implies and exaggerates. (Unsurprisingly, of these, the pornographic has solicited the most conspicuous popular attention.)

Aligned with shifts at once too rapid and too subtle to be summarised as quickfire points changes, an additional and rather broader tendency is demonstrated within the text which is beautifully illustrated by the next section of the paragraph. This is the displacement on Humbert's part of direct reflection, the endeavour to comprehend his experiences that has so patently inspired the book in the first place, ("to analyse my own cravings, motives, actions and so forth" [15]), in favour of a submission, not to the promptings of the now conveniently labelled 'stream of consciousness', but to a flow specifically channelled by the inferences and echoes of the words and images in which he has chosen to embody those apprehensions. Ruminations thus quite often ostentatiously deviate from what the reader is content (and tacitly demands) to perceive as private 'felt' experience (the reader's habitual intrusion), to the explicit domination and celebration of the associative and generative powers of language itself. In doing this, the author is not necessarily intending to topple an orthodoxy, but to alert the reader to the existence of flaws and blemishes, of *characters* within a medium all too casually dismissed as transparent and neutral. Hence the rough tumble of metaphors

that commence with the prim alliteration of "Mystery of the Menarche", before going on to savour the more colloquial figures which the phrase has, in its turn, spawned.

What is more, although these are imaginative re-presentations, we might do well to note that all euphemisms are rooted in the same, highly conscious effort to reduce the efficacy of the human voice, to limit their audience by the deliberate adoption of a mode understandable to some but not all. And among the public so excluded? The girl who will be bought "four books of comics, a box of candy, a box of sanitary pads, two cokes, a manicure set, a travel clock with a luminous dial, a ring with a real topaz, a tennis racket, roller skates with white high shoes...." [144], and for whom the patronising inanities of our paragraph's next line were designed.

"Mr Uterus (I quote from a girl's magazine) starts to build a thick soft wall on the chance that a possible baby may have to be bedded down there." [49]

The clinching (and wincing) points lie in the masculine designation of a distinctly female organ, and, just as tellingly, the coy deployment of "possible".

We are then left with a short concluding statement to round off the paragraph, and which ostensibly returns us to the erotic centre from which we began. However, the "bounded circle" that George Steiner spoke of<sup>32</sup> is by no means complete; rather, as a direct consequence of the lines that have followed, such a confining notion is now exposed as invalid and inappropriate. We return, not to a site of convenient sexual accommodation and glorification, but one more fully realised; as the possessor of other capacities and qualities

aside from the limited concerns of the pornographer. Moreover, the brilliance of this final line resides in a refusal to pander to easy satisfactions, but not so much through the reference to madness - the complete disturbance of any ordering - than by the far more devastating tactic of granting such unthinking pleas for reassurance with, as the phrase goes, a vengeance. Hence the provision of the ultimate in protective comforts; those to be found in the padded cell.

In proceeding from an actualisation (as opposed to a commonplace conception) of the erotic, the paragraph may perhaps be held as unrepresentative of Nabokov's book as a whole; but what its shimmies do provide us with is a fine example of the aplomb (an undoubtedly seductive ease) with which the piquancies of the erotic are transposed from its traditional company to the body of the text. Humbert's erotic urge - the impulse to utterly abandon oneself ("Ah, leave me alone in my pubescent park, in my mossy garden..... Never grow up" [23]) - is finally to luxuriate in language itself, and the reader of *Lolita* finds himself redeploying his senses to make much of the verbal folds and furls that are summarised in *Pale Fire* as partaking "not of text but texture."<sup>23</sup> After all, it is precisely with such an emphasis that the novel begins.

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My  
sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking  
a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three,  
on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta. [11]

Indeed, the reader is constantly obliged to linger over and savour with Humbert the fact that words at once render and rend a world.

.....my last vision that night of long-lashed Monique is touched up with a gaiety that I find seldom associated with any event in my humiliating, sordid, taciturn love life.... Stopping before a window display she said with great gusto: 'Je vais m'acheter des bas!' and never may I forget the way her Parisian childish lips exploded on 'bas,' pronouncing it with an appetite that all but changed the 'a' into a brief buoyant bursting 'o' as in 'bot.' [25]

.....we were welcomed to wary motels by means of inscriptions that read:

'We wish you to feel at home while here. All equipment was carefully checked upon arrival. Your license number is on record here. Use hot water sparingly. We reserve the right to eject without notice any objectionable person. Do not throw waste material of any kind in the toilet bowl. Thank you. Call again. P.S. We consider our guests the Finest People of the World.' [212]

Dear Dad:

How's everything? I'm married. I'm going to have a baby. I guess he's going to be a big one. I guess he'll come right for Christmas. This is a hard letter to write. I'm going nuts because we don't have enough to pay our debts and get out of here. Dick is promised a big job in Alaska in his very specialized corner of the mechanical field, that's all I know about it but it's really grand. Pardon me for withholding our home address but you may still be mad at me, and Dick must not know. This town is something. You can't see the morons for the smog. Please do send a check, Dad. We could manage with three or four hundred or even less, anything is welcome, you might sell my old things, because once we get there the dough will just start rolling in. Write please. I have gone through much sadness and hardship.

Yours expecting,  
DOLLY (MRS. RICHARD F. SCHILLER)

[268]

It is precisely this awareness of language's myriad cutting edges that Nabokov applies to the erotic. The result is not its extirpation, but instead a flexed movement, the simultaneous restriction and extension of its nominal scope. Thus, there are vestiges of "lewd" lore to be uncovered in *Lolita*, but, as we have seen, they are to be found in lodes of even less accessibility than the conventional confines of the pornographic (See Appel, 428-429) - and in point of fact they effectively assume the status of (almost too) private jokes. It is, however, the encroachments an 'erotic' makes on other literary modes, its

incursion into alternative frames of reference, that distinguishes Nabokov's book, and which eventually obliges the reader to acknowledge the presence of an 'erotic' within language itself, an 'erotic' that by virtue of such osmosis slips away from its anchorage-ground in the flesh.

The consequence is that against the commonplace eroticism of the necessarily desensitized body, of commodity sexuality ("What I had possessed was not she, but my own creation, another fanciful Lolita - perhaps more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her: floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness - indeed no life of her own" [64]), runs a more extensive and attractive eroticism, one which strives to percolate an entire text. Hence the fate of the figure who is the focus of a purportedly pornographic desire, the girl the narrator would "encase" and dehumanise, is notably pre-figured in the famous initial description; if, that is, we register the important message contained in the lines, rather than merely contenting ourselves with drinking in their sound.

She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing  
four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks.  
She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted  
line. But in my arms she was always Lolita. [11]

From the outset then, the central conflict of the book is announced and its resolution intimated, and, perhaps even more significant, is the point that, if we are not sufficiently mindful, we can easily miss it. For, warily tracking the markedly incantatory rhythms of the sentences and the dramatic bid, not to just represent or evoke, but to conjure up a girl, there is a far less glamorous struggle enacted: to enforce a single definition over and above all other perceptions. This endeavour, to replace what we may see as a list of



character parts with just one, seeks to confirm a renaming which scarcely masks its true nature as an act of appropriation on the part of the narrator. That the prosaic title under which the girl dies, that of "Mrs 'Richard F. Schiller'" [6], and hence the name with the strongest claim to binding her, is the one absentee on Humbert's list points with deft eloquence to the inevitability of his failure.

Such an urge to confine - "*to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets*" [136. My italics] - may also be read as patterning itself upon the designs of the pornographer, who, whether consciously acknowledging it or not, will tend to diminish and flatten the figures within the erotic tableaux, and to carry the process of fictional objectification through to the imposition of petrification and reification. Similarly, with Humbert here; "*in my arms she was always Lolita*" [my italics], and yet, at the same instance, this apparently dehumanising and reductive act of confinement may also be construed as arresting the workings of time - an agency that helps to confer our humanity, but to which the practises of art are for the most part inimical. And certainly, an urgency and a desire to limit the effects and encroachments of "Devouring Time" is one of the fundamental well-springs of art, one particularly epitomised in the measures adopted to protect and preserve a beloved from its incursions, whether they come from the hand of the portraitist, or, the more common association which we shall now turn to, the poet who would claim "*My love shall in my verse ever live young*"<sup>24</sup> [my italics], a title and a final vindication most definitely sought by Humbert Humbert.

.....one wanted H.H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic

sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only  
immortality you and I may share, my Lolita. [311]

"The patrimonies of poets" [133]

A comparison of the two appeals - of the poet and of "H.H." respectively - is, however, instructive. Shakespeare's sonneteer, whilst making the traditional request for the recognition of the beloved's merits, also reaffirms the sanctioned rôle of the poet; as the only figure fit enough to be, in the words of an earlier sonnet in the sequence, "all in war with Time for love of you."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, in his sequence, Humbert has not been averse to making such contentions:

We are unhappy, mild, dog-eyed gentlemen, sufficiently well integrated to control our urge in the presence of adults, but ready to give years and years of life for one chance to touch a nymphet. Emphatically, no killers are we. Poets never kill. [90]

If I dwell at some length on the tremors and gropings of that distant night, it is because I insist upon proving that I am not, and never was, and never could have been, a brutal scoundrel. The gentle and dreamy regions through which I crept were the patrimonies of poets - not crime's prowling ground. [133]

Not only does Humbert appear to be picking up the notion of poetic sanction in order to stretch it towards a literal bid for sanctuary, but further problems arise for the would-be poet, in that his field of battle does not limit itself to Time (the "years and years of life" he would sacrifice), it also manages to incorporate the purported *causus belli* as well.

She was thinner and taller, and for a second it seemed to me that her face was less pretty than the mental imprint I had cherished for more than a month: her

cheeks looked hollow and too much lentigo confused her rosy rustic features; and that first impression (a very narrow interval between two tiger heartbeats) carried the clear implication that all widower Humbert had to do, wanted to do, or would do, was to give this wan-looking though sun-coloured orphan *aux yeux battus* (and even those plumbaceous umbræ under her eyes bore freckles) a sound education, a healthy and happy girlhood, a clean home, nice girl-friends of her age among whom (if the fates deigned to repay me) I might find, perhaps, a pretty little *Magdlein* for Herr Doktor Humbert alone. But, "in a wink" as the Germans say, the angelic line of conduct was erased and I overtook my prey (time moves ahead of our fancies!), and she was my Lolita again - in fact more of my Lolita than ever. I let my hand rest on her warm auburn head and took up her bag. She was all rose and honey, dressed in her brightest red gingham, with a pattern of little red apples, and her arms and legs were of a deep golden brown, with scratches like tiny dotted lines of coagulated rubies, and the ribbed cuffs of her white socks were turned down at the remembered level, and because of her childish gait, or because I had memorized her as always wearing heelless shoes, her saddle oxfords looked too large and high-heeled for her..... In the hot car she settled down beside me, slapped a prompt fly on her lovely knee; then, her mouth working violently on a piece of chewing gum, she rapidly cranked down the window on her side and settled back again. We sped through the striped and speckled forest. [113]

This particular form - and she is silent only for the moment - is something far different from the love objects addressed in the stylised conjectures of the Shakespearean sonneteer. In the case of the latter, it is in part precisely because of the manner in which the subjects are treated according to a pre-eminently conventionalised literary code, that the figures of the 'Friend' and the 'Dark Lady' have entertained so much speculation - to the extent of somewhat sidetracking the more noteworthy issue, that of the allocations and self-appointments made by the sonneteer. In short, the very insubstantiality of these personae afford the reader space for conjecture and even self-projection. The contrast with the creature in Humbert's account could not be more complete. There, as in the extract above, we are granted a phenomenally particularised portrait, indicative of attentions we more readily ascribe to the poet than the prosaist, but this image will not allow itself to be

considered as finished. Instead, it is self-modifying; to put it even more straightforwardly, it answers the artist back. Let us return to that hot car.

We rolled silently through a silent townlet.  
'Say, wouldn't Mother be absolutely mad if she found out we were lovers?'  
'Good Lord, Lo, let us not talk that way.'  
'But we are lovers, aren't we?'  
'Not that I know of. I think we are going to have some more rain. Don't you want to tell me of those little pranks of yours in camp?'  
'You talk like a book, Dad.'  
'What have you been up to? I insist you tell me.'  
'Are you easily shocked?'  
'No. Go on.'  
'Let us turn into a secluded lane and I'll tell you.'  
'Lo, I must seriously ask you not to play the fool. Well?' [113]

Thus, when Humbert proclaims "Oh, Lolita, you are my girl as Vee was Poe's and Bea Dante's....." [109], the documentation that goes with it provides the reader with considerable evidence to the contrary. And it is the same with the other poetic precedents he draws upon to authenticate his right to possession.

.....when Petrarch fell madly in love with his Laureen, she was a fair-haired nymph of twelve running in the wind, in the pollen and dust, a flower in flight, in the beautiful plain as described from the hills of Vaucluse. [21]

Leaving aside the fact that the identity of Laura, let alone her age on meeting the poet, is unknown (which necessarily invalidates it as any kind of 'supporting evidence'), the existence of a Laura, a 'Dark Lady', a Stella,<sup>26</sup> or even a Geraldine,<sup>27</sup> can only ever be as a cipher awaiting the reader's provision of a "rich place", an entity wholly (*sic.*) determined by the form in which it has been posited and the shaping dictates of its audience.<sup>28</sup> The ladies then are

confined by the sonnet's lines, which simultaneously serve to grant its audience access, that space for speculation and embellishment we mentioned earlier.

Although the figures in such pieces must to some degree partake of that limited 'freedom', it is only too apparent that they are denied license in any way to challenge their artistic constraints. At best, the protests that are allowed in a work like "My mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun"<sup>39</sup> can only reanimate conventions and rhetorical tropes; certainly they cannot reprimand the ascendant voice. Moreover, the voice issuing forth such complaints belongs to the poet, *not* the beloved, one whose intentions we have touched on earlier, and might perhaps now reappraise in yet another light.

*My love shall in my verse ever live young.*  
[*My(!)* italics.]

Such practices and wiles are also discernible in the writings of the self-confessed "poet *à mes heures*" [46] in Nabokov's book, in particular the sort of protestation of uniqueness which masquerades under the refutation of moves against it and towards the imposition of a literary classification. Hence, as the sonneteer turns on mock-Petrarchanisms in "My mistress's eyes.....", so Humbert states of his mistress "neither is she the fragile child of a feminine novel" in order to affirm "what is most singular is that she, *this* Lolita, *my* Lolita, has individualized the writer's ancient lust, so that above everything there is - Lolita." [46]

In addition, however, the reader is repeatedly obliged to observe just how considerable a resistance this Lolita - neither child nor woman, a creature between times, and, we might like to think, in some way amenable to being taken out of time - puts up to the figure whose offer to take her out of time,

to render her "eternal" [67], also entails an existence as "a young captive" [159], not only in a metaphysical sense, but, as we have previously stressed, in a most literal one as well. This is the Lolita who retorts to the artist who would trick her up with metaphors and enfold her in his pages for "anthological delectation" [163]; "You talk like a book, Dad" [116], and obliges him to make the rejoinder "I am speaking English" [152] on more than one occasion<sup>40</sup> - actions consistent with her response to a more obvious attempt on Humbert's part after their first night together to mould her according to his own image ("Lo viciously sent those nice presents of mine hurtling into a corner, and put on yesterday's dress" [140]). No matter, then, how well grounded a claim Humbert may appear to have on the title of poet, his pretensions to depict "my American sweet immortal dead love" [282] are scotched constantly by the intrusion of the girl whose vocabulary alone so resolutely places her in time, in the America of the late 1940's, the postwar boom years.

Again, if we glance back at the opening paragraph of the novel (which, you might recall, was initially set off from the main body of the text as a prose poem in the first edition), it patently does have much in common with that yearning and wistful strain of eulogy which we have come to expect of the sonneteer. And from a figure who later admits to having "immersed myself in the poetry of others" [259], perhaps it should not be too much of a surprise that the tone and rhymes established at the onset of one of the sonnets in the *Astrophil and Stella* sequence come to mind in particular.

Stella, the only planet of my light,  
Light of my life, and life Of my desire,  
Chief good whereto my hope doth only aspire,  
World of my wealth, and heaven of my delight;<sup>41</sup>

-However, whereas the brevity and economy of the verse form encourage idealisation and an inferential reading, *Lolita* conforms to the casual, yet increasingly resonant aside thrown out by Humbert on the occasion of his reunion with the young Miss Haze at Camp Q.: "time moves ahead of our fancies!" [113] This is not to say that the classical stasis of the sonnet, its facility to retain a host of lost times, are attributes of which Humbert is ignorant; rather, his very proximity to that which he craves to 'hold' prevents him from accommodating it within an art world, and instead encourages him to impose it on a backdrop altogether less amenable to his transformations.

She had entered my world, umber and black Humberland, with rash curiosity; she surveyed it with a shrug of amused distaste; and it seemed to me now that she was ready to turn away from it with something akin to plain revulsion. Never did she vibrate under my touch, and a strident 'what d'you think you are doing?' was all I got for my pains. To the wonderland I had to offer, my fool preferred the corniest movies, the most cloying fudge. To think that between a Hamburger and a Humburger, she would - invariably, with icy precision - plump for the former. [168]

What Humbert revealingly talks of as "the ineffable life.....I had willed into being" [115], namely, *his* Lolita, is finally too delicate an entity to thrive in an American landscape that has not undergone a similar metamorphosis, as the difficulties "the open-air lover" encounters in "the Wilds of America" make all too hilariously apparent [see 170]. Critically then, lined up alongside the poetic vision of the pristine, timeless artefact, "this *nouvelle*, this Lolita, my Lolita" [42], are the unmodified raw materials - which exist in time and are subject to change - from which it purports to have been shaped; "but the fog was like a wet blanket, and the sand was gritty and clammy, and Lo was all gooseflesh and grit, and for the first time in my life I had as little desire

for her as for a manatee" [169]. Humbert, in point of fact, is never quite the poet; he is at best the would-be poet at work, striving to overcome "gooseflesh and grit" in order to enforce his own perception, in fashioning and maintaining "my own creation, another fanciful Lolita - perhaps more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her: floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness - indeed no life of her own" [64].

The obvious consequence for the reader of the fictional scenario being repeatedly subject to this peculiarly twinned focus - far more acute than that glimpsed in *Phin* - is that he is permanently assigned the objective distance that Humbert only attains to lose. Indeed, it is significant that the closest Humbert gets to producing some form of unitary perspective and arresting the movement of time is a condition only arrived at through the total ascendancy of will. The alleged high-point of Humbert's 'art' is finally dependent on the will's efficacy to amend his double vision of Dolores Haze, thereby enabling him to superimpose the image of his "fanciful Lolita" over and above all others, and so collapse any semblance of distance to produce a sight that is, in all senses 'out of true'. Moreover, as we can hardly fail to notice, the effectiveness of this doubletake is helped considerably by the distracting presence of a suspenseful and distinctly erotic tracery - a reminder to Nabokov's "good reader" of the bids for power never wholly concealed by a surface sheen.

.....all of a sudden a mysterious change came over my senses. I entered a plane of being where nothing mattered save the infusion of joy brewed within my body. What had begun as a delicious distension of my innermost roots became a glowing tingle which now had reached that state of absolute security, confidence and reliance not found elsewhere in conscious life. With the deep hot sweetness thus established and well on its way to the ultimate convulsion, I felt I could slow



down in order to prolong the glow. Lolita had been  
safely solipsized. [62]

And of course, Humbert's "creation" here does not stop at screening out the catalogue of variant 'Lolitas' we were presented with as the novel opened; it is also blind to other suggestions which emerge during the course of reading the book, most notably those propounded by the girl's mother, and even the child herself.

.....added Haze, "...You see, *she* sees herself as a starlet; *I* see her as a sturdy, healthy, but decidedly homely kid. This, I guess, is at the root of our troubles." [67]

Now, if these figures, who at least inhabit the same textual milieu as the narrator, are to be denied a say in the fabrication of their own make-up (which, as we can see from the above, is not without its own element of self-deception), then the implications for Humbert's readers must be construed as just as bleak. Are we too being adjudged in the end as surplus to requirements, a verdict which in its turn begs the question of whether we can talk of an art so flawless as to counter its integral weakness; the audience it needs must beseech.<sup>42</sup> For the emergence of this particular stasis is for Humbert alone, "suspended on the brink of that voluptuous abyss" [62], in a time scheme that may aspire to an eternal but only attains the permanent present of the erotic, and whose most revealing remark is to be found stowed away in a parenthetical aside in which he bestows upon himself "a nicety of psychological equipoise comparable to certain techniques in the arts" [62]. At such moments, the narrator's performance is only comparable, at best, as a displacement or

travesty of the formations and patterning of an art-world; it is not on equal terms, or indeed, wholly a part of one. Humbert's perception is incapable of integrating itself with any supposed norm in the same way that his view of Lolita's social mores could never hope to accommodate the kind of scenario - the literally *moving* picture - of growing up and actually experiencing those times outlined by Tom Wolfe.

.....the Life - that *feeling* - The Life - the late 1940s early 1950s American Teenage Drive-In Life was *precisely* what it was all about - but how could you tell anybody about it?.....it was very Heaven to be the first wave of the most extraordinary kids in the history of the world - only 15, 16, 17 years old, dressed in the *haute couture* of pink Oxford shirts, sharp pants, snaky half-inch belts, fast shoes..... Postwar American Suburbs - glorious world! and the hell with the intellectual badmouthers of America's tailfin civilisation.....They couldn't know what it was like or else they had it cultivated out of them - the feeling - to be very Superkids! the world's first generation of the little devils - feeling immune, beyond calamity. One's parents remembered the sloughing common order, War & Depression - but Superkids knew only the emotional surge of the great payoff, when nothing was common any longer - The Life! A glorious place, a glorious age, I tell you! A very Neon Renaissance.....It was a fantasy world *already*, this electro-pastel world of Mum&Dad&Buddy&Sis in the suburbs. There they go, in the family car, a white Pontiac Bonneville Sedan - *the family car!* - a huge crazy god-awful-powerful fantasy creature to begin with, 327-horsepower, shaped like twenty-seven nights of lubricious luxury brougham seduction - *you're already there, in Fantasyland.....*<sup>43</sup>

And what of the world outlined by Dolly Haze's headmistress, the cruelly named Miss Pratt?

'....Dorothy Humbird is already involved in a whole system of social life which consists whether we like it or not, of hot-dog stands, corner drugstores, malts and cokes, movies, square-dancing, blanket parties on beaches, and even hair-fixing parties!....' [179]

Clearly, to draw attention to the partiality of the kind of picture Humbert offers us, and to implicitly argue that the reader of a text is being allocated a distinct vantage point from which he may look upon the perceptions and assumptions of a narrator, together with other less obviously tailored material, is to announce the presence of that most stalwart of fictional practices, irony. Such a clear irony, however, one of simple discrepancy, is, by and large, difficult to sustain, due to its utter dependency on the central figure's persistently naïve interpretation of events for the bulk of the novel: as the narrator is obliged to act or reflect during the course of the fiction, so it becomes correspondingly more and more difficult to deny him or her access to knowledge. Thus in one sense the oft-berated 'excessive' attentions Henry James bestows in his later fictions to continual and slight modifications of ignorance serve to deflect the reader's attention from not too involved issues of misinterpretation, at once complicating and 'preserving the irony - even 'in the instance of a consciousness as theoretically 'innocent,' or as James himself puts it, as "small,"<sup>44</sup> as that of Maisie Farange. Indeed, it is interesting to note that arguably the closest approximation to a fictional *tabula rasa* to appear in recent years, Kosinski's *Chauncey Gardiner*,<sup>45</sup> results in an innocence that can only be satisfactorily placed according to an inhuman, or perhaps 'extra-human', criteria, something the ending of the author's screenplay endorses even more emphatically.<sup>46</sup>

As such, we might state that the novel has for the most part come to rely on overlapping, or, more accurately, intermingling ironies: those which its public traditionally deem 'corrective' and 'external', in so far as we talk of them as 'administered' by the author; and those which we might term 'internal' and are actually employed by figures within the fiction, which we might perhaps like to regard as their own self-assertions. Thus Henry James may in one

breath call the consciousness of Miss Farange "small" (an 'external' observation), but in order to grant her some measure of distinction, in the next talk of it as "expanding"<sup>47</sup> (the 'internal' distinguishing note). The subdued ironies accessed by James' creation, however, only offer an antithesis to the pronouncements and stances of Nabokov's Humbert. The eyes of the latter for the discrepant, and his ears for the discords of everything save his Lolita are the prime sources of much of the novel's incontestable and priceless humour. Here is the Humbert of the North.

One group, jointly with the Canadians, established a weather station on Pierre Point in Melville Sound. Another group, equally misguided, collected plankton. A third studied tuberculosis in the tundra. Bert, a film photographer - an insecure fellow with whom at one time I was made to partake in a good deal of menial work (he, too, had some psychic troubles) - maintained that the big men on our team, the real leaders we never saw, were mainly engaged in checking the influence of climatic amelioration on the coats of the arctic fox.

We lived in prefabricated cabins amid a pre-Cambrian world of granite. We had heaps of supplies - the *Reader's Digest*, an ice cream maker, chemical toilets, paper caps for Christmas. My health improved wonderfully in spite of or perhaps because of all the fantastic blankness and boredom. Surrounded by such dejected vegetation as willow scrub and lichens; permeated, and, I suppose, cleansed by a whistling gale; seated on a boulder under a completely translucent sky (through which, however, nothing of importance showed), I felt curiously aloof from my own self. No temptations maddened me. The plump glossy little Eskimo girls with their fish smell, hideous raven hair and guinea pig faces, evoked even less desire in me than Dr. Johnson [the camp nutritionist] had. Nymphets do not occur in polar regions. [35]

Humbert's jibes at the appendages of a consumer society which his expeditionary force is obliged to trail after it are just as cutting as the "whistling gale" to which its members are also subjected. It is an acuity that can be felt not only in Humbert's incorporation of the ice cream maker into their list of stores (truly the epitomé of obsolescence in such a context), but also in the all too wide-eyed introduction it receives ("We had heaps of supplies").

However, to restrict our reading of such an excerpt according to any one particular set of precepts - the most immediately attractive is perhaps that of a European's denigration of American materialism, and, by implication, his promotion of the sophisticated cultural heritage from which he is derived - although an attractive proposition, is to miss a rather more blatant point, its operations on a surface level.

Indeed, the more attentively one looks, the more one realises that the entire piece functions as a number of highly polished linguistic surfaces, which seem at times to be striving to shed its main body of denotative meaning. Whether it take the form of the literary allusion that denies "Pierre Point" a place in the atlas, or the elaborate quasi-scientific periphrasis on the pelt of the arctic fox, we confront a virtuoso piece of circumlocution which may say something about the extent of Humbert's disdain, but in terms of imparting 'hard' information, communicates virtually nothing. Instead, the lines speak of an attention lavished on the sounds and placings of words (that "dejected vegetation") and the balancing of internal echoes within the sentence (the "prefabricated" and the "pre-Cambrian", the "blankness" and the "boredom"). This is what comes to matter, more so than the determination of an easily assimilated 'sense': that second group in the tundra *had* to investigate tuberculosis, the words made it so. It is, in a sense, something of a correlative to Humbert's conception of the self; as he stands "aloof" from that, so too does the language he employs endeavour to stand apart, the words to sound only to each other. Humbert's renowned lament, that he has "only words to play with" [34], may come close to a truism, but these words are distinct entities, *playthings*. This is the full consequence of Humbert's irony: everything is at once there and yet splintered. The reader heeds the patterns and structures which remain undeniably operative, and very carefully managed at that, but the

words still stand out as palpable, almost as bulwarks to stave off a "fantastic blankness" that stretches far beyond the boundaries of the Arctic Circle. How else, for example, can we make anything of a profile like that of "Bert" - a figure who performs a task that Humbert repeatedly alludes to ("I could have filmed her!"<sup>48</sup> [233]), who mirrors his penchant for instituting and uncovering linguistic disguise, and not only shares his "psychic troubles" but even part of his name ("Come on, how often exactly, Bert?" [194]).

The alacrity with which *Lolita's* narrator falls back on reserves of irony can thus be seen to make for a considerably more comprehensive charge than any easy and undemanding laughter generated at the satirical expense of external agencies like 'the American way of life.' For what is ultimately most unsettling about Humbert's irony is that it thrives as more than a protective and defensive mechanism, or even a designation as some form of pre-emptive strike, because its encroachments unerringly come full circle ("I felt curiously aloof from my own self"). In the end the irony is always targetted on himself, even at those moments when we would expect him to be most aware of others.

Some time passed, nothing changed, and I decided I might risk getting a little closer to that lovely and maddening glimmer; but hardly had I moved into its warm purlieus than her breathing was suspended, and I had the odious feeling that little Dolores was wide awake and would explode in screams if I touched her with any part of my wretchedness. Please, reader: no matter your exasperation with the tender-hearted, morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect hero of my book, do not skip these essential pages! Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me; try to discern the doe in me, trembling in the forest of my own iniquity; let's even smile a little. After all, there is no harm in smiling. For instance (I almost wrote "frin-stance"), I had no place to rest my head, and a fit of heartburn (they call those fries "French," *grand Dieu!*) was added to my discomfort. [131]

Now whether here; where the game is being played with the rarefied sensibility we attach to the poet (the reapplication of the Renaissance figure of the doe or hind to the lover rather than the mistress constitutes a particularly deft touch), or elsewhere; where the irony works on an equally extreme mode of vision, that of Humbert's impression, part savage, part ridiculous, of disinterested observation (the "wretchedness" that carries through into the self-loathing procession of apes and spiders headed by a "pentapod monster" [286]), it is our sense of the effort invested which takes precedence over its intended effect.

To some extent, of course, the desired result has been secured,<sup>49</sup> for Humbert's maneuverings undoubtedly do divert our attention from his basic status, indeed, his basest status, that of criminal defendant. However, they do so at the cost of intensifying the reader's concentration on the fevered workings of the self that has deemed it necessary to devise such elaborate and extensive tactics. The care bestowed on a phrase that may go by barely registered by the reader - "into its warm purlieus", for example, which not only reanimates the "enchanted hunter" metaphor, but also draws on its more poetic, figurative meaning, 'to pursue illicit love' - denotes astonishing, if not preposterous, pains being taken over what is, after all, a piece of patent self-mockery. Increasingly, Humbert appears as much possessed by, as possessor of, a mode of apprehension riddled with an inordinate degree of self-consciousness, and, as we turn the pages, the continual shuttling between first and third person voices looks less and less a well-chosen technical device, and more and more an involuntary and inevitable development.

Instead of reflecting on the combination of objectivity, sensitivity and ease within literary conventions we might expect of the poet, the reader encounters the hypertrophic, the overwrought in its fullest sense - in both

prose and person - the neurosis and self-regard of the would-be poet. And inevitably, such a self-communing mind cannot but help consider that particular option, too, as just one more amongst *all* those possible poses which it wishes to retain.

At first I planned to take a degree in psychiatry as many *manqué* talents do; but I was even more *manqué* than that; a peculiar exhaustion, I am so oppressed, doctor, set in; and I switched to English literature, where so any frustrated poets end as pipe-smoking teachers in tweeds. [17]

Humbert's self-absorption then determines his alliance, not, as he would like, with an order of poets, but a somewhat more restless brotherhood whose sufferings have been quite extensively documented.

'I weigh and analyse my own passions and actions with stern curiosity, but without participation. Within me there are two persons: one of them lives in the full sense of the word, the other cogitates and judges him.....'<sup>50</sup>

Nearly always, so as to live at peace with ourselves, we disguise our own impotence and weakness as calculation and policy; it is our way of placating that half of our being which is in a sense the spectator of the other.<sup>51</sup>

A malady, the cause of which  
'tis high time were discovered,  
similar to the English "spleen" -  
in short, the Russian "chondria" -  
possessed him by degrees.  
.....  
Apostate from the turbulent delights,  
Onegin locked himself indoors;  
yawning, took up a pen;  
wanted to write; but persevering toil  
to him was loathsome: nothing  
from his pen issued, and he did not get  
into the cocky guild of people  
on whom I pass no judgement - for the reason  
that I belong to them<sup>52</sup>

I have grown much too used to an outside view of myself, to being both painter and model, so no wonder my style is denied the blessed grace of spontaneity.<sup>53</sup>



Although I could never get used to the constant state of anxiety in which the guilty, the great, the tender-hearted live, I felt I was doing my best in the ways of mimicry. As I lay on my narrow studio bed after a session of adoration and despair in Lolita's cold bedroom, I used to review the concluded day by checking my own image as it prowled rather than passed before the mind's red eye. I watched dark-and-hand-some, not un-celtic, probably high-church, possibly very high-church, Dr. Humbert see his daughter off to school. I watched him greet with his slow smile and pleasantly arched thick black ad-eyebrows....Weekends, wearing a well-tailored overcoat and brown gloves, Professor H. might be seen with his daughter....Seen on weekdays....Raising a cold eye from book to clock... ....Walking across the cold campus....Slowly pushing my little pram through the labyrinth of the supermarket... ....Shovelling the snow in my shirt-sleeves.....

[190-191]

"Are you bothered by Romantic Associations?" [84]

One might do well at this juncture to point out that this particular lineage is derived not so much from critical pronouncements, exemplified in John Hollander's synopsis of *Lolita* as "the record of Mr Nabokov's love affair with the romantic novel,"<sup>54</sup> but from the clarification it receives in another work issued under Nabokov's name in the same year as *Lolita*. This, and the source of the first of the extracts listed above, is the edition of Lermontov's *A Hero of our Time* he produced in collaboration with his son Dmitri in 1958, a work whose structural intricacies you might recall as offering an interesting comparison to the patterns that emerge in *Phin*. In his Foreword, Nabokov provides an invaluable programmatic schema of the antecedents of the central figure of Lermontov's tales.

We should not take, as seriously as most Russian commentators, Lermontov's statement in his Introduction (a stylised piece of make-believe in its own right) that Pechorin's portrait is "composed of all the vices of our generation". Actually, the bored and bizarre hero is a product of several generations, some of them non-Russian; he is the fictional descendant of a number of fictional self-analysts, beginning with Saint-Preux (the lover of Julie d'Étange in Rousseau's *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, 1761) and Werther (the admirer of

Charlotte S---- in Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, known to Russians mainly in French versions such as that by Sévelinges, 1804), going through Chateaubriand's *René* (1802), Constant's *Adolphe* (1815), and the heroes of Byron's long poems (especially *The Giaour*, 1813, and *The Corsair*, 1814, known to Russians in Pichot's French prose versions from 1820 on), and ending with Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (1825-32) and with various more ephemeral products of the French novelists of the first half of the century (Nodier, Balzac etc.)<sup>55</sup>

Equally, although we are about to pay some attention to a consideration of *Lolita* in relation to just such Romantic fiction, especially the more rigorously ironic pieces from which I have quoted, the reader should by no means regard such an approach as wholly binding (or, as Nabokov more engagingly puts it, "seriously"). As the approaches we have already discussed, the 'pornographic' and the 'poetic', have been unable to expose the text as a whole to view, but nonetheless proved able to cast certain facets of the work into sharper relief (and without, as one would expect, either of the two purviews emerging as mutually exclusive); so too with the aspect we might accredit to the "self-analyst". To do otherwise is to allow Humbert Humbert to succeed to the truly inspired title concocted for Pechorin, "a portrait composed of all the vices of our generation in the fullness of their development." (The "stylised piece of make-believe" of *Lolita's* Foreword, largely because of the more wayward tonal shifts it employs, can only talk of figures who "warn us of dangerous trends [and] point out potent evils" [7-8].)

Now, as we can see from the extracts selected, all these fictions pivot around the possessor of an extensive, and largely debilitating, self-consciousness. How much, for example, of this description derived from the Notes to *Eugene Onegin* could we apply directly to Humbert Humbert?

In an epistolary afterword to his novel, Constant describes *Adolphe* as blending egotism and sensibility,

and as foreseeing evil but retreating in despair when the advance of evil is imminent. His is a checkered nature, now knight, now cad. From sobs of devotion he passes to fits of infantile cruelty, and then again dissolves in saltless tears. Whatever gifts he is supposed to possess, these are betrayed and abolished, in the course of his pursuing this or that whim and of letting himself be driven by forces that are but vibrations of his own irritable temper. "*On change de situation, mais.....comme on ne se corrige pas en se déplaçant, l'on se trouve seulement avoir ajouté des remords aux regrets et des fautes aux souffrances.*"<sup>56</sup>

Both Humbert's mental, and indeed geographical, journeyings can thus be clearly seen to be in the peripatetic and paroxysmic tradition of such figures - a point neatly signalled by the make of the car in which he roams "the crazy quilt of forty-eight states" [158], a "Dream Blue Melmoth" [229, and see Appel's succinct gloss]. Where Nabokov's two works mark the most literal of advances on the concerns that haunt the correspondingly "checkered" figures of these nineteenth-century narratives, however, is in taking the notion of a disassociation of self and jacking it up to an even higher pitch. Such a development is perhaps most chillingly enacted for us in *Despair*, a novel whose leading figure, Hermann Karlovich, is described as "a pure artist of romance" - by himself of course.<sup>57</sup>

.....I had noticed lately, with gratitude to nature and a thrill of surprise, that the violence and sweetness of my nightly joys were being raised to an exquisite vertex owing to a certain aberration which, I understand, is not as uncommon as I thought at first among high-strung men in their middle thirties. I am referring to a well-known kind of 'dissociation.' With me it started in fragmentary fashion a few months before my trip to Prague. For example, I would be in bed with Lydia, winding up the brief series of preparatory caresses she was supposed to be entitled to, when all at once I would become aware that imp Split had taken over. My face was buried in the folds of her neck, her legs had started to clamp me, the ashtray toppled off the bed table, the universe followed - but at the same time, incomprehensibly and delightfully, I was standing naked in the middle of the room, one hand resting on the back of the chair where she had left her stockings and panties. The sensation of being in two places at once gave me an extraordinary kick; but this was nothing compared to later developments....The next phase came when I realized that the greater the interval

. between my two selves the more I was ecstasied; therefore I used to sit every night a few inches farther from the bed, and soon the back legs of my chair reached the threshold of the open door. Eventually, I found myself sitting in the parlour - while making love in the bedroom. It was not enough.....Alas, one April night, with the harps of rain aphrodisiacally burbling in the orchestra, as I was sitting at my maximum distance of fifteen rows of seats and looking forward to an especially good show - which, indeed, had already started, with my acting self in colossal form and most inventive - from the distant bed, where I thought I was, came Lydia's yawn and voice stupidly saying that if I were not yet coming to bed, I might bring the red book she had left in the parlour.<sup>58</sup>

The schizoid workings of Hermann's mind lead on to breakdown, the transference of one of "Split's" personalities on to another figure within the novel (the hapless Felix), and murder in the best tradition of the *Doppelgänger* tale (although in point of fact there is none, save in Hermann's consciousness<sup>59</sup>). This too constitutes another design which crops up amongst *Lolita's* damasks (the key word?), most notably in Humbert's endeavours to discover the identity of Clare Quilty, "to trace the fugitive.....to destroy my brother." [249]

Although *Despair* does use other literary motifs (there is an amusing digression on the epistolary novel, for example,<sup>60</sup> and the insurance fraud at its centre is a staple of the thriller), for the most part, its strengths lie in the manner it battens on the issue of self-regard and pushes that to its most extreme form of fictional accommodation, the *Doppelgänger* tale, in order to prove something of a cuckoo in that particular nest. In contrast, *Lolita* relies on a considerably more restricted use of the device of the double than many critics would have us believe.<sup>61</sup> For the bulk of the novel, Nabokov appears to be content to avail himself of those Romantic pieces of self-examination that stop short of such an overt collapse of the self. Thus, *Lolita* is largely free from the excursions into the fantastic or the hysterical which mark the deployment of the theme of the double in the work of writers

such as Poe and Dostoevski (after all, we are dealing with a narrator who expresses some awareness of those tendencies<sup>62</sup>), and is perhaps more fruitfully associated with the more restrained self-analytic mode adopted in the best of the works to feature in Nabokov's list; those by Chateaubriand, Pushkin, Constant, and Lermontov.

Now, aside from their concern with the wranglings of the solitary consciousness, what all four of these works share is a very distinct economy; not just the fact that none of them stretch over two hundred pages, but the manner in which they all present the sort of highly distilled sentiment and expression that is closer to the poetic than the straightforward cataloguing of social experience which has come to dominate our conception of the novel. Pushkin's verse novel manifestly provides the most obvious support for such a claim, but Nabokov's recorded comments on the other three texts all point in a direction away from the prosaic to something altogether more resonant. Thus *Adolphe* is talked of as "a masterpiece of artistic saturation", and "a purely psychological romance;"<sup>63</sup> *René* is praised for its "*charme velouté*,"<sup>64</sup> and Lermontov's "five stories grow, revolve, reveal, and mask their contours, turn away and reappear in a new attitude or light like five mountain peaks attending a traveller along the meanders of a Caucasian canyon road."<sup>65</sup> Although Nabokov's work is substantially longer than any of these pieces, and as we shall examine later, incorporates a 'prosaic' element - a distinct historical grounding - its narrator shares with such figures something of that "checkered nature"<sup>66</sup> which fluctuates between a longing for self-abasement and an impulse for lyrical surrender, and that ironic insight into personal insufficiencies which countermands a full realisation of self.

Consequently, Humbert's poetic yearnings<sup>67</sup> strive repeatedly with the harsher, though still stylised, voice which informs us, "I am no poet. I am only a very conscientious recorder." [74]

.....bending towards her warm upturned russet face  
sombre Humbert pressed his mouth to her fluttering  
eyelid. She laughed and brushed past me out of the  
room. My heart seemed everywhere at once. Never in my  
life - not even when fondling my child love in France -  
never -

Night. Never have I experienced such agony. I  
would like to describe her face, her ways - and I can-  
not, because my own desire for her blinds me when she  
is near. I am not used to being with nymphets, damn  
it. If I close my eyes I see but an immobilized frac-  
tion of her, a cinematographic still, a sudden smooth  
nether loveliness, as with one knee up under her tartan  
skirt she sits tying her shoe. 'Dolores Haze, *ne montrez pas vos zhambes*' (this is her mother who thinks she  
knows French).

A poet à *mes heures*, I composed a madrigal to the  
soot-black lashes of her pale-grey vacant eyes, to the  
five asymmetrical freckles of her bobbed nose, to the  
blonde down of her brown limbs; but I tore it up and  
cannot recall it today. Only in the tritest of terms  
(diary resumed) can I describe Lo's features: I might  
say her hair is auburn, and her lips as red as licked  
red candy, the lower one prettily plump - oh, that I  
were a lady writer who could have her pose naked in a  
naked light! But instead I am lanky, big-boned, wooly-  
chested Humbert Humbert, with thick black eyebrows and  
a queer accent, and a cesspoolful of rotting monsters  
behind his slow boyish smile. [46]

On the one hand, there are the short lines, the repetition ("Never....never  
....Never"), and rising rhythms ("a sudden smooth nether loveliness") which  
speak of desire, rapture, and a world out of time ("My heart seemed everywhere  
at once"): on the other, there is the exact attention to the present we observe  
in the astringent report on Charlotte's diction; whilst somewhere in between  
are admissions - "my own desire for her blinds me", the presence of "a cess-  
poolful of rotting monsters" - which seek to forestall the objections of his  
audience. Ultimately, Humbert's plea does not leave the reader blind as to his  
disguises, and, even more importantly, we become aware that the greater the  
pains he takes to persuade us, the greater the pain he seeks to hide.

Such are the vacillations, what Humbert later outlines with characteristic ambiguity as "the constant state of anxiety in which the guilty, the great, the tender-hearted live" [190], which we also confront in *Adolphe*. Although a broad outline of the French text would appear to act almost as a mirror image of the later novel (exactly reversing the theme of the efforts of an older man to hold a young girl, in favour of the treatment of a younger man's endeavours to free himself of an elder mistress), and there is certainly precious little of *Lolita's* humour to be found on any of Constant's pages, its more restricted scope does offer an interesting slant on a number of postures adopted by Nabokov's narrator "deep in my elected paradise - a paradise whose skies were the colour of hell-flames - but still a paradise" [168].

In particular, we might compare an extract below with Humbert's guise of tremulous lover on [131] (see my 125-126). Other attitudes the figures both strike include that of the threatened figure seeking refuge - "I often felt we lived in a lighted house of glass, and that any moment some thin-lipped parchment face would peer through a carelessly unshaded window to obtain a free glimpse of things that the most jaded *voyeur* would have paid a small fortune to watch" [182]. (This accounts for Humbert's understandable "desire to get myself *casé*, to attach myself to some patterned surface which my stripes could blend with" [177].) And there is also the rôle of self-proclaimed victim - "The passion I had developed for that nymphet....would have certainly landed me again in a sanatorium, had not the devil realised that I was to be granted some relief if he wanted me as a plaything for some time longer" [58] - most evident in Humbert's struggles in the second part of the book "to break some pattern of fate in which I obscurely felt myself being enmeshed" [217]. The excerpt from *Adolphe's* solo performance - like Humbert's, also a one-man show, now follows.

When these times of insane despair have at last gone by and the moment comes for seeing you again I set out for your house trembling and afraid that all the passers-by are guessing my innermost feelings. I stop, walk slowly, put off the moment of bliss, bliss which is constantly being threatened and which I always think I am on the point of losing. For it is an imperfect and checkered happiness, and probably every minute of the day something is working against it: either malignant events, the eyes of jealous onlookers, purely arbitrary caprices of fate or your own will! When I reach your door and open it I am seized by a fresh panic and steal forward like a criminal, begging mercy of everything I meet as though each inanimate object were hostile and begrudged me the moment of felicity that is still to be enjoyed. I am scared by the least sound, and the slightest movement terrifies me; the very sound of my own footsteps makes me recoil. Even when I am within reach of you I still dread some obstacle which might suddenly thrust itself between you and me. At last I see you, see you again and breathe again, I contemplate you, I stand like a fugitive who has set forth in some place of sanctuary which will protect him from death. But even then, when my whole being leaps towards you, when I sorely need rest after so many tribulations, need to lay my head in your lap and let my tears flow freely, I have to control myself sternly - even with you I have to live a life of strain with never a moment of abandon when I can let my feelings go!<sup>ee</sup>

Such edgy intimations of movement towards the consideration of an other and the entrusting of one's self to a *respected* custodian, only for them to abruptly come up against the narrator's consciousness of his lack of self-worth (wherein lies the precise source of those fabricated self-presentations and rhetorical postures) account for the peculiarly wearing nature of *Adolphe*, its tendency to abrade as much as upbraid its readers. Nabokov's novel rarely rubs itself as raw as this, principally because the range it covers is far wider, but this narratorial consciousness of the self as a part player ("Main character: Humbert the Hummer" [59]) is by no means unknown in *Lolita*.

I happened to glimpse from the bathroom, through a chance combination of mirror aslant and door ajar, a look on her face.....that look I cannot exactly describe...an expression of helplessness so perfect that it seemed to grade into one of rather comfortable inanity just because this was the very limit of injustice and frustration - and every limit presupposes something beyond it - hence the neutral illumination. And when you bear in mind that these were the raised



eyebrows and parted lips of a child, you may better appreciate what depths of calculated carnality, what reflected despair, restrained me from falling at her dear feet and dissolving in human tears, and sacrificing my jealousy to whatever pleasure Lolita might hope to derive from mixing with dirty and dangerous children in an outside world that was real to her.

[285-286]

Humbert's self-insights in such an extract are clearly rooted in considerations made from a quite marked position of strength in relation to a beloved (his social and material hold over Dolores Haze is something we can never really forget), whereas Adolphe's ruminations on his entanglement with Ellenore seem to arise from a weakness in the face of the beloved (though in terms of social standing he too occupies a far more advantageous position than his partner). Both, however, are alike in so far as both can be seen 'at heart' as strategies that are only half admitted as such; for neither figure, though offering soundings of their own falsity of considerable acuity and depth, suffers such pointed insights to correct the course of self-impositions they compulsively enact. Thus.

And there were times when I knew how you felt, and it was hell to know it, my little one. Lolita girl, brave Dolly Schiller.

I recall certain moments, let us call them icebergs in paradise, when after having had my fill of her - after fabulous, insane exertions that left me limp and azure-barred - I would gather her in my arms with, at last, a mute moan of human tenderness (her skin glistening in the neon light coming from the paved court through the slits in the blind, her soot-black lashes matted, her grave grey eyes more vacant than ever - for all the world a little patient still in the confusion of a drug after a major operation) - and the tenderness would deepen to shame and despair, and I would lull and rock my lone light Lolita in my marble arms, and moan in her warm hair, and caress her at random and mutely ask her blessing, and at the peak of this human agonised selfless tenderness (with my soul actually hanging around her naked body and ready to repent), all at once, ironically, horribly, lust would swell again - and 'oh, no,' Lolita would say with a sigh to heaven, and the next moment the tenderness and the azure - all would be shattered.

[286-287]

While I was away I wrote regularly to Ellenore. I was torn between fear that my letters might give her pain and desire to describe only the emotions I was feeling. I would have liked her to see through me, but see through me without being hurt, and so I was pleased with myself when I had managed to substitute for the word love the terms affection, friendship or devotion. But then I would suddenly visualise poor Ellenore, sad and lonely with nothing to console her except my letters, and after two coldly thought-out pages would hurriedly add a few impassioned or tender sentences to deceive her afresh. In this way without saying enough to satisfy her I always said enough to mislead her. What a strange kind of deceit whose very success turned against me, prolonged my agony and was altogether unendurable!<sup>69</sup>

Now, although both pieces express shame and guilt at the plight in which their narrators find themselves and deem so insupportable - one talks of a world that is "shattered", whilst the other bemoans a situation as "unendurable" - the salient points remain that these conditions do persist, and, what is more, are confirmed as of their own making. Moreover, whilst it is customary to point to a propensity towards self-delusion as a major driving force behind ironic Romantic narratives, it is interesting to note that what the central consciousnesses here might be said to have in common is rather the inability to sustain such projections, to fully commit themselves to the analogous roles of poet and lover. Adolphe's irresolutions have been increasingly well charted in recent years, but Humbert's self-depreciation and his fixed attention to the creation and modification of 'his' Lolita combine to conceal an internal conflict which only occasionally peeks out directly at the reader from that surprisingly secure "tangle of thorns" [11]. This rare sighting can be found in Part one, chapter fifteen:

I knew that I had fallen in love with Lolita forever; but I also knew she would not be forever Lolita.  
[67]

Such a statement tells of far more than the mere installation of Time as the opponent of the 'poet' (the next line is "She would be thirteen on January 1"), it also fixes a dilemma which the reader is usually obliged to reconstruct from one or two momentarily resolved positions; either that of the submissive Lolita of Humbert's fancy; or the altogether more boisterous and earthbound creature he dedicates his irony to overcoming. The ferocity of the latter, which, you will recall, cuts through even Arctic wastes, may perhaps be best pictured as the equally extreme counterpart to Humbert's more approbative leanings. Although it operates most consistently against its supposed exponent, the irony is at perhaps its most wantonly vicious in a paragraph which documents representations Humbert fails to make; not towards Lolita, but towards his first wife, Valeria, which amount to complete dismissal:

After a brief ceremony at the *mairie*, I took her to the new apartment I had rented and, somewhat to her surprise, had her wear, before I touched her, a girl's plain nightshirt that I had managed to filch from the linen closet of an orphanage. I derived some fun from that nuptial night and had the idiot in hysterics by sunrise. But reality soon asserted itself. The bleached curl revealed its melanic root; the down turned to prickles on a shaved skin; the mobile moist mouth, no matter how I stuffed it with love, disclosed ignominiously its resemblance to the corresponding part in a treasured portrait of her toadlike dead mama; and presently, instead of a pale little gutter girl, Humbert Humbert had on his hands a large, puffy, short-legged, big-breasted and practically brainless *baba*.

[28]

The manner in which Humbert brings language to bear upon detailed specifics (look at the weight placed on "melanic root"), as if to somehow grind the material down, gives the reader a marked indication that this purported reassertion of "reality" is just as much a partisan experience as the more obviously indulgent treatments of Dolores Haze that follow it. Nabokov's text, however, does not content itself with repeated appeals to the reader's ability

to discern the enforced application of false images, whether they comprise the grotesquerie here or the softer shaping of a Lolita. These, though flattering, are apt to be subject to a law of diminishing returns, and are crucially supplemented in *Lolita* by delicate and varying registrations of the narrator's culpability in such instances. Thus the disgruntled complaint which surfaces after Humbert's character assassination of Valeria and heralds his version of the collapse of this first marriage, betrays equally an awareness and a muted acknowledgement of the purport of such inflictions.

During the last few weeks I had kept noticing that Valeria was not her usual self; had acquired a queer restlessness; even showed something like irritation at times, which was quite out of keeping with the stock character she was supposed to impersonate. [29]

And again, as the extensive roll-call of titles for *Lolita* which introduce Humbert's account betokens the inevitable defeat of his attempts to bind her to a single definition by their very profusion (and that critical absence); so does the verb "suppose" selected here indicate some measure of consciousness that this endeavour too is pre-ordained to failure. Moreover, in his dealings with his second wife, Charlotte Haze, he provides further evidence of an even fuller understanding of the force and prevalence of such wishes to define another's limits, by conceiving himself to be on the receiving end of attentions he knows to be misplaced.

Bland American Charlotte frightened me. My light-hearted dream of controlling her through her passion for me was all wrong. *I dared not do anything to spoil the image of me she had set up to adore.....* To break Charlotte's will, I would have to break her heart. If I broke her heart, her image of me would break too. [85-86. My italics]

For Humbert to construe his relationship with Charlotte along such lines clearly marks him capable of distinguishing certain glaring parallels with the restrictive treatment he himself imposes upon Dolores Haze, and also discloses an inconsistency of narrative voice which attracts (the reader who asks himself, 'After all, how consistent is my behaviour?'), just as much as it repels. As such, although we might well comment that the emergence of even these slightest of hints as to a possible reassessment on Humbert's part of his bearings towards others is wholly determined by the emotional stress he feels himself to be under - with respect to the three women in his life then, such twinges of 'conscience' as they are have arisen in turn from; Lolita's removal to summer camp; Valeria's imminent departure from her marriage; and Humbert's frantic search for a means of securing Charlotte's imminent departure - this fractured vision, nonetheless, should be recognised as extensively informing the piece as a whole.

And, in a manner characteristic of Nabokov's telling deployment of the conventional poses and notions available to would-be poets, it should come as no surprise that the most obvious and most traditionally poetic treatment, a visual trope, is certainly not neglected as a means of impressing upon us this sense of the narrator's "monstrously twofold" [20] world. Indeed, from the outset, optical figures are used to distinguish the nymphet from the norm.

It is a question of focal adjustment, of a certain distance that the inner eye thrills to surmount, and a certain contrast that the mind perceives with a gasp of perverse delight.....My world was split. I was aware of not one but two sexes, neither of which was mine; both would be termed female by the anatomist. But to me, through the prism of my senses, 'they were as different as mist and mast.' [19-20]

"Mist" in fact permanently affects Humbert's vision of his now suggestively surnamed charge, whilst his "focal adjustments" ironically function only to blur and elide.<sup>70</sup> The most blatant demonstration of such workings is the momentarily held "lighted image" of a nymphet which fades to altogether drabber actuality, "an obese partly clad man reading the paper." [266] This repeat performance<sup>71</sup>, later described by Humbert as "the race between my fancy and nature's reality" [266], is the struggle enacted repeatedly throughout the novel as a whole, to impose a private image, not so much *upon* vulgar actuality as *over* it. If the eyes ever do have it in this book, it is by virtue of a squint that seeks to overcome sights it finds incompatible with the maintenance of its personal vision; of seeing two, and by an effort of will enforcing one dominant image (again, that "creation, another fanciful Lolita - perhaps more real than Lolita; *overlapping, encasing her*" [My italics. 64]). And as such ferocious concentration and scrutiny is difficult to maintain, the mundane will of course keep disrupting it, as evinced during this bout of ill-temper.

She sat right in the focus of my incandescent anger.  
The fog of all lust had been swept away leaving nothing  
but this dreadful lucidity. Oh, she had changed! Her  
complexion was that of any vulgar untidy highschool  
girl who applies shared cosmetics to an unwashed  
face..... [206]

Humbert pays phenomenal attention to Dolores Haze: "She pressed as usual her books to her chest while speaking or listening, and her feet gestured all the time: she would stand on her left instep with her right toe, remove it backward, cross her feet, rock slightly, sketch a few steps, and then start the whole series all over again" [189]. In the light of passages such as this, a reading of the book as some form of catalogue or report on the nymphet genus

is certainly not out of the question.<sup>72</sup> But, as for the Renaissance sonneteer, the intense particularity of his observations is one method of blanking out the everyday and making over a world ("this Lolita....was to *eclipse* completely her prototype" [My italics. 42]). As with the example just cited, however, many of the most effective re-creations, typically cast as throwaway asides, are placed *in time*.

.....I might consider the question whether a girl of fourteen can don her first 'formal' (a kind of gown<sup>73</sup> that makes thin-armed teenagers look like flamingoes).  
[188]

We have already seen the literal resistance of the American landscape to its relegation to the status of congenial backdrop, and it certainly features among the more persistent scuttlerers of the narrator's pretensions towards the sanctified ground of a poetic/pornographic domain (Its 'dragons' do bite!<sup>74</sup>). Nonetheless, observations like the one cited above, however purportedly involuntary, do outline a distinctive terrain which is of considerable import to the novel's success - and which has led to at least one historian proclaiming the work "probably the most satisfying fictional picture of the physical, and to some extent the moral, aspects of postwar America."<sup>75</sup>

"I am only a very conscientious recorder." [74]

Warren French, in his introductory piece to a collection of literary essays on the Fifties, heralded Nabokov as "The man coming even closer than Bellow to serving as a literary emblem for the period...[a position]...consolidated with his scandalous, panoramic view of American life, *Lolita*."<sup>76</sup> It is an indication

of the difficulty of evaluating the period as a whole that this comment should be found in a piece titled 'The Age of Salinger'!

And, as far and away its author's most popular success, one niche in which *Lolita* can be most readily placed is on the fictional 'bestseller' lists of the time.

Thus

*Lolita's first appearance in the New York Times' Bestseller lists.*<sup>77</sup>

(30th August 1958)

1. *Anatomy of a Murder*, Robert Traver [32].
2. *The Enemy Camp*, Jerome Weidman [9].
3. *Ice Palace*, Edna Ferber [23].
4. *The Image Makers*, Bernard V. Dryer [9].
5. *The Time of The Dragons*, Mrs. Ebert-Rotholz [8].
6. *The King Must Die*, Mary Renault [6].
7. *The Winthrop Woman*, Anya Seton [26].
8. *Strangers When We Meet*, Evan Hunter [11].
9. *Around The World With Auntie Mame*, Patrick Dennis [1].
10. *Seidman and Son*, Elick Moll [12].
11. *The Dud Avocado*, Elaine Dundy [3].
12. *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov [1].
13. *The Northern Light*, A. J. Cronin [12].
14. *The Greengage Summer*, Rumer Godden [21].
15. *Chez Pavan*, Richard Llewellyn [2].
16. *The Portuguese Escape*, Ann Bridge [4].



Week in which *Lolita* first headed the *New York Times*' bestseller lists (28th September, 1958)

1. *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov [5].
2. *Anatomy of a Murder*, Robert Traver [37].
3. *Around The World With Auntie Mame*, Patrick Dennis [5].
4. *The Enemy Camp*, Jerome Weidman [13].
5. *The King Must Die*, Mary Renault [10].
6. *Dr. Zhivago*, Boris Pasternak [1].
7. *The Image Makers*, Bernard V. Dryer [13].
8. *The Best of Everything*, Rona Jaffe [2].
9. *Ice Palace*, Edna Ferber [27].
10. *The Time of The Dragons*, Mrs. Ebert-Rotholz [12].
11. *The Once and Future King*, T. H. White [3].
12. *Strangers When We Meet*, Evan Hunter [15].
13. *Chez Pavan*, Richard Llewellyn [6].
14. *Seidman and Son*, Elick Moll [16].
15. *The Winthrop Woman*, Anya Seton [30].
16. *The Bramble Bush*, Charles Morgendahl [2].

Week in which *Lolita* completed a year in the *New York Times*' bestseller lists (23rd August, 1959)

1. *Exodus*, Leon Uris [46].
2. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, D. H. Lawrence [15].
3. *The Ugly American*, William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick [44].
4. *Dear and Glorious Physician*, Taylor Caldwell [21].
5. *Dr. Zhivago*, Boris Pasternak [48].
6. *Celia Garth*, Gwen Bristow [14].
7. *The Tents of Wickedness*, Peter De Vries [3].
8. *California Street*, Niven Busch [9].
9. *Advise and Consent*, Allen Drury [2].
10. *Mrs 'Arris Goes to Paris*, Paul Gallico [35].
11. *The Light Infantry Ball*, Hamilton Basso [10].
12. *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov [52].
13. *The Young Titan*, F. Van Wyck Mason [12].
14. *The Chinese Box*, Katherine Wigmore Eyre [14].
15. *The Art of Llewellyn Jones*, Paul Hyde Bonner [4].
16. *Nine Coaches Waiting*, Mary Stewart [26].

(The figures in parentheses represent the number of weeks the book has featured on the list.)

We shall look more closely at the issue of the book's accuracy as a social representation later, but by the time of its publication - it was begun in 1949, concluded in 1954, and it came out in America in the Autumn of 1958, three years after its initial publication in Paris - *Lolita* could be sited quite amenable within at least one distinct current of American letters of the period. This is the first wave of sociology best-sellers (Reisman's *The Lonely Crowd* [1950]; Wright Mills's *White Collar* [1951]; Valentine's *Age of Conformity* [1954] and Whyte's *The Organisation Man* [1956]): all of whom exhibited concern over the interaction of suburban man and the mass-media world and worried over the frictions and infringements upon one's sense of self, aggravated by the rapid material growth and encroachments of consumer culture. Their considerable success with a general, as opposed to a specialist, audience gives evidence of the renewed resurgence of a perennial American concern. Indeed, so familiar a topic had it become by December 1958, that, with *Lolita* comfortably settled in second place in the bestseller lists, the Christmas issue of *Reader's Digest* even carried its own discussion of the problem, under a heading which would have surely delighted Humbert as one of its select group of Arctic readers [see 35]: 'The Danger of Being Too Well Adjusted.'

Similarly, if we return to some of Nabokov's fellow authors in the *New York Times*' fiction lists, then we can also observe similar concerns being expressed within their pages, ranging equally across those both 'high' and 'low' of brow.

If the domestic sales of books like *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *The Ugly American* appear to point to the existence of some form of climate for

self-castigation, such a hypothesis gains further credence should we glance at their contemporaries which do not treat such matters head on. It certainly seems the case that even the most cautious and conservative fictions of the period could not do without their own gesture in that particular direction.

Dock Street, which he had first remembered in the early days of the Model T Ford, was hideously crowded with arrogant, rainbow-hued cars lining each kerb of the old business thoroughfare. The trolley cars that had operated when he had first known the town had disappeared. Except for the Dock Street Savings Bank, the façades of the shops along the streets had all been altered in an aggressive way that reminded him of television make-up on the faces of certain superannuated actresses. The new plastic façades on Dock Street, were as blatant as the cars when the May sunlight struck them, justifying the remark, which he had heard somewhere, that we were living in a jukebox civilisation. In fact, all of Dock Street seemed to be dancing that morning to a modern jukebox record, luxuriating in its materialism and in the pseudo-sophisticated displays in its shop windows. In the show business one had necessarily to develop an eye for change, but he was forced to admit that the rising tide of new gadgets for sale on the old street was beginning to confuse him. All you could perceive was that everything was on the verge of change, which would eventually be reflected in every facet of life and thought. He wished to goodness that he could gauge the trend, which was vaguely reminiscent, of course, of the upsurge of 1929, but no trend was ever identical with another.<sup>78</sup>

She ['Bridie Ballantyne'] knew and understood about some of those men, scarcely more than boys - surrounded by thousands at close quarters at Morgernstern or Kinkaid Air Bases, who knew loneliness such as only a mechanised society can produce. On leave they washed, shaved, dressed with extra care; boots were shined, uniform brushed. They lounged around Baranof's Gold Street, they dropped in at the juke-box joints, they slipped coins in the slot to be lulled or soothed by the tranquillizers; artificial music. A mechanical sound hammered out 'You're a Livin' Doll,' or the whining self-pitying ballads of the day - why did you leave me....was it to grieve me....you in my arms.... you have those charms.<sup>79</sup>

The prissy and rather snobbish response demonstrated in the first extract towards the "juke-box civilisation"<sup>80</sup> - a piece of "pseudo-sophisticated" journalese which J. P. Marquand's writer figure of course does not invent, but merely reports (this in unsophisticated circles is known as "having one's cake

and eating it") - is absent from Nabokov's more tempered critique of similar machines and their associated malaises.

Mentally, I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl. Sweet hot jazz, square dancing, gooey fudge sundaes, musicals, movie magazines and so forth - these were the obvious items in her list of beloved things. The Lord knows how many nickels I fed to the gorgeous music boxes that came with every meal we had! I still hear the nasal voices of those invisibles serenading her, people with names like Sammy and Jo and Eddy and Tony and Peggy and Guy and Patty and Rex, and sentimental song hits, all of them as similar to my ear as her various candies were to my palate.....She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster. [150]

Nonetheless, it is clearly noticeable that Humbert's threnody does at least have certain targets in common with the more self-satisfied critiques of his contemporaries, and as such, does leave itself open to some form of bracketing or recuperation alongside them, as was attempted by the more banal of the contemporary reviewers. For example, the judgement of *The Kansas City Star*, who proclaimed *Lolita* "A first-class satire of European manners and American tastes, a cutting exposé of chronic American adolescence and shabby materialism"<sup>e1</sup> was used in Putnam's' initial advertising campaign for the book, and acts as a verdict indicative of the sort of masochistic relish with which Americans periodically flaunt their capacity to absorb self-criticism, delightfully summarised in the blurb on the cover of one of the paperback editions of one of the year's other big sellers, *The Ugly American*: "IF THIS WERE NOT A FREE COUNTRY THIS BOOK WOULD BE BANNED....." (Unfortunately, when the same company produced the first paperback editions of *Lolita* they plumped for the more tawdry device of the plain brown wrapper [actually closer to old gold] and the ever-faithful allure of "COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED."<sup>e2</sup>)

Attempted rapprochements with the 'serious issues' of the fiction of the day were rapidly sought: Elizabeth Janeway wrote of the piece as "Peter-De-Vries humour in a major degree,"<sup>83</sup> a comparison to the New Yorker writer whose own novel of that year, *The Mackerel Plaza*, has recently been reactivated - together with that analogy, 'this time claimed by Frederick Raphael.<sup>84</sup> But such alignments not only ignore Nabokov's lightness of touch - that hint of the pun as Humbert stuffs "the gorgeous jukebox" - they fail conspicuously to grasp the crucial importance of the book's formal status as an apparently freewheeling text.

Precisely because Humbert is portrayed as a (very!) partial creature, his exaggerations (the stylised lament that leads off with "The Lord knows how....") and inconsistencies (the talk of the "disgustingly conventional little girl" that rapidly switches to "the ideal consumer") alert us to regard his attitudes with amusement and caution, without pressurising us to conform to them in the manner solicited by either the "pseudo-sophisticated" ploys of a Marquand or the folksy wisdom of a Ferber. Furthermore, as the reader is never really allowed to forget that this voice is conducting a defense and that Humbert's work is as much an exercise in rhetoric (yes, it is a *virtuoso performance*) as the sales pitches he points out to us, our responses are correspondingly more involved. The tone of the excerpt last quoted is governed not by any reactionary hostility, but according to sensations of misapprehension and loss, and the realisation that that world is the one in which Humbert is enmeshed ("Despite my having dabbled in psychiatry and social work, I really knew very little about children" [126]). Thus the satire on the actual scores harder.<sup>85</sup>

Bourbon Street (in a town named New Orleans) whose sidewalks, said the tour book, 'may [I liked the 'may'] feature entertainment by pickaninnie:; who will [I liked

the 'will' even better] tap-dance for pennies' (what fun)..... [158]

Yet the same vocabulary is capable, like Joyce's borrowings from commercial prose in *Nausicaa*, of "fizzing."<sup>66</sup>

I would sit,.... and watch her gambol, rubber-capped, be-pearled, smoothly tanned, as glad as an ad, in her trim-fitted satin pants and shirred bra. Pubescent sweetheart! [163]

And, again, more akin to "*l'oeuvre ormonde du sublime Dublinois*" [209] than the scope of the mid-brow writer, it can still affect.

I covered my face with my hand and broke into the hottest tears I had ever shed. I felt them winding through my fingers and down my chin, and burning me, and my nose got clogged, and I could not stop, and then she touched my wrist.  
'I'll die if you touch me,' I said. 'You are sure that you are not coming with me? Is there any hope of your coming? Tell me Only this.'  
'No,' she said. 'No, honey, no.'  
She had never called me honey before. [281]

The parallel with *Nausicaa* is a valuable one, not only because both writers "cause some of that dead and rotten stuff to reveal here and there its live source, its primary freshness,"<sup>67</sup> and at crucial moments deploy pathos (Nabokov in the above instance, and Joyce in the disclosure of Gertie MacDowell's limp), but because both, in effect, exact a retribution by taking the fullest advantage of languages of false promise.

Moreover, the parody attributed to the two writers is not as distorted as one might at first think. Joyce's interest in the sound of the contemporary, as evinced in the letters and as the subject of endless research, is well

known, but it is perhaps not the unlikeliest, nor the wildest of speculations to suggest that Nabokov, who took such pleasure in the advertisements of the *Edinburgh Review* whilst preparing his edition of Pushkin,<sup>66</sup> should not push Humbert's sales talk too far from the actual. We have already noted Humbert's attempts to 'speak Lolita's language', designs which are all too clearly analogous to those of the advertising world, in so far as they seek not only complicity, but to shape an audience, to tell it what it wants. It may also prove instructive to remind ourselves of some of the numerous occasions when the narrator finds himself caught up by his own spiel.

For instance (I almost wrote "frinstance"), I had no place to rest my head.... [131]

Query: is the stepfather of a gaspingly adorable pubescent pet, a stepfather of only one month's standing, a neurotic widower of mature years and small but independent means, with the parapets of Europe, a divorce and a few madhouses behind him, is he to be considered a relative, and thus a natural guardian? And if not, must I, and could I reasonably dare notify some Welfare Board and file a petition (how do you file a petition?) [174]

I could not help seeing the inside of that festive and ramshackle castle in terms of 'Troubled Teens', a story in one of her magazines, vague 'orgies', a sinister adult with pennele cigar, drugs, bodyguards. [294-295]

And, more valuable still, these and other instances might perhaps even succeed in jogging the memory of the more alert reader back to recall exactly what profession Humbert adopted when he first arrived in America.

In New York I eagerly accepted the soft job fate offered me: it consisted mainly of thinking up and editing perfume ads. I welcomed its desultory character and pseudoliterary aspects.... [34]

Indeed, it is of some significance, and certainly fascinating, to speculate how the narrator's argot might well have seemed just as much at home alongside the contemporary voices competing with it for the attention of *Lolita's* first mass audience, as equally well as it appears an integral part of the prior time in which it is set. The following extract talks of "teen-magazines," but the selections from issues of *The New Yorker*<sup>89</sup> around the time of the book's publication that follow it point to the pervasiveness of the language of the Fifties 'small-ads,' and the book's debt to the jingling chimes of such a vocabulary.

Ads and fads. Young scholars dote on plenty of pleats  
- *que c'était loin, tout cela!* It is your hostess'  
duty to provide robes. Unattached details take all the  
sparkle out of your conversation. All of us have known  
"pickers" - one who picks her cuticle at the office  
party. Unless he is very elderly or very important, a  
man should remove his gloves before shaking hands with  
a woman. Invite Romance by wearing the Exciting New  
Tummy Flattener. Trims tums, nips hips. [256]





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Los Angeles—J. W. Robinson Co.  
Madison—Harry S. Manchester, Inc.

Miami—Burdine's, Inc.  
Milwaukee—T. A. Chapman Co.  
New York—Bloomingdale's  
Ogden—Fred M. Nye Co.  
Passaic—Wechsler's  
Paterson—Meyer Brothers  
Philadelphia—John Wanamaker  
Phoenix—Goldwater's  
Pittsburgh—Joseph Horne Co.  
Portland—Meier & Frank  
Poughkeepsie—Lucky, Platt & Co.

Richmond—Miller & Rhoads, Inc.  
Rochester—Sibley, Lindsay & Curr Co.  
Salt Lake City—Z. C. M. I.  
San Francisco—City of Paris  
South Bend—George Wyman & Co.  
Spokane—The Crescent  
St. Louis—Stix, Baer & Fuller Co.  
Syracuse—The Addis Co.  
Tray—The Peerless Co.  
Washington, D. C.—Woodward & Lothrop  
Yonkers—John Wanamaker  
Youngstown—Chas. Livingston & Sons

available at stores listed or write, SWIRL, Inc., 1350 Broadway, New York 18, N. Y.

The peculiar blend of coyness and instruction (that "slightest tendency to tummy"); the alliteration here and the internal rhymes ("...press-less and crease controlled. Pinks, Blues or Golden hues") are features commonly found in many advertisements of the period. These, together with other variant phrases of the order of "Portrait in Pink...blushing to brilliant hues. New sleep shape: Pink Crystal swathed in Amethyst nylon tricot,"<sup>94</sup> "Helanca for slink or swim - Helanca tanksuits by Jantzen,"<sup>95</sup> "luxurious, high lustre corduroy by Reeves. Most popular with lasses in classes...."<sup>96</sup>; little would be out of place in *Lolita's* copy.<sup>97</sup>

Additionally, the marketing of the child in such advertisements throws a number of fascinating historical sidelights on the novel. The matching clothes for mother and daughter, for example, (you might recall the new bikinis adopted by the Haze girls [43]), provide a splendid manifestation of one facet of the increasing postwar stress placed upon the mother/child relationship (a 'fashion' more than a little connected with the need to reaccomodate the returning G.I.s in the labour market). Another contemporary concern, if anything, even more susceptible to a speedy inflation to cliché because of its notoriety, is in its turn signally acknowledged within the text.

'We have still quite a stretch,' I said, 'and I want to get there before dark. So be a good girl.'  
 'Bad, bad girl,' said Lo comfortably. 'Juvenile delickwent, but frank and fetching....' [115]

Similarly, we are made to wonder how far is Humbert straining our credulity in his treatment of vulgarised Freudian theory (again something extensively popularised in the period), when we do go so far as to compare it with some of the productions then current.

I quote: the normal girl - normal, mark you - the normal girl is usually extremely anxious to please her father. She feels in him the forerunner of the desired elusive male ('elusive' is good, by Polonius!). The wise mother (and your mother would have been wise, had she lived) will encourage a companionship between father and daughter, realizing - excuse the corny style - that the girl forms her ideals of romance and of men from her association with her father. [152]

The piece below is from a 'market rival', the sort of novelist whose achievement is accurately and acidly summarised by Sebastian Knight, "to travel second-class with a third-class ticket, - or if my simile is not sufficiently clear, - to pamper the taste of the worst category of the reading public - not those who revel in detective yarns, bless their poor souls - but those who buy the worst banalities because they have been shaken up in a modern way with a dash of Freud...."<sup>98</sup> Similarly, the selections from the advertising campaign that follow the extract are also contemporary products:

The chit is fourteen; she should be betrothed now and preparing for marriage, thought Diodorus resentfully.... Rubria, although still too slender, and given to attacks of breathlessness and pallor about the lips when tired, had a round little bosom and her legs, immodestly flashing from under the blowing tunic, were definitely the legs of a woman. Diodorus was aghast both at this new aspect of his daughter and that she was not as yet betrothed. He was also furious at Lucanus for some obscure reason.<sup>99</sup>



THIS IS DADDY<sup>100</sup>



Capezio Shoes

THIS IS ME IN MY **KATE GREENAWAY**

And this is why daddies (and soon other boys) ask her to dance. The Kate Greenaway dress, "Shall We?", falls in folds from an Empire waist. In pink or turquoise polished cotton. Sizes 3-6X, about \$6; 7-12, about \$8. Bonwit Teller, New York. John Wanamaker, Philadelphia. Halle Bros., Cleveland. The J. L. Hudson Co., Detroit. Julius Garfinckel, Washington, D. C., Auerbach's, Salt Lake City. Kate Greenaway, 1333 Broadway, New York 18

THIS IS DADDY<sup>101</sup>

Photographed at Barbison Theatre



## THIS IS ME IN MY KATE GREENAWAY

And the beginning of a femme fatale. Kate Greenaway makes a little girl enchanting in "Be My Partner," a pepper-corn triangle of woven cotton with a red cotton coat like a flyaway. Dress and coat in sizes 3 to 6X and 7 to 12. At 1100 S. Taylor St., Chicago and department Woodward & Lothrop, Washington, D.C. (Halter Bros. Dept. Store, 37th St. & City Hall). The J. L. Hudson Company, Detroit; The Marston Company, Inc., Dept. Kate Greenaway, 133 Broadway, New York 18



Such referents then, suggest that certain detailing and features within Nabokov's piece were very immediately accessible, fulfilling the requirements of an audience who demanded traditional documentary realism as equally well as appeasing those who sought more satiric pleasures. The difficulties of deciding at any one moment whether we are taking the latter for the former - the sort of 'misplacing' or 'misreading' which we witness uneasily in Charlotte's acceptance of Humbert's imaginary catalogue of past lovers (because we are specifically *told* that its roots lie in "soap operas, psychoanalysis and cheap novelettes" [82]) - provides the irritation and the edge necessary to any successful flirtation - the most accurate erotic analogy for this novel. Consequently, the implications of the book's success too, like a flirtation, must be susceptible to a number of simultaneous readings. In point of fact, the novel at times appears as the perfect illustration of the dilemma that so hampers Pnin's attempts at integration.

'You know I do not understand what is advertisement and what is not advertisement.'<sup>102</sup>

Concomitant then with the 'sophisticated' notion of seeing *Lolita's* popular sales, like those of *Laughter in the Dark*, as an indication of the piece's *failure* to prescribe certain genre features - of the erotic in particular - we must grant the more prosaic fact of their power, and of the impossibility of partitioning easy 'dividing lines' of appeal. Thus, should we return to some of the fiction on those bestseller lists and look at their treatment of the myth of the sexual charge of the child/woman - at once the appeal of the new and, as supposedly freshly formed, the mouldable - when, and

at what point, does the reading audience register the truly novel outweighing the purely nugatory?

Now the real battle for Christine began. She was seventeen; no longer a child, not yet a woman.<sup>103</sup>

Lara was only a little over sixteen but her figure was completely formed.<sup>104</sup>

Christine Storm, too, in those blindingly brilliant months, emerged from the chrysalis of girlhood into womanhood.<sup>105</sup>

A young girl glided into the hall, clad in a white palla, with a drift of gauze upon her head. She was about fifteen and extremely comely, with a ripe and graceful figure, fine dark eyes under narrow brows, a skin as white as snow, and a neck like a slender column. Her mouth was a rose; under the gauze on her small head flowed a mass of dark red curls and waves. She had a shy but coquettish expression, and was apparently conscious of her beauty.<sup>106</sup>

....her young body was becoming rounded with the sweetness of approaching puberty.....

Rubria achieved puberty, and Aurelia rejoiced.... She commended her daughter to the wife of Jupiter, the guardian of hearth and family and children. She bound up Rubria's hair in ribbons and counselled her in modesty. She taught her the arts of the household and the kitchen, and how a woman can best please her husband. She wrote to friends in Rome, and commented on the growing beauty and maturity of Rubria.

"You are hurrying matters," said Diodorus one evening. "The girl is only eleven years old." He was jealous of any youth who would take his daughter from him and enjoy her laughter and sweetness, and cleave her to him, and make her forget her father.<sup>107</sup>

Although we are thankfully spared sentences like these in *Lolita*, they clearly point up that Nabokov's manipulation of the forbidden features of the erotic is deliberate and ostentatiously so. Here we are not just addressing the banal theme of "the glamorous lodger" [51]: a whole host of taboos are compressed into the novel, as Humbert not only profanes the child, but also succeeds in incorporating elements of adultery and incest within his account.<sup>108</sup> Fascinatingly, however, (one hesitates to say, 'Revealingly,') even

such apparent overloading as this is incapable of shattering altogether the constructs formulated by readers. Instead, we would perhaps do better to register it as an index of their sophistication, not only in accommodating Nabokov's testing of an erotic, but in retaining some sort of grip on many of the other strands which feature in his narrative - though not necessarily a completely binding one.

That these shadings merge goes without saying, but the point that comes through most strongly, whether here in the erotic, or in the other tones and half-tones - realistic; romantic; poetic; ironic (erotic-realistic-romantic-poetic-ironic, by Polonius!) - which we have isolated in the text, is of their contribution, not so much to the denseness and intricacy of design, though they do make such marks, but to a combination which effectively spins out of its constituent parts. In the short story *Lance*, Nabokov talks of the possibility of experiencing "a prismatic dissolution,"<sup>109</sup> and such transformations and separations we have already witnessed in earlier narratives. However - and this, one suspects, ultimately lies behind Nabokov's choice of a career in writing rather than painting, - the written word can also work the other way; it can achieve the "divinely inutile"<sup>110</sup> task of reuniting the rainbow. The whirling and commingling motion of Nabokov's spectrum of fictional hues produces its own distinct white light, and it is to this that *Lolita* owes its pre-eminence over those works - less dynamic, less dense, in comparison - which preceded it. In one of those prior pieces, a fabricated author considering his craft states how "at times he felt like a child given a farrago of wires and ordered to produce the wonder of light,"<sup>111</sup> and it is to that onerous and Sisyphean business; of recombination; the pursuit of illumination; the production of the white (the next, new, page) whilst holding all the old colours, that Nabokov's succeeding fictions dedicate themselves.

## Footnotes

1. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, Ed. Alfred Appel Jr. [McGraw-Hill, New York and Toronto, 1970] 84. Future references to the text will follow in parentheses.

2. In the short Foreword affixed to the collection, *Nabokov's Quartet*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1967] Nabokov says of one of his earliest stories, "An Affair of Honour", which first appeared in 1928, that it "renders ...the degradation of a Romantic theme whose decline had started with Chekhov's magnificent story *The Duel*, (1891)." The conflict between Quilty and Humbert - despite the latter's attempts to maintain the proprieties ("Then, with the stern and romantic care of a gentleman about to fight a duel, I checked the arrangement of my papers, bathed and perfumed my delicate body, shaved my face and chest, selected a silk shirt and clean drawers, pulled on transparent taupe socks, and congratulated myself for having with me some very exquisite clothes....[270]) - doesn't so much register a further decline in the theme as effectively mark its termination. Lines of the order of "He was naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over me. We rolled over us." [301] are not to be found in Lermontov.

(Nonetheless, as a novel in the grand style, *Ada* inevitably obliges itself to include a duel among its many pages.)

3. Orville Prescott, "Books to Give and to Receive: A Critic's Christmas List", *The New York Times Book Review*, November 30th, 1958, 6.

4. "She Was a Child and I Was a Child", reprinted in Kingsley Amis, *What Became of Jane Austen? and Other Questions*, [Jonathan Cape, London, 1970] 77-85.

5. The furore and 'controversy' *Lolita's* British debut generated in the popular press of the time is well known, and has been quite well documented, though, as ever, the reactions of the *Daily Express* retain their power to amuse. Of available social registrations of the book's notoriety a personal favourite is provided by an episode of *Hancock's Half Hour*, then the nation's most popular television programme. First broadcast on Friday 26th February 1960, Ray Galton and Alan Simpson's script for 'The Missing Page' centres on Tony Hancock's increasingly desperate attempts to secure the solution to a detective story borrowed from the Public Library which, he discovers, lacks that crucial last page, where, inevitably, all will be revealed. The Nabokov connection is initiated by a fatalistic exchange on the occasion of Hancock's first trip to the library:

**Hancock** I suppose *Lolita's* still out.  
**Librarian** Yes.  
**Hancock** I thought so.

The killer blow, and the sort of exposure of British hypocrisy that the programme specialised in at its best, is delivered at the end of Hancock's return visit.

As they go out of the door a woman comes in carrying a book. Tony has a quick look at the title, then yells into the library.

**Hancock** *Lolita's* back!

All the people round the reading table jump up and make a dignified rush to the counter for the book.

**Man** I believe you'll find me top of the list...

**Woman** No, no I had my name down before it was published.

Fade on a heated argument between the readers and the librarian.

[Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, *Hancock's Half Hour* (The Woburn Press, London, 1974) Intro. Peter Black, 211.

The key phrase is, of course, that "dignified rush."

6. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, [New Directions, Norfolk, Conn. 1959] 205.
7. Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1967] 108-109.
8. Reprinted in Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1974] 23.
9. Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, rep. 1972] 68-69.
10. *Strong Opinions* 101.
11. *Ibid.* 137.
12. The practice of *Poshlost* functions in Nabokov's critical writing as a useful antithesis to the business of literature. It is succinctly outlined in *Strong Opinions* [see 100-101], but receives its most extensive definition in the book on *Gogol* [see 63-72], part of which is re-used in the short piece entitled "Philistines and Philistinism" that appears at the end of the *Lectures on Russian Literature*. It is from the latter that the following short summary is taken:

Philistinism implies not only a collection of stock ideas but also the use of set phrases, clichés, banalities expressed in faded words. A true philistine has nothing but these trivial ideas of which he entirely consists..... He is the conformist, the man who conforms to his group, and he is also typified by something else: he is a pseudo-idealist, he is pseudo-compassionate, he is pseudo-wise. The fraud is the closest ally of the true philistine. All such great words as 'Beauty,' 'Love,' 'Nature,' 'Truth,' and so on become masks and dupes when the smug vulgarian employs them.....

Russians have, or had, a special name for smug philistinism - *poshlost*. *Poshlism* is not only the obviously trashy but mainly the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive. To apply the deadly label of *poshlism* to something is not only an aesthetic judgement but also a moral indictment.

[Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Ed. Fredson Bowers (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1981) 310 and 313.]

13. Maurice Charney, *Sexual Fiction*, [New Accents, Methuen and Co. Ltd, London, 1981].

14. George Steiner, "Night Words" in *Language and Silence*, [Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, rep. 1979] 95.

15. Susan Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination" in *Styles of Radical Will*, [Secker and Warburg, London, 1969] 66.

16. General statements of the kind offered here by Michael Mason in his review of this edition ["All Woman" in *The London Review of Books*, Vol 7, No. 9, May 23, 1985, 8.], I would venture to suggest, raise far more questions than they assuage.

In recent years certain commentators have also realised that it has much more intellectual meat to it than its reputation would imply.

17. Walter Kendrick, "Two Sad Russians" in *The London Review of Books*, Vol 7, No. 15, September 5, 1985, 11-12.

18. Sontag 70.

19.

Artistically, the dirtier typewriters try to get, the more conventional and corny their products become....

[*Strong Opinions* 133].

20. John Cleland, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, Ed. Peter Sabor [The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1985] 91.

21. A good example of the problems involved in trying to ascertain the presence, let alone the measure, of parody within an erotic narrative can be found in the prefatory essay Peter Wagner affixes to his edition of Cleland, [*Fanny Hill or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, Ed. Peter Wagner (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1985)]. This boldly argues the presence of considerable sophistication in the text and momentarily holds it up as "a unique combination of parody, erotic entertainment, and a philosophical concept of human sexuality borrowed from French sources and adapted to the English bourgeois

viewpoint" [28], only to introduce the most sober and demure of coveralls at the last, so deferring the issue of relevant definition by consigning it to history's safekeeping.

Whether as a novel, parody, or licentious fiction,  
*Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* is a true product of its  
time. [29]

Peter Wagner's retreat from the question of just how much self-consciousness and humour an erotic narrative can sustain without proving detrimental to its central sexual charge is understandable. This is not only because of the practical difficulties of making such an evaluation, but, and his argument does acknowledge this, there is also the existence of a fear on the part of the reader that he or she may be overwriting a text, reading too much into it, something which Nabokov consistently makes use of in this and later works. This blurring and overloading of genre, together with the broader question of the procuring power of narrative (which is given its most blatant embodiment in the erotic) are significant contributors to the distinct *frisson* of *Lolita*.

22. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, Ed. Fredson Bowers [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1980] 373-374.

23. At this particular juncture, we might remind ourselves that the apparent butt of a joke here is in itself an instrument of parody, in so far as all such titles constitute an inversion of Christian confession. Albeit in that broadest of senses then, we can justifiably call such texts 'parodic.'

24. And on the subject of commonplace labelling, the publishing imprint under which *Lolita* first saw light of day itself proved to be rather more of a commonplace label than its author first suspected. After the novel was turned down by a number of American publishing houses, Nabokov's text was finally issued by Maurice Girodias' Olympia press, decked in the same green binding as its notorious Traveler's Companion series - (among whose volumes, according to Alfred Appel, is numbered *The Sexual Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* [*The Annotated Lolita* xxxiv]). That "a book that differed so utterly in vocabulary, structure, and purpose (or rather absence of purpose) from....(Girodias').... other much simpler commercial ventures, such as *Debby's Bidet* or *Tender Thighs*" [*Strong Opinions* 275] should emerge in such a fashion is, on one level, unfortunate (whilst also arguing a naïvete scarcely present in the fiction); on another, it makes a most distinctive contribution to what we have discussed as *Lolita's* erotic guise. In the end, one is tempted to mark the whole thing down to pure coincidence (or more accurately perhaps, a misreading by M. Girodias who "thought that it might lead to a change in social attitudes toward the kind of love described in it" [*Strong Opinions* 271]) - despite the suspicions that a literary treatment would certainly give rise to - if only because works produced under such an imprint inevitably confine themselves from the outset to a limited circulation among precisely the audience least likely to register either an attack on, or parody of, the form itself. Moreover, one would have to question anybody's willingness to consciously undertake an act of what would then unavoidably appear to be a quite monumental act of economic perversity.

25. Anon., *The Confessions of Victor X.*, [Caliban Press, London, 1985] Ed. and Trans. Dr.(!) Donald Rayfield.

26. *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters: 1940-1971*, Ed. Simon Karlinsky [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1979] 201-202.

27. Such decoding is, of course, hardly an unknown happening, as the fun Joyce has with Grandpa Virag's quasi-scientific studies in *Ulysses* makes clear.

For all these knotty points see the seventeenth volume of my *Fundamentals of Sexology or the Love Passion* which Doctor L. B. says is the book sensation of the year.

[James Joyce, *Ulysses*, (The Bodley Head, London, rep. 1955) 489.]

28. Leaving aside the construction of, and reception afforded to surveys like *The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study on Female Sexuality* [Macmillan, New York, 1976], at the time of writing (Autumn, 1985) the market for the prurient, it would seem, remains buoyant. Indeed, the staple topics appear remarkably consistent, as one of the non-fiction successes of the American publishing year - (160,000 copies sold since April, mass paperback rights sold to Warner Bros. for \$65,000 and A.B.C. have picked up the rights for the 't.v. movie') - is about to be issued in Britain with a modified title: *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking the Silence* now becomes *Breaking the Silence: Lesbian Nuns on Convent Sexuality*. See Rosemary Bailey, "The Confession that Backfired", *The Sunday Times* September 8, 1985, 36.

In addition, the current "talk of the Frankfurt Book Fair", according to *The Observer Review* is one Sally Beauman, "the English journalist whose blockbuster *Destiny* sold to Bantam in America for \$1,015,000." Its U. K. paperback rights, we later learn, make the quieter, more British, contribution of "more than £150,000" to Ms. Beauman's bank account. And the subject material of the fiction in question? Patricia Miller reports it deadpan - as the only possible response? - "It is all about a woman with diamonds set in her labia." (See Patricia Miller, "DESTINY: For A Few Dollars More", in *The Observer Review* October 20, 1985, 47.)

29. Lionel Trilling, "The Kinsey Report", in *The Liberal Imagination*, [Secker and Warburg, London, 1951] 224-225.

30. *Strong Opinions* 73.

31. Inevitably, the issue of Humbert's 'heart' is something that can be claimed to resonate throughout the text in a multiplicity of ways. In the first place, the author's relationship with Dolores Haze is cited as the final blow that has "ended by knocking my poor heart out of its groove" [171], and references to the physical pain he experiences from his "miserable pump" [216] pepper the narrative. Obviously allied to this literal heart trouble is the metaphorical suffering that Humbert would have us believe again results from his involvement with Lolita. And, finally, it is surely no accident that Humbert's adoption of the confessional genre further encourages the audience to regard his outpouring as 'from the heart.'



32. Steiner 95.

33. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1962] 63.

34. William Shakespeare, Sonnet 19, l 14 in *The Sonnets*, [Cambridge University Press, Second Edition, rep. 1981] Ed. J. Dover Wilson.

35. Ibid. Sonnet 15, l 13.

36. Interestingly enough, amongst the list of Dolores' classmates ("A poem, a poem, forsooth!" [54]) is the "adorable Stella, who has let strangers touch her." [55]

37. In the case of the latter, one feels, for once, that Humbert, has rather missed an opportunity for 'creating' further literary precedents. See Emrys Jones' edition of *Surrey: Poems*, [Clarendon, Oxford University Press, rep. 1973] 108-109.

38. That this issue of presentations and artistic entrapments continued to fascinate Nabokov is borne out by the highly suggestive heading attached to the unfinished, and as yet unpublished work he was engaged upon at the time of his death, intriguingly titled *The Original Of Laura*, where Flora's "exquisite bone structure slipped into a novel - became in fact the secret structure of that novel, besides supporting a number of poems." (This is taken from Dmitri Nabokov's Introduction to the posthumous edition of his father's dramatic works. See Vladimir Nabokov, *The Man From the U. S. S. R. and Other Plays*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1985] 5.)

39. Shakespeare, Sonnet 130.

40. C.f.

'In former times, when I was still your dream male (the reader will notice what pains I took to speak Lo's tongue), you swooned to records of the number one throb-and-sob idol of your coevals' (Lo: 'Of my what? Speak English'). [151]

41. Sir Philip Sidney, Sonnet 68 ll 1-4 of *Astrophil and Stella* in *Sir Philip Sidney: Selected Poems*, Ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones [Clarendon, Oxford University Press, rep. 1979] 151.

42. The attraction to Nabokov of an art refined and quite self-sufficient - the work whose "audience an artist imagines, when he imagines that kind of a thing...(as)...a room filled with people wearing his own mask" [*Strong Opinions* 18] - is undoubtedly present, but should be measured against a countering pull, just as strong, and too rarely stressed, to find, let alone make over, a public. Again, from *Strong Opinions*:

I am all for the ivory tower, and for writing to please one reader alone - one's own self. But one also needs some reverberation, if not response, and a moderate

multiplication of one's self throughout a country or countries; and if there be nothing but a void around one's desk, one would expect it to be at least a sonorous void, and not circumscribed by the walls of a padded cell.

[*Strong Opinions* 37.]

Similarly, such a necessary urge to communicate marks a major stage in Cincinnatus C.'s gravitation towards "those beings akin to him" in *Invitation to a Beheading*, creatures who, like the would-be writer, make an appeal; seeking to offer themselves and to employ their "voices" [*Invitation to a Beheading* 208]. Hence an importance bestowed by designating it Cincinnatus' "last wish":

' - and I ask you so earnestly - my last wish - how can you not grant it? I must have at least the theoretical possibility of having a reader, otherwise, really, I might as well tear it all up. There, this is what I needed to say.'

[*Invitation to a Beheading* 178.]

43. Tom Wolfe, 'What Do You Think Of My Buddha?' in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, [Bantam Books, New York and London, rep. 1981] 34-35. Another, rather more elegaic, literary perspective on this period can be found in John Updike's short story, 'When Everyone was pregnant,' which is collected in his 1973 volume, *Museums and Women and Other Stories*, [André Deutsch, London, 1973] 91-97.

44. Henry James, *What Maisie Knew*, [Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, rep. 1980] 6.

45. A theme which is at its most fetching in the exchange between the Russian Ambassador and one of his baffled investigative agents:

Sulkin went on, 'your Mr. Chauncey Gardiner remains, to all intents and purposes,' and here he held up the sheet of paper by its corner, 'a blank page.'

'Blank page?'

'Blank page,' echoed Sulkin. 'Exactly. Gardiner's code name!'

Jerzy Kosinski, *Being There*, [Black Swan Books, London, rep. 1983] 95.

46. The cinematic adaption of Kosinski's novel, presumably following his script, ends with Gardiner walking out of camera shot across a lake without disturbing the surface of the water.

47. *What Maisie Knew* 6.

48. An extensive list of cinematic images is collated by Carl Proffer in his *Keys to Lolita*, [Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Ind. 1968] 108-110.

For an equally extensive and amenably eccentric treatment of the theme in Nabokov's oeuvre as a whole, see Alfred Appel's *Nabokov's Dark Cinema* [Oxford University Press, New York, 1974].

49. The confession is, naturally enough, an essentially proleptic mode, and, in Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*, we are fortunate to possess not only a precursor of what we have talked of as Humbert's pre-emptive strikes, but also a clear demonstration of the effectiveness of such techniques. In his Introduction to Pechorin's journal, the narrator points to an effect and a direction that Humbert's prose would seek to emulate and enforce:

While reading over these notes I became convinced of the sincerity of this man who so mercilessly exhibited his own failings and vices.

[Mikhail Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*, Trans. and Ed. Vladimir Nabokov in collaboration with Dmitri Nabokov (The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, rep. 1984) 53.]

50. *A Hero of Our Time* 133-134.

51. Benjamin Constant, *Adolphe*, Trans. Leonard Tancock [Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, rep. 1980] 49.

52. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*, Ch. One, Canto 38, ll 1-5 and Canto 43, ll 6-14, Trans. and with Commentary by Vladimir Nabokov, [Bollinger Foundation, Pantheon Books, New York, N.Y., 1964] 112 and 113.

53. Vladimir Nabokov, *Despair*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1966] 29.

54. John Hollander, "The Perilous Magic of Nymphets," *Partisan Review* 23, Fall 1956, 560.

55. Vladimir Nabokov, Foreword to *A Hero of Our Time*, xvi.

56. *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*, Vol. Three, 100-101.

57. *Despair* 188.

58. *Ibid.* 37-38.

59.

Felix in *Despair* is really a false double.

[*Strong Opinions* 84.]

60. *Despair* 70.

61. See Alfred Appel who, in his Foreword, talks of the novel as "probably the most intricate and profound of all *Doppelgänger* novels, written at precisely the time when it seemed that the Double theme had been exhausted in

modern literature" [lxiv]. Such a topic comprises one of the thinner literary seams mined in *Lolita* and one which has received more than its due share of critical attention. In this particular instance it is better that the novelist should have the last word:

The *Doppelgänger* subject is a frightful bore.

[*Strong Opinions* 83.]

62. You might recall that the receipt of Charlotte's letter occasions the following outburst on Humbert's part.

After a while I destroyed the letter and went to my room, and ruminated, and rumpled my hair, and modelled my purple robe, and moaned through clenched teeth and suddenly - Suddenly, gentlemen of the jury, I felt a Dostoevskian grin dawning (through the very grimace that twisted my lips) like a distant and terrible sun. [72]

Although Hermann Karlovich also exhibits enough of a familiarity with Dostoevskian concerns to burlesque them - placing him between Doyle and Leblanc in a list of crime novelists [*Despair* 132] - the narrator of *Despair* is far more ostentatiously less in control of his particular account than Humbert Humbert, and, as such, approaches that distinctive blend of self-justification and paranoia we find in Dostoevski without "the mystical trimming dear to that famous writer of Russian thrillers" [*Despair* 98].

Stop, pity! I do not accept your sympathy; for among you there are sure to be a few souls who pity me - me, a poet misunderstood. 'Mist, vapour....in the mist a chord that quivers.' No, that's not verse, that's from old Dusty's great book, *Crime and Slime*. Sorry: *Schuld und Sühne* (German edition). Any remorse on my part is absolutely out of the question: an artist feels no remorse, even when his work is not understood, not accepted.

[*Despair* 187].

63. *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*, Vol. Three, 101 and 100.

64. *Ibid.* 98.

65. Foreword to *A Hero of Our Time* ix.

66. *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*, Vol. Three, 100-101.]

67. As befitting the would-be poet figure we discussed earlier (see "The Patrimonies of Poets"), and observed in the extract quoted from *Eugene Onegin* ("nothing / from his pen issued"), Humbert's work does not survive here; nor should we be neglectful of the fact that when Dolores Haze does leave Humbert,

it is for the acknowledgedly productive "Author of *The Little Nymph, The Lady Who Loved Lightning* (in collaboration with Vivian Darkbloom), *Dark Age, The Strange Mushroom, Fatherly Love*, and others" [33]. Significantly, the only poem Humbert does complete and which we receive in full, "Wanted, wanted: Dolores Haze," is immediately followed up with a critique [see 259]. As Humbert confesses, if he "wrote many more poems" then he also "immersed (him)self in the poetry of others" [259].

68. *Adolphe* 60-61.

69. *Ibid.* 76.

70. That the objects of comparison selected by Humbert to emphasise a difference should be clearly distinguishable in terms of meaning, and yet bound together by their appearance as words on paper, only a letter, a mere typo apart, is typical of the confusions about the rôle and place of language Nabokov effects in the novel as a whole. Moreover, this particular instance also serves to anticipate the more extensive linguistic meditations centered on the episode of the f/mountain misprint in *Pale Fire*.

71. C.f. [22].

72. At one point Humbert talks of the pleasure he derived whenever the opportunity presented itself to "compare Lolita to whatever nymphets parsimonious chance collected around her for my anthological delectation." [163] The suggestion here of *Lolita* as, in part, the result of a purely scientific urge to collect, collate and form a body of material in order to document and chart the habits of the genus 'nymphet' - in short to define, to "treasure every inch of their nymphancy" [224] - is a theme which repeatedly crops up in the narrative. From that first attempt at classification onwards, ("Now I wish to introduce the following idea...." [see 18-20]), the reader is presented with a farrago of facts outlined with a distinctive note of finality, yet wholly lacking any semblance of order and composition. At times the outcome, this peculiar mixture of the random and the authoritative, is strangely reminiscent of a 'Believe it or Not' feature. Among the snippets - "The science of nympholepsy is a precise science" [131] - we thus proceed to learn:

Nymphets do not occur in polar regions. [35]

....nymphets do not have acne although they gorge themselves on rich food. [43]

.....for all the world, like the cheapest of cheap cuties. For that is what nymphets imitate... [122]

.....with a burst of rough glee (the sign of a nymphet!) [135]

Hysterical little nymphs might....run up all kinds of temperature - even exceeding a fatal count. [242]

73. In Stanley Kubrick's 1962 cinematic adaption of the novel, a 'formal' is used as a double 'dating' agent; both to place it in time and to effectively

disclose Quilty's interest in Lolita for the first time. In point of fact, the film appears to update the action from the early to the late nineteen-fifties, setting Humbert's first meeting with Dolores Haze in the Summer of 1958 - judging from the scenes which show Lo playing with a hula hoop and watching the 1957 British film, *The Curse of Frankenstein* - at the very earliest. In a scene not used in the film, Nabokov's screenplay at one point fixes the year as Charlotte presents Humbert with a photograph of herself taken when she was twenty-five (and greatly resembled her daughter), which we are informed she then signs:

'For my *chéri* Humbert from his Charlotte. April 1946.'  
[if it is now 1960]

[Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita: A Screenplay*, (McGraw-Hill, New York and Toronto, 1974) 78].

Nabokov also incorporates within his filmscript a scene (again discarded by Kubrick) in which Humbert and Lolita watch Quilty's play, *The Nymphet*, on television (a broadcast interrupted by what Nabokov satirically labels as **A Supremely Happy Announcer** and - for the ads. - **A Fruity Voice**). The absence of television from the novel is to a modern audience perhaps the most obvious dating agent of that text, and certainly, Nabokov was not overly happy with all of its intrusions in the film, as he made clear to Alfred Appel.

'Kubrick put a TV set in their motel rooms - that's wrong! They were utterly alone.'

[Alfred Appel Jr., *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*, (Oxford University Press, 1974) 244.]

The film, in fact, loses much from its rather thin and etiolated sense of period - in part an unavoidable consequence of producing it in England.

74. See [170].

75. John Brooks, *The Great Leap: The Past Twenty-five Years In America*, [Victor Gollancz, London, 1966] 201.

76. Warren French, 'The Age of Salinger' in *The Fifties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama*, [Everett/Edwards inc, Florida, 1970] 11.

77. The survey announces itself to be "based on reports from leading booksellers in 37 cities showing the sales rating of 16 leading fiction ... titles over the last three weeks. Sales through the book clubs are not included."

78. John P. Marquand, *Women And Thomas Harrow*, [Collins, London, 1958] 46.

79. Edna Ferber, *Ice Palace*, [First published 1958, Victor Gollancz. Republished by Cedric Chivers Ltd, Portway, Bath, 1977] 139-140.

80. Nabokov reserves his most devastating twist on the "jukebox civilization" theme for his filmscript.

**Humbert** Do you hear me, darling? I want a little chat with you, *mon petit chat*. Please.

**Lolita** If you give me a dime. From now on I'm coin operated.

[*Lolita: A Screenplay* 124-125.]

81. Featured in the first advertisements for the novel ["G. P. PUTNAM'S announce with pride the American publication of one of the most widely discussed novels of our time"]. See *The New York Times Book Review*, August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1958.

82. See the 1961 Corgi edition of *Lolita*. As an object of controversy and censorship questions in America, Nabokov's novel can, in point of fact, be quite neatly placed historically alongside Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which features in the last of the New York Times' bestseller lists given in the main body of the text (23<sup>rd</sup> August, 1959), and J. P. Donleavy's *The Ginger Man*, a publishing stablemate of *Lolita* at The Olympia Press in France, and which appeared in an abridged form in the United States in that same year (1958).

83. Elizabeth Janeway, 'Driven By Desire,' *The New York Times Book Review*, August 17<sup>th</sup>, 1958. 25.

84. Peter De Vries, *The Mackerel Plaza*, [First published 1958, Victor Gollancz, 1958. Republished as an Oxford 20<sup>th</sup> Century Classic, Oxford University Press, 1984] x-xi.

85. The undoubted guile and depth of allusion within the piece by no means countermands Nabokov's distinct registrations of the commonplace racial prejudice of the contemporary suburb (Charlotte's hostility to Louise and ambition "to get hold of a real trained servant maid like that German girl the Talbots spoke of" [82] speaks for itself, but plain statement is, at least in one instance, even more effective: "I entered the wrong store and a wary old Negro shook his head even before I could ask anything" [270]), nor the bigotry conveniently tucked away as supposedly 'genteel' anti-Semitism. Charlotte's inquiry about the existence of a "certain strange strain" in Humbert [76-77] initiates a 'concern' that prompts Jean Farlow's interruption of her husband's reflections on [81], and which is succinctly traced by Appel on 423-424 (the gloss on 'NEAR CHURCHES' offered a useful reminder to this later reader).

86. James Joyce, *Selected Letters*, Ed. Richard Ellmann, [Faber and Faber, London, 1975] 245.

87. *Lectures on Literature* 346.

88. Alfred Appel quotes M. H. Abrams' recollection of Nabokov's enthusiastic researches for *Eugene Onegin* in his Introduction to *The Annotated Lolita* xlvi. (In Volume Three of the edition Nabokov caustically summarises *The Edinburgh Review* as "an influential Philistine sheet of the period" [102])

89. Although Nabokov himself chose a piece from *The Saturday Evening Post* in order to illustrate *poshlost* in the short critique, "Philistines and Philistinism," that I alluded to earlier (*Lectures on Russian Literature* [312]) I have made my selections from *The New Yorker* not merely for ease of access, but because as both a contributor and reader (see *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters: 1940-1971* at the time of *Lolita's* writing), one suspects Nabokov would be rather more consistently familiar with its contents than that of *The Post*.

90. *The New Yorker*, October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1955, 17.

91. Ibid. April 28<sup>th</sup>, 1956, 50.

92. Ibid. September 20<sup>th</sup>, 1958, 129.

93. Ibid. October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1958, 79.

94. Ibid. November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1958, 10.

95. Ibid. April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1958, 10.

96. Ibid. August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1955, 35.

97. In the screenplay he produced for Kubrick, Nabokov allows Mrs. Chatfield to praise *Lolita* to Humbert at the 'formal' - updated in the film to a 'hop' - in terms that are most signally derived from the advertiser's pen.

Your *Lolita* looks perfectly enchanting in that cloud of pink.

[*Lolita: A Screenplay* 55.]

98. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* 55.

99. Taylor Caldwell, *Dear and Glorious Physician*, [First published 1959, Collins, London, rep. 1978] 83. It self-effacingly describes itself on both jacket front and spine as "A major novel about St. Luke" - and immediately prompts doubts as to the likelihood of there ever being a minor work covering the same field.

100. *The New Yorker*, November 29<sup>th</sup>, 1958, 29.

101. Ibid. October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1958, 26. In both of these advertisements we might observe the presence of some of those "characteristics which, according to writers on the sex interests of children, start the responses stirring in a little girl: clean-cut jaw, muscular hand, deep sonorous voice, broad shoulder" [45] - at least according to Humbert. They would also appear to have their "pleasantly arched thick black ad-eyebrows" (*The Annotated Lolita* [190]) in common with Humbert, an asset Nabokov cites as beloved of the advertising agency in the piece on "Philistines and Philistinism" (See *Lectures on Russian Literature* [313]). The featured male in this particular ad., moreover, "resemble[s]" one "crooner or actor chap" [45] we might have expected to feature in the list on 150. ('Frank' as model for Quilty? - the mind boggles!)



102. Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation of a Beheading*, [Heinemann, London, 1957] 60.

103. Ferber 151.

104. Boris Pasternak, *Dr. Zhivago*, [Collins Fontana Books, London, rep. 1970] 34. An indication of the public's awareness of the two, vastly differing compositions by Russians that dominated the bestseller lists for much of 1958 and 1959 is provided by the cartoon reproduced below which first appeared in *The New Yorker*, December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1958, 34.



*"What I've tried to do is make her  
a Lolita type, and him a sort of Dr. Zhivago."*

105. Ferber 176.

106. Caldwell 450.

107. Ibid. 62 and 64.

108. Nabokov's awareness of the extent to which his work plays on 'dangerous ground' is best indicated by his amusing citation of the other two subjects unlikely to go to press in his Afterword of 1956.

...there are at least three themes which are utterly taboo as far as most American publishers are concerned. The two others are: a Negro-White marriage which is a complete and glorious success resulting in lots of children and grandchildren; and the total atheist who lives a happy and useful life, and dies in his sleep at the age of 106. [316]

109. Vladimir Nabokov, *Nabokov's Dozen*, [Heinemann, London, 1959] 215.

110.

Chess problems demand from the composer the same virtues that characterize all worthwhile art: originality, invention, conciseness, harmony, complexity, and splendid insincerity. The composing of these ivory-and-ebony riddles is a comparatively rare gift and an extravagantly sterile occupation; but then all art is inutile, and divinely so, if compared to a number of more popular human endeavours.

[Vladimir Nabokov, Introduction to *Poems and Problems*, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1972) 15.]

111. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* 84.

Pale Fire: "Cells interlinked within cells interlinked within cells...."

Of all Nabokov's American fictions, *Pale Fire* is perhaps the most explicitly deceptive, and if that sounds somewhat paradoxical, then it is very much in keeping with a text that continually shuffles meaning and statement. That the book is to be a piece of chicanery is immediately evident from a cursory glance at the opening pages, which indicate the ostentatiously wayward and shifting foundations upon which the work is constructed, and which Nina Berberova summarises thus:

There is in *Pale Fire* a structural surprise: the symbolic level, the fantastic, the poetic, lies on its surface and is obvious, while the factual, the realistic, is only slightly hinted at, and may be approached as a riddle. The realistic level is hidden by the symbolic one which has nothing enigmatic in it and is immediately clear to the reader.<sup>1</sup>

The overt and "poetic" meaning of *Pale Fire* tells of the boyhood, brief reign, and eventual exile of one Charles Xavier Vselav, the last King of Zembla, who, when deposed, flees via the Côte D'Azur to the United States. There he is tracked down by Gradus, a representative of a dedicated group of Anti-Karlists known as the Shadows, who proceeds to bungle an assassination attempt, and succeeds only in killing the wrong man. This information is presented to the reader through a series of footnotes that endeavour to provide the definitive reading of a poem entitled "Pale Fire" written by the American poet John Francis Shade, who falls to the would-be regicide's bullet. The book, *Pale Fire*, as such constitutes a scholarly edition of the long poem "Pale Fire", together with a foreword, commentary and index. These are all provided by Charles Kinbote, like Shade a member of staff at Wordsmith University, who was

Shade's neighbour, living in a house rented from a local dignitary, Judge Goldsworth, who, in turn, is on sabbatical in England.

Now we come to the book's "structural surprise": unfortunately for the reader's peace of mind, the aforementioned poem makes perfect sense considered on its own merits; as an elegy upon the death of the poet's daughter, Hazel, and a meditation upon the rôle and importance of art when measured against death. Moreover, its form, four cantos of heroic couplets, enables those reflections to be expressed with considerable succinctness and clarity, certainly enough to endow the work with the sort of lucidity we would expect to frustrate the production of any hidden meaning or involved critical exegesis. However, the reader is presented with exactly that - and with a vengeance, in a phenomenally detailed account of the Zemblan king's adventures - and from thereafter the game is on: to explain the presence of this vast bulk of data, which occupies approximately three-quarters of the book, and to discover the nature of the relationship between Shade and Kinbote.

At the same time, the novel does not neglect to provide the reader with clues, or approximations of such, towards a possible solution. These begin as early as the very first page of the Introduction when, after the best part of three paragraphs dealing with the condition of the manuscript as received by the editor - as disinterested and meticulous an example of literary scholarship as one could hope to find - the following sentence interrupts the account.

There is a very loud amusement park in front of my present lodgings.<sup>2</sup>

By the time we have finished reading the Foreword other examples of the editor's instability have cropped up, ranging from petty assault [24], to the

straightforward reportage that his mental state has been questioned [25], and the deduction that Kinbote is insane, in the Lockean sense of possessing an *idée fixe* that comes to dominate his life, namely Zembla, is the one we are inexorably drawn to make. What is more, as the commentary starts to unfold, the reader becomes more and more intrigued by the ever-increasing number of features in common shared by the editor and his king: in looks [76]; upbringing (Kinbote mentions his uncle's castle on 28); painterly preferences (the editor refers to "a beloved early Picasso" [83], while Charles owns a reproduction of a later work by the same artist [76]); and both men even possess the same susceptibility to headaches brought upon by the study of poetry (Charles is prone to "frequent migraines" [76] and Kinbote's last allusion to the fun fair in his Foreword [28] notes the presence of "that carousel inside and outside my head").

This often quite subtle and delicate construction of intermeshing connections provides the more astute reader with an amusing 'scenic route' to the realisation that Kinbote and king are one and the same - a verdict that even the most unobservant, or, to adopt Nabokovian parlance, the most "inexperienced"<sup>3</sup> of readers cannot avoid arriving at by following the direct path also provided by the author. In effect, this begins in earnest with the second footnote, in which we are told how the king lectured in disguise in the Zemblan capital of Onhava (and, of course, giving the two figures something else in common: both are scholars) - an event, one imagines, which would be kept an extremely close secret. The depth and extent of Kinbote's knowledge about the most intimate of details concerning Charles Xavier is simply staggering, and bespeaks the sort of overconfidence which in turn inculcates suspicion in the mind of the reader. Eventually, just to underline the 'solution,' the by-now extremely unsettling third-person narrative ("My friend

could not evoke the image of his father" [101]) gives way momentarily to a direct first-person confessional.

One summer before the first world war, when the emperor of a great foreign realm....was paying an extremely unusual and flattering visit to our little hard country, *my father* took him and a young Zemblan interpreter....in a newly purchased custom-built car on a jaunt in the countryside. *As usual*, King Alfin traveled without a vestige of escort, and this, and his brisk driving, seemed to trouble his guest.

[My italics 102]

Consequently, even for the most inept of readers, Kinbote's promise to disclose "an ultimate truth, an extraordinary secret" [215] cannot fail to provoke an ironic smile, as those titles have been belied a long time ago.

This is the result of the most cursory examination of *Pale Fire*: Kinbote is Charles II of Zembla. However, a more consistent and careful application to the nuance of the text reveals that one is able to delve further than this mere surface solution, and that in fact the Nabokovian ideal, the rereader, can come up with an alternative and more inclusive answer to the questions instigated by Kinbote's Commentary. What Nina Berberova terms the "factual" theme can then be discerned; one which can be baldly summarised as the reader's discovery that Kinbote is in fact a mentally disturbed member of the teaching staff at the same university as Shade - and no more. Using the raw materials of his everyday existence: past memories; newspaper reports; working associates and rivals; Professor Botkin (we learn his name on 155 in another of those disturbing asides that punctuate the text like variations on an electroencephalogram) has fabricated a fantasy world peopled and shaped according to his desires and feelings of guilt, and in which, in order to fully compensate for his feelings of personal inadequacy, he has placed himself at its centre.

The most notable example of this remodelling of event is to be found in his treatment of the death of Shade, the event which has literally triggered off the book in front of us. Shade was, as Kinbote claims, killed in error; but not, as Kinbote's pathetic need for recognition demands, in mistake for him, but rather because the poet resembles the judge in whose house Kinbote is staying (see 267). Kinbote's final report on Shade's murderer offers us the cunningly banal tale adopted by the would-be king-killer in order to obscure his true mission. This apparently successful ruse involves "his deceiving the police and the nation by posing as Jack Grey, escapee from an asylum, who mistook Shade for the man who sent him there" [299], a plausible enough story that becomes even more credible should the reader recall

a morocco-bound album in which the judge had lovingly pasted the life histories and pictures of people he had sent to prison or condemned to death: unforgettable faces of imbecile hoodlums, last smokes and last grins, a strangler's quite ordinary hands, a self-made widow, the close-set merciless eyes of a homicidal maniac (somewhat resembling, I must admit, the late Jacques d'Argus)..... [83]

We thus come to a new solution of *Pale Fire*: Kinbote as Charles II of Zembla; and, an indication that issues may become cloudier yet, a nigglingly exact conformity, not just to that conception of insanity outlined by John Locke, but one even going so far as to mirror one of the very examples provided by the philosopher.

In fine, the defect in *Naturals* seems to proceed from want of quickness, activity, and motion in the intellectual Faculties, whereby they are deprived of Reason: Whereas *mad Men*, on the other side, seem to suffer by the other Extreme. For they do not appear to me to have lost the Faculty of Reasoning; but having joined together some *Ideas* very wrongly, they mistake them for Truths; and they err as Men do, that argue right from wrong Principles. For by the violence of

their Imaginations, having taken their Fancies for Realities, they make right deductions from them. Thus you shall find a distracted Man fancying himself a King, with a right inference, require suitable Attendance, Respect and Obedience: Others who have thought themselves made of Glass, have used the caution necessary to preserve such brittle Bodies. Hence it comes to pass that a Man, who is very sober, and of a right Understanding in all other things, may in one particular be as frantick, as any in *Bedlam*; if either by any sudden very strong impression, or long fixing his Fancy upon one sort of Thoughts, incoherent *Ideas* have cemented together so powerfully, as to remain united.<sup>4</sup>

At this juncture, it is perhaps of value to reflect on the processes which, we, as, readers have undertaken in order to "make sense" of *Pale Fire* thus far. So far, the approach adopted has been broadly in line with that advanced by Nina Berberova: to treat the work as something that requires elucidation, as a series of happenings to be ordered and endowed with significance. In short, the reader is following the prescribed notion of reading that reaches its purest form of expression in the genre of the detective story.<sup>5</sup> Like the detective, we endeavour to clear up mysteries and replace them with truth. Critically too, it is a truth that tends towards the indivisible, and certainly one sufficiently finite to ensure that there are none of what the detective traditionally terms 'loose ends', even if it should be sufficiently bold to acknowledge within the fiction that life outside its covers may not be like that.

'.....What do you plan to do now?' he asked.  
'Go up against Lavery again, of course.'  
He agreed that that was the thing to do. He added: 'This other, tragic as it is, is really no business of ours, is it?'  
'Not unless your wife knew something about it.'  
His voice sounded sharply, saying: 'Look here, Marlowe, I think I can understand your detective instinct to tie everything that happens into one compact knot, but don't let it run away with you. Life isn't like that at all - not life as I have known it. Better leave the affairs of the Chess family to the police and keep your brains working on the Kingsley family.'  
'Okay, I said.'  
'I don't mean to be domineering,' he said.



I laughed heartily, said good-bye, and hung up.<sup>6</sup>

The reader laughs along with Chandler's hero, because, in the final instance, the resolution of the detective's inquiries will inevitably lead to "one compact knot", for that is what the genre demands. Moreover, this is precisely the sort of approach and thinking which contributes so much to the pleasure of reading, and, which, in an even more overt fashion, acts as the motivation behind most literary criticism. After all, the most commonly held (favourable) image of the critic is one of a passionate inquirer striving to inform the reader what the work is 'all about,' whilst the language he or she employs, despite its locutions and euphemisms, only overlays the same intentions as the detective. Both are working their way through various 'levels of meaning' in an endeavour to discover that "one compact knot" which repudiates any further contributions. To put the enterprise far more succinctly, however, it is necessary to invoke the statement of intent we receive from the critic at work within *Pale Fire*

'.....I intend to divulge to you an ultimate truth, an extraordinary secret that will put your mind completely at rest.'  
[215]

This sentence neatly summarises the aim of most critics, and yet is it not rather chastening to note that the effect of such a remark in this book serves only to promote laughter at the critic's expense, especially when we consider that Kinbote is only attempting to sort things out in the manner of the best of critics; in order to put our minds "completely at rest"?

Above all then, it is Kinbote's presence, the effective placing of an interpreter critic *within* a poem as opposed to a genre fiction that governs how we read *Pale Fire*; for, in doing so, all the constructions and patternings that the reader aligns to offer an interpretation, to make fiction, are immediately pushed right to the fore. Furthermore, because we are presented with an editorial interpretation that is astoundingly rich in detail - evident from the very first note to the poem, which incorporates an extended discussion of the Zemblan coat of arms, whilst the second footnote promptly follows this up by telling us that "Parachuting had recently become a popular sport" [75] - we start to wonder about its purpose: it is undoubtedly diverting, but is it diverting us from something important? Or then again, are not such suspicions still in concordance with the pursuit of "an ultimate truth", a final level of meaning? Kinbote's strategy of trying to tie everything up in the production of an *all-conclusive* reading is something we too enact as readers. But surely there is some sort of warning being offered to us when such desires are so pathologically and neurotically over-developed. To arrive at a truly all-conclusive reading, must, as a matter of course, result in the exclusion of any other interpreters, and so leave nothing save the product of one's own self, a hermeticism that blurs into solipsism. And all this has sprung from the formulations of readers and the desire to understand? If we are not perhaps being indicted, then to some extent we cannot avoid being implicated.

As we have already seen in *Bend Sinister*, one of the more central themes of Nabokov's work is his continual questioning of the insistent demands of the reader (indeed the species identified by Nabokov as the "naïve reader" would claim it as a right), to place himself above others, to secure for himself that lofty position of judgement from which he can decide for others. Clearly, two of the most effective models for the presentation of such an issue are the

guises of critic and King, as, at their root, they both set themselves up as superior to others: one, the bearer of "an ultimate truth"; the other, sanctioned by notions like 'the People' or even 'Divine Right.' However, the task of discrediting or deriding *another* critic-king, rather than oneself, is still very much the easy option to take, worthier of the Nabokovian one-liner ("Portraits of the head of government should not exceed a postage stamp in size"<sup>7</sup>) than the more expansive treatment afforded by fiction. For a novelist to work towards such a goal is to perpetuate merely the notion of superiority maintained by reader and author, who are as a result raised 'above' the sort of ego-centred distortions engaged in by Kinbote. It is precisely to counter such thoughts as these that the poet within the fiction refuses to condemn Kinbote.

I espied at last the top of my poet's head and the bright brown chignon of Mrs. H. above the backs of two adjacent chairs. At the moment I advanced behind them I heard him object to some remark she had just made:

'That is the wrong word,' he said. 'One should not apply it to a person who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention. That's merely turning a new leaf with the left hand.'

I patted my friend on the head and bowed slightly to Eberthella H. The poet looked at me with glazed eyes. She said:

'You must help us Mr. Kinbote: I maintain that what's his name, old - the old man, you know, at the Exton railway station, who thought he was God and began redirecting the trains, was technically a loony, but John calls him a fellow poet.'

'We all are, in a sense, poets, Madam,' I replied  
[238]

As we have observed in the earlier novels, the way in which Nabokov repeatedly eschews easy and conventional readings of "reality" is nowhere more flatly demonstrated than by the manner in which the author prevents his audience from arriving at a decisive understanding of the narrator's character. *Pale Fire*, however, takes even the vagaries of Humbert Humbert's voice a stage

further: for what can ever be upheld as reliable - let alone definitive - from Kinbote's lips? When can we take this man's *word*? In this way, the "ultimate truth" we are seeking is withheld from us, and the necessity for such a term, like "reality," to be kept within inverted commas is doubly endorsed.

Thus, by shifting our ground from believing Kinbote to be king of Zembla, to holding the revised opinion that Kinbote only *thinks* himself king of Zembla, are we not still engaged in just modifying the frame in which we may safely place Kinbote, to put our minds, as the editor himself puts it, "completely at rest"? For it is clear that there is a definite tendency for the reader to envisage Kinbote in the broad lines of caricature, rather than to grant him any of the subtler shadings of distinction and individuality. The move from one solution of the puzzle to a second, somewhat more satisfactory than the first, might, therefore, simply mirror the reader's willingness to concede Kinbote that slightly larger frame. This is not necessarily to allow him a greater actual freedom or independence, but instead to accommodate more extensive reconciliations and alignments on the part of the reader. And if, as we are in part clearly directed to do, we view Kinbote's interpretation of Shade's text as restrictive, one which, for all its apparent size and sprawl, also belittles and confines, what do we make of our own stratagems as readers in effecting such a shift of opinion? The reader witnesses Kinbote imprison Shade with his interpretation.

Let me state that without my notes Shade's text has simply no human reality at all since the human reality of such a poem as his (being too skittish and reticent for an autobiographical work), with the omission of many pithy lines carelessly rejected by him, has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and his surroundings, attachments and so forth, a reality that only my notes can provide. To this statement my dear poet would probably not have subscribed, but, for

better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last  
word. [28-29]

The question is; do we imprison Kinbote by these our immediate interpretations?

If we go on to employ the common critical stance of viewing the book as a composition of various overlaid levels of meaning, in the manner of Nina Berberova, or for that matter, of the fictional detective, then our revised opinion encourages us to try and locate Kinbote's contradictions and contrariness within some sort of framework of Freudian oppositions, in so far as he seems to conform to any 'popular' conception of the paranoid schizophrenic. The reader who takes up and follows such a standard allows himself to feel far more at ease with the character's adoption of the Zemblan motif: for, according to that particular set of confines, that level of meaning, Kinbote should feel an affinity with a kingdom that has been lost. This would not merely explain his presence in the American provincial backwater of New Wye, but more importantly, it would provide him with an outlet for his guilt-feelings about the extent of his own self-deception. Zembla, then, provides a justifiable source of self-esteem, and in addition, because at heart its exploiter knows it to be false, it also heightens his own sense of self-loathing.

Similarly, the editor's pious exultations about religion (see especially 116; 167 and 223-227) can be catalogued as further over-compensatory gestures for those same intense feelings of inadequacy that more than once prompt "dark and disturbing" pleas ("Dear Jesus, do something" [93]) and thoughts of self-destruction. Indeed, the latter element is particularly evident in the footnote in which Kinbote discusses the suicide of Hazel Shade, and its final lines show the frailty of his contact with the world of sanity.

When the soul adores Him Who guides it through mortal life, when it distinguishes His sign at every turn of the trail, painted on the boulder and notched in the fir trunk, when every page in the book of one's personal fate bears His watermark, how can one doubt that He will also preserve us through all eternity?

So what can stop one from effecting the transition? What can help us to resist the intolerable temptation? What can prevent us from yielding to the burning desire for merging in God?

We who burrow in filth every day may be forgiven perhaps the one sin that ends all sins.<sup>e</sup> [221-222]

The reader is being tacitly invited to formulate the extremely vivid image of a psychological archetype, a case history (one is reminded of John Ray's attempt to classify Humbert Humbert in the Foreword to *Lolita*) whose peculiar arrangement of balanced mental forces neatly accounts for Kinbote's wild oscillations of personality. With the adoption of such a stance we feel we better understand the editor's desperation to make Shade write about Zembla. Only then, when his dreams have been granted some sort of objective existence apart, outside of themselves, in short, when they have been legitimized, only then can he feel secure. It is surely no accident that the king's by-name encapsulates the aim of Kinbote's dreams, for his only need is to "Be loved."

When in the course of an evening stroll in May or June, 1959, I offered Shade all this marvelous material, he looked at me quizzically and said: 'That's all very well, Charles. But there are just two questions. How can you know that all this intimate stuff about your rather appalling king is true? And if true, how can one hope to print such personal things about people who, presumably, are still alive?'

'My dear John,' I replied gently and urgently, 'do not worry about trifles. Once transmuted by you into poetry, the stuff will be true, and the people will come alive. A poet's purified truth can cause no pain, no offense. True art is above false honour.' [214]

Now, regardless of whether quite such a model Freudian picture is developed by the reader, we are never allowed to forget that an incident like this, as a

*literary* happening, discloses far more complex material than any cut-and-dried psychiatric case study. For example, there is clearly a very keen sense of humour at work (or in play) *on* Kinbote, as, no matter how exhaustive the editor's attempts at self-promotion become, the more completely he undermines the ground beneath him. Thus Kinbote is admonished for his efforts to dominate the book by paying the forfeit himself of acting as the work's chief butt. He is granted a Midas-gift, which the reader perceives as the administration of a traditionally 'poetic justice' - a term which seems more than an especially suitable ironic corrective in these circumstances, it begins to sound disturbingly literal.

At the same time, the edge that this comedy possesses, the awkwardness the reader feels at watching Kinbote repeatedly rush to condemn himself, also facilitates the emergence of a markedly resilient and telling pathos. The editor's all-too evidently sincere belief in the utmost value of the transforming power of the imagination, the essentially Romantic view of its efficacy to transcend the limitations of self and ego, is something that the reader, particularly the reader of footnoted poetry, will be familiar with, and can, as a consequence, easily comprehend, and, in part, even share with Kinbote. However, in this instance, the application of such a tenet goes quite against the directed course of ridding oneself of the taint of self, and instead seeks the exact opposite, namely the total gratification of ego - Kinbote's. The disparity shown up between the lofty expression of disinterested ambition and a completely self-indulgent purpose is so vast that any impression of an easily purchased sentimentality is comprehensively avoided. Indeed, the pathos that does result is of an altogether different order, one truly indicative of the urgency and desperation of a need that has brought about such a dichotomy: for, tied to the comedy is a very affecting sense of isolation, which is per-

haps the only thing in *Pale Fire* that threatens to remove the inverted commas from 'the real.' Kinbote's repeated attempts to raise a hero above the common herd succeeds, not to his advantage, but to his cost, as intention and effect splinter.

In simple words I described the curious situation in which the King found himself during the first three months of the rebellion. He had the amusing feeling of his being the only black piece in what a composer of chess problems might term a king-in-the-corner waiter of the *solus rex* type. [118-119]

The boast is hollow, yet strangely triumphant, for the extravagance and energy of the editor's claims and conceit prevail over any straightforward conformity to a psychological template. Indeed, Kinbote sometimes brings to mind another figure now bestowed with the status of archetype, Shakespeare's Falstaff. In addition to being caught out repeatedly by their respective audiences, both figures, interestingly enough, are also castigated within the environs of their texts: Falstaff, through the device of the mock-robbery at Gad's Hill<sup>9</sup> and the failure of his attempted seductions in Windsor Park:<sup>10</sup> whilst Kinbote actually admits to inventing a variant of Shade's poem that furthers his own Zemblan theme (the "confession" of 227-228 which goes on to become the "contribution" of 314). And yet, despite this double pricking of their self-conceit, within their world and outside it (i.e. within the reader's), both pick themselves up and roll on, indefatigable, but never invulnerable, except to conventional attempts at easy assimilation. The most obvious quality that the pair of them have in common and which solicits the reader's acceptance, catering to his willingness to replace the specific with the general, is, ironically, their respective flair for invention. The steady accumulation of figures besieging



Sir John at Gad's Hill encourages us to be lenient to their creator because it is such a prodigious and ever-swelling fantasy. Similarly, who could resist smiling at the combination of literal-mindedness and wayward originality which marks a footnote like the one on "lemniscate."

'A unicursal bicircular quartic' says my weary old dictionary. I cannot understand what this has to do with bicycling and suspect that Shade's phrase has no real meaning. As other poets before him, he seems to have fallen here under the spell of misleading euphony. To take a striking example: what can be more resounding, more resplendent, more suggestive of choral and sculptural beauty, than the word *coramen*? In reality, however, it merely denotes the rugged strap with which a Zemblan herdsman attaches his humble provisions and ragged blanket to the meekest of his cows when driving them up to the *vebodar* (upland pastures). [136]

Even more brazen and amusing is the manner in which Kinbote uses the text of Shade's poem to promote some of the most delightfully tenuous stopping-off points, a technique that even a master teller of tall tales (Jack Falstaff?) could surely not help but admire:

TV's huge paperclip now shines instead  
Of the stiff vane so often visited  
By the naive, the gauzy mockingbird  
Retelling all the programs she had heard; [35]

*Line 62: often*

Often, almost nightly, throughout the spring of 1959, I had feared for my life. Solitude is the play-field of Satan. I cannot describe the depths of my loneliness and distress. [95]

The net result is that both Nabokov's and Shakespeare's audiences end up indulging what, it must be said, are extremely unattractive figures - the choice between a sack-swilling, press-garging lecher and a pedantic, halitosis-ridden

pederast is anything but an enviable one - and, consequently, both sidestep definite categorisation. This is especially true of Kinbote, who seems to conform exactly to the psychiatrist's archetype discussed earlier, but, as the book draws to a close, even this dramatic and striking image is revealed as a strategy, a means to move inside the reader's guard in order to deliver a beautifully-timed sucker punch.

I shall continue to exist. I may assume disguises, other forms, but I shall try to exist. I may turn up yet, on another campus, as an old, happy, healthy, heterosexual, Russian, a writer in exile, sans fame, sans future, sans audience, sans anything but his art. I may join forces with Odon in a new motion picture: *Escape from Zembla* (ball in the palace, bomb in the palace square). I may pander to the simple tastes of theatrical critics and cook up a stage play, an old-fashioned melodrama with three principles: a lunatic who intends to kill an imaginary king, another lunatic who imagines himself to be that king, and a distinguished old poet who stumbles by chance into the line of fire, and perishes in the clash between the two figments. Oh, I may do many things! {300-301}

Not only does any notion of Kinbote as a comprehensive 'character' abruptly disintegrate as we reach out to embrace it, but yet another variant solution, one that perhaps delves down even further into our much sought for "ultimate truth" and final level of meaning, now presents itself. Previous solutions: first, of Kinbote as king, and later, of Kinbote believing himself a king, have relied on the existence of a Zemblan nation within the world of the book. However, our foundations for such an assumption do not bear up to any rigorous examination, for, as we have already seen, Kinbote would seem to represent what could well be the apogee of another literary convention which *Pale Fire* insistently undermines, that of the unreliable narrator. As editor, Kinbote imparts all the information we receive, and acts as the book's major

voice; so what evidence have we that his country thrives outside of an ever-active imagination?

Aside from newspaper articles in France (L'EX-ROI DE ZEMBLA EST-IL A PARIS? [149]) and America ("He began with the day's copy of *The New York Times*. His lips moving like wrestling worms, he read about all kinds of things. Hrushchov [whom they spelled 'Khrushchev'] had abruptly put off a visit to Scandinavia and was to visit Zembla instead..." [274]), references to Zembla that are not directly given by Kinbote are few and far between, until the documented discussion in the University Faculty Club.

Pictures of the King had not infrequently appeared in America during the first months of the Zemblan Revolution. Every now and then some busybody on the campus with a retentive memory, or one of the clubwomen who were always after Shade and his eccentric friend, used to ask me with the inane meaningfulness adopted in such cases if anybody had told me how much I resembled that unfortunate monarch. I would counter with something on the lines of 'all Chinese look alike' and change the subject.....

In the meantime, at the other end of the room, young Emerald had been communing with the bookshelves. At this point he returned with the T-Z volume of an illustrated encyclopaedia.

'Well,' said he, 'here he is, that king. But look, he is young and handsome' ('Oh, that won't do,' wailed the German visitor.) 'Young, handsome, and wearing a fancy uniform,' continued Emerald. 'Quite the fancy pansy, in fact.'

'And you,' I said quietly, 'are a foul-minded pup in a cheap green jacket.'

'But what have I said?' the young instructor inquired of the company, spreading his palms out like a disciple in Leonardó's *Last Supper*.

'Now, now,' said Shade. 'I'm sure, Charles, our young friend never intended to insult your sovereign and namesake.'

'He could not, even if he had wished,' I observed placidly, turning it all into a joke.

Gerald Emerald extended his hand - which at the moment of writing still remains in that position.

[264, 268-269]

Whilst the final sentence emphasises that even here Kinbote is controlling the narrative, acting as a filter through which everything must pass prior to

reaching us, the manner of this reportage would suggest that Zembla has an independent existence, simply because any endeavour to ridicule Kinbote would surely commence with the most direct means of attack: that of questioning the existence of his country in the first place, rather than taking up the weaker option of mocking the appearance of its monarch. Can this really be regarded as conclusive though? Perhaps Kinbote will only allow a demonstration of the unwarranted persecution he suffers to extend thus far, not deeming it valid to repeat the slanders and slurs of others? And then again, what is the reader to make of the editor's later references to "wild, misty, almost legendary Zembla" [255]? Once more, all we can ascertain with any degree of confidence is the inadvisability of venturing on a conventional reading of *Pale Fire*, of 'getting to the bottom' of this book and securing its solution.

For a reader no longer at ease with the notion of Zembla, or with certain perceptions and deductions about Kinbote which previously served to warrant a 'hold' upon him, the obvious recourse is to turn to the other predominant figures in *Pale Fire*: the many-titled assassin Jakob Gradus (variously "Jack Degree, de Grey, d'Argus, Vinogradus, Leningradus etc." according to the index [307]) and the poet John Shade. The host of pseudonyms adopted by the former would seem to suggest a figure even more overtly protean than Kinbote gradually reveals himself to be. However, such an expectation is rapidly quelled, because, rather than producing an effect of bewilderment and disorientation in the manner of Kinbote, Gradus' various aliases give the reader an early indication of an intention to confirm and reassure our notion of the conventional. Paradoxically enough, in this instance, a host of possible names serve to identify Gradus immediately as a type; the spy cum secret agent who, as a 'master of disguise', features as one of the stalwart figures of the adventure story, has, after all, rapidly become among the most numbingly conventional of

figures. (One has only to think of Baroness Orczy's "Scarlet Pimpernel,"<sup>11</sup> or the amused tolerance with which we regard even one of the more superior forms of such a species, Dickens' shadowy detective in *Bleak House*, Inspector Bucket.)

Moreover, just to push home even further the comforting notion of the adventure story, another genre fiction which ends in solutions as neat as the detective's, figures from such tales do appear in *Pale Fire*: Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, a particular favourite of the young Nabokov,<sup>12</sup> and, judging by their references to him (see 34 and 78) not actively disliked by either Shade or Kinbote, pops up in the book, as too, right at the end, does a reference to a proposed film, "*Escape from Zembla* (ball in the palace, bomb in the palace square)" [301], an idea which obviously recalls Anthony Hope's much-filmed *The Prisoner of Zenda*, another tale involving impersonation in an off-the-map European state, Ruritania. Unfortunately, such direct reassurances are denied to us because of a critical difference between the creations of Conan Doyle and Hope and the being known as Gradus: whereas the implication we are supposed to receive from a Sherlock Holmes is of a richness of character, from which our hero has to select merely one strand which can then be sufficiently developed as to constitute a whole new identity, the reader's impression of Gradus is of a remarkable paucity of character, of nothing save the superficial. This 'secret agent' is so utterly incompetent that he can't even keep his bowels in order [280; 282 and 295], and he is consistently presented to us in the hard unyielding lines of the cartoon, "our clockwork man" [152], so utterly lacking in resource that at one point the narrator peers right through him.

We know already some of his gestures, we know the chimpanzee slouch of his broad body and short hindlegs. We have heard enough about his creased suit. We can at last describe his tie, an Easter gift from a dressy butcher, his brother-in-law in Onhava: imitation silk, colour chocolate brown, barred with red, the end tucked into the shirt between the second and third buttons, a

Zemblan fashion of the nineteen thirties - and a father-waistcoat substitute according to the learned. Repulsive black hairs coat the back of his honest rude hands, the scrupulously clean hands of an ultra-unionized artisan, with a perceptible deformation of both thumbs, typical of bobéche-makers. We see, rather suddenly, his humid flesh. We can even make out (as, head-on but quite safely, phantom-like, we pass through him, through the shimmering propellor of his flying machine, through the delegates waving and grinning at us) his magenta and mulberry insides, and the strange, not so good sea swell undulating in his entrails.

[277-278]

We are reminded of Paduk in *Bend Sinister*, another two dimensional brute (in this case, actually modelled on a cartoon figure, Mr. Etermon<sup>3</sup>) who elicits fear and revulsion, but also a creature never wholly credible. Like his predecessor, Gradus ultimately remains a blot or a blemish, never anything as distinctive, or for the reader, as manageable, as a literary character. In retrospect then, before we reach this rather heightened form of irresolution, our expectations as readers have been raised and dashed, not once, but twice: from viewing the assassin as unmanageable (the profusive number of aliases), to seeing him as complex but manageable (the typical 'secret agent') before deciding that he is in fact so simple as to be unmanageable ("our 'automatic man'" [279]).

And so what of Shade? Interestingly enough, the initial physical cataloguing of the poet proceeds to achieves within a single paragraph what it takes the bulk of an entire book to accomplish with the figure of Kinbote: namely, the formulation of a momentary image which fails to withstand intensive scrutiny - for "even with the best of visions one must touch things to be *quite* sure of 'reality.'"<sup>4</sup> John Francis Shade is drawn for us and then promptly rubbed out before our eyes.

His whole being constituted a mask. John Shade's physical presence was so little in keeping with the harmonies hiving in the man, that one felt inclined to

dismiss it as a coarse disguise or passing fashion; for if the fashions of the Romantic Age subtilized a poet's manliness by baring his attractive neck, pruning his profile and reflecting a mountain lake in his oval gaze, present-day bards, owing perhaps to better opportunities of aging, look like gorillas or vultures. My sublime neighbour's face had something about it that might have appealed to the eye, had it been only leonine or only Iroquoian; but unfortunately, by combining the two it merely reminded one of a fleshy Hogarthian tippler of indeterminate sex. His misshapen body, that grey mop of abundant hair, the yellow nails of his pudgy fingers, the bags under his lustreless eyes, were only intelligible if regarded as the waste products eliminated from his intrinsic self by the same forces of perfection which purified and chiseled his verse. He was his own cancellation. [25-26]

And yet, the reader's urge to locate some sort of stable point from which to approach a work that so evidently and wilfully thrives off inconsistencies, *non-sequiturs* and tangents, tends even to override so direct a rebuff as this. We proceed to latch on to the poet as something dependable, to see the Shade as solid, not just because of a lack of reasonable alternatives, but largely because of the demonstration of a coherent sensibility, as manifest in the poem 'Pale Fire.'

The four cantos of *Pale Fire* are ruminations, equally as flippant as austere, which endeavour to address that hoary question of man's place in the world. Their aim, however, is not necessarily to secure an answer, but rather to cobble together a workable credo which encompasses both a world of great joy (Shade's love for his wife), and considerable pain (the poet's daughter, both in life and in death). The evolution of this final faith has its starting point in a moment after Shade's delivery of a lecture to his American audience (a work with the quintessentially ridiculous title of 'Why Poetry Is Meaningful to Us'), when he suffers a heart attack. While unconscious, the poet glimpses what may constitute an answer to the problem of our 'place,' our "ultimate truth."

A sun of rubber was convulsed and set;  
And blood-black nothingness began to spin  
A system of cells interlinked within  
Cells interlinked within cells interlinked  
Within one stem. And dreadfully distinct  
Against the dark, a tall white fountain played.

I realised, of course, that it was made  
Not of our atoms; that the sense behind  
The scene was not our sense.....

My vision reeked with truth. It had the tone,  
The quiddity and quaintness of its own  
Reality. It was. As time went on,  
Its constant vertical in triumph shone.  
Often when troubled by the outer glare  
Of street and strife, inward I'd turn, and there,  
There in the background of my soul it stood,  
Old Faithful! [59-60]

Some time later, in a magazine, Shade reads an article which recounts how a Mrs. Z. underwent an apparently identical experience. After enduring an extremely uncomfortable meeting with the aforementioned Mrs. Z., (and later capturing her speech patterns in his verse quite beautifully) the poet eventually discovers that the journalist's account was not wholly accurate.

'There's one misprint - not that it matters much:  
*Mountain* not *fountain*. The majestic touch.'

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 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 in it as they who played it found.

[62-63]

What Shade is moving tentatively towards is not something we could confidently call a resolution, for it lacks that requisite sense of termination or finish; instead, there is a note of consolation, a wistful appreciation of the unique



ability of man to form relationships and connections: to link things together in the everyday, and also to fix and hold those connections together in art. But, at the same time, there is always the possibility - in fact, more of a probability - of those links being broken, as represented by the fate of what, at one point, Shade believed had been a permanent solution. The power we all have, to discern "some kind / Of correlated pattern in the game," can, (and perhaps always will?) take us away from the solace of security. If a final instance was ever to be reached, Shade's wry relation of a story that works against himself may well prove to be the most appropriate of available images. Even in that crushingly banal lecture title, together with an implied content that must surely touch upon platitudes along the lines of poetry representing life at its most 'meaningful,' there could well lie a final 'level' of meaning if perhaps we were to invert question and answer. Why is life meaningful to us? Because we can fashion poetry - and, to offer another "contrapuntal theme," does this not take us back (or forwards, depending on the order in which you choose to look at this book's components) to Kinbote's adage: "...we all are, in a sense, poets" [238]? The trite assumes a new air of significance that would appear to be grounded in the reader's awareness of its manifest artificiality and inadequacy, and he therefore values it for precisely these qualities.

As the reader comes increasingly to realise, the *conscious fabrication* of the sort of links and speculations outlined above, constitutes the most appropriate, and the most respectful, of tactics with which to *entertain Pale Fire*. Critically, it is not necessarily the speculations and conclusions drawn that come to matter, but the reader's *involvement* with the text in making them. This is not to ignore the text, but to inhabit it fully, like a garment, and to test, in both senses of the word, its *play*. Moreover, the book provides the most fitting of examples for us (pun intended) in the phenomenon outlined by

Shade: for we should keep uppermost the fact that the poet's formulations were all derived from a mis-reading of a text which he believed to be reliable. But out of this erroneous interpretation came the source of the developing vision of Shade's verse - and, given the most extreme (or the most ideal?) of circumstances, could not such a procedure extend even further, to the production of whole new worlds? Perhaps such a miraculous happening even occurs in this very book?

In the large envelope I carried I could feel the hard-cornered, rubberbanded batches of index cards. We are absurdly accustomed to the miracle of a few written signs being able to contain immortal imagery, involutions of thought, new worlds with live people, speaking, weeping, laughing. We take it for granted so simply that in a sense, by the very act of brutish routine acceptance, we undo the work of the ages, the history of the gradual elaboration of poetical description and construction, from the treeman to Browning, from the caveman to Keats. What if we awake one day, all of us, and find ourselves utterly unable to read? I wish you to gasp not only at what you read but at the miracle of its being readable (so I used to tell my students). Although I am capable, through long dabbling in blue magic, of imitating any prose in the world (but singularly enough not verse - I am a miserable rhymester), I do not consider myself a true artist, save in one matter: I can do what only a true artist can do - pounce upon the forgotten butterfly of revelation, wean myself abruptly from the habit of things, see the web of the world, and the warp and weft of that web. Solemnly I weighed in my hand what I was carrying under my left armpit, and for a moment I found myself enriched with an indescribable amazement as if informed that fire-flies were making decodable signals on behalf of stranded spirits, or that a bat was writing a tale of legible torture in the bruised and branded sky.

I was holding all Zembla pressed to my heart.

[289]

The critical difference between the imaginative productions of Shade and Kinbote is not the most apparent, that of scale and ambition, but rather the existence of a *verifiable* element of deception at the core of the poet's account. It is the printer's error that endows Shade's canto with importance, the incorporation within the verse-framework of an element of falsehood, of

which we have crucially been given some degree of objective proof, namely the testimony of somebody else, the journalist. As a result, the reader is invited to look upon a representation or model which differs radically from the conventional semblance of order to which we grant the status of definite meaning. Instead of offering the reader total order and cohesion, as we see Kinbote striving to do throughout the copious footnotes, which seek to explain and embrace everything in terms of the Zemblan theme, we are presented with a self-declared *illusion* of order which simultaneously draws in disorder and incoherence - the chance element of a possible "misprint." In Kinbote's interpretative model, nothing is allowed to thrive extraneous to Zembla, "a reality that only my notes can provide" [29]; whereas, in Shade's poem, the model is ostentatiously incomplete.

*Man's life as commentary to abstruse  
Unfinished poem. Note for further use.*

[67]

The poet's *modus operandi* here, of building verse upon foundations that ultimately proved unsound - through either falsity (the misprint) or through an absence of explanation (the final line of the poem that we require to label the work a 'true' representation) - provide a far more satisfactory and sophisticated image of humankind endeavouring to come to terms with experience than the "compact knot" of the investigative critic.<sup>15</sup>

Now, to see Kinbote's attempt to finalise meaning as inadequate is a relatively straightforward task, for it is signalled for us by a number of literary strategies used to show his unsuitability for the rôle he seeks, that of an authority. Thus, for example, the editor's account of one of the early

stages of Gradus' pursuit of the king, a meeting with one Gordon Krummholz, "an amusing pet" [310], and, it is strongly implied, an intimate associate of Charles Xavier, is notable for its combination of indistinct remembrance and an all too easily distinguishable note of homosexual desire, as, in the course of a walk to a swimming pool, Gordon goes through a remarkable number of clothing changes.

He had nothing on save a leopard-spotted loin-cloth....  
He put on his sandals and led the way out. Through light and shade walked the strange pair: the graceful boy wreathed about the loins with ivy and the seedy killer in his cheap brown suit with a folded newspaper sticking out of his left-hand coat pocket.  
'That's the Grotto,' said Gordon. 'I once spent the night here with a friend.' Gradus let his indifferent glance enter the mossy recess where one could glimpse a collapsible mattress with a dark stain on its orange nylon. The boy applied avid lips to a pipe of spring water and wiped his wet hands on his black bathing trunks. Gradus consulted his watch.....'By the way, where is he now, that king?'  
'Who knows,' said the boy striking his flanks clothed in white tennis shorts, 'that was last year.'  
.....They had now reached the swimming pool. Gradus, in deep thought, sank down on a canvas stool..... The seat creaked under him and he looked around for another seat. The young woodhouse had now closed his eyes and was stretched out supine on the pool's marble margin; his Tarzan brief had been cast aside on the turf.  
[199, 200-201]

Kinbote's report of an episode which, of course, he could not have witnessed in the first place, is patently distorted by his lust for Gordon, and yet the tone and sensibility exhibited in phrases such as "graceful boy," "avid lips," and "young woodhouse," is so effete that we indulge the editor far more than we condemn him; for to challenge details of dress is not to pose the fundamental question of whether the meeting between Gradus and Gordon Krummholz ever took place at all. Moreover, the extravagance of Kinbote's language is evident here in a term like "young woodhouse," and the abrupt tonal shifts it invariably triggers: the next line curtly cuts short any note of yearning conveyed in the

phrase's ornate and mournfully stylised assonance, with the harshly plosive and guttural matter-of-factness of "Gradus spat in disgust..." [201] All this combines to promote an impression of instability and wayward variation.

Such indistinct figures are typical of those who inhabit Kinbote's world and they remain, like the narrator's prose, disturbing, because, for all the apparent precision of their description, they are never wholly realised. Gordon and Gradus are also a very long way removed from the sort of references a reader might reasonably expect to come across within the confines of a critical commentary. Excluding the editor, is it not significant that only one Zemblan figure, Gradus, has any direct contact with Shade, and that results in the poet's destruction? In short, although it is possible to trace certain parallels between the inhabitants of New Wye and Zembla - a teacher of Freshman English, Gerald Emerald, for example, metamorphosises into Izumrudov, "one of the greater Shadows" (see 24 and 255, where both share "a green velvet jacket"<sup>16</sup>) - the essentially domestic environs of Shade's poem would seem to provide the most absolute of contrasts with the peculiar and quasi-Gothic fairy-tale society of Zembla. Compare the descriptions that the poet and his editor produce on the topic of their respective spouses. First, the critic-king.

Our Prince was fond of Fleur as of a sister but with no soft shadow of incest or secondary homosexual complications. She had a small pale face with prominent cheekbones, luminous eyes, and curly dark hair. It was rumored that after going about with a porcelain cup and Cinderella's slipper for months, the society sculptor and poet Arnor had found in her what he sought and had used her breasts and feet for his *Lilith Calling Back Adam*; but I am certainly no expert in these tender matters. Otar, her lover, said that when you walked behind her, and she knew you were walking behind her, the swing and play of those slim haunches was something intensely artistic, something Arab girls were taught in special schools by special Parisian panders who were afterwards strangled. Her fragile ankles, he said, which she placed very close together in her dainty and wavy walk, were the "careful jewels"

in Arnor's poem about a *miragarl* ('mirage girl'), for which "a dream king in the sandy wastes of time would give three hundred camels and three fountains."

On sagaren werem tremkin tri stana  
Verbala wod gev ut tri phantana

(I have marked the stress accents).

[108]

Then, the poet.

We have been married forty years. At least  
Four thousand times your pillow has been creased  
By our two heads. Four hundred thousand times  
The tall clock with the hoarse Westminster chimes  
Has marked our common hour. How many more  
Free calendars will grace the kitchen door?

I love you when you're standing on the lawn  
Peering at something in a tree: 'It's gone.  
It was so small. It might come back' (all this  
Voiced in a whisper softer than a kiss).  
I love you when you call me to admire  
A jet's pink trail above the sunset fire.  
I love you when you're humming as you pack  
A suitcase or the farcical car sack  
With round-trip zipper.

[43]

Clearly, the emotional colouring and the range of observation and thought we witness in Shade's verse extend over far more easily assimilated experiences than the diverse and wayward wanderings of Kinbote's prose. The poet's work is distinguished by its quiet, rather self-deprecating celebration of his long marriage, and, throughout much of it, the employment of a modest and intimately conversational vocabulary. Altogether, it is an unassuming account which the reader may, without too many qualms, term prosaic. In the other account, however, the reader is faced with a far more lavish vocabulary than that demonstrated by Shade, which makes far more extensive and ostentatious use of linguistic resources. Thus, in the opening sentence of Kinbote's verbal portrait, the reader notes the deployment of alliteration to reinforce meaning

("fond of Fleur"), and the running together of sibilants to draw the sentence together ("soft shadow of incest"). More obviously, whereas Shade's remembrance of his dead daughter causes him to centre his thoughts on the *singularity*, in more than one sense of the word, of his love for his wife; the reaction of Kinbote to the promptings of memory results in the production of a *plurality* of responses, and, especially, the emergence of an overt sexuality that is all the more disturbing for its lack of focus, as "incest," "secondary homosexual complications," a heterosexual "lover," and "special Parisian panders" all make an appearance within the space of a paragraph.

Consequently, the contents of Kinbote's prose present us with confusion (if Otar was Fleur's lover, what exactly was Arnor's relationship with her, especially as we are informed that she acted as a model for "breasts" and "feet" in one of his paintings?); the inexplicable (why should Arnor have followed Fleur "with a porcelain cup and Cinderella's slipper for months"?); and, above all, again quite literally, the fantastic (those "Parisian panders who were afterwards strangled"). The manner, too, in which we are given the final piece of information in this extract compounds the reader's sense of bewilderment yet further, in so far as it appears to mark a return to his commonplace conception of the impartial academic critic - a tenet which has undergone rather a severe test in the lines prior to this. That bald statement, "I have marked the stress accents," no longer carries the same weight of meaning, or conveys the impression of staid critical solidity that one would normally deem appropriate to its position here within the confines of a literary footnote. Indeed, the reader's difficulty in coming up with an all-inclusive response with which he can feel fully satisfied, one that can convincingly contain the text, is a problem of comprehension which we far more readily associate with the effects of poetry rather than prose.

Such an analogy, however, should not make one infer that Shade's poem is by any means always immediately intelligible, as it too possesses its share of ornate language and pays the requisite attention to poetic effect ("the svelte Stilettoes of a frozen stillicide - " [34]), together with allusions that refer to esoteric settings, be they French ("Your great Maybe, Rabelais: / The grand potato - " [52] a pun spotted by Kinbote), or even American ("*Red Sox Beat Yanks 5-4 / On Chapman's Homer*" [36] - the punning baseball headline missed by our editor). Again, the poem does not wholly skirt the obscure either.

Lafontaine was wrong:  
Dead is the mandible, alive the song. [42]

Despite the occasional exception though, the critical point remains, and remains to be exploited by Nabokov: that the ordinary reader is willing to accommodate the presence of certain obscurities in verse far more readily than he is prepared to accept the prevalence of inconsistencies in prose. Simply because of its appearance on the printed page, poetry immediately elicits a far more flexible response from the reader to something like the break-up of syntactical barriers than do challenges to the narrower and more restricted conception we generally have of prose. Thus, shifts in tone and voice of the order we have seen in Kinbote's footnotes, which we can only begin to accommodate within our conventional understanding of prose by taking the most extreme step, that of labelling their narrator insane, can be undertaken in verse in a manner far more satisfactory to all concerned. For example, the second stanza of Shade's very first Canto, demands far less dramatic a readjustment on the part of the reader to his received notion of what constitutes the poetic than the sample of Kinbote's prose we have been discussing.



Retake the falling snow: each drifting flake  
 Shapeless and slow, unsteady and opaque,  
 A dull dark white against the day's pale white  
 And abstract larches in the neutral light.  
 And then the gradual and dual blue  
 As night unites the viewer and the view,  
 And in the morning, diamonds of frost  
 Express amazement: Whose spurred feet have crossed  
 From left to right the blank page of the road?  
 Reading from left to right in winter's code:  
 A dot, an arrow pointing back; repeat:  
 Dot, arrow pointing back ... A pheasant's feet!  
 Torquated beauty, sublimated grouse,  
 Finding your China right behind my house,  
 Was he in *Sherlock Holmes*, the fellow whose  
 Tracks pointed back when he reversed his shoes?

[33-34]

To the reader of modern poetry or academic editions - the being, somewhat more perceptive than the "naïve reader", towards which much of this work is directed - there is very little to prevent him from achieving the sort of rapprochement commensurate with Eliot's dictum of "fragments ... shored against my ruins."<sup>7</sup> However, the very nature of 'Pale Fire', the poem as a consideration of the possibilities open to the artist prior to the act of writing, the work of art as a sorting out, a rehearsal rather than an actuality, also draws upon a literary tradition with which the latterday reader is also fairly familiar, from poets like Eliot, Yeats ('The Circus Animals' Desertion') and Stevens ('Notes Towards A Supreme Fiction'), together with prose writers such as the Gide of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* and the Proust of *A la Recherche De Temps Perdu*.

Interestingly enough, another feature which makes a significant contribution to easing our assimilation of Shade's poem, again something that has become an essentially common literary practice in the twentieth century, and one particularly marked in Eliot's work, is the incorporation within the text of a very self-consciously *literary* field of reference. Indeed, it is no surprise for the perceptive reader to discover that the work of art which gives

Hazel Shade so much trouble in Canto Two and which is caustically summarised as "some phony modern poem" [46] by her father, should turn out to be Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

Nevertheless, Shade's four Cantos are studded with allusions to a host of authors: with explicit 'name checks' being given to writers as varied as Pope [46]; Rabelais [52]; Frost [48]; Shakespeare [68]; Poe [56]; Marvell and Donne [58], and the intriguing coupling of Socrates and Proust [41]. There are also 'guest appearances' by a whole host of literary products which stretch from Swift's *Vanessa* [42] to Dostoevsky's *Karamazov* [57], and even on to Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* [58 - and, judging by the footnote to line 680, unread by Kinbote]. There are several bookish jokes, exemplified by the puns on Rabelais and Keats mentioned earlier, together with the paired locales of Goldsworth and Wordsmith [34] and the local "Crashaw Club" [58], whilst the more scholarly reader is invited to pick out more obscure allusions, ranging from Browning's *Seahorse* (again, spotted by Kinbote - see 58 and 240) to the actions of the poet paring his nails that would seem to suggest a parody of the artistic credo advanced by Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.<sup>18</sup>

That another reader should have raised the possibility of there being just such an allusion here, only to have it curtly denied by the author ("an unpleasant coincidence" replied Nabokov to Alfred Appel's inquiry<sup>19</sup>), provides perhaps the most telling demonstration of just how literary a context the

reader is encouraged to build around Shade's poem, and gives a revealing indication of the extent to which the reader's formulations are governed by the received opinion that one of the predominant modes of what we now understand as the 'poetic,' is the use of the parodic. Strangely enough then, one of the major forces emerging to convince the reader that the claims of Shade's work to be regarded as 'poetic' are valid and that the writer is engaged in forging a 'reality' or 'truth' superior to that which we are accustomed to demand of the prosaic, is the unequivocal manner in which the piece proclaims its origins and its placement in a *fictive* order. Thus, what in effect constitutes the continual reiteration of 'Pale Fire's' falsity acts as an agent authorising its deployment of the sort of shifts, gaps and lapses of surface meaning which we incorporate in our usual conception of the poetic. Perhaps the notion of '*forging* a truth' extends even further than the critical coinage might at first suggest.

Consequently, Shade's text solicits our support for it to be rightly considered within the traditional confines of the 'poetic' by offering us both the essentially mundane, documented actuality of a family group (poet, wife, and daughter), and the world of art that comprises the other important element of Shade's existence. Such a blend, of the expansive vision of art grounded in the middling modesty of domestic life, presents a complete contrast to the soaring flights of fancy we receive from Kinbote.

Your profile has not changed. The glistening teeth  
Biting the careful lip; the shade beneath  
The eye from the long lashes; the peachy down  
Rimming the cheekbone; the dark silky brown  
Of hair brushed up from temple and from nape;  
The very naked neck; the Persian shape  
Of nose and eyebrow, you have kept it all -  
And on still nights we hear the waterfall.

Come and be worshiped, come and be caressed,  
My dark Vanessa, crimson-barred, my blest

Whilst the two facets of the poet's life reinforce each other, Kinbote's imaginative transfiguration of the everyday serves only to highlight the complete lack of interrelation between the domestic and artistic aspects of his existence. Whereas Shade's verse incorporates bathos and self-mockery, any humour coming out of Kinbote's reworkings of the everyday is always involuntary and generally emerges at his expense. Witness the editor's portrayal of his gardener, "Balthasar, Prince of Loam." [98]

.....he was a strong strapping fellow, and I hugely enjoyed the aesthetic pleasure of watching him buoyantly struggle with earth and turf or delicately manipulate bulbs, or lay out the flagged path which may or may not be a nice surprise for my landlord, when he safely returns from England (where I hope no bloodthirsty maniacs are stalking him!). How I longed to have him (my gardener, not my landlord) wear a great big turban, and shalwars, and an ankle bracelet. I would certainly have him attired according to the old romanticist notion of a Moorish prince, had I been a northern king - or rather had I still been a king, (exile becomes a bad habit). [291-292]

If the wanderings of Kinbote's mind serve to betray his ignorance of the need for some sense of proportion and balance to enter into the dealings between the two worlds of art and of the everyday ("Imagination without knowledge leads no further than the backyard of primitive art, the child's scrawl on the fence and *the crank's message in the market place*"<sup>20</sup> - My italics), a similar effect is produced when the editor attempts to draw upon the resources and resonances of the art world. Although Kinbote's references to the literary world are relatively few and far between in comparison with Shade (for once, as one would expect of the critic), those that do occur strive to endorse that "ultimate truth" [215] being propounded by the editor. The most obvious

example of this particular strategy provides one of the most striking metaphors for the limitation of vision brought about by the Zemblan obsession: Kinbote's failure to recognise the source of the poem's title, because his copy of *Timon of Athens* is in Zemblan [285]. And, repeating a device applied to the outlining of Gaston Godin in *Lolita*,<sup>2</sup> the world of literature functions as a signalling agent of other authorial biases:

A tray with fruit and drinks was brought in by a *jeune beauté*, as dear Marcel would have put it, nor could one help recalling another author, Gide the Lucid, who praises in his African notes so warmly the satiny skin of blackimps. [248]

The decadence and sensuality of this prose style is hardly in accordance with the conventional image of the classical literary critic. There is little trace of the latter's supposed dispassionate objectivity here - and yet such meritorious qualities are tacitly claimed from the outset by the physical appearance of Kinbote's book, a scholarly edition, whose "notes, in conformity with custom, come after the poem" [28]. The ease with which self-interest and self-promotion slip out from under the editor's guise of magnanimity in this short extract, and the frequency with which this process recurs in the work as a whole, at times even infers that Kinbote's unwitting course of self-betrayal is perhaps not as inadvertent as it may seem at first glance. It could, in point of fact, suggest the failure of endeavours to blur poetic and prosaic boundaries, 'elevated' and 'everyday' artistic claims, as the former proceeds to justify its traditionally 'superior' status, by discrediting the editor's contentions to appropriate its territory - at least under the colours of critical disinterest and highmindedness he so desperately strives to maintain. Moreover, as these stumbling advances comprise the only account we have, and,

therefore, the only measure against which we can hope to judge the editor, so likewise does Kinbote's personal veracity increasingly come into question. The result? A critic-king is unmasked and stands as a *Pretender* - a title which has rather far-reaching ramifications in this book.

Now, to point out the presence of an imbalance in Kinbote's views and approach is hardly the most onerous of tasks, but if we consider for a moment the notion of existent works of art functioning as a criteria for either condemnation (as with Kinbote), or verification (as with Shade), then it is surely possible to argue for an alternative reading of the same material. Thus, if we have granted Shade's text an authenticity, it is at least partly derived from the touchstone of old texts (we shall return to its other, domestic, base shortly), and the best it can correspondingly hope for in its turn is to sustain just such a rôle itself in the future. This, of course, is precisely the status Kinbote grants "Pale Fire" by using it as his 'old text' or principal source of literary reference. Again, the swift appropriation and slightly more rigorous treatment of familiar patterns combine to show that the neat polarities of Shade (American, artist, and heterosexual lover) opposing Kinbote (European, critic, and pederast) which the ingenuous reader continually pressurises himself to adopt, are anything but clearcut.

Shade, however, does appear to have a distinct advantage over Kinbote in one crucial respect: namely, that his *milieu* is not seen to be wholly dependent upon literary referents and ostentatiously fabricated worlds. The reader of his verse is granted a sight of Shade's operations within domestic environs, living with his wife and daughter and working as a practising poet. In contrast, Kinbote's 'home' environment is that of Zembla, of intrigue and possible reprisal, but, as Mary McCarthy has shown in her fascinating essay on *Pale Fire*,<sup>22</sup> it constitutes, above all, a world which has been manufactured by its

sole inhabitant. "Through long dabbling in blue magic," [289] Kinbote has managed to fashion a largely self-sufficient world, whose origins and derivations we catch an occasional glimpse of when the camouflage is breached momentarily. Hence the Emerald/Izumrudov link; the riddle of Gradus' identity; and the possible existence of that newspaper headline in *The New York Times*. For the most part, we are left to speculate as to whether the inevitable in-fighting within a university provides the rough draft of Kinbote's persecution mania or not, whilst the only piece of information which we are given directly further hampers any satisfactory identification of source material by constituting an explicit fabrication in itself, the poem 'Pale Fire.' Significantly, the essential mystery of the imaginative transformation from source to story is something which the novelist Vladimir Nabokov also takes pains not to reveal.

*Can you tell us something about the actual creative process involved in the germination of a book - perhaps by reading a few random notes for or excerpts from a work in progress?*

Certainly not. No foetus should undergo an exploratory operation.... All I know is that at a very early stage of the novel's development I get this urge to garner bits of straw and fluff, and eat pebbles. Nobody will ever discover how clearly a bird visualises, or if it visualises at all, the future nest and the eggs in it.<sup>23</sup>

Now, of the two aspects of Shade's domestic life that make us so reluctant to look for faults of any kind in his particular findings, let us first examine his occupation as man of letters. This entails, inevitably, a consideration of the sole example of that work, 'Pale Fire.'

As we have already seen, the poem contains a host of bookish references; but the literary figures who seem to stand as its most prominent precursors

are those of Robert Frost (particularly in the dovetailing of mundane actuality and abstract thought, exemplified in lines 525-536 [53]), and, perhaps most notably of all, Alexander Pope (even this editor notes the presence of "a neo-Popian prosodic style" [296]). Like the four Epistles of the latter's *Essay on Man*, Shade's four Cantos attempt to examine what Pope calls in the Argument of the First Epistle, "the Nature and State of Man, with respect to the Universe," and he adopts the same measure, the heroic couplet, as his eighteenth-century antecedent. Moreover, the reader is told on l. 384 [33] that Shade has just concluded a *critical* monograph on Pope - which again refutes any suggestion of easy distinctions between himself and the book's other critic, particularly should the reader recall an earlier admission on the part of Kinbote.

I have reread, not without pleasure, my comments to his lines, and in many cases have caught myself borrowing a kind of opalescent light from my poet's fiery orb, and unconsciously aping the prose style of his own critical essays. [81]

In fact, it is Kinbote who informs the reader that Shade's book is called "*Supremely Blest*, a phrase borrowed from a Popian line, which I remember but cannot quote exactly" [195]. With this in mind, let us turn to Shade's poem, thirty or so lines further on, together with Kinbote's comments upon it.

I went upstairs and read a galley proof,  
And heard the wind roll marbles on the roof.  
"See the blind beggar dance, the cripple sing"  
Has unmistakably the vulgar ring  
Of its preposterous age. Then came your call, [48]

The draft yields an interesting variant:

I fled upstairs at the first quawk of jazz  
And read a galley proof: "Such verses as  
'See the blind beggar dance, the cripple sing,  
The sot a hero, lunatic a king'  
Smack of their heartless age." Then came your call



This is, of course, from Pope's *Essay on Man*. One knows not what to wonder at more: Pope's not finding a monosyllable to replace "hero" (for example, "man") so as to accommodate the definite article before the next word, or Shade's replacing an admirable passage by the much flabbier final text. Or was he afraid of offending an authentic king? [202-203]

The second line from Pope cited here could well function as a summary of *Pale Fire* itself, especially if one recalls the manner in which Shade disarms the reader by quite blatantly undercutting himself when he relates the fountain / mountain incident. In applying Pope's words to the book, not only is the reader given a pinpoint diagnosis of Kinbote's malady, but he is also granted another self-mocking description of its writer, who, conforming to the most stereotyped view of the modern poet, does indeed drink (see 22; 26; and 288), and yet still lays claim to the hero's rôle in his art. Surely it would not be out of keeping for "our poet" - the reader by now has a definite stake in him - to offer such a caustic picture, both of himself and his paranoid neighbour? And yet, retrospectively, the reader cannot be wholly sure that this rough draft actually exists, for, fifteen pages later, we are confronted with the following footnote.

I wish to say something about an earlier note (to line 12). Conscience and scholarship have debated the question, and I now think that the two lines given in that note are distorted and tainted by wishful thinking. It is the *only* time in the course of these difficult comments, that I have tarried, in my distress and disappointment, on the brink of falsification. I must ask the reader to ignore those two lines (which, I am afraid, do not even scan properly). I could strike them out before publication but that would mean reworking the entire note, or at least a considerable part of it, and I have no time for such stupidities. [227-228]

The variant versions incorporated within the text are listed in the Index [314-315], and although the faked draft quoted in the note to line 12 ("Ah, I

must not forget to say something / That my friend told me of a certain king"  
[74]) is not included, other alternative lines are glossed thus:

.....the Zemblan King's escape (K's contribution, 8  
lines), 70; the Edda (K's contribution, 1 line), 79;  
Luna's dead cocoon, 90-93; children finding a secret  
passage (K's contribution, 4 lines), 130 [314]

In the light of the earlier confession cited above, what are we exactly to make of the term "contribution"? That those lines so marked are the parts of Shade's verse most heavily indebted to Kinbote, or, more straightforwardly, that the editor simply wrote them himself? The rough draft which includes Pope's "The sot a hero, lunatic a king" is accounted for in the Index as "additional line from Pope (possible allusion to K)" [315], which, rather surprisingly, only speculates that the editor's direct influence may be discerned - a gesture which now appears as somewhat restrained for what we coming to expect of Kinbote. Together with the fact that the next two lines of the *Essay on Man*, provide Shade with the title of his critique ("The starving chemist in his golden views / Supremely blest, the poet in his muse."<sup>24</sup>) - which is not picked up by Kinbote - (despite his statement that he remembers the phrase on 195), would seem to suggest that this particular variant is more likely to be the work of the poet than his editor.

What is more intriguing, however, and what begins to suggest that the works of Pope may make a significant contribution to that much longed for definitive solution to *Pale Fire*, is the direct reference to Kinbote's homeland, Zembla, thirty or so lines prior to the extract Shade does actually use within his poem.

But where th'Extreme of vice, was ne'er agreed:  
Ask where's the North? at York, 'tis on the Tweed;  
In Scotland, at the Orcades; and there,  
At Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where.  
No creature owns it in the first degree,  
But thinks his neighbour farther gone than he.<sup>25</sup>

Zembla here represents something more than an actual place (Nova Zembla); the context endows it with something of the mythic, the rôle that Kinbote confers upon it with the book's final words, the definition of Zembla given in the Index.

*Zembla*, a distant northern land.

[315]

The question which these findings subsequently raise is whether or not we can detect another possible source of Kinbote's fantasy in Pope's citation of Zembla: has the editor taken it up from the eighteenth century poet, and consequently tailored it to his own idiosyncratic requirements? At the same time, the line does select Zembla as a possible location for "th'Extreme of vice," not the sort of claim, one would imagine, that Kinbote would be eager to make on behalf of his homeland. What is more, the last two lines quoted could also be seen as an interesting challenge to a maker of fictions: 'Why not create a figure who could be viewed as an "extreme of vice" - and therefore, barely constitute a recognisable character, since what is vice but the misrepresentation of humanity? - and locate this creature within a work of fiction as an actual "neighbour" from Zembla?' As for his occupation, this too may be suggested by other literary references to Zembla, such as the country's appearance in a work written by Pope's close friend, Jonathan Swift.

a malignant Deity call'd *Criticism*. She dwelt on the Top of a snowy Mountain in *Nova Zembla*; there *Momus* found her extended in her Den, upon the Spoils of numberless Volumes half devoured. At her right Hand sat *Ignorance*, her Father and Husband, blind with Age; at her left, *Pride* her Mother, dressing her up in the Scraps of Paper herself had torn. There, was *Opinion* her sister, light of Foot, hoodwinkt, and headstrong, yet giddy and perpetually turning. About her play'd her Children, *Noise* and *Impudence*, *Dullness* and *Vanity*, *Positiveness*, *Pedantry*, and *Ill-Manners*.<sup>26</sup>

To erect such a structure would of course require the sort of specialised knowledge of eighteenth century literature which Shade demonstrates in his pun on Swift's poem 'Cadenus and Vanessa' (see ll's 269-271 [42-43]) - or again, the perspicacity Kinbote shows in spotting the allusion [172]. *Pale Fire's* strongest Swiftian link is, however, not with his poetry or *The Battel of the Books*, but rather with *A Tale of a Tub*. Its bewildering shifts of tone and voice culminate in 'A Digression on Madness', the chapter brought to the mind of the book's intended audience, the reader we shall term the 'naïve scholar,' by Kinbote's all too guileless reflection upon noting Shade's allusion:

I notice a whiff of Swift in some of my notes. I too am a desponder in my nature, an uneasy, peevish, and suspicious man, although I have my moments of volatility and *fou rire*. [173]

Ascertaining Shade's and Kinbote's relative familiarity with the works of Swift thus emerges as a practice which only achieves what could be termed the characteristic response to the latter's writings, an extremely profound sense of disturbance and perplexity. Consequently, let us return to the poems of Pope, a subject about which we are relatively sure that the knowledge of the poet outstrips that of the editor, to trace the Zemblan motif therein.

Zembla's earliest manifestation in Pope's verse is in 'The Temple of Fame,' where in fact it is described thus:

So *Zembla's* Rocks (the beauteous work of Frost)  
Rise white in Air, and glitter o'er the Coast  
Pale Suns, unfelt, at distance roll away,  
And on th'impassive Ice the Lightnings play:  
Till the bright Mountains prop th'incumbent Sky:  
As *Atlas* fixed, each Hoary Pile appears,  
The gather'd Winter of a thousand Years.<sup>27</sup>

If we retain the common eighteenth century practice of capitalising nouns, not only is Frost invoked, the poet with whom Shade is most commonly bracketted ("my name / Was mentioned twice, as usual just behind / (one oozy footstep) Frost" [48]), but so too is the heat of "Pale Suns," only the shortest of distances from *Pale Fire*. By now, one feels it to be inevitable rather than appropriate that Pope should give his reader a footnote to his description, and one that has some import for the reader of Nabokov's book.

Tho a strict Verisimilitude be not requir'd in the Descriptions of this visionary and allegorical kind of Poetry, which admits of every wild Object that Fancy may present in a Dream, and where it is sufficient if the moral meaning atone for the Improbability: Yet Men are naturally so desirous of Truth, that a Reader is generally pleas'd in such a Case, with some Excuse or Allusion that seems to reconcile the Description to Probability and Nature. The Simile here is of that sort, and renders it not wholly unlikely that a Rock of Ice should remain for ever, by mentioning something like it in the Northern Regions, agreeing with the accounts of our modern Travellers.<sup>28</sup>

As Pope strives to show that the image he has employed has some basis in documented fact, in short, to convince us of its 'reality,' his observation concerning the reader's urge to "to reconcile the Description to Probability

and Nature" points precisely toward the impulse that so much of *Pale Fire* is designed to play off and exploit.

Zembla's other manifestation in the works of Pope is in *The Dunciad*, the poem which is, of course, presided over by Dulness, a literary feature, which, once more, provides a further variant view of many of the concerns of *Pale Fire*. Moreover, the specific context in which it crops up is during an attack on verbal inconsistency, again an issue which the reader of *Pale Fire* cannot avoid but find richly appropriate.

And ductile dulness new meanders takes;  
There motley Images her fancy strike,  
Figures ill paired, and Similes unlike.  
She sees a Mob of Metaphors advance,  
Pleas'd with the madness of the mazy dance  
How Tragedy and Comedy embrace;  
How Farce and Epic get a jumbled race;  
How Time himself stands still at her command,  
Realms shift their place, and Ocean turns to land.  
Here gay Description Egypt glads with show'rs,  
Or gives to Zembla fruits, to Barca flow'rs;  
Glitt'ring with ice here hoary hills are green.  
In cold December fragrant chaplets blow,  
And heavy harvests nod beneath the snow.  
All these, and more, the cloud-compelling Queen  
Beholds thro fogs, that magnify the scene.  
She, tinsell'd o'er in robes of varying hues,  
With self-applause her wild creation views;  
Sees momentary monsters rise and fall,  
And with her own fool's-colours gilds them all.<sup>29</sup>

The temptation to proclaim Kinbote a servant of "the cloud-compelling Queen" (itself a term which could be taken as a coarse description of the editor, but I am no Gerald Emerald) is almost overpowering, especially when we glance back at the sort of footnote typified by that to line 231.

A beautiful variant, with one curious gap, branches off at this point in the draft (dated July 6):

Strange Other World where all our still-born dwell,  
And pets, revived, and invalids, grow well,  
And minds that died before arriving there:  
Poor old man Swift, poor --, poor Baudelaire

What might that dash stand for? Unless Shade gave prosodic value to the mute e in "Baudelaire," which I am certain he would never have done in English verse (c.p. "Rabelais," line 501), the name required here must scan as a trochee. Among the names of celebrated poets, painters, philosophers, etc. known to have become insane or to have sunk into senile imbecility, we find many suitable ones. Was Shade confronted by too much variety with nothing to help logic choose and so left a blank, relying upon the mysterious organic force that rescues poets to fill it in at its own convenience? Or was there something else - some obscure intuition, some prophetic scruple that prevented him from spelling out the name of an eminent man who happened to be an intimate friend of his? Was he perhaps playing safe because a reader in his household might have objected to that particular name being mentioned? And if it comes to that, why mention it at all in this tragical context? Dark, disturbing thoughts. [167-168]

What these Popian echoes and apparent foreshadowings are pushing increasingly to the fore is the question of whether Kinbote actually has an independent existence of his own, or is instead a creation of Shade, an artist familiar with eighteenth century literature. Certainly, another extremely perplexing pair of lines in Shade's poem which the reader was previously obliged to take up as a rather uncanny presentiment of the fate awaiting his verse, now assumes a different complexion.

*Man's life as commentary to abstruse  
Unfinished poem. Note for further use.*

[67]

Why "further use"? Perhaps that particular tactic is being deployed right now?

Within *The Dunciad* there is another, essentially literary figure, apart from Dulness, who could also be viewed as a noteworthy antecedent of Kinbote, one Annus, who, in a footnote accredited by Pope's first independent editor, William Warburton, to be the result of a collaboration between himself and the poet,<sup>30</sup> is described as "the Monk of Viterbo, famous for many Impositions and

Forgeries of ancient manuscripts, which he was prompted to by mere Vanity..."<sup>31</sup>  
The lines introducing this pious faker also rather strangely incorporate a reference to a "well dissembled em'rald;"<sup>32</sup> the stimulus for another figure within *Pale Fire*, or just a coincidence? And even more puzzling is the opening description of *The Dunciad's* Third Book, where Pope's "hero", the poet recently crowned 'King Log' by Dulness, journeys to the Elysian Shade:

And now, on Fancy's easy wing convey'd  
The King descending view th'Elysian Shade.  
A slip-shod Sibyl led his steps along,  
In lofty madness meditating song;<sup>33</sup>

Not only is the reader faced with the explicit notion of a "Sibyl" acting as a source of inspiration, a rôle played by our poet's wife ("And all the time, and all the time, my love, / You too are there, beneath the word, above / The syllable, to underscore and stress / The vital rhythm." [68]), but both her fore and surnames appear on alternate lines of Pope's verse, "Sibyl/Sybil" and "Shade." At the same time, however, one finds it unavoidable to forget that similar observations have been made by other critics of other poets.

*Line 17:* And then the gradual; *Line 29:* gray

By an extraordinary coincidence (inherent perhaps in the contrapuntal nature of Shade's art) our poet seems to name here (gradual, gray) a man, whom he was to see for one fatal moment three weeks later, but of whose existence at the time (July 2) he could not have known. [77]

One moment: if we look back at Zembla's appearance in Epistle Two of the 'Essay on Man' once more, do we not now notice the presence of a "degree"<sup>34</sup> - and is not that one of Gradus' many aliases? (Mary McCarthy goes even further



in suggesting that those opposing King Charles gain their title of "Extremists" from this same extract.<sup>35</sup>) And what of Charles Xavier's mother, Queen Blenda: is she not a mere misprint away from the Belinda of 'The Rape of the Lock', a work which is also strewn with a number of puns on the word "botkin"?<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, Dr. Johnson, whose relationship with Boswell is the first literary referent that the reader of *Pale Fire* is granted,<sup>37</sup> comments on the methods of poetic composition available to a writer in his *Preface to Pope* in a manner very much akin to that which leads off Shade's final Canto, and, a few pages later, he says of Pope's voluminous notes to his translation of *The Illiad*

.... though they were undoubtedly written to swell the volumes, (they) ought not to pass without praise: commentaries which attract the reader by the pleasure of perusal have not often appeared: the notes of others are read to clear up difficulties, those of Pope to vary entertainment.<sup>38</sup>

Another pointer to *Pale Fire*? As Kinbote himself muses, "Dark, disturbing thoughts." Or perhaps the ideal reader of *Pale Fire* would now muse on a question not to be explicitly framed until Nabokov's *next* book.

.....but for the moment I am not going to enlarge upon the uncanny element particular to dreams - beyond observing that 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 a new truth ('Tell me,' says Osberg's little gitana to the Moors, El Motela and Ramera, 'what is the precise minimum of hairs on a body that allows one to call it 'hairy'?)<sup>39</sup>

The notion of fiction as no more than an amalgam of enforced coincidences is something with which *Pale Fire* flirts most beguilingly - as evinced in the

fact that Kinbote does indeed possess the Shakespeare play from which Shade derives the title of his poem, so making his "luck....a statistical monster" [285]. (This particular theme is one which is deployed to considerable effect in *The Gift* in the near-meetings which precede the love affair of Fyodor Godunov-Cherdynstev and Zina Shchyogolev, before being subjected to the more rigorously controlled metaphysical experiment that is *Transparent Things*.) However, what we can remark upon with some confidence is that the echoes of the work of Locke, Pope, Swift and Johnson all encourage the extended application of Kinbote's key description of his homeland to the world of Shade.

....in fact the name Zembla is a corruption not of the Russian *zemlya*, but of Semberland, a land of reflections, of 'resemblers' - [265]

The tacit invitation which the reader first took from the text; to dismiss the world of Zembla as patently 'unreal' in favour of investing belief in Shade's small-town world of domestic trivia, of "free calendars" [43], "Mah-jongg" [46], and dining "at half past six" [68], is now shown to be misplaced. For how can the poet's world present us with an adequate measure of the 'real' when we are even beginning to suspect that Shade's wife may have her origins in mere *coincidence*, the existence of proximate nouns as seen and worked on by a poet.

Then there is also his daughter, Hazel Shade, perhaps the closest that the book comes to providing a sacrificial victim to the devouring assimilations of the reader: the *stereotype* - in this instance, 'the problem teenager,' "difficult, morose - / But still my darling" [45]. Paradoxically, the reason why Hazel appears as a figure closer to a more traditional conception of

"character" than most, is because she stands, to a large extent, outside the interplay between Shade and Kinbote which takes up most of the book. Allied to this is an extremely strong desire on the part of the reader to regard Hazel's character as something definite, an existence which we can both locate and finalise, because her paramount importance resides in her termination, her death. In short, she has been concluded; whereas, although we are also informed of her father's death at the outset of *Pale Fire*, her father resists evaluation through the productions of his art, a creation that installs a screen between himself and a judging reader in the same way that Humbert's testimony functions in *Lolita*. That Hazel's resistance to interpretation should take the form of breaking down language through anagrams and word reversals (see 45 and 188-189), and not seek the frail and careful order "in terms of combinational delight" [69] that Shade attains in his poetry, is again also something to which we can easily attach significance. Such a standpoint, crucially, also enlists the actual manner of her death in support of its argument, labelling it as both a metaphorical and a horribly literal attempt to get beneath the surface of things.

However, Mary McCarthy, the first critic to note the importance of Pope to *Pale Fire*, has performed one invaluable piece of critical detective work by tracing Hazel Shade's birthplace to a literary source,<sup>40</sup> and so disrupting the neatness of the stance that this line of thought facilitates. We can find Shade's child in an even longer poem than the one in which she now resides, a work which, not too surprisingly for the reader now, is constructed in Cantos and printed with explanatory notes, just like "our poet's" (and whose notes are credited to the author of the poem....), Sir Walter Scott's *The Lady of the Lake*.

In lone Glenartney's hazel shade;<sup>41</sup>

*The Lady of the Lake?* What are we now to make of Hazel Shade's death by drowning in our sought-for network of causal or allegorical ties?

What even this somewhat cursory examination of Shade's rôle as a literateur has perhaps now disclosed, is something of the workings of a text which persistently offers the *promise* of the revelation of "an ultimate truth" [215], only as a lure. By reneging repeatedly on this promise, and yet still holding the fascination of the reader, the prose doubly enforces its resistance / opposition to those who would like to bestow upon the fiction the certainty which we allocate to fact (or reserve for the world of art as provider of 'higher' truths). Rather than teasing out meaning, we are teased by it.

Inevitably, however, the nature of the linguistic terms which the reader finds himself employing during any discussion of this authorial technique of displacement, help to foster a reading of the book as precisely that "series of levels" which he must find more and more inadequate as a responsive formulation. The problem of language's propensity for essentially linear rank-orientated systems, even when a writer is striving against just that sort of prescription, is something which *Pale Fire* endeavours to address in a far more thoroughgoing fashion than previous Nabokov novels. To put it bluntly, the shifts and realignments that the reader is directed towards making in this book are not to any 'deeper' or more 'profound' level of meaning, nor to any 'higher truth'; and to talk of *Pale Fire* as *undermining* expectation is to give emphasis more to the violence of the disruption than to posit a new hierarchical system. Instead of directing oneself towards a central meaning, one may perhaps receive greater benefits from actively working around options

governed by the text. Thus, for example, we do not move away from the notion of Shade as 'a man of letters,' rather we adopt a new slant: not only Shade, but his family too, are men of letters; they are formed of ink and typographical spacing.

As we have noted in those earlier works, one of Nabokov's most telling effects is not of a final denouement, but of dismantlement, as the book proceeds to expose its own scaffolding. In this respect it might be helpful to consider *Pale Fire* as an artefact which has somehow managed to clear for itself, and is now established within, its own space: the reader aligns himself in relation to this artefact, but does not pursue a linear or time-orientated course. Perhaps the most helpful comparison is to imagine a reading of the book as acting out the process undertaken by a sculptor in carving a figure out of a block of stone: initially he draws an outline on the face of the slab, that is, a two-dimensional representation, and then gradually he cuts deeper to create a three-dimensional composition that claims its own space. The resultant form positively *demand*s to be seen from several points of view. Thus we move from front to back, left side becomes right, and right, left; the sinister, dextrous, the dextrous, sinister.....Kinbote, Shade, Shade, Kinbote?

The most striking example of this sort of effect being sought for through verbal devices is, of course, the manner in which Nabokov's book is set out as Foreword, Poem, Commentary and Index, that is, as a collection of documents. Needless to say, this raises numerous possibilities of ordering the material, and these are immediately opened out for the reader by Kinbote at the end of his Foreword - itself a piece of prose to which the reader of poems accompanied by commentaries is likely to arrive at last!

To this poem we must now turn. My Foreword has been, I trust, not too skimpy. Other notes, arranged in a running commentary, will certainly satisfy the most voracious reader. Although these notes, in conformity with custom, come after the poem, the reader is advised to consult them first and then study the poem with their help, rereading them of course as he goes through its text, and perhaps, after having done with the poem, consulting them a third time so as to complete the picture. I find it wise in such cases as this to eliminate the bother of back-and-forth leafings by either cutting out and clipping together the pages with the text of the thing, or, even more simply, purchasing two copies of the same work which can then be placed in adjacent positions on a comfortable table.... [28]

Such a clear refutation of linear time, together with the denial of consistent characterisation and plot formulation, is clearly designed to prevent the mastication of *this* text by "the most voracious reader" [28]. In this group one would have to include those who debate the issue of Shade and Kinbote's relative priority<sup>42</sup> - a concern, one might now venture to suggest, that the critic detective should perhaps term a red-herring. Shade and Kinbote are, after all, no more than narrative poses, voices who cut across each other - in so far as one of them (Shade) states: "Resemblances are the shadow of differences." [265]

What may seem to be the most fundamental of schisms is, in this book, drawn surprisingly close together. Thus, for example, although the reader is not on the whole dissuaded from interpreting Shade's poem as the expression of a quasi-Romantic sensibility in which the production of the artefact emerges as of paramount importance, even to the extent of overhauling death ("I feel I understand / Existence, or at least a minute part / Of my existence, only through art," [68-69]), it is also notable that it is precisely this stand which is refuted in favour of the human society of the everyday.

And I'll turn down eternity unless  
The melancholy and the tenderness

Of mortal life; the passion and the pain;  
The claret taillight of that dwindling plane  
Off Hesperus; your gesture of dismay  
On running out of cigarettes; the way  
You smile at dogs; the trail of silver slime  
Snails leave on flagstones; this good ink, this rhyme,  
This index card, this slender rubber band  
Which always forms, when dropped, an ampersand,  
Are found in Heaven by the newlydead  
Stored in its strongholds through the years.

[53]

The effect on the reader of the narrative's apparent hortations and near-retractions is to frustrate his desire to construct a hierarchy of meaning. A system hitherto topped by the benign sovereignty of art is perhaps now under threat, and, what is more, the habitual response of all readers, a realignment of ranks through which new emphases and stresses can be absorbed, only leads to further disturbing consequences. To reconcile the art-world with the domestic, the obvious step to take would involve widening our 'literary catchment area.' However, to do so would surely oblige us to incorporate a consideration which we would have perhaps hoped to discard: the possibility that Sybil Shade may very well be an art-product of John Shade's. Once we have resorted to such a measure, then there is no longer any opposition: Shade turns down the joys of art in favour of those offered by one of his own creations.

Alternatively, let us retain the option that Sybil Shade does have an objective existence within the society of New Wye, and examine that most pointed of contrasts between the domestic lives of "our poet" and his editor. Notwithstanding the fact that the life "enjoyed" by Shade incorporates the pain of his daughter's death, it still thrives, largely due to the support and consoling presence of another person apart from himself, in the form of his wife. This mundanely intimate involvement could not make more of a contrast with the exotic imaginative backdrops dreamt up by Kinbote, nor, more import-

antly, could it better point up the extent of the editor's isolation. (His abortive associations with his students are fleetingly and pathetically alluded to in the text, for example, at 26-27 and 97). Even if we choose for the moment to ignore the most immediately obvious interpretation of Kinbote's homosexual leanings, as representative of the obsessional and potentially solipsistic, - an endeavour to find love in his own image - then there still remains a tendency to condemn the editor for his failure to achieve what the poet manages - namely, to seek and attain somebody else's love.

And yet: if one looks closely at the attachment between the Shades, and especially the manner in which the poet maintains the all-pervasive nature of Sybil's presence - as always with him, "beneath the word, above / The syllable" [68] - we might well envisage an alternative perspective for the reader which the text is just as easily able to support. The love John Shade has for his wife is shown to make her the sole focus of all activity. This is a conventional enough picture which is taken further along notionally "poetic" lines by his surrender to her of the ability to endow the material with meaning - or, as it is more familiarly expressed, his wife makes John Shade's life 'worth living.' However, what are we to think when this licence is extended - the 'law' taken to the very letter - to allow Sybil to transform the very meaning of her husband's words - words which we traditionally value more than most, for they are a poet's words?

To encourage such changes ("And all in you is youth, and you make new, / By quoting them, old things I made for you" [68]), does this not bring into question the poet's fitness for the status of lover, or even perhaps what truly forms the lover, in so far as such a path appears to lead only to the most dangerous of tautologies: the complete loss of self in self? For this would surely be the logical result of an exchange of verses between the couple (and,



implicitly, all exchanges?): with Shade consigning himself to a round of endless and obsessive, examinations of the body of material which he himself has generated. Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* provides an extremely stimulating perusal of such topics; it points to considerations which begin to draw Shade and Kinbote rather closer together than one might have anticipated.

for me, an amorous subject, everything which is new, everything which disturbs, is received not as a fact but in the aspect of a sign which must be interpreted. From the lover's point of view, the fact becomes consequential because it is immediately transformed into a sign: it is the sign, not the fact, which is consequential (by its *aura*). If the other has not given me this new telephone number, what was that the sign of? Was it an invitation to telephone *right away*, for the pleasure of the call, or only *should the occasion arise*, out of necessity? My answer itself will be a sign, which the other will inevitably interpret, thereby releasing, between us, a tumultuous maneuvering of images. *Everything signifies.*<sup>43</sup>

.....Werther is not perverse, he is in love: he creates meaning, always and everywhere, out of nothing, and it is meaning which thrills him: he is in the crucible of meaning. Every contact, for the lover, raises the question of an answer: the skin is asked to reply.<sup>44</sup>

It is interesting to note that Barthes' final observation, "the skin is asked to reply", makes exactly the sort of bid to break down verbal oppositions and philosophical polarities to which *Pale Fire* so patently aspires. If we were to adopt Barthes' extremely plausible meditations, then what kind of light would be shed upon Kinbote's thoroughgoing treatment of the poem, 'Pale Fire'? For there is surely a desire as strong as that uniting the Shades in Kinbote's passion to interpret every nuance of 'Pale Fire.' (And perhaps it is now opportune to remember, that, after all, that supposedly normative relationship could constitute an *affaire* between a writer and his text too.) Thus, like the most avid of lovers, even the most trivial of details is treasured. Indeed, one suspects that both Barthes and Nabokov would argue that the presence of

exactly recorded and sensuously registered trace elements may well prove to be the most important criteria of all.

'In art, the roundabout hits the centre....Caress the details,' Nabokov would utter, rolling the r, his voice the rough caress of a cat's tongue, 'the divine details!'<sup>45</sup>

The incident is trivial (it is always trivial) but it will attract to it whatever language I possess.<sup>46</sup>

The parallels between the interpretative activity undertaken by both Shade and Kinbote are nonetheless, for the most part, only discreetly suggested by the text. However, there is one notable instance when such a comparison is quite openly solicited; when, towards the end of his Commentary, Kinbote actually places his response to Shade's text within the linguistic boundaries of a love affair, albeit homosexual in implication. The effect of the analogy upon the reader admittedly encompasses the comic, as we again witness Kinbote's mask of objectivity torn away, but the sense of disappointed affection which it engenders comes across as equally valid, just as 'real.'

I started to read the poem. I read faster and faster. I sped through it, snarling, as a furious young heir through an old deceiver's testament. Where were the battlements of my sunset castle? Where was Zembla the Fair? Where her spine of mountains? Where her long thrill through the mist? And my lovely flower boys, and the spectrum of the stained windows, and the Black Rose Paladins, and the whole marvelous tale? Nothing of it was there! The complex contribution I had been pressing upon him with a hypnotist's patience and a lover's urge was simply not there. Oh, but I cannot express the agony! Instead of the wild glorious romance - what did I have?.....

Gradually I regained my usual composure. I reread *Pale Fire* more carefully. I liked it better when expecting less....I now felt a new, pitiful tenderness toward the poem as one has for a fickle young creature who has been stolen and brutally enjoyed by a black giant but now again is safe in our hall and park, whistling with the stableboys, swimming with the tame seal. The spot still hurts, it must hurt, but with

strange gratitude we kiss those heavy wet eyelids and  
caress that polluted flesh. [296-297]

Who then lavishes the greater love, the more complete act of total attention, the poet or the editor?

Another demonstration of the sort of blurring of oppositions (which will receive even more extensive treatment in *Ada*) is provided in this text by Nabokov's anticipation and forestalling of readings which we would deem more subtle than those sought by the being Kinbote terms "the voracious reader" [28] - the ingenuous figure who consumes the text whilst hunting for "an ultimate truth" [215] as though it was a sixpence in a Christmas pudding. If, as we have repeatedly seen, such naïvete is perpetually disappointed by a text that refuses to be so devoured, then it is of value to look at the manner in which Nabokov entertains the more sophisticated literary palate, how he panders to what we may describe as the refined appetite. Such a reader will not seek the homogeneity and order bound within the "one compact knot," to return to an old metaphor, instead, he will expect to be presented with an interpretation and reading of experience *within the text* that points to life as essentially aleatory: a laying out of threads and skeins.

Thus we arrive at the position whereby, for the sophisticated reader (and, it must not be forgotten, for the poet himself), Shade's poem only assumes the function of a verifiable representation of experience when it is discovered that the poet's reflections are centred on error, on the printer's misprint. Only when he is told that his hypotheses have been stimulated by a mistake can Shade compose an artwork capable of appeasing both his own demands and the more developed tastes of his readers. Moreover, such sophisticated customers are consequently placed in the at first peculiar posi-

tion of hoping, not for verifiable truth in the text, but instead for verified error (which in this instance is crucially granted). When that position is confirmed, when Shade's offering can be expanded to fashion an entity that incorporates the possibility of error; if you like, of a certain indigestibility, only then will the hunger of the sophisticated reader, somewhat paradoxically, be satisfied. To put it less circumspectively, what the reader confronts in *Pale Fire* is a representational model that contains within it the means to discredit itself.

It is perhaps Nabokov's most eloquent and subtle variation on the rather grand effects that have hitherto tended to mark the end of his fictions. Witness the total collapse of subject / object relations in the final pages of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*; Pnin's abrupt sidestep away from the text of a book that can purportedly attempt to explain him, or the explicitly theatrical retreat that concludes an early work like *Invitation to a Beheading*. This is not to claim, of course, that there is *no* disruption of reader-text relations at the end of *Pale Fire* itself, but rather the reader of this book, even the most naïve - cannot but have less faith in any semblance of linear narrative coherence than he may choose to retain at the end of *Pnin* or even when faced with the startling dismissal of reader empathy that comes at the end of *Bend Sinister*. After all, it should be remembered that the books which preceded *Pale Fire* have, to a large extent, utilised and exploited stock novelistic forms (the "college novel" and the invariably labelled 'disturbing' "political satire" in the last two cited instances) in order to then oblige the reader to look anew at their pretensions to truth, and even perhaps to see them as accommodating that claim, of *pretension*, more thoroughly than he previously suspected.

In performing such a task, however, the fictions have still been forced to offer some sort of echo of conventional formats even through their parody: for to mock is in part to acknowledge existence. This issue reached its apogee, of course, in what now appears to be the most quintessentially Nabokovian of jokes and reversals, the massive financial success of the author's reworking of what is among the most restrictive and banal of literary forms, the titillating confessional. Ironically, Nabokov's *public* status as a novelist, (a concern which will itself be treated in *Look at the Harlequins*), that is, his place in the world of bestsellerdom and of the middlebrow debate on the morality of "that book they even banned in France"<sup>47</sup> - still the issue given most critical attention - is founded on the strength of the public's desire to allocate *Lolita* a place within a tradition that it sought to bury.

One of the functions of all my novels is to prove that the novel in general does not exist. The book I make is a subjective and specific affair.<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, that Nabokov's popular persona - "*Lolita* is famous, not I. I am an obscure, doubly obscure novelist with an unpronounceable name."<sup>49</sup> - should be viewed as largely based on a misreading, is a happening so fitting that one is tempted to view it as designed. It could even be argued that it provides Nabokov with a far more appropriate literary niche than the slot between *Lady Chatterly's Lover* and *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, namely as a scion of the persecuted and noble line that includes *Fathers and Sons*, *Madame Bovary*, and *Ulysses*.

Returning to *Pale Fire*, Shade's distinctive representation of experience, his poem, is a likeness of life which endeavours to retain within an overt,

somewhat archaic literary form involving cantos and couplets, the possibility of imminent revision and reappraisal - for both maker and reader. Furthermore, it raises considerable difficulties of evaluation even for what we would presume to be the more flexible expectations of a sophisticated reader. If, as we have proposed earlier, the latter's claim to sophistication lies in a greater, or at least more apparent, willingness than his naïve counterpart to envisage an authorial creation of a world as something not wholly finished or completely bound down - in short, to concede that "loose ends" may more closely approach verisimilitude than the coherent entity of what the fictional detective calls the "one compact knot" and what Kinbote calls "an ultimate truth" [215] - then the typist's error which stimulates the poem, 'Pale Fire,' provides for such a reader an ideal trope with which to try to circumscribe that area of uncertainty and inaccessibility which prevents man from ever completely attaining or representing the harmonious formulation of our universe we could justifiably term the 'real.' The optimism of Shade's "favourite Pope" [250] - "All nature is but Art, unknown to thee; / All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see; / All Discord, Harmony, not understood: / All partial Evil, universal Good..."<sup>50</sup> - now offers more and more of a counter-theme.

However, if the presence of error acts to guarantee the verisimilitude of the mimetic model for the sophisticated reader, how is he supposed to then regard the other version of the 'real' submitted in this piece, that of Zembla, arguably a world even more surely founded - if this is possible - on error and misreadings? Although the space which is tacitly offered for our involvement within Shade's text (through the use of devices like the misprint and the implication of another line to follow the nine hundred and ninety-ninth line of the poem), will support any claims Shade's vision may make to be rightfully

upheld as pre-eminent (in so far as his world remains largely open to us, whilst that proffered by his editor seeks to exclude its public through the dictatorship of figures and definitions grounded wholly in terms of Zembla), nonetheless, the sophisticated reader cannot avoid feeling somewhat ill at ease with even so rarefied a literary paradigm as Shade's.

Such doubts are further exacerbated by additional considerations, of which by far and away the most glaring is just how ornate Kinbote's imaginative construction is and the magnitude of the scale upon which it has been built. Indeed, the relationship between Commentary and Poem often seems like that of a young cuckoo to a sparrow, as Kinbote's edifice threatens to overshadow the more subtle finesse of Shade's miniature. Consequently, to view the Commentary along the lines of a cautionary coda to the poem serves to illustrate more than the unruliness of the editor's contribution, it also highlights just how dangerous and precarious the formulation of an error-based system must be.

The second major difficulty encountered is again relatively clear cut and has been touched upon before: namely, the benefits that accrue for a sophisticated reading from the fact that Shade's fiction adopts the guise of poetry, the form with which we can most readily accommodate inconsistency and uncertainty, a position that even so provocative a critic as Barthes concedes: "for us, Poetry is ordinarily the signifier of the 'diffuse,' of the 'ineffable,' of the 'sensitive,' it is in the class of impressions which are unclassifiable."<sup>51</sup> Opposing Shade's production - and, given its expression, one is almost challenged *not* to view it in terms of direct opposition - is Kinbote's model of the real couched in plain prose. Indeed, the sort of prose which the sophisticated reader may perhaps concede is occasionally capable of transmitting the inalienable meaning of poetry, that of the novel, is utterly neglected.

Instead, the reader is confronted with prose operating in its narrower and traditional rôle as the form most suited to the rationality of syntactically ordered explanation.

But enough of this. Let us turn to our poet's windows.  
I have no desire to twist and batter an unambiguous  
*apparatus criticus* into the monstrous shape of a novel.  
[85-86]

The dilemma for the reader now clearly arises: to what extent does the medium in which Shade and Kinbote's respective versions of the real are framed contribute towards our acceptance of them? - especially should we recall a remark made by Kinbote quite early in the book.

There is.....a symptomatic family resemblance in the coloration of both poem and story. I have reread, not without pleasure, my comments to his lines, and in many cases have caught myself borrowing a kind of opalescent light from my poet's fiery orb, and unconsciously aping the prose style of his own critical essays. [81]

Are we perhaps guilty of not paying due recognition to Kinbote's model because the challenge it throws down to our perceptions - even to the most sophisticated - is more thoroughgoing than Shade's in its choice of prose rather than poetry as the means of expressing revelation?

The final strategy to confound the wishes of a would-be interpreter to elevate Shade's vision to the detriment of Kinbote's adopts perhaps the most intriguing and subtle of the methods deployed by Nabokov, and is particularly tailored to the attempts of the sophisticated reader to reach a satisfactory alignment with an error-orientated system. The poem, 'Pale Fire,' functions as a valuable representation of the real to such a reader because, in addition to



the inevitable connotation of order and curtailment which accompanies the imposition of the poetic frame, a certain intractability, a resistance to a finite order, is also retained for him, a sense of other arrangements than those governed by prosaic sense, exemplified in the sound ties that form "some kind of link-and-bobolink" [63]. Within Shade's model a legitimate impression of Kinbote's "ultimate truth" can be seen to inhabit quite literally an area, not of writing, but rather one *bordered* by writing; lying between the 'f' and 'm' of f/mountain, and following the nine hundred and ninety-ninth line of the poem. This is a factor which makes a contribution of some significance to the relatively sophisticated notion of an inalienable truth which extends beyond language.

Now, in order to arrive at some approximation of this distinctive schema, the sophisticated reader is, at root, proposing an interpretation of Shade's text which refuses to evaluate the printer's mistake on a literal basis, - as presumably would the naïve reader - but instead chooses to consider it as a more metaphorical concern, existing not as error as such, but as a representation of the *freedom* to err, that is, the uncertainty which the sophisticated reader seeks to derive from his texts. Hence the emergence of the neat arrangement whereby the imposition of a structure - albeit not one necessarily blessed with the linear rationality of prose - is offset, or, to adopt the classical critical locution, *counterbalanced*, by the presence of those aforementioned 'loose ends.' It does so in order to solicit some degree of localisation upon a dynamism of shifting uncertainty which is, for the most part, seen as uncontainable.

After the effort of constructing such a frame of reference, however, there is a definite tendency for even the most sophisticated of readers to overlook its existence as a product of style, its *prima facie* status as a manufactured

tool, despite the refinement of the design, rather than as an end in itself. No model, no matter how highly developed, can provide direct access to "an ultimate truth" - for, as we have repeatedly seen, that is a phenomenon which threatens language rather than conforms to its boundaries - it can only allow us to furnish ourselves with some sort of verbal representation of that unknown, to depict our own illusion of that condition. Is it not after all, a self-evident truth that no reader is capable of dealing with uncertainty at first hand, of our existence on the brink of choice? We can only do so by either radically transforming it, that is, by coming to a resolution (and perhaps endeavouring to talk of it retrospectively), or by adopting the more subtle tactics of a John Shade. He strives to place it within another frame, something akin to the bracketing of a variable function in algebraic equations, in such a manner as to facilitate its entry into a communicable world, the realm of discourse and human exchange. Crucially, however, even Shade's efforts lose what can only ever amount to a tangential sense of relevance when the model selected begins to operate as the boundary of its creator's attention, instead of what it originally provided, a stepping-off point for the imagination (and which, at best, it still continues to offer). Thus:

...if my private universe scans right,  
So does the verse of galaxies divine  
Which I suspect is an iambic line.  
I'm reasonably sure that we survive  
And that my darling somewhere is alive,  
As I am reasonably sure that I  
Shall wake at six tomorrow, on July  
The twenty-second, nineteen fifty-five,  
And that the day will probably be fine; [69]

The sophisticated reader - and certainly the rereader - cannot help but come to see Shade's lines as unwittingly self-ironising, in so far as he learns from

both Foreword and Commentary that "our poet" will not see any sort of day tomorrow. That "Faint hope" [63] of order about which Shade feels "reasonably sure" is then in the most banally literal of final instances (that curtailed by death) not borne out by events.

Such a refutation has extremely disturbing ramifications for the sophisticated reader, particularly if we bear in mind that it is delivered here to a poet, the figure who, above all others, we are accustomed to credit as being *directly* involved with the wresting of meaning from chaos, that struggle with uncertainty to derive a truth that extends beyond words ("not text, but texture" [63]). If the poet fails and his order emerges as delusory, then what are the implications for a creature who is also seeking to arrive at some form of satisfactory representation of the 'real', but who operates at a stage removed from the (Promethean) labours of the artist; indeed, who operates with the latter's very words, and functions precisely at the level of "text, not texture"?

Is this not the plight of the sophisticated reader of this book - to be continually brought back to the realisation that his endeavour to secure that fundamental uncertainty he takes for the 'real' is equally as misguided as the search for order undertaken by the sophisticated author in his poem - or, for that matter, differs little, at root, from the naïve doctrinaire systemisation that Kinbote seeks to justify in his Commentary?

Such perturbing, but increasingly relevant, ties - and, in particular, the suggestions of parity between the interpretations offered by Kinbote and the sophisticated reader - become more and more difficult to avoid. Perhaps the source of the strongest link between them, (and what distinguishes Shade's arrangements from theirs) lies in the manner in which both are advanced from a position of some uncertainty (how to interpret the real as circumscribed by

this poem) and move towards the establishment of a relative certainty (through the deployment of Zembla and error-based orders respectively). In contrast, Shade's path reverses this trend by commencing from a position of certainty - despite the fact that it is the certainty of being wrong which licences him to write of "some kind / Of correlated pattern in the game" [63] - towards a stance that challenges the faintly discernible assumptions which underpin even that subtly worked position.

The emergence of what at first seems the most improbable of confederacies, that between Kinbote and the sophisticated reader, may perhaps even lead the latter further on: to a consideration of the merits of his claim to hold such a title. And, in keeping with the nature of other effects we have witnessed in this piece, should he choose to do so, such an investigation invariably uncovers just how comprehensive an invited terminology turns out to be. Hence, to practise sophistication is at root to adulterate or distort, and even, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, "to falsify by mis-statement or by unauthorised alteration," activities which we would surely feel far happier ascribing to Kinbote than to ourselves. Indeed, what does come out of such reflections is the greater suitability of another term to summarise the sort of reader which this text strives to produce - and, of course, it also embraces Kinbote - that of 'sophist,' a word capable of meaning "a wise and learned man," in addition to its more familiar usage as "one who makes use of fallacious arguments; a specious reasoner."

To conduct such an argument is inevitably to expose oneself in turn to accusations of using sophistication in perhaps both of these senses of the word (or more damningly, only one!), but nonetheless, the existence of that field of meaning over which these two definitions contend, and the possibility that a single word - if read properly - is capable of affording such

expansiveness, is an abiding concern of *Pale Fire*. Moreover, it is also an issue to which the figure we come closest to acknowledging along the lines of Baudelaire's tripartite dictum, " - *Hypocrite lecteur, - mon semblable, - mon frère*"<sup>52</sup> - pays an attention that, even in passing, confirms it as a vital rather than a sterile concern.

I wish you to gasp not only at what you read but at the  
miracle of its being readable [289]

The armoury of strategic devices deployed by Nabokov within this work aspire to go much further than engendering interpretative frustration: they endeavour to provide the reader with an enactment of the processes by which he grants meaning. This is achieved initially through the construction of a stylised surround - be it a naïve "ultimate truth," or the type of 'manageable uncertainty' forged by the more discerning - in which we then proceed to site meaning, or, if we are to claim the status of sophistication, *against* which we seek to locate meaning. The critical point, however, remains the fundamentally *precursive* nature of what amounts to a *fabrication* - not merely in the sense of constituting a point of reference, but, equally important, is its insistent stand as something *not* real, as distinctly false.

If we return to the elegant formulations of "our poet," which attempt to encompass the order-resistant element of chance and uncertainty evidenced in the misprint, then we can see that the least misrepresentative (and the least sophisticated) reading we are able to advance is that the poem, 'Pale Fire,' acts as a purveyor of fabrication, something admittedly only a Shade different from operating under false pretenses, but crucially distinguished from that. The poem, therefore, offers the stylisation of a chance element, that intract-

ability we have discussed earlier, which allows the reader (and it must not be forgotten, Shade himself) the opportunity to accommodate a greater, actual, uncertainty, by its provision of that particular model as a means of reference, rather than to profess the depiction of that uncertainty *per se* from the outset.<sup>53</sup>

Such a viewpoint, of art as essentially limited, is most tellingly substantiated by Shade's inability to educe from his versifications his own fate on July 22nd. 1959. This event, in its turn, inevitably directs the sophisticated reader back to mull over the earlier error which first stimulated the poet's hypothesis, and the growing realisation that to view the misprint in terms of the symbolic is to belie its existence as actuality, as the unforeseen which can only be accounted for in art (i.e. tailored to the model), *after* it has occurred. Time and time again the reader - whatever his status - is confronted with the frame as an agent for confining the real: Shade's model finally betrays its creator, and the manner in which Kinbote's Scheherazade spinning only keeps death at bay,<sup>54</sup> at the cost of what we have formerly understood as sanity, makes this explicit. Concomitant with this, the reader is himself also obliged to acknowledge his own predilection - and the idea of 'obsession' is never more than a hair's breadth away - for the construction of such frames.

It is precisely this type of equivocation which constitutes the only "ultimate truth" available to the reader of *Pale Fire*. Indeed, it may perhaps be more accurate to call it the reader's 'sentence': one that may become debilitating if ignored, as we can see from the imbalance of forces that have moulded Gradus. The inability of the latter, either to react to, or rejoice in, the riches offered by the specific, which he deems "diabolical" [152], is neatly captured in those moments during his quest for the king when "in the vicinity

of Lex he lost his way," [198] and, later in the text, when he is shown having difficulties with an even more explicit embodiment of verbal resources, as we observe him "vainly progressing through a labyrinth of stacks" [281] in the College library. And yet, for Gradus' audience, the mental activity and attentiveness that he rejects remains a profoundly human sentence: for only through our appreciation - in its fullest sense - of the reserves of consciousness itself can we aspire to challenge those limits we have placed upon it to make it manageable.

*What distinguishes us from animals?*

Being aware of being aware of being. In other words, if I not only know that I *am* but also that I know it, then I belong to the human species. All the rest follows - the glory of thought, poetry, a vision of the universe.<sup>55</sup>

Such a premise as this is one that we are unaccustomed to perceive as a stimulus for fiction-making; instead, we tend to look for the exploitation - to a greater or lesser degree - of that network of assumptions we bring to bear upon a text. Thus, to offer some very broad generalisations, one of the satisfactions we take from Jane Austen's *Emma* is the possibility afforded to us of recognising a figure worthy enough - at least, by the end of the novel - to claim the title of heroine; whilst from a book like *Vanity Fair*, as its subtitle of 'A Novel without a Hero' suggests, we derive a different sort of pleasure, one grounded in our willingness to recognise the assumption of the necessity of heroes figuring in novels as not only rather banal, but precisely as an assumption. In both of these instances, however, the notion of fictional heroes and heroines functions as some sort of pole by virtue of which the reader can orientate himself to the work in question. Consequently, what

appears to be the potentially more subversive and damaging treatment of readers' assumptions about fiction, as seen within *Vanity Fair*, can still be accommodated by flexing the assimilative frame.<sup>56</sup>

The sleight of hand that Nabokov deploys in his piece is one which directs itself, not to attacking the notion of the frame as such (as, for example, with somebody like Robbe-Grillet), but, instead, it exploits our eagerness to manipulate (which is in essence to concede) the frame; as the reader is induced to make progressively more complex and involved arrangements in an attempt to reclaim the text as referable to that central core of assumptions. Such over-compensatory actions, should the reader persist in them, in fact serve only to ensnare him further within the fine mesh of variable interpretations he compulsively weaves. As we have seen, to delve further and further into *Pale Fire* in the manner of the fictional detective is to uncover ever smaller and more intricate patterns than we either suspected or are able to deal with according to the precepts of any single, all-explaining truth, finding, as Shade says "A system of cells interlinked within / Cells interlinked within cells..." [59] The resultant embroilment on the part of the reader acts more like a magnet upon those compassing impulses - the metaphoric 'pole' found in Austen and Thackeray - to switch attention away from a by-now addled network of assumptions towards the issue of his own rôle in such manipulations and mappings. This enforced re-examination and questioning of the reader's *place* is, of course, an activity paralleled by the workings of both Kinbote and Shade, and as a consequence, by the end of the book, certain arrangements have begun to assume the status of arraignments.

We are thus treated in *Pale Fire* to a grand performance in which the essential trick its author manages to pull off is to shape a body of material which promotes the practice of framing as something central to human experi-



ence, and yet, at the same time, which refuses to submit to the (customary) imposition of being itself consigned to the status of an explicable text. Instead, as we have repeatedly noted, the attack is carried to the reader on three fronts: namely; through the unfamiliarity of the form in which it is couched; the incorporation of an anticipatory critique; and, above all, by the confusion engendered for the reader over the nature and identity of the book's dominant figure. All of these point to the charge that, as readers, our dealings with fiction, the recuperation of a text through the agency of our seemingly ever-resourceful frame, may well possess a far more ambiguous nature than we would perhaps like to acknowledge. And so, both the habit of framing, as the *modus operandi* which most readily springs to mind, (that is to say, with the least consideration of its status as a device), together with its phenomenal ease of deployment, - in this instance, its readiness to absorb and soften hard-edged intractability - are pushed to the fore. Precisely because of its lack of success in performing its normal task, - in this case, to assimilate the non-interpretative - the practice of framing takes on altogether more ambivalent and disturbing proportions, and our attention is unwillingly drawn to additional connotations with criminal, as well as pictorial, shadings.<sup>57</sup> This is not to deny the creative element inherent in the frame, but rather to attempt to redress a prevalent view that overlooks the deceptive element with which it is always interlaced.

Indeed, that the two partake of each other is the vital point, as can be seen in what constitutes perhaps one of the more useful analogies one could make of *Pale Fire's* relationship to any "ultimate truth": that contained within an earlier work in the Nabokov canon. *Bend Sinister* incorporates the following meditation on the subject of translation.

It was as if someone, having seen a certain oak tree (further called Individual T) growing in a certain land and casting its own unique shadow on the green and brown ground, had proceeded to erect in his garden a prodigiously intricate piece of machinery which in itself was as unlike that or any other tree as the translator's inspiration and language were unlike those of the original author, but which, by means of ingenious combinations of parts, light effects, breeze-engendering engines, would, when completed, cast a shadow exactly similar to that of individual T - the same outline, changing in the same manner, with the same double and single spots of suns rippling in the same position, at the same hour of the day.<sup>es</sup>

Krug, the philosopher, notes the incredible difficulty and the ever-present risk of wholesale misinterpretation in framing such thoughts. (This is a theme which, as noted in my "*Bend Sinister: 'A Shrivelled World,'*" lies at the heart of that particular book.) But the danger of making a travesty of the Real in our endeavours to secure it fast is continually felt in *Pale Fire*, even to the extent of adding considerable poignancy to its more blatantly humorous moments.

When the Zemblan Revolution broke out (May 1, 1958), she wrote the King a wild letter in governess English, urging him to come and stay with her until the situation cleared up. The letter was intercepted by the Onhava police, translated into crude Zemblan by a Hindu member of the Extremist party, and then read aloud to the royal captive in a would-be ironic voice by the preposterous commandant of the palace. There happened to be in that letter one - only one, thank God - sentimental sentence: 'I want you to know that no matter how much you hurt me, you cannot hurt my love,' and this sentence (if we re-English it from the Zemblan) came out as: 'I desire you and love when you flog me.'

[205]

*Pale Fire*, I would maintain, presents us with the model, that "prodigiously intricate piece of machinery" in all its ungainliness, to the "individual T" of ultimate Truth. The possibility that a reader can approach such an artificial creation - and the book refuses to cloak its artifice with

the decorous literary habits of the past, ("The form of *Pale Fire* is specifically, if not generically, new"<sup>59</sup>) - and perceive a similarity between the shadow it casts and that thrown by its 'natural' counterpart ("Down, Plato, down, good dog"<sup>60</sup>) is the hope that 'finally' underlines *Pale Fire*. That it is a hope is most clearly borne out by the manner in which the agency of art, simultaneously a benevolent deception and a misleading framer, allows John Shade to catch sight momentarily of the only "ultimate truth" which can be applied to him and his kind:

...we are most artistically caged

[37]

Shade is "artistically caged"; for we, as readers, know him to be a product of Nabokov's pen. In this lies our relative superiority to all the explanatory configurations produced by the figures within the fiction, the sensation that we are more favourably placed to wrest the inverted commas from the 'Real'. And yet, for all that, Shade *does* glimpse a truth that the reader is denied. Thus, not only does our position *à propos* the text continue to require adjustment, this time to a stance subordinate to 'character' rather than our familiar site above it (and, as detectors of Nabokov's strategies to forestall a full definition, which aspires to a ranking above the author), but, in addition, we are more and more obliged to regard our approach as non-linear, as moving towards the completion of a cycle which is also continual change, as language slides into language and word into word (see *Word golf* in the Index).

*Pale Fire* enacts rather than depicts its truth: - that of the impossibility of interpretation, a belief which Nabokov would maintain of all his fictions ("Impersonally speaking, I can't find any so-called main ideas, such

as that of fate, in my novels, or at least none that could be expressed lucidly in less than the number of words I used for this or that book<sup>61</sup>). In doing this, if it both shows and demands the immense length and labour of the effort to realise that shadow of the Real, it does so to make the book's readers gasp at the wonder of such a transformation, and value even more highly this miraculous metamorphosis.

Then with a pleasure which is both sensual and intellectual we shall watch the artist build his castle of cards and watch the castle of cards become a castle of beautiful steel and glass.<sup>62</sup>

## Footnotes

1. Nina Berberova, "The Mechanics of *Pale Fire*" in *Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes*, Ed. A. Appel Jr. and C. Newman [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1970] 147-148.

2. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1962]  
13. Future references to the text will follow in parentheses.

3. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1980] 210.

4. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, Ed. P. H. Nidditch [Clarendon, Oxford University Press, 1975] Book II, Ch. XI, s. 13, 160-161.

5. Interestingly, the blurb on the back of the Penguin edition of the novel [Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1973], whilst talking of "an extraordinary, uncategorizable book" offers as an opening for its readers the consideration that "*Pale Fire* might be described as a sort of do-it-yourself detective story." Against his oft-repeated dismissals of the genre - "There are some varieties of fiction that I never touch - mystery stories, for instance, which I abhor,...."; "with a very few exceptions, mystery fiction is a kind of collage combining more or less original riddles with conventional and mediocre artwork" etc. [*Strong Opinions* 43 and 129] - we might bear in mind that Nabokov has from the beginning of his career never been averse to making use of it:

The texture of the tale mimics that of detective fiction but actually the author disclaims all intention to trick, puzzle, fool, or otherwise deceive the reader.

This is from Nabokov's foreword to the short novel first published in 1930 and later translated as *The Eye* [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1966, 9]. Over forty years later, he was to say of the techniques deployed in his then most recent piece, *Transparent Things*, "This promises a thriller...." (*Strong Opinions* 196) - an indication of the writer's repeated exploitation of diverse aspects of even those fictional genres he personally found unprepossessing as a reader.

6. Raymond Chandler, *The Lady in The Lake*, [Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, rep. 1959] 94.

7. Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1974] 35.

8. The tonal shifts within the extract are indicative of a cross-hatching, if anything, even quirkier than Humbert's prose in *Lolita*. Initially, this piece is reminiscent of a wayward Thoreau, but as it develops, it increasingly

resembles a variation, or rather, mutation, of the occasional forays into maudlin sentimentality made by the Edwardian adventure storytellers - usually as a nod to the 'love interest', as in Anthony Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda*, a tale to which we have already referred. Here, Rudolf Rassendyll confronts his beloved Princess Flavia (yes, the names are as ridiculous as those in the Zemblan Court), but the spectre of his cousin and look-a-like, the King of Ruritania, her intended, intervenes.

.....his figure - the lithe buoyant figure I had left in the cellar of the hunting lodge - seemed to rise, double-shaped, before me, and to come between us, thrusting itself in even where she lay, pale, exhausted, fainting, in my arms, and yet looking up at me with those eyes that bore such love as I have never seen, and haunt me now, and will till the ground closes over me - and (who knows?) perhaps beyond.

[Anthony Hope, *The Prisoner of Zenda* and *Rupert of Hentzau*, (Everyman, J. M. Dent, London, rep. 1966) 72.]

9. William Shakespeare, *Henry IV Part 1*, Ed. J. Dover Wilson, [Cambridge University Press, 1946] Act II, Scenes II and IV.

10. William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Ed. A. Quiller-Couch and J. Dover Wilson, [Cambridge University Press, 1921] Act V, Scene III.

11. You might recall that Victor's dream of flight in *Pnin* ends with him awaiting the arrival of one "Percival Blake, a cheerful American adventurer" [Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin*, (Heinemann, London, 1957) 86], who must surely be a direct, albeit colonial, descendant of the figure enshrined in Baroness Orczy's books.

12. Cf.

Between the ages of ten and fifteen in St. Petersburg, I must have read more fiction and poetry - English, Russian and French - than in any other period of my life. I relished especially the works of Wells, Poe, Browning, Keats, Flaubert, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Alexander Blok. On another level, my heroes were the Scarlet Pimpernel, Phileas Fogg and Sherlock Holmes....Of these top favourites, several - Poe, Jules Verne, Emmuska Orczy, Conan Doyle, and Rupert Brooke - have lost the glamour and thrill they held for me.

[*Strong Opinions* 42-43.]

13. Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, rep. 1972] 68-71.

14. *Strong Opinions* 79.

15. Such a figure marks a considerable advance on the device featured in a prior work with which it would appear to have most in common, namely Sebastian Knight's epiphanic moment in the pension garden at the wrong Roquebrune (*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, [New Directions, Norfolk, Conn. 1959] 18-20).
16. Andrew Field points out in *Nabokov: His Life in Art* [Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1967] 312, that 'izumrud' is Russian for 'emerald'
17. T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land", l. 430, in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*, [Faber and Faber, London, rep. 1974] 79.
18. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, [Jonathan Cape, London, rep. 1945] 245.
19. *Strong Opinions* 70-71.
20. *Ibid.* 32.
21. C.f. the homosexual pantheon provided in *The Annotated Lolita*, Ed. Alfred Appel Jr. [McGraw-Hill, New York and Toronto, 1970] 183-184.
22. Mary McCarthy, "A Bolt From the Blue", first published in *New Republic*, June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1962, 22-27, and reprinted in her *The Writing on the Wall*, [Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1973] 20-37.
23. *Strong Opinions* 29 and 31.
24. Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, Epistle II, ll. 269-270, Ed. M. Mack [Twickenham Edition, Volume III, Methuen, London, 1950] 87. In the mammoth edition of Pushkin, which he worked on concurrently with *Pale Fire*, Nabokov praises the Augustan's "exceptional talent for placing the best possible words in the best possible order." [Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*, Trans. and with Commentary by Vladimir Nabokov (Bollinger Foundation, Pantheon Books, New York, N.Y., 1964) Volume 3, 30.]
25. *Ibid.*, Epistle II, ll. 221-226, 82.
26. Jonathan Swift, *The Battel of the Books* in *A Tale of A Tub and Other Early Works*, Ed. H. Davies [The Shakespeare Head Edition, Volume I, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1939] 153-154.
27. Alexander Pope, 'The Temple of Fame', ll. 53-60, in *The Rape of the Lock*, Ed. G. Tillotson [Twickenham Edition, Volume II, Methuen, London, rep. 1966] 256.
28. *Ibid.*, Appendix H., 410.
29. Alexander Pope, 'The Dunciad (B)', Book I, ll. 64-84, Ed. J. Sutherland [Twickenham Edition, Volume V, Methuen, London, 1943] 274-275.
30. Warburton's editing of Pope seems to have been of a rather eccentric nature. James Sutherland, in a preliminary to his own edition of 'The Dunciad (B)', notes that:

With the commentary....Warburton took notorious liberties, adding to those of his earlier notes which Pope had seen and approved, others which Pope did not live to read, and which he would almost certainly have disapproved of. In the present edition, where Warburton's 1751 notes throw any new light on the poem they have been included among the other editorial matter; where he is merely indulging personal animosities or displaying his learning, they have been ignored.

['The Dunciad (B)' 249].

It would appear that Warburton has successfully anticipated Kinbote by several centuries! These actions are confirmed by Maynard Mack in his recent biography, *Alexander Pope: A Life*, [W. W. Norton and Co., New York and London, 1986] 741-745, (see especially 745 where we are told that "even the editorial responsibility he held in the works, Warburton occasionally abused, inserting notes in later 'Dunciad' editions to pay off personal scores." Mack also informs us that Warburton's *Vindication of the Essay on Man*, the agency by which a then beleaguered Pope first became acquainted with him, in addition to its "considerable merits," demonstrates certain tendencies we have observed in other, later, acts of poetic interpretation. Thus it "strained passages in the poem toward literally pietistic senses they were not equipped to bear and claimed for it further, a ratiocinative rigour impossible and probably undesirable in poetry...." [Mack 738] His readings of Homer, too, apparently followed similar lines [see Mack 743]. Needless to say, this particular selection of information concerning the good bishop is itself somewhat partial.

31. *The Dunciad (B)*, 377.

32. *Ibid.*, Book IV, ll. 347-348, 377.

33. *Ibid.*, Book III, ll. 13-16, 320-321.

34. *An Essay on Man*, Epistle II, ll. 225, 82.

35. McCarthy 24-25. On the subject of these researches, Nabokov had this to say:

Mary McCarthy....has been very kind to me recently in the....*New Republic*, although I do think she added quite a bit of her own angelica to the pale fire of Kinbote's plum pudding.

[*Strong Opinions* 99.]

My own researches commenced independently of Mary McCarthy's entertaining inquiries, and have, inevitably, in some measure, overlapped with them. To extend Nabokov's figure, however, my eighteenth century referents are hopefully of a spirit that, if it will not make the pudding, will at least burn off of it without proving too detrimental to the original flavour.



36. See Canto II, l. 130, together with Tillotson's note thereon [*The Rape of the Lock* 168].

37. See the prefatory quote affixed to the text from Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* 6.

38. Dr. Samuel Johnson, *Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, to the Works of the English Poets: Pope*, in *Samuel Johnson*, Ed. D. Greene [Oxford Authors, Oxford University Press, 1984] 746-747.

39. Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1969] 361.

40. McCarthy 30.

41. Sir Walter Scott, 'The Lady of the Lake' in *Selected Poems*, Ed. Thomas Crawford, [Clarendon, Oxford University Press, 1972] Canto I, l. 30-31, 141. The "hazel shade" also recurs later in the same Canto.

42. For Kinbote as master maker, see Page Stegner's *Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, [Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1967] 128-130, and for Shade's installation as overall creator, see Field 300 and 317-319.

43. Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, Trans. Richard Howard [Jonathan Cape, London, 1979] 63.

44. Ibid. 67.

45. Ross Wetzsteon, "Nabokov as Teacher" in *Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes*, Ed. A. Appel Jr. and C. Newman [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1970] 242 and 245.

46. Barthes 69.

47. Anon., "In and Out of Books" in *The New York Times Book Review*, August 17<sup>th</sup>, 1958. 8.

48. *Strong Opinions* 115.

49. Ibid. 101.

50. *Essay on Man*, Epistle I, ll. 289-292, 50-51.

51. Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, Trans. Richard Howard [Jonathan Cape, London, 1982] 71.

52. Charles Baudelaire, 'Préface' l. 28 in *Baudelaire: Selected Poems*, Sel., trans., and intro. Joanna Richardson [Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, rep. 1980] 28.

53. Witness Nabokov's comments on *trompe l'oeil*, a subject to which Kinbote also addresses himself (see 74-75):

A good *trompe l'oeil* painting proves at least that the painter is not cheating. The charlatan who sells his squiggles to *épater* Philistines does not have the talent to draw a nail, let alone the shadow of a nail.

[*Strong Opinions* 167.]

54. In a 1966 interview Nabokov stated that Kinbote "committed suicide... ..after putting the final touches to his edition of the poem" [*Strong Opinions* 74]. At the same time, of course it should not be forgotten that Kinbote only exists within the covers of *Pale Fire* in the first place - and, when we finish the book, we too kill him off, a fact that Nabokov may well be playing with here.

55. *Strong Opinions* 142.

56. Even here, however, as critics like Bruce Morrissette in his 1963 study, *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet* (Revised and translated by the author as *The Novels of Robbe-Grillet* [Cornell University Press, Ithaca N.Y., 1975]), have sought to prove, texts which appear on early readings to challenge, even to threaten, fictional norms can be absorbed and safely reassigned under the name of literature. *La Jalousie* serves as perhaps the best example within the Frenchman's work - becoming accessible once we place it as the more or less internal monologue of an unbalanced narrator in the same manner that we treat Hermann Karlovich in *Despair* - or even a Charles Kinbote.

57. See Barbara Johnson's fascinating article, "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida", in *Yale French Studies* 55/6, 1977, 457-505, to which I am indebted.

58. *Bend Sinister* 107.

59. *Strong Opinions* 75.

60. *Ibid.* 78.

61. *Ibid.* 117.

62. *Lectures on Literature* 6.

Ada and those "Empty formulas benefitting the solemn novelists of former days  
who thought they could explain everything."

...in *intent*, *Ada* is certainly a major work, an attempt to write the quintessential novel, to hypostatize in ultimate form the conventions of its greatest subject, romantic love.<sup>1</sup> [My italics]

Elizabeth Dalton's review of Vladimir Nabokov's sixth and largest English novel, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, in 1970, provides a most succinct summary of critical response to a work which, with a mixture of ostentation and defiance, continues to challenge categorisation and frustrate exegesis. Her description of the book as "an attempt," together with references to its "intent," clearly point to a condemnation of the book as a failure, and yet if we look at the terms she employs, which speak of "the quintessential novel" and "ultimate form," it is hardly surprising that such a verdict should be reached. *Ada* is an immense novel with a large scope, which, from its very outset, presents itself as a body of work wholly governed by its own distinctive idiosyncracies, that is, as a text which *will* establish its own terms. Perhaps the best indication of this bid for complete literary independence is the fact that it has been compared to the fiction that the twentieth century critic reaches for as the most convenient of last resorts, Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*.<sup>2</sup>

The difficulty of ascertaining exactly what sort of book *Ada* is can be seen from the bewildering plethora of opinions and referents it has elicited, the range of which is quite considerable. Alfred Appel dubbed it "the family chronicle to end all family chronicles" before going on to note that "Nabokov's SF strain culminates in the physics fiction that is *Ada*;"<sup>3</sup> D. J. Enright chose

to emphasise that it often reads "like a parody of high class nineteenth century pornography,"<sup>4</sup> and John Updike intriguingly judged the book "Nabokov's most religious - his Testament as well as his *Tempest*."<sup>5</sup>

As the work spirals both around and out of the relationship between Ivan (Van) Veen and Adelaida (Ada) Veen, ostensible first cousins, but subtly confirmed within the narrative as brother and sister, it is appropriate that it should befall the teller of this tale of "ardent childhood romance,"<sup>6</sup> Van, to provide us with perhaps the most useful indication of the novel's intentions.

My aim was to compose a kind of novella in the form of a treatise on the Texture of Time, an investigation of its veily substance, with illustrative metaphors gradually increasing, very gradually building up to a logical love story, going from past to present, blossoming forth as a concrete story, and just as gradually reversing analogies and disintegrating again into bland abstraction. [562-563]

Although Nabokov has pointed out in *Strong Opinions* that this particular concept is designed specifically as a "structural trick"<sup>7</sup> to underpin Part Four of the book, the idea that *Ada* as a whole finally disintegrates into "bland abstraction" is one that, as I hope to show, throws considerable light on its peculiar nature and effects.

The notion of "Time" having a "Texture," an abstraction possessing a sensual actuality, is also of significance in *Ada*, in so far as its explication seems to offer one of the more valuable (although inevitably partial) views of the book: namely, that it concerns the means by which we divine and come to terms with what Van calls "the Real World in us and beyond us" [20]. And, yet again, even here in so short a phrase as a "World *in us and beyond us*" [my italics] there is that same insistent authorial pressure encouraging the reader to leave behind the traditional perceptions upon which he normally bases his

actions. As the linking of the apparent dispartes of "Time" and "Texture" directs the reader to alter his vision, in effect to enlarge it, to create a world in which they both have a distinct and definite relation to each other, so too does the discussion of a world *in* and yet *beyond* seek to achieve by similar, though qualified, means, the same effect. We have mentioned Nabokov's favouring of the oxymoron as a technical device earlier, in so far as it makes manifest the scope of literature's resources; for in that world a negative and a positive do not cancel each other out, but instead fuse to make something startling and new. Such combinations have, as we shall see, a particularly conspicuous rôle in *Ada*, but their usage in Nabokov's fiction stretches as far back as this short extract from *Invitation to a Beheading*, where the imprisoned Cincinnatus obtains some solace from the distinctive sight of a resting moth.

it was settled, asleep, its visionary wings spread in solemn invulnerable torpor; only he was sorry for the downy back where the fuzz had rubbed off leaving a bald spot, as shiny as a chestnut - but the great dark wings, with their ashen edges and perpetually open eyes were inviolable - the forewings, lowered slightly, lapped over the hind ones, and this drooping attitude might have been one of fragility, were it not for the most monolithic straightness of all the diverging lines - and this was so enchanting that Cincinnatus, unable to restrain himself, stroked with his fingertip the hoary ridge near the base of the right wing, then the ridge of the left one (what gentle firmness! what unyielding gentleness!)....<sup>e</sup>

Significantly, the moth's appeal to Cincinnatus is seemingly composed of an amalgam of modified contradiction ("and this...might have been....,were it not for....") and apparent resistance to its capture on paper ("invulnerable", "inviolable"), in order that the reader may be presented with the illusion of a language which denies its own presence to picture nothing save the beauty and

delicacy of the moth's particular quiddity. Similarly, the other, apparently clashing terms which are deployed do not cancel themselves out ("what gentle firmness! what unyielding gentleness!"); rather they convince us that the creature is more than understood for itself, it has become magical, "enchanted," whilst the link that has been established between the two captives finally emerges as one of compassion.

*Ada*, as a piece, seems to thrive on the wholesale extension of these principles of counterbalance and opposition, taken up and puffed as far as they will go to originate in its own, strangely narcotic, domain. Indeed, at times, the novel is reminiscent of nothing so much as a blown rose - louche, luxurious and decaying. Throughout its course, the work proceeds in a manner that continually intimates a more expansive view, aspiring towards a language that, in the final instance, bids to transcend verbal ties, opening things out rather than pinning them down. Given Nabokov's own advocacy of the virtues of precision and accuracy, this may seem somewhat paradoxical, but it is important to see it alongside his reiterated claim that a distinctive vocabulary is there to transmit thought distinctly.

...whatever term or trope I use, my purpose is not to be facetiously flashy or grotesquely obscure but to express what I feel and think with the utmost truthfulness and perception.<sup>9</sup>

To feel and to think repeatedly seek to fuse and be at one within the novel, in so far as its structure hangs on Van's endeavour to recapture his past feelings and thoughts through the agency of the mind, and, simultaneously, to preserve the notion of future possibilities as imminent, rather than as either realised or denied. It results in the peculiar sensation of rippings and

overlay that we receive from the summary of Van and Ada's initial sojourn at the ancestral home of Ardis.

She had never realised, she said again and again (as if intent to reclaim the past from the matter-of-fact triviality of the album), that their first summer in the orchids and orchidariums of Ardis had become a sacred and secret creed, throughout the countryside. Romantically inclined handmaids, whose reading consisted of *Gwen de Vere* and *Klara Mertvago*, adored Van, adored Ada, adored Ardis' ardors in arbours..... Nightwatchmen fought insomnia and the fire of the clap with the weapons of *Vaniada's Adventures*. Herdsmen, spared by thunderbolts on remote hillsides, used their huge 'moaning horns' as ear trumpets to catch the lilts of Ladore. Virgin chatelaines in marble-floored manors fondled their lone flames fanned by Van's romance. And another century would pass, and the painted word would be retouched by the still richer brush of time. [409]

Highly ornate description, literary parody, puns and the lush palpability of the prose combine here to endow the description of a couple actively living what we are accustomed to believing as the most real of experiences, with a countering, fictitious, almost mythic cast. And, if we remember that this is being recounted by one of that couple, now "reworking this, a crotchety gray old wordman" [121], then our response is to wonder whether even Van himself knew what this *affaire de coeur* really meant. Moreover, the fact that this description is placed as Ada's conscious remembrance of something she did not fully grasp at the time further impresses upon the reader, not only the remoteness of the incident from us (it is, after all, a reminiscence within a reminiscence), but also raises the question whether it can ever be truly appreciated. The consequence of this intermingling of density and distance is that although "the painted word would be retouched by the still richer brush of time" [409], the episode itself, as lost, invites the reader to see it as analogous to the very human sense of one's own transitoriness. Thus, the moment takes upon itself a seemingly manifold significance, partly because of

the manner it resists total explication, and partly because it appears to be animated only for the briefest of intervals - be it textual or actual.

It is the immense scope and thoroughness of the author's deployment of detail, time and again for twinned or dovetailing purposes, which does most to promote *Ada's* sense of heightened ambivalence. Nabokov seeks to maintain and negotiate the most precarious of literary balancing acts; whereby the reader is not dissuaded from viewing the isolated specific as fantastic and far removed from his own experience; but their accumulation has to be seen to make for a weight that will impinge upon such doubts. Hence, the pursuit of *Ada's* own, distinctly self-contained, veracity; as its echoings and shadowings of words, images and events coalesce and re-align themselves anew upon each new reading. This apparently perpetual shifting and re-grouping of fictional material not only makes a vivid impression on the reader, but the resultant sense of animation and plasticity acts both to rebuke the restrictive confines of linear time ("a dotted line of humdrum encounters" [253]), and to follow the wayward trails of a mind striving to understand what Van calls the "artistry of asymmetry" [280].

And yet, despite a phenomenal attention to minutiae - the book is that much *bigger* than *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* - as with its immediate forebears, an external ordering and synthesis is always denied the reader. In the picnic celebrating *Ada's* sixteenth birthday (itself a variant image of the picnic held for her twelfth birthday) such routine intentions are burlesqued by the appearance of "a dozen elderly townsmen, in dark clothes, shabby and uncouth" [268], who proceed to irritate Van, the artist supposedly in charge of his text, and also to frustrate the ordering impulses of his readers.



He asked Marina - did she want him to use force, but sweet, dear Marina said, patting her hair, one hand on her hip, no, let us ignore them - especially as they were now drawing a little deeper into the trees - look, look - some dragging *à reculons* the various parts of their repast on what resembled an old bedspread, which receded like a fishing boat pulled over pebbly sand, while others politely removed the crumpled wrappings to other more distant hiding places in keeping with the general relocation: a most melancholy and meaningful picture - but meaning what, what?<sup>10</sup> [269]

The underlying assumption here, of the reader as a participant, as a creature striving to locate the rationale of the text, is something that we have already witnessed as providing Nabokov with a starting point for many of his fictions. It is the tacit challenge to which he appears to have listened with increasing attention before embarking on his most thorough (and therefore most respectful) later fictional replies. As the previous chapter showed, *Pale Fire* registered a response which many have found too telling a reminder of their responsibilities to forgive: in it we are unnervingly accorded the treatment of participants rather than expected guests. In contrast, *Ada* extends a rather warmer and less intimidatory welcome, most obviously because its generous girth endows it with the weighty reassurance of a novel in the grand style, a sensation agreeably underlined by an opening line that hearkens back to that most honourable of ancestors, *Anna Karenin*.

In initially locating itself so firmly in the very heartland of the novel, *Ada* begs consideration, not as an attempt to break the novel (still the most convenient label affixed to *Pale Fire*), but as a compression, concentration and concatenation of techniques and approaches more clearly visible in earlier and comparatively less dense works like *Invitation of a Small Guest* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Earlier novels of this order, as we have discussed, gradually accumulate around a central character a form of linguistic matrix, a support which, despite fairly consistent suggestions from the author as to its essentially

arbitrary foundations, the reader is eager to accept as definite in order to locate it within his own direct 'experience', his assumptions and understanding of the world. The conflux of details, events and purported facts then, no matter how specious, encourage the reader to view the textual element as dynamic but not collatable, except by an act of creative manipulation by the reader himself. Consequently, he is flattered by the intimation that he can truly order and delineate the details - in effect, finish the job begun by the artist - and so offers a very distinct, indeed personal, commitment toward guaranteeing the efficacy of that 'partial' world in order to go on and make it 'whole.' Once the author has elicited such trust he has also won for himself a certain measure of flexibility and freedom, in the form of the potential to disrupt the surface consistency of the text thereby to impress his own insights, his *novel* vision, upon a reader who has effectively bound himself to that textual world.

One of the most succinct demonstrations of such workings can be found in *Invitation to a Beheading*, although, as we might by now expect, the process is seen as a negative image rather than the conventional print.

'I do not intend to complain' said Cincinnatus, 'but wish to ask you, is there in the so-called order of so-called things of which your so-called world consists even one thing that might be considered an assurance that you will keep a promise?'

'A promise?' asked the director in surprise, ceasing to fan himself with the cardboard part of the calendar (depicting the fortress at night, a water-colour). 'What promise?'

'That my wife will come tomorrow. So you will not agree to guarantee it in this case - but I am phrasing my question more broadly: is there in this world, can there be, any kind of security at all, any pledge of anything, or is the very idea of guarantee unknown here?''

Like Cincinnatus, the reader continually commits himself to the upkeep of a world which, if not actually tumbling down around his ears, critically never quite fulfills the obligations both, as Nabokov's lessees, must maintain it has incurred in order to establish some sense of purchase. In point of fact, the dexterity with which a narrative reneges on the promises we read into them - of consistency, assurance, of what Cincinnatus calls "any kind of security" - and avoids a blanket adherence to familiar story lines and genre patterns, is, if we would only admit it, a major source of the pleasure we derive from fiction. The Faustian elements of such a contract - for, if we are bound, it is surely to eternal disappointment, to find the fiction living up to its own demands rather than our expectations, is something that has always intrigued Nabokov. Indeed, together with its attendant theme, that this evasion of complete resolution - the business truly responsible for the joy of reading and writing - is perhaps just as likely as the mere replication of old fictional certainties to make for a nightmare in the world of the everyday (as it does for figures as varied as Cincinnatus, Van Veen, and Vadim) - such concerns tend to come more and more to the fore in his later work.

It is in the employment of this peculiar brand of open subterfuge that Nabokov most closely echoes the writings of Gogol, the subject of his sole biographical and critical monograph. Look, for example, at this extract from *Nevsky Prospekt*, where a lyric and exact portrayal of the St. Petersburg boulevard, "the jewel of our capital," fleshes out the tales of Piskarev and Pigorov only to undermine pretensions to verisimilitude and 'normality' abruptly as it draws to a non conclusion.

But strangest of all are the things which happen on Nevsky Prospekt. Oh, have no faith in this Nevsky Prospekt! I always wrap my cloak tighter around me when I walk along it and endeavour not to look at the

objects I pass. It is all deception, a dream, not what it seems! You think that that gentleman promenading in an excellently cut frock coat is very rich? Nothing of the sort: his entire fortune is in his frock coat. You imagine that those two stout fellows, who have paused to watch builders at work on a church, are discussing its architecture? - Not a bit of it: they are remarking on the strange way two crows have alighted facing one another.... Keep your distance, I implore you, from the streetlamps! and hurry past them quickly, as quickly as possible. Count yourself lucky if they spill their malodorous oil on your stylish frock coat. But everything, not only the streetlamp, exudes deceit. Nevsky Prospekt deceives at all hours of the day, but the worst time of all is at night, when the entire city becomes a bedlam of noise and flashing lights, when myriads of carriages rattle down from the bridges, the postillions cry out and prance on their horses and when the devil himself is abroad, kindling the streetlamps with the sole purpose of showing everything in a false light.<sup>12</sup>

In his discussion of Gogol's techniques, Nabokov summarises his predecessor's stylistic waverings thus:

Steady Pushkin, matter-of-fact Tolstoy, restrained Chekhov all have had their irrational insight which simultaneously blurred the sentence and disclosed a secret meaning worth the sudden focal shift... with Gogol this shifting is the very basis of his art.

The sudden slanting of the rational plane of life may be accomplished in many ways ... with Gogol it was a combination of two movements: a jerk and a glide. Imagine a trapdoor that opens under your feet with absurd suddenness, and a lyrical gust that sweeps you up and then lets you fall with a bump into the very next trapdoor.<sup>13</sup>

The strange degree of candour in that "jerk" and "glide," as everything happens before you, ensures the maintenance of the necessary collusion between author and reader (implied as much as actual) even as you are disclosed as its victim, a compact which, as we have stressed, can only take place once *all* the author's terms have been granted.

If we return to *Ada*, similar tactics seem to be employed, although more insistently and on a smaller scale, to draw the reader into the book, but they

stop short of procuring the sort of wholesale dissolution of narrative that we are obliged to register in the Gogol piece.

Nabokov's earlier works, however, have tended to turn on schismatic moments of this kind, and often in a distinctly less hesitant manner than the shadowy modes of *Nevsky Prospekt*. These texts effectively, and occasionally quite melodramatically, implode, as artifice collapses to reveal the power of an imagination that can readily form and destroy. Thus Cincinnatus C. dismisses the set in which his drama is to be played out because his imagination is no longer willing to grant it validity; Adam Krug is rescued from further pain and harm by what Nabokov calls in his preface "an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me;"<sup>14</sup> and Pnin returns to the place "where there was simply no saying what miracle might happen."<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the reader is also obliged to recall that such apparently isolated occurrences are wholly reliant on the expansiveness and effectiveness of the verbal props that fashion the world around it. The heartstopping events towards the end of these fictions: Cincinnatus C.'s so careful consideration of that moth; the instance when Pnin drops his punchbowl; or the moment when Humbert confronts Mrs Richard F. Schiller to exchange the most poignant of clichés; these can only take place after their existence has been verified by surroundings that have sufficient definition to make their dissolution *matter*. In short, there is a limit to how many times such a strategy can be employed, because some form of recognisable structure has to exist in order for it to be examined and picked apart. It is, after all, not without reason that Nabokov should assign the boy crying wolf the first place in his list of storytellers.

This pattern is almost completely inverted in *Ada*, where instead of building up in the text to a single instant of detailed insight into the imagination as fiction-maker, each moment is invested with an identically

valuable, if transient, significance as it resonates through the narrative that comprises the consciousness of Van Veen.

When in the middle of the twentieth century, Van started to reconstruct his deepest past, he soon noticed that such details of his infancy as really mattered (for the special purpose the reconstruction pursued) could be best treated, could not seldom be only treated, when reappearing at various later stages of his boyhood and youth, as sudden juxtapositions that revived the part while vivifying the whole. [31]

It is this notion of the fiction as not merely a work still in progress, but one that maintains itself in continuum, a stopped frame on an infinite reel, that ties *Ada* with its immediate antecedent, *Speak, Memory*, which in a like fashion follows through "such thematic designs," and whose musings often foreshadow it.

.....in a sense all poetry is positional: to try to express one's position in regard to the universe embraced by consciousness is an immemorial urge. The arms of consciousness reach out and grope, and the longer they are the better. Tentacles, not wings, are Apollo's natural members. Vivian Bloodmark, a philosophical friend of mine, in later years, used to say that while the scientist sees everything that happens in one point of space, the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time. Lost in thought, he taps his knee with his wandlike pencil, and at the same instant a car (New York license plate) passes along the road, a child bangs the screen door of a neighbouring porch, an old man yawns in a misty Turkestan orchard, a granule of cinder-gray sand is rolled by the wind on Venus, a Doctor Jacques Hirsch in Grenoble puts on his reading glasses, and trillions of other such trifles occur - all forming an instantaneous and transparent organism of events, of which the poet (sitting in a lawn chair, at Ithaca, N.Y.) is the nucleus.<sup>16</sup>

"An instantaneous and transparent organism of events, of which the poet.....is the nucleus" seems to be an accurate description of *Ada*, and it is through the development of this 'interiority,' the ability to make the "organism" "trans-

parent", that the work as a whole retains the profound ambiguity which we observed in the central moments of the earlier works. And perhaps the most important element of this "transparency," is its closeness to death; for as we have noted in *Ada's* predecessors, much of their power is derived from just such an association. Pnin's place of "miracles," for example, is described in terms which are not without irony and can readily be understood as intimating a return to his birthplace, the novelist's own pre-verbal (and therefore pre-Pnin) consciousness. *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* are, in a sense, both closed and enclosed by death, whilst the fates of Cincinnatus C. and Adam Krug too are not left untouched by a darker side: can the reader of *Invitation to a Beheading* really "judge by the voices" the nature of "beings akin" to Cincinnatus?<sup>17</sup>

The clearest indication we are given in *Ada* of the continual proximity of death is, of course, *Ada's* half-sister, Lucette - and indeed, like *Lolita*, the first thing the reader learns about her (apart from her date of birth) is the fact of her death. Generally, however, *Ada* does not progress to a culminating vision of death, and instead develops its own distinctive mode, eventually summarised by Van.

The strange mirage-shimmer standing in for death should not appear too soon in the chronicle and yet it should permeate the first amorous scenes. [584]

Given its rather nebulous existence, this "mirage-shimmer" is difficult to demonstrate externally, a problem further compounded by the largely successful attempt to bury it quite deep within the text, but references to Van as "the heavy hermit" [577], and "a crotchety gray old wordman" [121] emphasise that, like *Lolita*, *Ada* is a posthumous confession. Hence: remarks like "Van's sexual

dreams are embarrassing to describe in a family chronicle that the very young may perhaps read after a very old man's death" [361], and, of course, the editor's preliminary note heading the work. A rather peculiar feeling nevertheless does permeate the novel (which gets stronger upon rereadings), and the occasional specific manifestation of mortality can be detected, despite the narrator's attempt to keep it below the surface of his narrative, where the note of intermingling life and death is particularly sharp.

....the detail is all: The song of a Tuscan Firecrest or a Sitka Kinglet in a cemetery cypress; a minty whiff of Summer Savory or Yerba Buena on a coastal slope; the dancing flutter of a Holly Blue or an Echo Azure - combined with other birds, flowers and butterflies: that has to be heard, smelled and seen through the transparency of death and ardent beauty. [71]

Visions "seen through the transparency of death" permeate *Ada* because Nabokov does not shirk from recognising that the consciousness, his own as much as those of his creations, can operate as a wayward agent of destruction as readily as a disciplined force of compassion and creativity. And indeed, these consequent extremes, of consciousness at its height, through love, and at its nadir, its loss, insanity and death, are yoked together by Van Veen in his declaration of love for *Ada* - a love which becomes all the more poignant as we remember that the writer is now incapable of attaining the physical experience he so lauds here.

What, then, was it that raised the animal act to a level higher even than that of the most exact arts or the wildest flights of pure science? It would not be sufficient to say that in his love-making with *Ada* he discovered the pang, the *ogon'*, the agony of supreme "reality." Reality, better say, lost the quotes it wore like claws - in a world where independent and original minds must cling to things or pull things apart in order to ward off madness or death (which is the master madness). For one spasm or two, he was



safe. The new naked reality needed no tentacle or anchor; it lasted a moment, but could be repeated as often as he or she were physically able to make love.  
[219-220]

"To cling to things", that is, to possess them, truly to know and, in a sense, to create them, or to "pull things apart," these mark the range of the imagination's possibilities. However, this is not to claim that such qualities are mutually exclusive: rather, they are more than closely allied; for, as we shall see, Van and Ada are depicted as simultaneously "two *wunderkinder*" [379], and "satanic" [84 and 320]. What is more, is it not sobering to note that the turning points and moments of insight in works such as *Phin*, *Bend Sinister*, and *Invitation to a Beheading* obtain their considerable impact because they come so close to affirming the negative and destructive power of the imagination as it dispels the fictional edifice that the bulk of the narrative, by its very nature, has sought to construct? And can we face up to the implications of this as a reflection on our own, human, make-up? It is an issue that John Updike touches upon during his review of *Ada*, and one that comes through most tellingly in his choice of adjectives.

the most daring and distressing quality of his novels is their attempt to rub themselves bare, to display their own vestments of artifice and then to remove them . . . . Van says of a moment of semi-recognition, "It was a queer feeling - as of something replayed by mistake, part of a sentence misplaced on the proof-sheet, a scene run prematurely, a repeated blemish, a wrong turn of time." This "queer feeling" is the sensation "close to the edge of experience" that Nabokov seeks to embody in *Ada*; this "queer feeling" is at heart of his artistic rapture and devotion, and also of his not always delicious mystification, his not invariably enlightening pursuit of nuance inklings.<sup>1e</sup>

The removal of artifice must in some way inevitably detract from the fiction's validity, and it is perhaps as a consequence of this, and the implied questi-

oning of the craft of writing itself, that so sensitive a novelist as Updike should employ the word "distressing." Whether fiction can and should appeal to the reader by pandering to that destructive element within us and, more interestingly, when do such measures become 'unacceptable,' are the awkward questions that *Ada* repeatedly obliges the reader to face up to as he endeavours literally to 'make sense' of the work.

Hitherto, in earlier compositions, Nabokov has sought to convince the reader of the merit of his art and to examine the workings of perception by brilliant and subtle variations on the most expedient of solutions to such concerns; namely, to take the fiction away from the reader, to threaten the bearer of his tale. Confronted by creatures like Paduk or Axel Rex, or the impersonal agent of contingency that Humbert Humbert terms "Aubrey McFate,"<sup>19</sup> things take on value and importance. For, as we cannot accept with ease the notion of unjustified suffering, our consequent pursuit of some type of rationale or underlying plan grants the object of that threat validity.<sup>20</sup> If somebody wishes to take or break something, then we are obliged to allocate a motive: it must in some way be merited, otherwise we begin to lose a sense of order and consistency, in a word, *meaning*. Nevertheless, such a method, even when handled with the delicacy evident in the punchbowl incident in *Priglasenie*, cannot finally avoid being viewed as enforced, and, in a sense, negative. Consequently, instead of heightening the specific moment, and so compelling the reader to consider the kind of imploration made by one of the figures in Sebastian Knight's *Success* - "'can't you see that happiness at its very best is but the zany of its own mortality?'"<sup>21</sup> - *Ada* seeks to embody exactly the very instant of this most painfully ambivalent apprehension. We may perhaps most usefully regard such a writing as the continuation of the central concept of *Fale Fire*, which sought to express a variety of interpretations and signifi-

cances, all of which were drawn from a single entity in time and space - Shade's script. *Pale Fire* as such is a representation of one brief event, the contemplation of a poem - a work that underlies the Sisyphean task of unraveling art, which "at its greatest is fantastically deceitful and complex,"<sup>22</sup> by its unfinished state.

*Ada*, in fact, shares two particularly notable fictional devices with *Pale Fire*: namely, the idea of the unfinished manuscript and its deployment of the theme of the imaginary country. However, the implication and the scope of the world of Zembla extends in a very different direction from that of the twinned worlds of *Demonia* (Antiterra) and *Terra*. Whereas Zembla makes only too apparent the possibilities of self-deception, as it unwinds and discloses itself to be the product of the deranged mind of Kinbote, (whilst at the same time, its richness confirms the endless potential of an imagination that is only committing the poet's sin of seeing anew) Nabokov's use of the fantastic settings of *Demonia* and *Terra* operate in a rather different and, arguably, more sophisticated fashion. In order to gain even the barest appreciation of its workings then, it is necessary to examine the presentation of these twinned worlds with considerable care.

Antiterra, as the lavishly documented backdrop for the action of the novel, or perhaps more accurately, as the world in which Van relates these actions, would seem to be an Arcadian version of paradise. Particularly in the first section of the novel, Van and *Ada*, "a unique super-imperial couple" [71], sport like Greek Gods enjoying what the flyleaf of the book, "the poetry of its blurb," calls "the Ardors and Arbors of Ardis" [588].

They stood brow to brow, brown to white, black to black, he supported her elbows, she playing her limp light fingers over his collarbone, and how he 'labeled,' he said, the dark aroma of her hair blending

with crushed lily stalks, Turkish cigarettes and the lassitude that comes from 'lass.' 'No, no, don't,' she said, I must wash, quick-quick, Ada must wash; but for yet another immortal moment they stood embraced in the hushed avenue, enjoying, as they had never enjoyed before, the 'happy-forever' feeling at the end of never-ending fairy tales. [286-287]

However, if we are to view Antiterra as some form of Eden, an approach encouraged by the allusions to various other garden paradises in literature, which have been extensively documented in Bobbie Ann Mason's *Nabokov's Garden: A Guide to Ada*,<sup>23</sup> it is not the passive paradise of innocence and fellowship that characterises those depicted in poetry, painting and myth. In the first instance, of course, Van and Ada's relationship is directly opposed to any accepted morality outside the novel, and, far more critically, it is also outlawed even within its fantastic precincts.

If practiced rigidly incest led to various forms of decline, to the production of cripples, weaklings, 'mutated mutates' and, finally, to hopeless sterility<sup>24</sup> .....By mid-century not only first cousins but uncles and grandnieces were forbidden to intermarry..... [133-135]

Furthermore, the siblings cause considerable disruption, both physical and emotional, to those around them. References to Van as "this angry young demon" [302] and his sister as descendants of a distinctive lineage ("Your.... cruelty, Ada, is sometimes, sometimes, I don't know - satanic!" [84]) underline the warning we are given about the narrator as early as the novel's third chapter.

for no sooner did all the fond, all the frail, come into close contact with him (as later Lucette did, to give another example) then they were bound to know

anguish and calamity, unless strengthened by a strain  
of his father's demon blood. [20]

Indeed, in the course of his narrative Van directly admits to bloodying the nose of a railway porter [304-305]; breaking a relative's jaw for greeting Ada with an embrace in a restaurant [515-516]; ordering the blinding of the kitchen boy and would-be blackmailer Kim [see 406 and 441]. Indeed, again typical of this book, Van manages to *more than fully* justify the claims of the reviewer of his "noveltee," *Letters From Terra*, who professed to "pity his patients, while admiring his talent," [344] by his callous treatment of a victim of "time-terror."

readers who have been accusing Van of rashness and folly (in young Rattner's polite terminology) will have a higher opinion of him when they learn that our young investigator did his best not to let Mr. T.T. (the chronophobe) be cured too hastily of his rare and important sickness. [388]

Despite the fact that the novel as a whole is designed as Van's eulogy to Ada, she too demonstrates similarly "satanic" qualities, particularly in her seduction and subsequent disposal of Lucette,<sup>25</sup> and, equally effectively, through the narrative's deployment of some curiously off-hand asides. One of the most notable examples of the latter is hidden within Van's account of the onset of the tubercle-bacillus that is eventually to kill her husband, Andrey Winelander.

Much to Van's amusement (the tasteless display of which his mistress neither condoned nor condemned), Andrey was laid up with a cold for most of the week. Dorothy, a born nurser, considerably surpassed Ada (who, never being ill herself, could not stand the

sight of an ailing stranger) in readiness of sickbed  
attendance..... [526]

These then are the inhabitants of the protean and "terrible Antiterra" [338], the very name of which incorporates a negative prefix as if to point toward the ever present possibility of hostile and destructive action (and, of course, the planet's alternative title, Demonica, makes such options even more explicit). As such, perhaps the only generalisation left for the reader to make is that Antiterra thrives as a world of extremes, mirroring the range of events and feelings experienced by the Van Veens, "that strange family, the noblest in Estotiland, the grandest on Antiterra" [380]; to be at once bewitching and frightening, "splendid and evil," [301] within the same breath.

Given that the protagonists of the novel actually live on Demonica, it is not surprising that the reader is given rather less extensive information about its supposedly complementary 'other' world, Terra - with the most salient fact apparently emerging as its consistent opposition to Antiterra, "Terra the Fair" against "terrible Antiterra" [338]. However, if we can visualise Antiterra as a peculiar collage of paradise and hell, then it soon becomes evident that its "multicoloured" [301] blurring of seemingly contradictory states repeats rather than contradicts any formula of 'opposing' worlds. For, as we should perhaps expect from Nabokov's own rejection of dualism, ("...philosophically, I am an indivisible monist"<sup>26</sup>) he denies the reader the security and attendant complacency of two worlds confined to the position of polar opposites.

Significantly, Terra is initially presented to the reader within the inverted commas that the reader is eventually obliged to put around Antiterra.<sup>27</sup> From the outset, it is depicted as a "notion" [17], a conception of

the established Demoniac world that breaks up the latter's essentially 'poetic' harmony and replaces it with more mundane "historical" divisions, which, in turn, effect further disruption.

.....a more complicated and even more preposterous discrepancy arose in regard to time - not only because the history of each part in the amalgam did not quite match the history of each counterpart in its discrete condition, but because a gap of up to a hundred years one way or another existed between the two earths; a gap marked by a bizarre confusion of directional signs at the crossroads of passing time with not *all* the no-longers of one world corresponding to the not-yets of the other. It was owing, among other things, to this 'scientifically ungraspable' concourse of divergences that minds *bien rangés* (not apt to unhobble hobgoblins), rejected Terra as a fad or a phantom, and deranged minds (ready to plunge into any abyss) accepted it in support and token of their own irrationality. [18]

As a belief voiced by madmen, "Terra" should not be expected to carry much weight, an opinion that seems to be confirmed by what the reader learns of Van's research "in terrology (then a branch of psychiatry)" [18], which seeks to discover whether or not it exists. His subjects, "numerous neurotics, among whom there were variety artists, and literary men, and at least three intellectually lucid, but spiritually 'lost,' cosmologists" [182], do not convince us of Terra's physical existence, only of the possibilities encompassed within the title of Van's intriguingly unfinished dissertation, "Terra: Eremetic Reality or Collective Dream?" [182]

Certainly, the idea that Terra may occupy a rôle analogous to that of the Christian Heaven is encouraged by Antiterranean usage which echoes Earthly conversation and idiom.

in the eighteen-sixties the New Believers urged one to imagine a sphere where our splendid friends had been utterly degraded, had become nothing but vicious monsters, disgusting devils, with the black scrota of

carnivora and the fangs of serpents, revilers and tormentors of female souls; while on the opposite side of the cosmic line a rainbow mist of angelic spirits, inhabitants of sweet Terra, restored all the stalest but still potent myths of old creeds, with rearrangements for melodeon of all the cacophonies of all the divinities and divines ever spawned in the marshes of this our sufficient world. [20-21]

I shall never love anybody in my life as I adore you, never and nowhere, neither in eternity, nor in terrenity, neither in Ladore, nor on Terra, where they say our souls go. [158]

'....all you had on were those wrinkled, soiled shorts, shorter because wrinkled, and they smelled as they always did after you'd been on Terra with Ada, with Rattner on Ada, with Ada on Antiterra in Ardis Forest - oh, they positively stank, you know, your little shorts, of lavendered Ada..... [370-371]

However, Van's *Letters From Terra*, "a philosophical novel" [338], serves to obfuscate this version of Terra where "the strain of sweet happiness could always be distinguished as an all-pervading note" [341]. The society of the Terra envisaged by Van Veen, far from being a heaven, is a mirror of our own world, refracted in part by an overlay of art, an overlay which nevertheless fails to disguise the horror that lies behind it.

Last but not least, Athaulf the Future, a fair-haired giant in a natty uniform, the secret flame of many a British nobleman, honorary captain of the French police, and benevolent ally of Rus and Rome, was said to be in the act of transforming a gingerbread Germany into a great country of speedways, immaculate soldiers, brass bands and modernized barracks for misfits and their young. [341]

Thus the vision of an imaginary world (Antiterra), together with its own eschatological system (Terra), which the reader admired for its comprehension, and sought to embrace for the challenge of final definition it offered, now takes the question that it implied - "What is it that makes a Heaven and does it inevitably entail the production of a Hell?" - and, in manner akin to Gogol,



directs it back upon the reader. Not only does such a development proceed to renew the validity of the inquiry, it also intimates that the solution to it is within your reach; as a mode of apprehension. Hence, perhaps, the central theme of much of the novel can be located within a short exchange between Ada and Van.

'You believe, you believe in the existence of  
Terra? Oh, you do! You accept it. I know you!'  
'I accept it as a state of mind. That's not quite  
the same thing.'  
'Yes, but you want to prove it is the same thing.'  
[264]

Terra in the end has to be judged as "a state of mind", as too does Démonia, together with its inhabitants. For what finally emerges is that the two worlds are a means of representing the vast sweep of possibilities open to the mind, simultaneously presenting, if we recall the figure used in the introductory discussion of *Laughter in the Dark*, both the 'thought' and the 'footnote.'<sup>28</sup> Each dissolves and shifts as though functioning as protean metaphors for the limitless vision within the consciousness, which, it seems, can only be externally expressed through dualism. Here we see binary opposition challenged, deployed and subverted by the employment of a writing which approaches the status of a giant oxymoron in itself. *Ada* comprises an examination of "states of mind," the conditions whereby event and belief are formulated from "bland abstraction" [563], and its concern with this topic, the nature of the mind and the dichotomous systems it creates, is the reason why John Updike has deemed the piece Nabokov's "most religious work."<sup>29</sup>

Not untypically, Nabokov obscures and burlesques such a reading, in so far as Van denies even the possibility of the charge that his chronicle is

trying to establish any epistemological surety or significance; rather, the novel is advocated as an amalgam of "buoyant and bellicose exercises in literary style" [578]. Nonetheless, as any philosophical tract that purports to demonstrate the real is forced to employ language that bespeaks dualism, it is only through the language of the artist, the figure who understands how words sound and resound, that a new perception can be demonstrated. It is at such moments of reflection that Van's beliefs most clearly impinge upon the "strong opinions" of his maker.

.....his philosophic work, so oddly impeded by its own virtue - by that originality of literary style which constitutes the only real honesty of a writer. He had to do it his own way, but the cognac was frightful, and the history of thought bristled with clichés, and it was that history he had to surmount.  
He knew he was not quite a savant, but completely  
an artist. [471]

If we can accept *Ada* as an attempt to render conditions before something has attained definition, a novel of pre-enunciation in which everything is potential, then it is not surprising to see both *Demonia* and *Terra* as worlds of extremes, nor that they should attain some sort of resolution within the confines of the mind. Not only are they united in being states of Nabokov's mind, but they also meet together in a novel which re-enacts that initial conception, moving internally, back toward the imagination itself, and so fulfilling the author's own dictum, "All novelists of any worth are psychological novelists, I guess."<sup>30</sup>

And yet, always opposing the benevolent workings of the mind to determine "worth", there is its responsibility for "the terror of human thought." [21] It is to stress the continual presence of this countering force that Nabokov depicts, so early in the novel and with such implacability, the details

of Aqua's madness: "for the human brain can become the best torture house of all those it has invented, established, and used in millions of years, in millions of lands, on millions of howling creatures." [22]

But what does this repeated ambiguity, or, more accurately, the maintenance of potentiality, mean for the reader? - Is he watching Nabokov play God? This appears to be very close to the truth if we remember the proviso which Nabokov himself stipulates: that the reader should have an awareness of that ambiguity from the outset.

A creative writer must study carefully the works of his rivals, including the Almighty. He must possess the inborn capacity not only of recombining but of re-creating the given world. Imagination without knowledge leads no further than the back yard of primitive art, the child's scrawl on the fence, and the crank's message in the market place.<sup>31</sup>

If the reader can discern in the presentation of Terra and Antiterra a movement whereby a situation is crystallized through apparently opposing terms, and which then goes on to reveal that dichotomous system as arbitrary, is this all that is required of him? Such an interpretation would consider *Ada* primarily as a piece of education, informing the reader through the work that definitions (and, by implication, of course, the confining notion of theme in books) are inadequate. However, this is to slight the achievement, in so far as good art, and only good art, can effect the requisite modification, or elevation, of consciousness capable of directing it towards examining itself rather than its products. Needless to say, this evocation of the power of art is mirrored within the book itself. For, as the reader learns to accept Antiterra by the adoption of an imaginative perception encouraged by the setting down of Nabokov's particular perception in the novel *Ada*, so too do the Anti-

terrans eventually accept Terra through the influence of good art, Victor Vitry's film of *Letters from Terra*, which Van describes as "flawless" [580]. Sure enough, the last the reader hears of the twinned worlds is that they co-exist and indeed overlap, thus ensuring that choice remains open - and its inevitable attendant ambivalence retained.

.....thousands of more or less unbalanced people believed (so striking was the visual impact of the Vitry-Veen film) in the secret Government-concealed identity of Terra and Antiterra. Demonian reality dwindled to a casual illusion. Actually, we had passed through all that. Politicians dubbed Old Felt and Uncle Joe in forgotten comics, had really existed. Tropical countries meant, not only Wild Nature Reserves but famine, and death, and ignorance, and shamans, and agents from distant Atomsk. Our world was, in fact, mid-twentieth-century. Terra convalesced after enduring the rack and the stake, the bullies and beasts that Germany inevitably generates when fulfilling her dreams of glory. Russian peasants and poets had not been transported to Estotiland, and the Barren Grounds, ages ago - they were dying, at this very moment, in the slave camps of Tartary. [582]

If Nabokov's patterning of ambivalence does aspire to echo that of "his rivals," and in particular "the Almighty," it does so only in so far as their respective products both seek to elicit wonder alongside attempts at interpretation. Thus the novel intimates allegorical in inquiry, but its cornucopian form and precision of detail discourages any form of reductive reading, because "the microscope of reality.....is the only reality" [221] for Nabokov as well as for Van. In the purest sense then, *Ada* is his most ambitious work because it strives to present some form of model of a mind engaged in forming a fiction that cannot be dispelled, not merely "recombining" but "re-creating." Hence the numerous parodies and stylistic mirrorings of all forms of fictional mimesis: ranging from questions on the text (see 82-83; 468 and 520); to allusions to "a pretzel string of old novels"<sup>32</sup> [157]; and even discussions of

the mechanics of book production (see 442; 460 and 484) which are sufficiently extensive to be worth an article in themselves (as too are the extensive references to paintings and painters, which adds yet another theme to this ostentatious plethora of material<sup>33</sup>).

However, what prevents the emergence of the insupportable conditions postulated by Van when he is separated from Ada, those without cohesion and "with Terra a myth and all art a game" [452], is that real stakes are at risk. This comes through so strongly in the first instance because *Ada* stands as a semi-complete work, whose ninety-seven-year-old fabricator has died<sup>34</sup> whilst making "a regular inferno of alterations in red ink and blue pencil" [587] to the master copy, and, more significantly, because art can only vie with human suffering; it cannot protect Van from the remorse he feels at causing Lucette's death. In the most painful fashion, Van's claims for his art are not fulfilled. Compare his remembrance of the night of Lucette's suicide with his final discussion and reflections on the subject with Ada.

In a series of sixty-year-old actions which now I can grind into extinction only by working on a succession of words until the rhythm is right, I, Van, retired to my bathroom..... [490]

'Oh, Van, oh Van, we did not love her enough. That's whom you should have married.....I would have stayed with you both in Ardis Hall, and instead of that happiness, handed out gratis, instead of all that we teased her to death!'

Was it time for the morphine? No, not yet. Time-and-pain had not been mentioned in the *Texture*. Pity, since an element of pure time enters into pain, into the thick, steady, solid duration of I-can't-bear-it pain; nothing gray-gauzy about it, solid as a black bole, I can't,.....

Touch? A giant, with an effort-contorted face, clamping and twisting an engine of agony. Rather humiliating that physical pain makes one supremely indifferent to such moral issues as Lucette's fate, and rather amusing, if that is the right word, to constate that one bothers about problems of style even at those atrocious moments. [586-587]

As the reader moves towards an awareness that Van's art is ultimately incapable of securing the peace and oblivion obtained from morphine, correspondingly, he also becomes more sensitive to the element of desperation which filters through the book. It is not merely that the work is, in part, Van's defence - the expiation of his guilt for driving Lucette to commit suicide<sup>35</sup> - but that the monstrously virtuoso performance of the novel's prose ("Recollections are always a little 'stylized'" [234] is the most discreet of waivers) is there to distract the attention - not so much of the reader, rather, of the ostensible author - away from a truly threatening void below. The difference between Van's masquerade as author and acrobat (under the stage name of 'Mascodagama'), one feels, is never that considerable. That the novel is an endeavour to generate its own protection, to stave off such a threat, is obliquely suggested from the outset, and it is particularly noticeable in the account we are given of Van's tour around Ardis, where Ada effectively begins her life's rôle as his guide.

Vaguely impelled by the feeling that as long as they were inspecting the house they were, at least, doing *something* - keeping up a semblance of consecutive action which, despite the brilliant conversational gifts both possessed, would degenerate into a desperate vacuum of self-conscious loafing with no other resource than affected wit followed by silence, Ada did not spare him the basement where a big-bellied robot throbbed, manfully heating the pipes that meandered to the huge kitchen and to the two drab bedrooms, and did their poor best to keep the castle habitable on festive visits in winter. [45]

The consequence is that the reader comes to recognise the necessity of the book's existence to counteract the fear of negation and "silence," the vision lacking "that third sight (individual, magically detailed imagination)" that confines Marina to the status of "essentially a dummy in human disguise." [252]

Critically, this danger is only openly acknowledged by Lucette, whose confession to Van of her dread of such a void proceeds to expose her to its inroads and finally bring about her destruction.

' - but somehow all of it, this sauce and all the riches of Holland, form only a kind of *tonen'kiy-tonen'kiy* (thin little) layer, under which there is absolutely nothing, except, of course, your image, and that only adds depth and a trout's agonies to the emptiness. I'm like Dolores - when she says she's "only a picture painted on air."<sup>36</sup>  
'Never could finish that novel - much too pretentious.'  
Pretentious but true. It's exactly my sense of existing - a fragment, a wisp of colour.' [464]

In pinning her hopes on Van to overcome this "nothing" within her, she tragically fails to appreciate that his stronger impulses, of self-protection and love for Ada, will not allow him to recognise its existence in the way that she does. For if he was to do so, to grant "nothing" actuality, then it would entail the fundamental admission that his life lacked any sort of meaning, and, in effect, it would assign himself, his sister, and his work, to the fictionality that would destroy their rightful existence in Van's chronicle, leaving them as figures of Nabokov's imagination. Such an action marks the destructive potentialities of *Ada*, which are finally rebutted by an author who allows his work to conclude instead in the direction of fusion, toward accumulation, not dissolution, through the agency of art.

Actually the question of mortal precedence has now hardly any importance. I mean, the hero and heroine should get so close to each other by the time the horror begins, so *organically* close, that they overlap, intergrade, interache, and even if Vaniada's end is described in the epilogue we, writers and readers, should be unable to make out (myopic, myopic) who exactly survives, Dava or Vada, Anda or Vanda. [584]

The merger of Van and Ada into Vaniada (Russian for 'Van and Ada') accompanies the task of returning the main figures of the novel to the author's consciousness in a positive and creative fashion. Moreover, it also succeeds in asserting the value of art as the fabricator; not the patently flawed eulogy of Van Veen, marred by its inability to override death and its author's overly-stylised self-presentation as a "romantic character" [193]. Instead, it proclaims the merits of the greater and more complete vision - significantly shared by "writers and readers" - that has formed the Veens and their worlds.

Although the novel itself actually concludes with a mock blurb for *Ada*, an additional fictional gloss on a fiction which openly admits that its resources of detail and implication are not classifiable, in short, that there will always be "much, much more" [589] as new connections and ideas occur to the reader on each perusal, this fusion of Van and Ada<sup>37</sup> effectively marks the culmination of the novel (alternatively titled "*Vaniada's Adventures*"? [409]). In this respect, it is interesting to compare the effectiveness of this intimated reversion, back into the mind of its creator, with a more recent piece of fiction which seems to attempt similar things, John Fowles' *Mantissa*.

During the course of Fowles' narrative, the reader is confronted with various literary games and allusions, together with shifts of identity and point of view that recall Nabokov. What emerges is a duologue between the writer, Miles Green, and his muse-cum-mistress, Erato, a mode which offers a specific point of comparison with *Ada*, in so far as *Ada* herself carries out these duties with a similar gusto, and the novel as a whole incorporates the record of debates over the truth and accuracy of Van's chronicle and of the nature of writing.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the setting for *Mantissa*, the cell-like hospital room in which we first meet the amnesiac author, is eventually



revealed as a metaphor that points to its creator far more explicitly than Nabokov's twinned worlds.

'You can't bear to see me come up with a good idea of my own. And what your exceedingly feeble imitation of a bookish young woman failed totally to hide is your astounding ignorance of what contemporary literature is all about. I bet you haven't even cottoned on to what these grey quilted walls really stand for.' he pauses in the buttoning and looks at her. She shakes her head. 'I knew you hadn't. Grey walls, grey cells. Grey matter?' He taps the side of his head. 'Does the drachma begin to drop?'

'It's all...taking place inside your brain?'

'Brilliant'

.....'The amnesia?'.....

'Tell me.'

He pulls the trousers on. 'Well...in simple layman's language, the whole delicate symbolism of the amnesia derived from the ambiguous nature, in both its hypostatic and epiphanic *facies*, of the diegetic processus. Especially in terms of the anagnorisis.'<sup>39</sup>

Finally, Fowles' game concludes with a circular return to the novel's beginning which, like *Ada*, implies the supremacy of possibility over actuality: "conscious only of a luminous and infinite haze, as if he were floating, god-like, alpha and omega (and all between), over a sea of vapour."<sup>40</sup>

As such, both novels, to an extent, cover similar ground as examinations and allusive re-enactments of creative activity. However, despite the fact that Fowles' title provides him with a defence, (or should that be alibi<sup>41</sup>), and that his work comprises less than two hundred pages *in toto*, *Mantissa* achieves only a very limited success because the reader is never sufficiently convinced of either the urgency or the value of Fowles' art for it ever to become more than at best an engaging game. It lacks the presence of what Van calls "the shade side" [188] and, far more importantly, a vocabulary that allows the author to maintain a thorough-going ambivalence, rather relying purely on external effects - what is said as opposed to what *and* how. The

reliance on dialogue in *Mantissa*, in fact, constitutes that book's major weakness, and Fowles' handling of tone (especially Erato's voice) is often questionable, and at times, simply awkward.<sup>42</sup> Nabokov, on the other hand, manages to preserve within his language a distinct sense of potential, of "other possible forkings and continuations that occur to the dream-mind," [446] which endows his shifts and fusions with significance, rather than with the merely gratuitous, which underlies Fowles' conjuring up of cigarettes and bathrobes.<sup>43</sup> It is this resilience and depth, a sensation, as Nabokov says of *Pale Fire*, of "texture," that ensures his work is able to bear the implied weight of containing *all* resources and giving the illusion of being literally able to do anything next. This, in the final instance, is where *Ada* strives to outdo its apparent rôle models, those weighty nineteenth century tomes produced by "the solemn novelists of former days who thought they could explain everything" [My italics. 475], by making his literary edifice yet bigger, and, laughingly, trying to hold "everything."

That such an enterprise can appear as even remotely credible is due, in a large part, to the diversity of the book's linguistic base. Nabokov's facility with Russian, French, and American/English ("I am trilingual, in the proper sense of writing, and not only speaking, three languages....."<sup>44</sup>) provides him with a unique storehouse of polycultural heritages, whose advantages and drawbacks are discussed by George Steiner in his interesting article, 'Extraterritorial.' Steiner's final observations appear particularly apposite in the case of *Ada*.

Nabokov is a writer who seems to me to work very near the intricate threshold of syntax; he experiences linguistic forms in a state of manifold potentiality and, moving across vernaculars, is able to keep words and phrases in a charged, unstable mode of vitality.<sup>45</sup>

*Ada* is a novel that seeks to extend the engagement with paradox and antithesis we observed in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, if anything, even more thoroughly. Previous concerns recur, but alongside newer, more lavish, oppositions, in a work that talks of creation and destruction; of Van and Ada; of light and dark; of meaning and implication; of Demonica and Terra, to form an environment in which "manifold potentiality" does indeed thrive; and, if it is a world "where artists are the only gods" [521], then Nabokov shows us, through the blighted failure of Van Veen, that the resources of the mind are to be used with humility. Furthermore, if this, the boldest of his books, reinforces our respect for the myriad possibilities of human consciousness, it also points to the joy that can be derived from exploring them, a theme beautifully summarised by Van Veen.

unaccountably and marvelously her dazed look melted into one of gentle glee, as if in sudden perception of new-found release. Thus a child may stare into space, with a dawning smile, upon realising that the bad dream is over or that a door has been unlocked, and that one can paddle with impunity in thawed sky. [286]

In a letter written to Louise Colet after the successful conclusion of the morning horseback ride between Emma and Rodolphe that forms Part Two, Chapter Nine of *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert delightedly remarks: "for better or worse, it is a delicious thing to write, to be no longer yourself but to move in a universe of your own creating."<sup>46</sup> In *Ada*, Nabokov roams a consciousness to produce at once his "sunniest work"<sup>47</sup> and his "most bizarre excursion,"<sup>48</sup> but, more importantly, the expansiveness and generosity of his gift invites the imaginative reader to "paddle with impunity in thawed sky."

### Footnotes

1. Elizabeth Dalton, "Ada or Nada", *Partisan Review*, 37, 1970, 155.
2. See Anon., "Nabokov's Waterloo", *Times Literary Supplement*, October 2, 1969, 1121, and D. J. Enright, "Pun-Up", *The Listener* October 2, 1969, 457-458.
3. Alfred Appel, "Ada Described", *TriQuarterly*, 17, 161.
4. Enright, 457.
5. John Updike, "Van Loves Ada, Ada Loves Van", *New Yorker*, August 2, 1969, reprinted in his *Picked-Up Pieces*, [André Deutsch, London, 1976] 201.
6. Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1969] 588. Future references to the text will follow in parentheses.
7. Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1974] 289.
8. Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1960] 191.
9. *Strong Opinions* 179.
10. Cf Humbert's confrontation with the dress mannequins in *Lolita*:

One figure was stark naked, wigless and armless. Its comparatively small stature and smirking pose suggested that when clothed it had represented, and would represent when clothed again, a girl child of Lolita's size. But in its present state it was sexless. Next to it, stood a much taller veiled bride, quite perfect and *intacta* except for the lack of one arm. On the floor, at the feet of these damsels, where the man crawled about laboriously with his cleaner, there lay a cluster of three slender arms and a blonde wig. Two of the arms happened to be twisted and seemed to suggest a clasping gesture of horror and supplication. 'Look, Lo,' I said quietly. 'Look well. Is not that a good symbol of something or other?.....'

[Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, Ed. Alfred Appel Jr. [McGraw-Hill, New York and Toronto, 1970, 228.]

11. *Invitation to a Beheading* 62.
12. Nikolai Gogol, "Nevsky Prospekt" in *Nikolai Gogol: A Selection*, Trans. Christopher English [Progress Russian Classics Series, Moscow, 1980] 145-146.

13. Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*, [New Directions, New York, rep. 1961] 140-141.
14. Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, rep. 1972] xiv.
15. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin*, [Heinemann, London, 1957] 191.
16. Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1967] 218.
17. *Invitation to a Beheading* 208.
18. Updike 210.
19. *The Annotated Lolita* 58.
20. This thought crops up consistently in Nabokov's work. See, for example, Pnin's rememorations on the death of his first love, Mira Belochkin, at Buchenwald [*Pnin* 134-135] and Adam Krug's rejection of "the inanity of accumulating incalculable treasures of thought and sensation, and thought-behind-thought and sensation-behind-sensation, to lose them all at once and forever in a fit of black nausea followed by a infinite nothingness." [*Bend Sinister* 87-88].
21. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, [New Directions, Norfolk, Conn. 1959] 99.
22. *Strong Opinions* 33.
23. Bobbie Ann Mason, *Nabokov's Garden: A Guide to "Ada"*, [Ardis, Ann Arbor, Mi. 1974] 15-20.
24. Significantly, Van is revealed to be sterile [394], whilst the fact that Van and Ada's romance also marks the end of their family line (Ada at one point talks of her "acarpous destiny" [219]) contributes further dark and ironic shadings to Van's eulogy.
25. See 375 and 380.
26. *Strong Opinions* 85.
27. See 17.
28. See my "'A Shape for.....Expectations?'" 32-33.
29. Updike 201.
30. *Strong Opinions* 174.
31. *Ibid.* 32.
32. Amongst the types of novel explicitly named are: "the Georgian" [118]; "the Russian" [310]; "the contemporary" [315]; "some Dormilona novel" [308]; "old

romance" [369 and 409]; and even one tinged with "Dr. Henry's oil of Atlantic prose" [485]. It is this roll-call, together with the self-conscious employment of almost every possible novelistic technique that led to Alfred Appel's description of it as "a museum of the novel" in his "Ada Described."

33. Bobbie Ann Mason's list on 158 in her *Nabokov's Garden* would make a useful starting point.

34. We begin to suspect Van's death as the assertions and appearances of the pedantic editor, Ronald Oranger, grow in both frequency and confidence. These begin on 220, and, in fact, suggest that Van was revising 220-221 just before his death (a point supported on 221, not only by the exclamation, "I may die tonight", but also by the rhythms of the following line, which recall the "aurochs and angels" sentence at the close of *Lolita*).

My magic carpet no longer skims over crown canopies and  
gaping nestlings, and her rarest orchids. Insert. [221]

Certainly, had Van overseen publication, Oranger's intercessions on 365; 366; 374 and 375 would have not been allowed to stand, nor the censorial cuts also made by the editor. The latter, in point of fact, though ostensibly made to protect his wife's good name (she is Van's secretary), tend to encourage the speculations of the reader in a manner that the full text would not [576] - especially when the next page goes on to document the extent of Oranger's sycophancy.

35. In her chapter dealing with Lucette [*Nabokov's Garden* 93-120] Bobbie Ann Mason proposes this guilt as the motivating agent behind much of the novel in a thorough and cogently argued manner.

36. Interestingly, one could argue that even this apparently completely negative interpretation is susceptible to some degree of melioration, in so far as it is itself derived out of art - a bastardised version of Nabokov's *Lolita*. Its very formulation might thus be said to mark a creative act.

37. Van and Ada are continually depicted as mirror images of each other, a theme which invited John Updike to observe that Ada is "too ardent and intelligent, too *respectful*, to be external" [*Picked-Up Pieces* 206]. Again, brother and sister's existence as mutual reflection is a strand that can be traced through the novel. In particular, see 47; 58; 102; 105; 218; 333; 556; 583; 586; and 587.

38. See especially 425-426.

39. John Fowles, *Mantissa*, [Jonathan Cape, London, 1982] 114-115.

40. *Ibid.* 192. C.f. 9.

41. It is significant that Fowles has to call on that defence on 185, where a footnote informs us:

\*Mantissa: 'An addition of comparatively small importance, especially to a literary effort or discourse.' *Oxford English Dictionary*

42. See in particular the dispute and reconciliation [145-154] that concludes part three of Fowles' text.

43. Ibid. 95-100.

44. *Strong Opinions* 111.

45. George Steiner, "Extraterritorial" in *Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes*, Ed. A. Appel Jr. and C. Newman [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1970] 126.

46. Gustave Flaubert, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert 1830-1857*, Sel., ed., and trans. Francis Steegmuller [Faber and Faber, London, 1981] 203.

47. Robert Alter, "Ada or The Perils of Paradise" in *Vladimir Nabokov: A Tribute*, Ed. P. Quennell [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1979] 104.

48. Philip Toynbee, "Too Much of A Good Thing", *Observer Review*, October 5, 1969, 34.

*Transparent Things*: "The muffled shock of an incomplete coincidence."

An incident in the early pages of Nabokov's penultimate piece of fiction offers us entry at the oblique angle at which *Transparent Things* seems to thrive. It takes place as the father of Hugh Person (the book's central figure) leaves his Swiss hotel.

Dr Person stopped at the desk to inquire with his habitual fussiness if there was any mail for him (not that he expected any). After a short search a telegram for a Mrs Parson turned up, but nothing for him (save the muffled shock of an incomplete coincidence).'

Novels operate through coincidence: materials are drawn together as characters meet and reassemble, as images recur and repeat, and, as we have noted in Nabokov's own previous fictions, the practice of an initial reading may be said to constitute that progression through a text which aligns these echoings and parallels. To do so, indeed, is to lay the foundations of the book: as, with the turning of the final pages, the superstructure of coincidences draws tight together and the book is stilled, at least until another reading. In short, plots - of characters, of emotions, but above all, of language - are charted in order to impart value, what we adjudge as meaningful, to those coincident happenings. Thus, regardless of whether or not we seek what Henry James calls "a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs, and cheerful remarks,"<sup>2</sup> and, as I have stated in my opening chapter, precisely because the time of reading must eventually be spent and the actuality of print on paper give out, when we do come to the conclusion of a novel we are prey to that inordinate desire - and in our



treatment of *Pale Fire* we observed that it was capable of bordering on the obsessional - which deems the work a *finished* article.

Although the reader would most readily comprehend 'finished' as meaning that he is no longer directly involved with its words, it carries with it an additional connotation that is perhaps too readily amalgamated with the primary one, namely, that not only has the book ended in time and space, but that it has ended in import. The common tendency is to conclude that if, as readers, we have 'worked out' the book, established that network of connections we traditionally group under notions of plot and character, then we have also, in a more physical sense, worked the book 'out', in so far as we have exhausted it of meaning. Further, our position with regard to it has not merely stabilised; it has set. The curious situation, and classic novelistic paradox thus arises whereby the reader accredits the fiction with its life, but in the same instant curtails it - a phenomenon that Roman Ingarden revealingly terms the "concretization" of a work.<sup>3</sup> Now, for the reader familiar with Nabokov's work, and one that has travelled thus far in this narrative, the notion of "concreting" a text cannot but be accompanied by that negative charge which we have registered at the core of the totalitarianism of *Bend Sinister* and the threatened finite restriction of character which so many of the novels attempt to avert. Indeed, it is extremely significant that although Ingarden himself endeavours to open out his observations on the rôle of the reader in the production of fiction and offers a cogent case for considering that such a practice is "just as transcendent as the literary work,"<sup>4</sup> as an audience, we cannot stop ourselves from noting that the term he most readily uses - even if at times to work against - is one that carries with it such a forceful implication of irrevocably limiting the text, if not of petrifying it. Almost unavoidably, what Ingarden's terms provide us with is an extremely succinct

example of just how innate, and of course how powerful, a reader's wish to hold and confine fiction is.

Where we may arguably locate the essential drive behind such a force is in the reader's urgency to bridge a gap; in seeking to reconcile the disparity that exists between our own lives as readers, we who exist in continuum and without any definite plot, and those fixed patterns we proceed to impose, encouraged by their definite endings, on fictions. How can the reader see things with the completeness that we sense within our grasp when we read a novel? The answer is obviously that we cannot: the human pattern, our chain of coincidences, cannot be viewed properly until the onset of death, a topic that we shall return to, and one that Kinbote addresses in one of the more intriguing asides in *Pale Fire*.

Here is a passage that curiously echoes Shade's tone at the end of Canto Three. It comes from a manuscript fragment written by Lane on May 17, 1921, on the eve of his death, after a major operation: "And if I had passed into that other land, whom would I have sought? ... Aristotle - Ah, there would be a man to talk with! What satisfaction to see him take, like reins from between his fingers, the long ribbon of man's life and trace it through the mystifying maze of all the wonderful adventure....The Daedalian plan simplified by a look from above - smeared out as it were by the splotch of some master thumb that made the whole involuted, boggling thing one beautiful straight line."<sup>5</sup>

This concern with the difficulties inherent in the production of "one straight line" is something that functions as one of the hallmarks of Nabokov's fiction, and indeed the notion of definition as a form of death is something that contributes significantly to the density of works as apparently unconnected as *Bend Sinister*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Now, such a theme is by no means uncommon - one could speculate whether the lepidopterist in Nabokov could have forgiven Prufrock's bemoaning "The eyes

that fix you in a formulated phrase, / ...sprawling on a pin, / ...pinned and wriggling on the wall"<sup>6</sup> - but *Transparent Things* heralds a treatment of the issue that leans far more explicitly toward the metaphysical than these earlier works. Its place in any Nabokov canon is rather as a development of its immediate chronological precursors, *Pale Fire* and *Ada*; in making increasingly manifest the fascination with ontological questions that these works spiral out of and eventually endeavour to return to. Such tendencies can be stunningly depicted, as is exemplified in the manner in which a, for the most part, enchanting symbiosis gives way to synthesis in the case of Van and Ada. However, one should remain mindful both of the negative elements present within that work,<sup>7</sup> and of the fact that it is possible to detect a rather more disturbing enactment of a similar performance within *Pale Fire* in the dissolution of both Shade and Kinbote.

Nevertheless, whereas these earlier fictions are distinguished by the dexterity with which they proceed to draw in, envelop, and eventually implicate the reader, giving rise to suspicions about the efficacy of the very network he has endeavoured to complot; *Transparent Things* possesses a certain measure of austerity, which wards off the reader's attempt to appropriate the text rather more explicitly than the more concealed traps sprung by its predecessors. Instead of the superfluity of details which characterise *Pale Fire* and *Ada*, congeries further complicated by the insertion within these texts of figures engaged in tasks obviously analogous to the reader's, as Kinbote strives "to sort out those echoes and wavelets of fire, and phosphorent hints, and all the many subliminal debts to me"<sup>8</sup> within Shade's poem, and Van Veen seeks to "re-construct his deepest past,"<sup>9</sup> *Transparent Things* offers us the thinnest of glazes, the barest overlay of structural materials. Witness its opening lines

that reveal the as-yet-unnamed narrator attempting to select a central figure for his fiction.<sup>10</sup>

Here's the person I want. Hullo, person! Doesn't hear me.

Perhaps if the future existed, concretely and individually, as something that could be discerned by a better brain, the past would not be so seductive: its demands would be balanced by those of the future. Persons might then straddle the middle stretch of the seesaw when considering this or that object. It might be fun.

But the future has no such reality (as the pictured past and the perceived present possess); the future is but a figure of speech, a spectre of thought.

[1]

These short paragraphs present the reader with nothing more than the primary demand of any fiction: that of a voice soliciting an ear, the keystone of any literary structure. Indeed, until the appearance of the word "him," there is no reason for not thinking that this initial cry is addressed directly to us as readers, and it is only with the onset of the next chapter that we are allowed to feel we can in fact avoid such attentions. The figure the narrator settles upon in that chapter is one Hugh Person, whose very name all too clearly obliges the reader to acknowledge his own part in fleshing out fictional personae and granting them the status of literary 'character.' As we have remarked on prior occasions, the reader's usual practice, and one certainly encouraged by the Victorian novel, is to overlook such an involvement on his part, and instead accredit the writer with "that logical and conventional pattern we have fixed for them,"<sup>11</sup> a propensity Humbert Humbert perceptively detects in others, but unfortunately for one Dolores Haze, not in himself. However, when we are faced with a figure whose wife - that is, the being we would like to believe knows him best - mispronounces his name as "You Person," [42] such an option is no longer viable, unless as the most conscious of

evasions. Moreover, such a device also serves to give the reader notice that another of his more commonplace assumptions, that of the central figure as some sort of Everyman, is within these pages simultaneously solicited and burlesqued. However, as we shall see later, such a satire proceeds to loop back upon itself in what we have come to recognise as a Nabokovian mode, in order to supplement what at first appears as a disarming and straightforward jibe, with a rather more telling sting.

The immediate consequence is that the picture we construct of Person is one that, more than in any of the other novels, bears witness to an endeavour to refute the process of appropriation which masquerades under the guise of 'human interest.' For this reason he is generally portrayed in terms which, although not altogether external (we are presented with his thoughts quite regularly in the narrative), do tend to emphasise appearance rather than seeking to convey an impression of depth or resource as we would normally expect. For the most part then, Person functions as a fleeting occupier of momentary niches of space and time, only continuous as a shape transfixed against differing backdrops, and upon re-reading the piece it strikes the reader as peculiarly appropriate that the narrator's first attempt to pin him down on paper should not even begin to describe a 'real' Person, but concentrate on his image in a mirror.

....a handsome young fellow in black, with pustules on chin and throat, took Person up to a fourth-floor room and all the way kept staring with a telly viewer's absorption at the blank bluish wall gliding down, while on the other hand, the no less rapt mirror in the lift reflected, for a few lucid instants, the gentleman from Massachusetts, who had a long, lean, doleful face with a slightly undershot jaw and a pair of symmetrical folds framing his mouth in what would have been a rugged, horsey, mountain-climbing arrangement had not his melancholy stoop belied every inch of his fantastic majesty. [4]

The use of the conditional tense, and a final qualification that almost retracts the entire description, recalls the deployment of similar techniques to depict John Shade.<sup>12</sup> However, if the curious reader of *Pale Fire* is rebuked here, he is nonetheless still able to turn to an alternative source, which arguably contains the residue of the most valuable elements of the creature known as John Shade: his poem. With Person, such outlets are far more limited, although we are permitted to see an extract from his sole printed work:

He had published a poem in a college magazine, a long  
rambling piece that began rather auspiciously:

Blest are suspension dots... The sun was setting  
a heavenly example to the lake... [22]

The gentle wit demonstrated here is evidence of some degree of imaginative awareness, but it is rather less a susceptibility to the nuances of language and what it may do, than an acute responsiveness to appearances, in this instance; that of words on paper. Again, we cannot avoid granting some measure of significance to the fact that during the course of his job (proof-reader, *not* fiction-maker), Person also seeks to separate the physical actuality of the typescript from its wider meanings and implications:

Hugh liked to read a set of proofs twice, once for the  
defects of the type and once for the virtues of the  
text. It worked better, he believed, if the eye check  
came first and the mind's pleasure next. [74]

If we are being shown a burgeoning novelistic sensibility's reaction to the unique nature of the written word and its limitations here, then how are we to reconcile it with the imposition of distance between the reader and Person

that constitutes the norm for this text? Indeed, our attempts to fathom Person are perpetually frustrated by the adoption of a point of view which is rigorously aesthetic. Various aspects of the proof-reader's appearance are picked out as though they are details on a canvas and considered purely in terms of shape and space. The effect is to 'dehumanise' him, in so far as such a viewpoint excludes the reader from the access and sympathy that he is accustomed to expect from readings of what Nabokov has called "the so-called 'realism' of old novels, the easy platitudes of Balzac or Somerset Maugham or D. H. Lawrence - to take some especially depressing examples."<sup>13</sup>

Hence the emphasis on Person's limbs as components which don't quite fit together, best exemplified in the considerable attention paid in the text to his hands, "his bashful claws" [81], and their propensity for independent action.

A schoolboy, be he as strong as the Boston strangler - show your hands, Hugh - cannot cope with all his fellows when all keep making cruel remarks about his father. [16]

Hugh, in his sleep, had imagined that his bedside table, a little three-legged affair (borrowed from under the hallway telephone), was executing a furious war dance all by itself, as he had seen a similar article do at a séance when asked if the visiting spirit (Napoleon) missed the springtime sunsets of St. Helena. Jack Moore found Hugh energetically leaning from his couch and with both arms embracing and crushing the inoffensive object, in a ludicrous attempt to stop its inexistent motion. Books, an ashtray, an alarm clock, a box of cough drops, had all been shaken off, and the tormented wood was emitting snaps and crackles in the idiot's grasp. [21]

Julia liked tall men with strong hands and sad eyes. Hugh had met her first at a party in a New York house. [34]

Hugh, despite forelimb strength, was a singularly inept anthropoid. He badly messed up the exploit. He got stuck on a ledge just under their balcony. His flashlight played erratically over a small part of the facade before slipping from his grasp... [65]

'.....the tools may be of flesh and bone like these'  
(taking Hugh's hands, patting each in turn, placing  
them on his palms for display or as if to begin some  
children's game).

His huge hands were returned to Hugh like two  
empty dishes. [79]

The marked focus on Person's hands clearly point to his unwitting murder of his wife, in the same way that a similar stress on Homer Simpson's hands foreshadows the killing of Adore Loomis in *The Day of the Locust*.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in both West and Nabokov's books, such an emphasis also serves to deny the character the coherence that we expect of "old realism;" with the consequence that Homer Simpson remains a pathetic cartoon stylisation and Hugh Person, a colourless, pellucid figure ever so slightly out of joint. Indeed, even Person's feet are subjected to the same imperious treatment of 'detachment'; as they too are denied a permanent and integrated place in the set arrangement that should compose a human being. Instead, in a rather disturbing fashion, they are depicted as objects with which their owner has little relationship.

Person hated the sight and feel of his feet. They were uncommonly graceless and sensitive. Even as a grown man he avoided looking at them when undressing..... What a jaggy chill he experienced at the mere thought of catching a toenail in the silk of a sock (silk socks were out, too)! Thus a woman shivers at the squeak of a rubbed pane. They were knobby, they were weak, they always hurt. Buying shoes equaled seeing the dentist. [85]

This dislocation is not, however, merely limited to externals, for the mental faculties attributed to Person at various moments in the fiction are also at variance with the reader's attempts at synthesis; one moment, "a young man of dark genius" [17], the next, "an idiot." [21] "Brilliant" or a "sentimental simpleton?" [48] We wonder what it can be in the end, and, in doing so, almost



involuntarily touch upon the core of our own desire to 'characterise' Person, to bring to an end that impression of inconsistency which subverts and resists our attempts at ordering it. Needless to say, such perplexity is expressed within the text itself by one Madame Charles Chamar, née Anastasia Petrovna Potapov, Person's eventual mother-in-law.

She had long grown accustomed to entertaining this or that young man whom capricious Armande had stood up; but the new beau was dressed like a salesman, and had something about him (your genius, Person!) that puzzled and annoyed Madame Chamar. She liked people to fit. The Swiss boy, with whom Armande was skiing at the moment on the permanent snows high above Witt, fitted. So did the Blake twins. So did the old guide's son, golden-haired Jacques, a bobsled champion. But my gangly and gloomy Hugh Person, with his awful tie, vulgarly fastened to his cheap white shirt, and impossible chestnut suit did not belong to her accepted world. [38]

Person does not "fit" into the "accepted world" of Madame Chamar, who is herself interestingly rendered in the most perfunctory and succinct of novelistic terms, because the qualities and attributes that normally fuse to constitute a personality do not amalgamate in this instance. Those aspects of character that the reader forces to co-incide, "fits" together to convince himself of the figure's veracity, do not join in the case of Hugh Person. Instead, he exists as an unfinished work, "an incomplete coincidence," [11] rather indistinct and muted - and, certainly by the standards of "old realism," "somehow not a very *good* Person." [48] And yet, have we not just been shown that it is for precisely this reason, Person's irresolvability as a character, his resistance to simplification and integration into the world of "fat, vulgar Madame Chamar," [42] that he has been selected as subject material? Indeed, does not the narrator directly inform us that in this uniqueness lies the source of Person's "genius" [38]?

A special emphasis on this sort of disparity, I would maintain, is particularly prevalent throughout *Transparent Things*, and much of its notably brief length is dedicated to enquiries, of considerable playfulness and wit, concerning a host of assumptions which both underlie our readings of fiction and equip us to locate them safely within some sort of amenable literary paradigm. Moreover, often attention that would appear to be bestowed upon seemingly rather small concerns carries with it surprisingly far reaching implications - especially when compared to the modes of thought and expression manifest in the literary output of the practitioners of "old realism."

Thus, to take an example from one of the authors cited by Nabokov, *Sons and Lovers* charts the progress of Paul Morel's endeavour to clear a space for himself outside of social norms, but the reader of Lawrence's novel is easily able to accommodate such a figure and even emerge with a ready definition; that of the nascent artist in pursuit of a voice of sufficient range and timbre to express his rebellion against accepted modes of conduct. Moreover, we can also locate Paul in relation to additional determinants aside from our usual understanding of what constitutes the artist, most notably of course, the influence and contradictory impulses exerted upon him by his parents. Consequently, by the time we have reached the end of Lawrence's book, and despite the fact that it purportedly depicts a leave-taking and an apparent denial of the element pre-eminent in defining him to the reader (namely, his relationship with his mother), Paul Morel does not succeed in escaping us.

'Mother!' he whispered - 'mother!'  
She was the only thing that held him up, himself, amid all this. And she was gone, intermingled herself. He wanted her to touch him, have him alongside with her.  
But no, he would not give in. Turning sharply, he walked towards the city's gold phosphorence. His fists were shut, his mouth set fast. He would not take that

direction, to the darkness, to follow her. He walked towards the faintly humming, glowing town, quickly.<sup>15</sup>

For all the apparent open-endedness of this conclusion, the intimation of the text to the reader is so marked as to act as an effective proscription of any pretensions on his part to a reading that differs from the sole interpretation we are in fact invited to make: that Paul Morel acknowledges here his death as a son and now advances towards his destiny as man and artist. Despite superficial similarities, the contrast with the ending of a novel such as Nabokov's *Pnin* is considerable and quite instructive. There, the protagonist heads towards a future to which the reader is denied easy access or the saving grace of convenient orientations and consoling single readings; of Timofey Pnin the only net conclusion we are can draw is that he evades our net, moving toward "where there was simply no saying what miracle might happen."<sup>16</sup>

Now, what we have earlier talked of in previous chapters as the recuperation and modification of fictional characterisation is among the more immediate and easily gratifiable of literary pleasures, and it is an aspect of reading certainly not neglected in Lawrence's assiduous cultivation of our interest in Paul Morel. Nonetheless, perhaps an even more accurate yardstick for evaluating the potency of the reader's wish to make such assimilations is the regard Nabokov pays to it in his construction of *Pnin*. The prime strategy deployed by Nabokov therein is repeatedly to offer the hope of the reconciliation of character attributes that we have come to expect of a novel, (engendered at least in part by a literary heritage currently dominated by works such as *Sons and Lovers*), right up to the moment that the reader is made incontrovertibly aware of the narrator's partiality and the essential justice of Pnin's charge that "He is a dreadful inventor (*on uzhasniy vidumshchik*)."<sup>17</sup>

And yet, the idiosyncrasy of the book's tactics, of encouraging and augmenting the reader's belief that he is engaged in a sophisticated and eventually satisfactorily finite series of formulations only to finally dash them, also lays the work open to the more elaborate recuperation (smear?) that it is in fact granting such a practice the status of an acknowledged approach. Indeed, as we have discussed earlier (see "Cells interlinked within cells interlinked within cells....."), one could develop such a line further to argue that the use of such methods does not merely bestow upon 'traditional' character assembly a degree of validity, but, to a considerable extent, helps to perpetuate it.

The susceptibility of any critique to the more insidious accusation that to deem its subject material worthy of attack is in fact to prop up that which one intends to topple, is an extremely difficult charge to counter. This is particularly so when one realises that to produce an analysis which is itself sophisticated enough to utilise the methodology and assumptions of its target against itself, leaves it liable to be interpreted in a way diametrically opposed to that intended. Favourably, it can be viewed as the purest of critiques in relying on, and exposing, those ideas that the subject takes for granted, or in a less favourable light, as an assault tainted by devices and assumptions that should be wholly disavowed.

*Transparent Things* seeks to avoid this sort of threatening and involved dualistic entrapment of fiction by denying the reader the wealth of materials that even *Pnin* can be seen to provide in its imagery, its qualifications, and its embellishments. Instead, the piece exposes the reader to a sparseness and an austerity that acts as a far more direct challenge to the reader's desire to accommodate fictional materials. Indeed, I would maintain that the process of stylised recuperation whereby the reader accedes on the one hand to the notion that a character is of value because he is unique, and then proceeds to confine

him according to the bounds of his own personal understanding and, equally pervasive, his knowledge of the previously established "realism" of earlier texts, meets, in this book, perhaps its sternest resistance in the Nabokov canon. Again, if we return to a novel like *Invitation of a Small Town*, its opening lines draw the reader in and offer him purchase on a largely identifiable enactment of small-town 1950's America, whereas the later book, from its very outset, casts down before us awkward and explicit clashes and contradictions, involving the reader in a struggle to ascertain something approaching a satisfactory overview of the text. In this sense then, as we have observed, *Transparent Things* would appear to have something in common with its immediate fictional predecessors, as evinced in the similarities of the stylistic techniques employed in outlining *Invitation* and sketching *Person*. (You may now recall that "Daedalian plan simplified by a look from above"<sup>18</sup>)

However, the difficulties the reader may have in reconciling the inconsistencies of description in *Lolita*, *Pale Fire* and *Ada* are to a notable degree offset by the manner in which these texts pour forth - and in an ever-increasing profusion - a superabundance of connections and parallels, so preventing the reader from mapping the novels in accordance with the level of permanence, and the attendant satisfaction, that we associate with previous chartings of "old realism." Consequently, the richness of what we may even more appropriately now call verbal *trappings*, serves to betray the reader into a realisation of his own rôle in selecting and making alignments within the fiction as actions of restriction and limitation. In short, through a host of strategic devices, some of which have been discussed in earlier chapters, these books curtail convenient assimilation and absorption, because they produce in the reader the impression that there is, as the final words of *Ada* phrase it, "much, much more."<sup>19</sup>

With reference to such a schema then, *Transparent Things* would seem to mark an almost total *volte face*: for in this book the reader is not provided with "more," but just the opposite; as he is now obliged to work with what is almost the very least. Consequently, objections to the figures within the work as "even more perfunctory than usual,"<sup>20</sup> or "mere cursory squiggles on the paper, with Person as "a melancholy cipher,"<sup>21</sup> it seems, are rather missing the point. This book simply lacks the sort of density to which the reader can surrender himself and luxuriantly wallow (as with *Ada*). Nor does it even have that implied depth of resources commensurate with the emergence of figures of sufficient 'complexity', (i.e. capable of sustaining an acceptable number of internal contradictions without fragmenting the fiction), as to merit our labelling it a piece of literary "realism" (the fallacy which *Priglasenie* exposes as style). *Transparent Things* endeavours to provide its readers with the most loosely knit and frailest of skeins, as, in all senses of the word, the *thinest* of Nabokov's texts, with certainly little of the texture we associate with its more opulent predecessors.

Now, to point out that other attempts at the assimilation of fiction are essentially stylistic phenomena, and, at best, imaginative products in themselves, is not to lay claim in any way to a position of superiority or preferential treatment to be accorded to *Transparent Things*. What it does offer can be no more accurately captured and retained by any critical catch-all of 'subversion' than those alternative strategies, for it too - and this is a recurrent theme in Nabokov's work - comes down to "a question of style."<sup>22</sup> Like all of Nabokov's fiction, *Transparent Things* calls into question the reader's urgency to unify and homogenize the inconsistencies of texts by the deployment of a stylistic and stylised technique. For how else but by a literary stance, a *pose*, could the reader be beguiled into perceiving a certain

inadequacy about the fictional materials of *Transparent Things* and, because of this paucity of information, be left with the sensation that "coincidences" will always somehow remain "incomplete" and resolution never be attained?

What Nabokov seems to be playfully addressing in *Transparent Things* is the question of just how little information, as readers, we are willing to settle for in our quest to formulate plots, a literary version of a philosophical chestnut raised lightheartedly in *Ada*:

('Tell me,' says Osberg's little gitana to the Moors, El Motela and Ramera, 'what is the precise minimum of hairs on a body that allows one to call it 'hairy'?)<sup>23</sup>

Hence, whereas previously "the ornamentation of the commonplace"<sup>24</sup> that constitutes the traditional fictional patterns of "old realism" is there to be picked apart, here the fiction proclaims an absence of pattern, and its author, whose insistence on precise details is so marked, tellingly summarises it as "merely a beyond-the-cypress inquiry into a tangle of random destinies."<sup>25</sup> The extent of any freedom from literary confines, of the exact location of the dividing line between "tangle" and recuperated story, is, however, of course impossible to ascertain, something Henry James points out in a discussion that helps to elucidate *Transparent Things*.

Mr Besant has some remarks on the question of 'the story' which I shall not attempt to criticise, though they seem to contain a singular ambiguity, because I do not think I understand them. I cannot see what is meant by talking as if there were a part of the novel which is the story and part of it which for mystical reasons is not - unless indeed the distinction be made in a sense in which it is difficult to suppose that any one should attempt to convey anything, represents the subject, the idea, the *donnée* of the novel; and there is surely no school - Mr Besant speaks of a school - which urges a novel should be all treatment and no subject. There must assuredly be something to treat;

every school is intimately conscious of that.....There are some subjects which speak to us and others which do not, but he would be a clever man who should undertake to give a rule - an *index expurgatorius* - by which the story and no-story should be known apart. It is impossible (to me at least) to imagine any such rule which shall not be altogether arbitrary.<sup>26</sup>

Nabokov's work then, despite its hindrance of those linked chains of causality and coincidence, which invite either empathy with character or convenient accommodation, cannot thus avoid lending itself to some degree of recuperation. For the reader, the most immediate and readily-detectable strain in *Transparent Things* amenable to such action is its presentation of those elements which, according to John Updike, make the book, "something of a thriller,"<sup>27</sup> whereby we discover that during "the quasi-insane state into which sleep put him" [56], Hugh Person strangled his wife Armande. This the reader learns by piecing together the various snippets of information he is proffered in the accustomed manner. And at the same time, the reader cannot help but notice that a reading conducted solely along such lines, like *Person*, doesn't quite "fit;" in so far as the order in which we receive the events which lead up to prefigure Armande's death, do not facilitate any alignment with the set of expectations we would customarily bring to bear on a fiction once we have recognised the characteristic voice of the "thriller." On the contrary, such a "coincidence" is too "incomplete," and the voice "muffled" almost to the point of silence. Thus, for example, the first fact that we are told about Armande is of her non-existence, a "late wife," [My italics. 4] before her involvement with Person is re-created for us<sup>28</sup> (see especially 55 and 62-67), something paralleled, if we were alert enough to spot it, in information offered by John Ray, Jr, at the outset of another Nabokov novel ("Mrs 'Richard F. Schiller' died in childbed, giving birth to a stillborn girl, on Christmas Day 1952"<sup>29</sup>). Our



impression of Armande is then, from the outset, one of absence rather than presence, a sense that is reinforced with comments like the following, summarising her initial meeting with Person:

The mechanism of their first acquaintance was ideally  
banal. [25]

As such, the reader will obviously find it difficult to develop any notion of a character according to the precepts of "old realism," but will tend to see some correspondence with the thriller convention which invariably provides him with a corpse as the leading-off point for the book. However, in the opening pages of a thriller we would surely expect our corpse to be rather more centre-stage<sup>20</sup> than merely to figure in a cursory aside, and, similarly, that an account of the actualities of any murder either to accompany it then and there, or to take place at the end of the book rather than two-thirds of the way through it [79-81].

An additional feature which cuts across the reader's desire to classify *Transparent Things* under the heading of "thriller" provides a further indication of both the adroitness and the playful nature of the treatment which the author is capable of extending to assumptions about fiction within the piece. One could perhaps label it as a form of *reductio ad absurdum*, but Nabokov's approach is possibly better summarised as being often akin to that of a child insistently questioning and pushing answers and ideas to extremes, to leave himself finally - and, just as importantly, his answerer, the ostensible source of authority - with nothing but the inquiry, "why?" Hence the reader of this book is surprisingly disquietened and discouraged from labelling *Transparent Things* as a thriller by the presence of too many corpses, almost the last

thing one would expect to disturb such an analysis. For not only do the central figures, of Person, Armande and Baron R. (the latter, of whom more later, is the provider of Person's proofs - inevitably, as it turns out, in more than just the immediate sense of that word) all perish during the course of the book, but those on the most distant of peripheries also meet their demise, a fact eloquently noted by Updike ("A worse than Calvinist sense of rigour constricts the poor bright creatures into the narrowness of the killing bottle"<sup>21</sup>). Here are just a few of the extracts from the deaths column.

....since he could not tell her *which* room on the third floor he had occupied she, in turn could not give it to him, especially as the floor was full. Claspig his brow, Person said it was in the middle three-hundreds and faced east, the sun welcomed him on his bedside rug, though the room had practically no view. He wanted it very badly, but the law required that records be destroyed when a director, even a former director, did what Kronig had done (suicide being a form of account fakery, one supposed). [4]

Hugh and the new, irresistible person had by now switched to French, which he spoke at least as well as she did English. Asked to guess her nationality he suggested Danish or Dutch. No, her father's family came from Belgium, he was an architect who got killed last summer while supervising the demolition of a famous hotel in a defunct spa..... [27]

Mr R. had discovered one day, with the help of a hired follower, that his wife Marion was having an affair with Christian Pines, son of the well-known cinema man who had directed the film *Golden Windows* (precariously based on the best of our author's novels)..... Very soon, however, he learned from the same sleuth, who is at present dying in a hot dirty hospital on Formosa, an island, that young Pines, a handsome frog-faced playboy, soon also to die, was the lover of both mother and daughter, whom he had serviced in Cavaliere, Cal., during two summers. [32]

Momentarily putting aside the issue of the verifiability of such information, the problem faced by the reader is more than just the number of deaths, or even of any adjustment on his part to the violence and pain with which many meet their ends. Our unease is rooted in the fact that we are obliged to take

into account that many of these exotic deaths (locations are as widespread as Switzerland, Formosa and Colorado) are apparently due either to accidents or what we usually term 'natural' causes - elements which the stylisation of the thriller is loath to accept within its covers. In addition, and even more discouraging for the follower of such works, these mortalities, because of their resistance to the usual pattern of immediate incorporation within the perimeters of genre (in short, there is no-one to whom we can ascribe blame), detract from the central importance we would like to allocate to Armande's death. The result is a thriller which collapses under the onslaught of the corpses that should nourish and sustain it.<sup>32</sup>

What we might perhaps propose is that within *Transparent Things* Nabokov provides his own literary illustration to James's thoughts about the difficulty of rendering fiction in terms of levels of plot satisfaction. He does so through the device of playing devil's advocate; of accepting the reader's wish to form stories and then pushing such an urge to the limit with the provision of often what seems to be the most desultory of information, rather than confronting that desire head-on. As James reminds us, however, the establishment of anything approaching "an *index expurgatorius*" is a task for what he characteristically terms "a clever man," - put plainly, an impossibility.

Nabokov, to whom the epithet "clever" has often been applied in the manner of the Jamesian usage here,<sup>33</sup> in a sense picks up this gauntlet by managing to imply the existence within the fiction of an extremely "clever" creature, in the form of the American novelist Baron R., who, in turn, supplies the reader with the answer to a far more subtle and engaging mystery than that posed by Person: the identity (namely?) of the book's narrator. A careful reading of *Transparent Things* reveals this to be the ghost of Baron R., and the principal clues which enable one to reach this "elegant solution"<sup>34</sup> are

provided by the fictional author's unique idiom. This peppers the narrative (see for example 31; 69; 71; 92 and 103-4) and makes its most conspicuous appearance in the work's final sentence.

Easy, you know, does it, son.

[104]

R.'s line of encouragement is addressed to his old proofreader as Person perishes in a fire at his Swiss hotel to join him in what the latter describes as "it: not the crude anguish of physical death but the incomparable pangs of the mysterious mental manoeuvre needed to pass from one mental state to another." [104] Again, as with Armande, the life of R. is presented to the reader in an order that displaces conventional chronology, in so far as we are not informed of his death at the outset (in order to view him as spectral), but instead have to wait for this data until the twenty-first of the book's twenty-six chapters. Nonetheless, the reader's detective work is facilitated by R.'s "exasperating way not only of trotting out hackneyed formulas in his would-be colloquial thickly accented English, but also of getting them wrong" [31] - "To make a story quite short [31]; "tickled me black in the face" [69]; "so long and soon see" [71]; and "in redskin file" [103] - together with his repeated and highly idiosyncratic use of "O.K." and "son" (see 31; 32; 69; 92 and 104). Moreover, as H. Grabes perceptively noted,<sup>35</sup> the narrator's comments are explicitly keyed for us by the use of a different tense, the present, and so distinguished from that of the main body of the text, which is related in the traditional tense of most fiction, the past.

Now such a tense, together with the concomitant supposition, that of the happening of 'once upon a time,' is one of the keystones of "old realism" and

is particularly evident in arguably its most important technical prop, which we can easily detect in the hectoring tone that concludes *Sons and Lovers*: that of the omniscient narrator. That emergent voice, because it derives its authority from the past, carries with it an extremely powerful and comforting sense of certainty: for not only is what we are reading in a work of "old realism" most definitely *not* happening to us; but even more importantly, whatever it may have been, it is over with and finished. Clearly, however, this degree of certainty is inapplicable to our own lives as readers (and in that lies much of its attraction) - at least until we too are relegated to the status of past tense - and it was in order to align the novel more closely with what he construed as life in the present tense, that a novelist like James sought to confront, and by implication question, the ease of the reader's capitulation to any "sense of the past" within his fictions. Thus, any wish to draw significant moral lessons or consign any of the challenge of James's fiction to the safety of a self-delegated past,<sup>26</sup> is countered by the novelist's continual experimentation with the third-person narrative voice, which extends from the sophisticated vacillations of Strether to the "light vessel of consciousness" of Maisie Farange. If the variation and scope of these models of restricted insight provides the most telling indication of James's awareness of the difficulties of quelling the beguiling note of termination which fiction sounds for the reader, then the detection of any similar hampering of passive resignation on the part of the reader within Nabokov's fiction is a far more clear-cut affair.

The more comprehensive attacks on easy reassurances which we have so far documented in Nabokov's work give the most marked indication of just how imperative he regards this self-appointed task to be, of alerting his audience to the possibilities of more mutual communications between author and reader.

Indeed, critical responses to Nabokov's work have tended to overstress his concern with the artist and the practice of writing at the cost of demoting the considerable importance he attaches to the art of reading, which makes itself manifest both in his critical engagements with other writers, (the four volume edition of *Eugene Onegin*, the three volumes of *Lectures*, and the book on Gogol) and in his recorded responses to interviewers.

*What about the pleasures of writing?*

*They 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.<sup>37</sup>*

[My italics]

It is, therefore, as a measure of the respect with which Nabokov regards his reader that we should view the manner in which a novel like *Pnin* gleefully proceeds to expose the ever-present allure of yielding to the seductive reassurances of the past. Hence the disavowal of responsibility, in itself amounting to a variant and perverse form of death wish, whereby the reader grants the teller of a tale an omniscience that can never be warranted, is therein skilfully rebuked, if not wholly discredited, as more and more details about the relationship between the narrator and Pnin's wife come into the open.

This marked distrust of omniscience distinguishes most of Nabokov's fictions, even stretching back to quite early works such as *Despair*. Here the gradual revelation that the ordering of that most confident of narrator-perpetrator's, Hermann, is inaccurate and verging on the insane, highlights the possible consequences entailed by allowing oneself to play God and conveniently retreating from any human involvement.<sup>38</sup> In keeping with his rôle of

devil's advocate in *Transparent Things*, however - and it is surely the most apt posture to adopt in a struggle with godly omniscience - Nabokov's penultimate work provides the reader (for the first time?), with exactly what he or she (and, it must not be forgotten, the author) most crave for, an ideally omniscient narrator, and what is more, in order to satisfy the most scrupulous, a narrator whose omniscience is for once genuinely justified. This narrator is blessed with "the favours of death knowledge" [82], and so appointed to the position whereby the "one beautiful straight line" is visible. Moreover, the narrator also stands firm on the only possible ground (apart from the regions of insanity) with which the reader can feel in any way comfortable as he attempts to recuperate proclamations such as "there are no mysteries now" [28] without recourse to irony.

Unfortunately for the reader whose thankful withdrawal from active involvement with the fiction is now seemingly encouraged, the validity of this narrative voice is conveyed to us rather paradoxically: namely, by R.'s refusal to exploit his omniscience and *not* complete those coincidences that enable the reader to terminate the fiction and consign *Transparent Things* to the past. Such a credo is directly outlined to us in chapter twenty-four, which exists not so much as an easily assimilated modernist aside, but rather, according to the definition proffered by Vadim in *Look at the Harlequins!*, as "the margin - where inspiration finds its sweetest clover."<sup>39</sup>

Direct interference in a person's life does not enter our scope of activity, nor, on the other, tralittitiously speaking, hand, is his destiny a chain of predeterminate links: some 'future' events may be likelier than others, O.K., but all are chimeric, and every cause-and-effect sequence is always a hit-and-miss affair, even if the lunette has actually closed around your neck, and the cretinous crowd holds its breath. [92]

*Transparent Things* may thus be said to present a number of events, a life, in a manner which never forces their integration into patterns, and thereby gives the reader, an indefatigable seeker of patterns, the impression that the strings are never quite drawn together tightly enough to provide the series of coincidences that can secure a definitive "cause-and-effect sequence." And the principal cause of the difficulty and the frustration the reader experiences in attaining any sense of resolution? We cannot help but ascribe it to that complete omniscience, the possession of those "favours of death knowledge," which necessitates equal weight being given to the treatment of everything the narrator encounters. Hence:

In his search for a commode to store his belongings Hugh Person, a tidy man, noticed that the middle drawer of an old desk relegated to a dark corner of the room, and supporting there a bulbless and shadeless lamp resembling the carcass of a broken umbrella, had not actually been reinserted properly by the lodger or servant (actually neither) who had been the last to check if it was empty (nobody had). [6]

Hugh examined the items in a souvenir store. He found rather fetching the green figurine of a female skier made of a substance he could not identify through the show glass (it was 'alabasterette,' imitation aragonite, carved and coloured in the Grumbel jail by a homosexual convict, rugged Armand Rave, who had strangled his boyfriend's incestuous sister). [13]

.....three American kids began pulling sweaters and pants out of a suitcase in a savage search for something stupidly left behind (a heap of comics - by now taken care of, with the used towels, by a brisk hotel maid). [25]

There were only two people there, a woman eating a snack in a far corner (the restaurant was unavailable, not yet having been cleaned after a farcical fight) and a Swiss businessman flipping through an ancient number of an American magazine (which had actually been left there by Hugh eight years ago, but this line of life nobody followed up). [95-96]



In apparently tidying up loose ends the narrator proceeds to make the reader conscious of his own endeavours to formulate sequence and, in the Jamesian sense, "story" - and, as R.'s knowledge of events so manifestly surpasses that of the reader, (particularly so, of course in the light of his double rôle within - as something we would like to call a 'character' - and also outside the text - as narrator) the folly and sheer inadequacy of taking any viewpoint as definitive becomes only too clear. And so, the granting of omniscience to the narrator - surely the most devout wish of fiction-maker and reader alike - is revealed as a Midas-gift; as, far from facilitating the formulation of a definitive novelistic structure, it entails instead its rebuttal in favour of the perpetual revelation of more and more of what Baron R. calls, not without a covert pun, "line(s) of life."<sup>40</sup> [96] It is precisely this activity, as the reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* suggested, which appears to be the fundamental transparency behind *Transparent Things*:

The momentary, splendid coherences of fiction have become transparent, so that we can see the stuff it's made of slipping, flowing away in all directions, into other minds, other uses, other futures.<sup>41</sup>

The theory of transparency within the book itself is outlined by R. on the very first page.

When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of the object. Novices must learn to skim over matter if they want matter to stay at the exact level of the moment. Transparent things, through which the past shines! [1]

To perceive something as transparent then is to delve into its past in pursuit of those "line(s) of life" with which it connects and coincides - a process which all too clearly has its dangers, as, once began, such an undertaking may have no foreseeable end. Indeed, the more developed illustrations of transparency given to the reader, exemplified by the history of the pencil which takes up all of chapter three, are critically never concluded. "The complicated fate of the shavings, each mauve on one side and tan on the other when fresh, but now reduced to atoms of dust whose wide, wide dispersal is panic catching its breath" [7] are not followed up by the narrator, and the retained possibility of doing so through a later act of transparency should alert us to the fact that not all the lines of life have yet been uncovered. Furthermore, without some attempt at discrimination and order, does the vision applied to all and sundry not debase and trivialise?

He bared the bed and rested his head on the pillow while the heels of his shoes were still in communication with the floor. Novices love to watch such fascinating trifles as the shallow hollow in a pillow as seen through a person's forehead, frontal bone, rippling brain, occipital bone, the back of the head, and its black hair. [102]

Transparency offers phenomenal insight, but - and this is a consideration that the profusion of options tend to overshadow - no cohesion; as R. states, the adoption of such endless perspectives, although "always entrancing," carries with it the possibility of being "sometimes terrifying." [102] As such, the parallels the reader is immediately tempted to draw between the process of making something transparent and the construction of the superstructure of past coincidences and echoes which supports a novel is not as straightforward as it seems - a point Nabokov himself is not averse to stating directly.

Reviewers of my little book made the lighthearted mistake of assuming that seeing through things is the professional function of a novelist. Actually, that kind of generalisation is not only a dismal commonplace but is specifically untrue. Unlike the mysterious observer or observers in *Transparent Things*, a novelist is, like all mortals, more fully at home on the surface of the present than in the ooze of the past.<sup>42</sup>

It is extremely significant that although R., our "mysterious observer," is capable of dredging up "the ooze of the past", the major consequence of his so doing is to remind the reader of the essential arbitrariness of the order which the fiction-maker imposes upon his material. Our attention is drawn to the *manufacture* of partial, 'surface' connections, rather than to any confirmation of completed, deeper links, as this ostensible refusal to 'novelize' obliges us to examine more fully the very process of selection itself. A good example of such techniques is provided by the parallel descriptions we are offered of Person's first and last visits to the "Villa Nastia," where Armande lived prior to her marriage. Compare:

.....Person's power of orientation now failed him but a woman selling apples from a neighbouring stall set him straight again. An overaffectionate large white dog started to frisk unpleasantly in his wake and was called back by the woman.

He walked up a steepish asphalted path which had a white wall on one side with firs and larches showing above. A grilled door in it led to some camp or school. The cries of children at play came from behind the wall and a shuttlecock sailed over it to land at his feet..... [37]

Hugh hesitated at a street corner. Just beyond it a woman was selling vegetables from a stall. *Est-ce que vous savez, Madame* - Yes, she did, it was up that lane. As she spoke, a large, white, shivering dog crawled from behind a crate and with a shock of futile recognition Hugh remembered that eight years ago he had stopped right here and had noticed that dog, which was pretty old even then and had now braved fabulous age only to serve his blind memory.

The surroundings were unrecognizable - except for the white wall. His heart was beating as after an arduous climb. A blond little girl with a badminton racket crouched and picked up her shuttlecock from the sidewalk. Farther up he located Villa Nastia, now

painted a celestial blue. All its windows were  
shuttered. [87]

What the reader is here invited to witness is an effective repudiation of linear time in favour of the drawing of an alternative line; as through the deployment of the instrument of memory, Person proceeds to align the woman and her dog along a "line of life" that dispels the eight years of recorded time separating the two incidents. However, the fact that such a practice is documented by a narrator far more observant than Person, gives rise to certain misgivings about the sort of satisfactions afforded by the processes of memory, in so far as some degree of selection, albeit, as is presented here, largely unconscious, inevitably makes itself manifest. This is demonstrably shown by the fact that although Person remembered the woman and the dog, he missed the shuttlecock, whilst for the narrator to show us the shuttlecock implies that there could be more, that just a full account of these incidents could easily constitute an entire volume in itself. The result clearly draws attention to the establishment of the lines themselves, rather than convincing us of the existence of any wholly satisfactory order.

Again, if we look at another pair of analogous moments in *Transparent Things*, Person's discovery of two corpses, firstly that of his father, and then that of his wife, our attention is drawn to the practice of selection, of a choice that has been made. Look at the similarities of perspective adopted by the narrator in both cases:

Spatial disarrangement and dislocation have always their droll side, and few things are funnier than three pairs of trousers tangling in a frozen dance on the floor - brown slacks, blue jeans, old pants of grey flannel. Awkward Person Senior had been struggling to push a shod foot through the zigzag of a narrow trouser leg when he felt a roaring redness fill his head. He died before reaching the floor, as if falling from some

great height, and now lay on his back, one arm outstretched, umbrella and hat out of reach in the tall looking glass. [14-15]

She was lying quite still. He groped for the fallen lamp and neatly lit it in its unusual position. For a moment he wondered what his wife was doing there, prone on the floor, her fair hair spread as if she were flying. Then he stared at his bashful claws. [81]

The "line of life" connecting the two happenings is as much - if not more - bound by the same aesthetic, a concern with the distribution of shape on a canvas, than indebted to the actualities of the two dead bodies and, because we are aware that this viewpoint has been picked out from the infinite number available to the truly omniscient, the lines lose something of the charge we should like to feel justified in imparting to them. Indeed, there is a sense in which they seem almost insultingly spurious, so clearly do they reveal themselves to be the product of the perceiver's mind, rather than the retainers of those objective truths to which we might pay homage.

The incorporation within the fiction of the omniscient R. thus enables Nabokov to pull off a peculiar literary 'double-take.' A number of events and instances are selected and laid down before the reader, the props which we are accustomed to take up as 'the novel.' Accompanying these traditional materials this time, however, is an element of suspicion, a distinct note of reservation, sounded by the implication that the data we have been given by R. - all that we have and ever will have to support the structure - is somehow inadequate and even faintly discreditable. This donation - normally gratefully and unquestioningly received - may even begin to appear quite paltry compared with what we readily imagine to be the unlimited resource of the narrator. And in this of course, lies the double-take: the reader of R.'s narrative perceives, or rather allows himself to perceive, the business of plot-making, or what we

might more appropriately call the creation of story lines, as tarnished and unsatisfactory.

But by what means are stories discredited and the apparent realisation of the "*index expurgatorius*" permitted to draw nearer? By bookish ones, of course! - for it could readily be argued that the invention and careful placement of R. is among the sharpest of literary practices. It certainly follows a traditional design for channelling and directing the reader's ever-willing accreditation of authority to an entity he can readily construe or designate as an external source, i.e., one that cannot make claims on him.

Consequently, although these observations at first seem to raise the glimmer of a revised solution to *Transparent Things* which would stress that, instead of believing the tale, we may now really trust the teller; in point of fact, it is precisely the maintenance of such a position which is comprehensively undermined. As pursuers of narrative lines in this particular text, we have already come across too many diversions and sidelining strategies to conspire unquestioningly in the fabrication of another. Answers are thus eschewed and prominence is given to what we can only legitimately call the manner(ing) of their generation. For even this omniscient narrator, as we can scarcely have failed to notice, has demonstrated preferences and made selections (if only to free himself from the task of cataloguing the pencil!), which in turn further obliges the reader, a creature now aware of, but still hopelessly caught up in, his own momentum, to uncover yet another pose.

Such teasing deferments, bringing to mind the standard postmodern figure of the novel as a series of chinese boxes, or recalling our subject material, the *matrushka* doll, would seem to conform to that conception of Nabokov's artifice which regards it not merely as self-referential, but as rigourously and frostily exclusive - for who lies behind R. but Nabokov? Or rather an

image of Nabokov "imperious, sardonic, dismissive, categorical, the ruler by divine right of his own private kingdom."<sup>43</sup> And of course, should we choose to look carefully enough, we may notice with D. Barton Johnson that the English letter R when reversed forms the Cyrillic equivalent of the pronoun 'I';<sup>44</sup> with Lucy Maddox that "R.'s abbreviated name shades phonetically into 'our';"<sup>45</sup> or even that a whimsical but "emotional" metaphor deployed by Nabokov in an interview ("I might concede, however, that I keep the tools of my trade, memories, experiences, sharp shining things, constantly around me, upon me, within me, the way instruments are stuck into the loops and flaps of a mechanician's magnificently elaborate overalls"<sup>46</sup>) quite literally 'suits' R. down to the ground.

....R. came in. He had not shaved for three or four days and wore ridiculous blue overalls which he found convenient for distributing about him the tools of his profession, such as pencils, ball pens, three pairs of glasses, cards, jumbo clips, elastic bands, and - in an invisible state - the dagger which after a few words of welcome he pointed at our Person. [69]

These mock-alignments between the author's public face and the creatures of his imagination can obviously be envisaged in part as previews for the forthcoming attraction of *Look at the Harlequins!*, but their contribution to this more immediate fiction, along with other unmaskings of other poses, serves as far more than just an end in itself. Its purpose is distinct, in so far as the continual frustration of the reader's desire to extricate himself from the welter of entanglements generated by his attempts to secure a residue of authority outside of himself, finally entails the admission that one cannot ever wholly divorce oneself from a text. To endeavour to do so in Nabokov's work, as we have repeatedly seen, generally only succeeds in further impli-

cating and indicting ourselves as the culpable source we seek - a question Walter Benjamin addresses, one might say touches paper on, in his suggestive essay, "The Storyteller."

The reader of a novel.....is isolated, more so than any other reader. (For even the reader of a poem is ready to utter the words, for the benefit of the listener.) In this solitude of his, the reader of a novel seizes upon his material more jealously than anyone else. He is ready to make it completely his own, to devour it, as it were. Indeed, he destroys, he swallows up the material as the fire devours logs in the fireplace. The suspense which permeates the novel is very much like the draft which stimulates the flame in the fireplace and enlivens its play.

It is a dry material on which the burning interest of the reader feeds. "A man who dies at the age of thirty-five" said Moritz Heimann once, "is at every point of his life a man who dies at the age of thirty-five." Nothing is more dubious than this sentence - but for the sole reason that the tense is wrong. A man - so says the truth that was meant here - who died at thirty-five will appear to *remembrance* at every point in his life as a man who dies at the age of thirty-five. In other words, the statement that makes no sense for real life becomes indisputable for remembered life. The nature of the character in a novel cannot be presented any better than is done in this statement, which says that the 'meaning' of his life is revealed only in his death. But the reader of a novel actually does look for human beings from whom he derives the 'meaning of his life.' Therefore he must, no matter what, know in advance that he will share in their experience of death: if need be their figurative death - the end of the novel - but preferably their actual one. How do the characters make him understand that death is already waiting for them - a very definite death and at a very definite place? That is the question which feeds the reader's consuming interest in the events of the novel.

The novel is significant, therefore, not because it presents someone else's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about.<sup>47</sup>

Clearly much of what Benjamin has to say can be applied directly to *Transparent Things*, and indeed, if we re-examine Nabokov's text in the light of this retrospective illumination, one could perhaps even argue that it is so obliging as to provide the reader with a literal and exemplary target for what



Benjamin talks of as "the burning interest;" for neatly coinciding with the ending of the narrative itself is what quite ostentatiously amounts to a made-to-order death, the immolation of Person. In short, within *Transparent Things*, the reader is so stoked up as to necessitate facing up to rather more of the 'true' nature of that process of consumption we have earlier talked of as "assigning to the past" than he might perhaps feel comfortable with, as those aspects of reading which, as here, we largely treat euphemistically, are disclosed. Only in this sense can *Transparent Things* be arraigned as the most remorselessly schematic of all Nabokov's works; as part of a strategy that directs most of the book's forces towards exposing the reader to the most crudely powerful - as most explicit - manifestation of his or her desires, the urge to commit something to the certain safeties of the past in order to feel we may understand it more fully, which emerges as at once the most human and inhuman of motives.

Critically, however, it is an attitude whose inculcation is by no means solely limited to the reader, the presence of distinctly ambiguous acts of consumption permeate the narrative as a whole, with the appearance of one Mr Wilde, as Lucy Maddox observes, even providing us with a textual referent in the famous dictum from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*: "...each man kills the thing he loves."<sup>48</sup> Thus we are, if not left exactly free, only discretely encouraged to interpret Person's killing of Armande, who is to be found, like the beloved of Wilde's guardsman, "murdered in her bed,"<sup>49</sup> as the disturbing culmination - disturbing because we sense some degree of logic - of earlier endeavours to pin down and define somebody else's character: firstly through marriage, and then, as we might expect of the would-be author, through the attribution and summation of the qualities his wife possesses. Both of these variant types of possession sought by Person of Armande do not succeed, in so far as he never

secures her marital fidelity to him (we are told that during her skiing vacations apart from her husband "she had enjoyed full conjunction with only a dozen crack lovers in the course of three trips" [67]), nor does he ever manage to fathom her out by treating her in the manner of a literary character.

He loved her in spite of her unlovableness.  
Armande had many trying, though not necessarily rare,  
traits, all of which he accepted as absurd clues in a  
clever puzzle. [63]

The slaying of Armande, who in the extract above is significantly not credited with any notable marks of distinction or "rare traits," offers us a vivid and startling illustration, not only of possible consequences if the urge to comprehend is unchecked, but also of the ensuing degree of involvement between the would-be interpreter and his (or her) subject materials. This obliges us to register that integral struggle for possession which is contained within any discussion of what an interpreter *makes* of the information to which he or she has been given access.

If the agencies of excessive love, and love of definition, which bring about the death of Armande provide us with some form of echo of our own workings as readers of Nabokov's text, then perhaps even more telling resonances are set off by the death of Person. For this action seems to intimate some point of contact - albeit violent, not only in a literal sense (killing Person), but also figuratively (violating the internal consistencies we inevitably impose on the textual world) - which extends beyond the confines of the fiction. Like Armande, Person too is denied the possession of any special attributes, being called at one point "a rather ordinary American," [107] and he is forced to play the part of confessed favourite and eventual victim of

the figure who manifests that "burning interest." Thus Person is described as "one of the nicest persons I knew" [83] by one who professes the desire to fully define as early as the third chapter's examination of the pencil:

Alas, the solid pencil itself as fingered briefly  
by Hugh Person still eludes us! But he won't, oh no.  
[8]

R.'s twinned and transient rôle, existing as he does both within the textual environs (as renowned author) and outside it (as narrator of that text), effectively completes a concentric network of encirclements, whereby the 'lives' we would bestow upon figures of speech are successively - one might say systematically - closed off. Armande's existence is, likewise, stemmed by Person's most literal encirclement of her neck,<sup>50</sup> before he too is curtailed by the narrator in a manner consistent with the practice of one of his earlier novels, *Figures in a Golden Window* (or, as Armande calls it, *The Burning Window* [26]).

As he reached the window a long lavender-tipped flame danced up to stop him with a graceful gesture of its gloved hand. Crumbling partitions of plaster and wood allowed human cries to reach him, and one of his last wrong ideas was that those were the shouts of people anxious to help him, and not the howls of fellow men. Rings of blurred colours circled around him, reminding him briefly of a childhood picture in a frightening book about triumphant vegetables whirling faster and faster around a nightshirted boy trying desperately to awake from the iridescent dizziness of dream life.  
[104]

Evidently the next sequential death demanded to comply with such a reading is that of R. himself, which the reader is accordingly granted in the twenty-first chapter. However, the narrator's double rôle, and by implication, his store of

creative gifts, tend to complicate such a remorseless schematisation by seemingly buttressing his vision against the threat of complete definition. In addition, they of course point to the existence of another authority with even greater claims to the delivery of a finishing stroke, in Nabokov himself. Nonetheless, the applicability of our model is by no means wholly undermined: for R.'s apparent deliverance (the promise of which he extends to Person in the fiction's final sentence) is most signally tied to the issue of final definition, in so far as one could argue that his 'escape' only arrives *through* death.

What I hope that this perusal of the manoeuvrings and attempts at synthesis undertaken by the reader - obviously with varying degrees of consciousness - serves to address, is not the relative suitability of any of the models which the reader creates, or the merits of their claims for definitive status. Rather it is to draw attention to the reader's facility to adapt to even such an extremely stylised situation as the one he finds himself in here. The reader is able to accommodate a narrative voice that is at once alive and yet beyond the grave, an ability that not only highlights the narrator's dispensation of life and death within a fiction, but also points to the reader's own power in upholding, at root, these apparent contradictory forces. It is precisely this supreme amenability on our part, our readiness as readers to grant such a voice credibility, in short, to verify it, which obliges us to see ourselves as just as much agents - perhaps even victims - of that "burning interest" which we have discerned in other relations in the book. If Armande is loved, slain and defined by Person, who is in turn prey to the narrator's probings, then by an invited extension, not only is that identity we compose as R. revealed as not immune to such overwhelming attentions, but so too perhaps is even Nabokov himself, in spite of these elaborate stylistic distancing devices. And the very profusion of those adroit defences, as with

the earlier fictions, do they not in part serve to indicate the frailty of that unsullied communication they presumably seek to protect?

Now, up to this point, I have been stressing what we have relatively conveniently termed a 'darker' or 'destructive' element within the involved relationship which exists between reader and text, as evinced in my adoption and adaptation of the adjectives that Benjamin affixes to the reader, those that speak of the latter's interest as "burning" and "consuming." Not surprisingly, such a choice could, therefore, be seen as liable to be construed as expressive of a somewhat partial viewpoint, given its apparent failure to acknowledge the more positive benefits of reading. However, although a manifest emphasis on this supposed 'darker' side is indeed a very necessary corrective in order to offer some redress to an issue that has suffered considerable neglect, I would suggest that the adjectives I have employed possess an inference that overrides any purely castigatory implications, principally because the process of consumption, as we have discerned in each relationship within *Transparent Things*, also entails an equal measure of self-consumption.

The suitability of the notion of a "burning interest" thus extends much further than its encapsulation of the reader's workings on the prose: it is also quite able to incorporate the consequences for the creative reader of such actions. For as the flame eventually turns upon itself and thereby transforms itself into what it was not, so too with the operations of the creative reader and the artist, a point Nabokov brings up in a discussion of the development of a fiction - in this instance, the literal writing of one, although in the light of previous statements (see my 317) we may legitimately also apply it to the reader's effect upon a text.

A passerby whistles a tune at the exact moment that you notice the reflection of a branch in a puddle which in its turn, and simultaneously, recalls a combination of damp green leaves and excited birds in some old garden, and the old friend, long dead, suddenly steps out of the past, smiling and closing his dripping umbrella. The whole thing lasts one radiant second and the motion of impressions and images is so swift that you cannot check the exact laws which their recognition, formation, and fusion - why this pool and not any pool, why this sound and not another - and how exactly are all those correlated; it is like a jigsaw puzzle that instantly comes together in your brain with the brain itself unable to observe how and why the pieces fit, and you experience a shuddering sensation of wild magic, of some inner resurrection, as if a dead man were revived by a sparkling drug which has been rapidly mixed in your presence.

.....In my example memory played an essential though unconscious part and everything depended upon the perfect fusion of the past and present. The inspiration of genius adds a third ingredient: it is the past and the present and the future (your book) that come together in a sudden flash; thus the entire circle of time is perceived, which is another way of saying that time ceases to exist. It is a combined sensation of having the whole universe entering you and of yourself wholly dissolving in the universe surrounding you. It is the prison wall of the ego suddenly crumbling away with the non-ego rushing in from the outside to save the prisoner - who is already dancing in the open.<sup>51</sup>

The comparison Nabokov employs to render these happenings is one we might even reclaim as central to the working of his fiction as a whole. Hence the scenario of the reader enlisted in the effective creation of a fictional void or vacuum, (in the manner a flame burns up oxygen), whose eager appetite functions only to expose the work even more comprehensively to an urge or pressure of consumption. Moreover, we continually underestimate the true measure of this, because it is only available to us retrospectively. It is the genius of the characteristic Nabokovian implosion that it affords us precisely such a view, whereby we end up confronting our own imprints and recognising the marks of our own play of consciousness. These signs then declare themselves as equally revelatory of so-called 'positive freedoms' as they are of supposedly 'negative restrictions' - which is of course exactly the 'point'

Nabokov strives to put across in his works, that any 'point' is ultimately our creation, not his.

Returning to *Transparent Things*, we should observe that although the notion of the "burning interest" is something that affords us quite far-reaching access into the piece, its essential value resides in our consideration of it as a means of approach rather than as a method of evaluating or tabulating the contents of the fiction. What is more, it is the fecundity of the text to generate such avenues of inquiry, without exhausting itself, that constitutes perhaps the most accurate register of its value. Thus, if we do seek to pigeonhole this work as an abstract experiment, we are effectively circumscribing its rôle as instigator of a plethora of combinations of potential restitutive gestures directed against itself. For example, there is within *Transparent Things*, a certain coherence of atmosphere and landscape, coolly neutral and somewhat chaste, that the more abstract account would tend to ascribe to a specific authorial intention of testing the limits of the reader's tractability, his very willingness to impart life. At the same time, this sparsity helps the fiction to avoid skirting the edge of the mythic, and seemingly allows it to empty itself of meaning, as opposed to imploring, or even more commonly, requisitioning, the reader to fill it with finite meaning. This is certainly the case, but should we not also allow for the more mundane possibility that the banality of many of the book's events; the skiing, the admiration of the scenic view, the browsing through shops and the desultory walks that culminate in coffee in cafés, in fact partake of a 'straightforward' literary realism, or what we may more accurately talk of as that impression of Switzerland fostered by fiction such as *The Magic Mountain* and, to provide an illustrated example, Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*.

It was a damp April day, with long diagonal clouds over the Albishorn and water inert in the low places. Zurich is not unlike an American city. Missing something ever since his arrival two days before, Dick perceived that it was the sense he had in finite French lanes that there was nothing more. In Zurich there was a lot beside Zurich - the roofs upled the eyes to tinkling cow pastures, which in turn modified hilltops further up - so life was a perpendicular starting off to a postcard heaven. The Alpine lands, home of the toy and the funicular, the merry-go-round and the thin chime, were not a being here, as in France, with French vines growing over one's feet on the ground.<sup>52</sup>

However, whereas Fitzgerald is operating within a convention that Flaubert more acidly acknowledges in the pinings of Emma Bovary, ("Why could not she lean over balconies in Swiss chalets, or enshrine her melancholy in a Scotch cottage, with a husband dressed in a black velvet coat with long tails, and thin shoes, a pointed hat and frills?"<sup>53</sup>) Nabokov's scene-setting functions in a far less dogmatic fashion. It is closer to a literary equivalent of what is commonly called, in cinematic parlance, "establishing shots," those images that by their very perfunctoriness act as something more extensive than simply informing us where the action is sited. (The Eiffel Tower provides a good example - at least for the non-French.<sup>54</sup>) They tell us our locale, but, rather world-wearily, go on to suggest that it doesn't really matter *that much* anyway.

And again, such complications do not necessarily end there, they can be further supplemented by a biographical overlay; a knowledge that Nabokov wrote this work in Switzerland and lived there for a decade may inform another reading.

*Transparent Things*, then, may be said to present, if not an altogether comfortable grounding in actuality (albeit one that still remains an essentially literary presence), certain trace elements of such a patterning. To this the reader necessarily pays the complimentary gesture of discernment and



attempted fusion, even if proceeding onward to advance more elaborate claims on the text.

Consequently, it is perhaps as a consideration of the multiplicity of a text's appeal to the involuntary compulsion of the reader to assign meaning, and indeed, of the very existence of that reflex necessity ceaselessly endeavouring to locate and relocate both the prominent and the indistinct - something we might well visualise as tirelessly and morbidly picking at one's own wounds - that Nabokov's work may be most beneficially viewed. Hence Lucy Maddox in her excellent piece on the book talks of it as adopting the guise of "a kind of instructive or illustrative report," with its topic, "the progress of an ordinary life,"<sup>55</sup> and this certainly goes some way to encompassing the advancement of certain possibilities that provide the fiction with its body. (Of course, and at the risk of stating something of a truism, the ostentatious irresolution and failure of other elements to coincide is, as we have noted, just as integral a part of the design.) However, I would rather look to the words of the text itself to furnish us with a more accurate - as more elliptical - rendition of the book's intentions, namely that given by R. in the final chapter.

.....a person and the shadows of related matter are  
being followed from youth to death. [102]

Despite the existence of this discrete denial of any exact equivalence between word and actuality, and of the amalgamation of coincidence to form substance (contained in the cautious qualification that speaks in terms not material but tentative, of *shadows*), Ms. Maddox nonetheless finds no difficulty in reclaiming *Transparent Things* in her very next sentence as "finally a novel, as its

title page announces, and the author whose name appears there is not Mr R. but Vladimir Nabokov."<sup>56</sup> Such an eminently sensible observation also wholly refutes or at least disavows, a reading that would claim for the work that chilly exclusivity others have noted. And yet - particularly if we draw upon the tenets advanced in Nabokov's attack on Commonsense in the afterword to the *Lectures on Literature*<sup>57</sup> - we might realise that the merits of this verdict lie not so much in the decision itself, but in the confidence with which such an assertion is put forward. This offers an alternative to the idea that Nabokov's work is a 'failure,' and instead, indicates that for all the book's ingenuity of planning and pellucidity of prose (the latter being by now a fact that one is in danger of taking for granted, but the accuracy of an eye capable of discerning Armande's "smiling toes" [53] is still capable of jolting complacency), lexical devices are simply no match for "the burning interest." This is not to suggest though that the title page of *Transparent Things* comprises an admission of surrender to that impulse, but to propose an evaluation of the fiction according to the criteria to which Nabokov himself pays most heed, its *novelty*:

Every original novel is 'anti-' because it does not resemble the genre or kind of its predecessor.<sup>58</sup>

Where *Transparent Things* touches upon the novel, therefore, is not in any obvious resistance that it may put up to "the burning interest" (for that is largely preordained to failure); it is to be found in the fiction's enaction of its movements. In tracking the mazy, often indiscernible and yet unstoppable paths it will adopt (again we recall the flame's delicate probings of the

combustible) even "the burning interest" does not escape altogether unscathed from the flare of human intelligence.

### Footnotes

1. Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1973] 11. Future references to the text will follow in parentheses.

2. Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction' in *Selected Literary Criticism*, [Peregrine Books, Harmondsworth, 1968] 82.

3. See Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work Of Art: An Investigation on the Borderline of Ontology, Logic and Theory of Literature*, Trans. George G. Grabowicz [Northwestern Univ. Press, Evanston, Ill., 1973]

4. Ibid. 336.

5. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1962] 261.

6. Cf Stephen Dedalus on the beach at Sandymount:

Here. Put a pin in that chap, will you.

(James Joyce, *Ulysses*, [The Bodley Head, London, rep. 1955] 44).  
Or Annette in Nabokov's next production:

No, she would not give examples. She would not be pinned down to whirl on the pin like a wingless fly.  
Or butterfly.

(Vladimir Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!* [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1975] 108).

7. For a more detailed account of the carnage caused by the siblings, see my previous chapter, "Ada and those 'Empty formulas benefitting the solemn novelists of former days who thought they could explain everything.'" - especially 275-277.

8. *Pale Fire* 297.

9. Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1969] 31.

10. The distinctive opening gambit of *Transparent Things* does not, however, exist in a void if we look closely at the Nabokov canon. In point of fact, the selection of a character by a novelist provides the sole topic of the short piece, 'Recruiting,' and the treatment of the question of an author's essential propriety in such matters is not expressed therein without a distinct measure of ambivalence - as the following discussion of proper conduct makes clear.

.....at all costs I had to have somebody like him for an episode in a novel with which I had been struggling for more than two years. What did I care if this fat old gentleman, whom I first saw being lowered from the tram, and who was now sitting beside me, was perhaps not Russian at all? I was so pleased with him! He was so capacious! By an odd combination of emotions I felt I was infecting that stranger with the blazing creative happiness that sends a chill over an artist's skin. I wished that, despite his age, his indigence, the tumor in his stomach, V. I. might share the terrible power of my bliss, redeeming its unlawfulness with his complicity, so that it would cease being a unique sensation, a most rare variety of madness, a monstrous sunbow spanning my whole inner being, and be accessible to two people at least, becoming their topic of conversation and thus acquiring rights to routine existence, of which my wild, savage, stifling happiness is otherwise deprived.

[*Tyrants Destroyed and Other Stories*, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1975) 108-109.]

11. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, Ed. Alfred Appel Jr. (McGraw-Hill, New York and Toronto, 1970) 267.

12. See my "Cells interlinked within cells interlinked within cells....." 197-198.

13. Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1974] 118.

14. According to Alfred Appel, during his short stay in California, where he worked on the *Lolita* screenplay for Stanley Kubrick's film, Nabokov received an offer to adapt West's (arguably definitive) Hollywood novel for the cinema.

'I considered it' says Nabokov, 'but the book's short chapters were too disjuncted; I could not visualise them as a unit. It would have been too difficult a task.

[Alfred Appel Jr., *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*, (Oxford University Press, New York and London, 1974) 232.]

15. D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, [Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, rep. 1954] 510-511.

16. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin*, [Heinemann, London, 1957] 191.

17. *Ibid.* 185.

18. *Fale Fire* 261.

19. *Ada* 589.

20. Julian Mitchell, 'Nabokov's New Novel', *The Listener* 89, May 24, 1973, 695.
21. Jonathan Raban, 'Transparent Likenesses', *Encounter* 41, September 1973, 78.
22. Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, rep. 1972] 217.
23. *Ada* 361.
24. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, Ed. Fredson Bowers [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1980] 2.
25. *Strong Opinions* 194.
26. James 92-93.
27. John Updike, 'The Translucing of Hugh Person', *New Yorker*, November 8, 1972, reprinted in his *Picked-Up Pieces*, [André Deutsch, London, 1976] 212.
28. Significantly, of course, the full extent of the relationship between Person and Armande is never fully outlined in the text, and, at best, the reader only receives a bejewelled demonstration of that relationship working itself out (exemplified in the "minor miracle" of 55). And once again, in addition to rebuking our search for an etiology, the narrator's observation, "Nobody, least of all her mother, could understand why Armande married a rather ordinary American with a not very solid job" [67], affirms a privacy that we are not accustomed to granting a piece of fiction.
29. *The Annotated Lolita* 6.
30. For further fun with this convention, see Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommés* and Knight's *The Prismatic Bezel*.
31. Updike 212.
32. Again, Knight's *The Prismatic Bezel* provides a fruitful comparison; as its thriller element gradually gives way under similar circumstances. Here each character in the hotel setting is discovered to be related in some way to all the other guests and 'over-connectedness' confounds the detective whilst the death that generates the tale eventually proves to be faked.
33. C.f. the distinctive aroma of *poshlost* that emanates from the following extract, an ill-judged attempt at artistic ranking to be found in *Novels and Novelists: A Guide to the World of Fiction*.

in English, except in *Pnin*, he is usually self-conscious, whimsical and desperately insecure. He did know the language well, but felt at heart he could not (he called his English "second-rate"). He is the cleverest of all twentieth-century novelists, and owes a huge debt to Gogol. But his fiction will eventually

be seen as a demonstration that you cannot write like Gogol in the English language.

[Martin Seymour-Smith Ed., *Novels and Novelists: A Guide to the World of Fiction*, (Windward Books, London, 1980) 191].

The blithe forecast of the fate of literary 'stock' (the "eventually" that admits no denial); the prescriptive use of the superlative ("cleverest"), but, above all, the selection of one exception (fortunate *Pnin!*) to a rule in order that its justness may be doubly underlined.....Need we go on?

34. *Strong Opinions* 16.

35. H. Grabes, *Fictitious Biographies: Vladimir Nabokov's English Novels*, [Mouton, The Hague and Paris, 1977] 100.

36. During the course of taking the hapless Besant to task in 'The Art of Fiction,' James issues the following, splendidly haughty, reproof, which, one imagines, would fit quite snugly in *Strong Opinions*:

We are discussing the Art of Fiction; questions of art are questions (in the widest sense) of execution; questions of morality are quite another matter and will you not let us see how it is that you find it so easy to mix them up.

[James 95.]

Questions of "execution" - in a fairly wide sense - are picked up later in the chapter.

37. *Strong Opinions* 40.

38. This is of course made quite clear in *Despair* by the manner in which Hermann repeatedly 'overlooks' the flagrant adulterous affair which takes place between his wife, Lydia, and her reputed 'cousin,' the painter Ardalion. Another rather more obvious figure who also enjoys playing God is the one who peers from his "rented cloudlet" in *Pale Fire* [276].

39. *Look at the Harlequins!* 23-24.

40. The tracing of "line(s) of life" is itself a theme which can in its turn be readily traced through a number of Nabokov's prior fictions - in particular, Sebastian Knight's second novel, *Success*, (see *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, [New Directions, Norfolk, Conn. 1959] 96-98) whose central concern has been anticipated in a yet prior work, *The Gift*, which tracks a number of near meetings between an eventual couple.

41. Anon. 'Making Fictions', *The Times Literary Supplement*, May 4, 1973, 488.

42. *Strong Opinions* 195.

43. Dean Flower, 'Nabokov's Personae', *Hudson Review*, Spring, 1985, Vol. 38, No. 1, 147.

44. D. Barton Johnson, 'Nabokov as Man of Letters: The Alphabetic Motif in His Work', *Modern Fiction Studies* 25, 1979, 407.

45. Lucy Maddox, *Nabokov's Novels in English*, [Croom Helm, London, 1983] 134.

46. *Strong Opinions* 155.

47. Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov' in *Illuminations*, Trans. Harry Zohn [Fontana Books, London, rep. 1981] 100-101.

48. Maddox 136.

49. Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, l. 6. in *De Profundis and other Writings*, [Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1980] 231. The degree of agreement over matters aesthetic between Nabokov and Wilde is one that should be looked at more closely. Although Nabokov fervently rejected the received gospel of "'art for art's sake' - because unfortunately such promoters of it as, for instance, Oscar Wilde and various dainty poets, were in reality rank moralists and didacticists" [*Strong Opinions* 33] - first-hand Wilde has considerable affinities with Nabokovian *Strong Opinions*. We might, for instance, favourably compare Wilde's famous digression on Washington's cherry-tree with Nabokov's 'Crying Wolf' anecdote, or, from the same Wilde source (*The Decay of Lying*), profitably apply the aphorism - "Life goes faster than Realism, but Romanticism is always in front of Life" [Wilde 87] - to a work like *Lolita*.

50. Aside from recalling one of the murderous possibilities Wilde speculates on in his poem ("Some strangle with the hands of Lust" l. 45), the death of Armande can also be seen as the nearest human equivalent to Nabokov's own preferred method of entomological execution, "an expert nip in the thorax" [*Strong Opinions* 199].

51. *Lectures on Literature* 377-378.

52. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night*, [Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, rep. 1983] 132.

53. G. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, Ed. with substantially new trans. Paul de Man [W. W. Norton Critical Edition, New York, 1965] 29. A concordance of literary Switzerlands would, one suspects, confirm its fictional status as somehow the most nugatory of nations, with the neutrality of the descriptions already cited seeming but a step away from the nullity we find in its most unflattering representation, that coined by Joseph Conrad's Razumov, of "the very heart of democracy....A fit heart for it; no bigger than a pea and about as much value." [*Under Western Eyes*, (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, rep. 1978) 174] For further on Conrad's Switzerland, see Frank Kermode's *Essays on Fiction 1971-1982* [Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1983] 144-145; whilst for marginally more favourable views I suggest the figure who draws on the memory of "my lacquered toy-bright Swiss villages and exhaustively lauded Alps [*The*



*Annotated Lolita* 170], or, better still, the thumbnail sketch proffered by his creator [*Strong Opinions*, 192].

54. For the sophisticated viewpoint of a native Frenchman, see the title essay of *The Eiffel Tower and other Mythologies* [Hill and Wang, New York, 1979] where Barthes proceeds to perform the sort of emptying out of meaning ("This pure - virtually empty - sign....") that Nabokov's Swiss cipher suggests, or, in a cinematic vein, the dizzying opening of Francois Truffaut's *Les Quatre Cents Coups* (1959).

55. Maddox 133.

56. Ibid.

57. See 'The Art of Literature and Commonsense' in *Lectures on Literature* 371-380.

58. *Strong Opinions* 173.

And For My Last Trick? - Look at the Harlequins!

The longer I live the more I become convinced that the only thing that matters in literature, is the (more or less irrational) *shamanstvo* of a book, i.e., that the good writer is first of all an enchanter.

But one must not let things tumble out of one's sleeves all the time as Malraux does.<sup>1</sup>

I happen to be the kind of author who in starting to work on a book has no other purpose than to get rid of that book and who, when asked to explain its origin and growth, has to rely on such ancient terms as Inter-reaction of Inspiration and Combination - which, I admit, sounds like a conjuror explaining one trick by performing another.<sup>2</sup>

The fake move in a chess problem, the illusion of a solution or the conjuror's magic: I used to be a little conjuror when I was a boy. I loved doing simple things - turning water into wine, that kind of thing; but I think I'm in good company because all art is deception.....<sup>3</sup>

These comments are a cursory selection from many such pronouncements which outline Nabokov's view of the artist as some sort of conjuror or professional deceiver. That they were made over three decades (respectively: 1946; 1956; and - slightly disrupting the pattern - 1967) indicates something of the extent to which this issue evidently intrigued Nabokov, and more than suggests that its ramifications may underpin many of his fictions. In what is, at the moment, Nabokov's final novel, *Look at the Harlequins!*, it thrives, as a most literal *concern*, throughout the entire work, with one of its more explicit manifestations taking place on "a dangerous dawn in May (1931? or 1932?)"<sup>4</sup> when Vadim, the central figure, wakes up to confront "the bed-mate" he has purchased the night before. The motivation behind Vadim's course of action was the desire to seek a distraction from a concern that haunts many of the figures within Nabokov's books, namely the existence of a perpetual disparity between the apprehensions of the mind, those images which are essentially complete and coherent, and the mundane world of everyday living which continu-

ally frustrates and disrupts such formulations. The picture that Vadim, a professional image-maker in his capacity as a novelist, has most recently experienced as tarnished and inaccurate provides perhaps the closest to the archetype in such cases, the most banal and yet the most moving of disappointments: that derived from a beloved. Vadim's wife, Iris, has recently been killed by a lover, whose existence the writer half-suspected but refused to acknowledge in order to retain the self-possession necessary to finish his current book. Now the issue comes to a head.

I turned in bed from the wall to the window, and Iris was lying with her dark head to me on the window-side of the bed. I kicked off the bed-clothes. She was naked, save for her black-stockinged legs (which was strange but at the same time recalled something from a parallel world, for my mind stood astride on two circus horses). In an erotic footnote, I reminded myself for the ten thousandth time to mention somewhere that there is nothing more seductive than a girl's back with the profiled rise of the haunch accentuated by her lying sidelong, one leg slightly bent. "J'ai froid," said the girl as I touched her shoulder.

The Russian term for any kind of betrayal, faithlessness, breach of trust, is the snaky, watered-silk word *izmena* which is based on the idea of change, shift, transformation. This derivation had never occurred to me in my constant thoughts about Iris, but it now struck me as the revelation of a bewitchment, of a nymph's turning to a whore - and this called for an immediate and vociferous protest. One neighbour thumped the wall, another rattled the door. The frightened girl, snatching up her handbag and my raincoat, bolted out of the room, and a bearded individual entered instead, farcically clad in a nightshirt and wearing rubbers on his bare feet. The crescendo of my cries, cries of rage and distress, ended in a hysterical fit. [74-75]

The "betrayal" or "breach of trust" that Vadim objects to so violently when it takes place within the boundaries of his own life is, ironically enough, among the most basic manoeuvres of his fictional practices, and it is certainly acknowledged as such by his creator.

Literature was born not the day when a boy crying wolf, wolf came running out of the Neanderthal valley with a grey wolf at his heels; literature was born on the day when a boy came crying wolf, wolf and there was no wolf behind him. That the poor fellow because he lied too often was finally eaten up by a real beast is quite incidental. But here is what is important. Between the wolf in the tall grass and the wolf in the tall story there is a shimmering go-between. That go-between, that prism is the art of literature.<sup>5</sup>

All Nabokov's novels centre on that area of "shimmering go-between," which links the fecund imaginative world of the artist and the physical existence of the protagonist, but which ensures they never *quite* tally. It is a zone which, with each novel, has become increasingly less resistant to the implication of those formulas of time, space and causality that govern what we are accustomed to call the everyday. When we look at Pnin's involvement with the Russia of his past, for example, we are invited to observe the workings of rudimentary self-protection, which, in conjunction with his dedicated researches (significantly into the overt escapism that constitutes fairy tales), seeks to prevent the figure's complete consciousness of his personal and cultural isolation. Significantly, in the final instance, such a defence conspicuously fails to provide Pnin with definite tenure, in the most literal sense of the word, in his new-chosen world of American academia. Such overt differences between worlds wished for and granted are taken to yet greater extremes in *Lolita*, where Humbert Humbert laments "the great rosegray never-to-be-had"<sup>6</sup> as his attempts to realise his vision of himself as "a dream dad protecting his dream daughter"<sup>7</sup> flounder and collide with hardnosed postwar America.

By the time of *Pale Fire*, this disparity has evolved into a magnificent mutation of the creative mind, as Kinbote's solipsistic *tour de force* provides a commentary that really does have the "last word."<sup>8</sup> Nabokov's next major

piece of fiction, *Ada*, endeavoured to transform solipsism into high art by virtue of making the construct world, the world of art, one that thrived on the dualistic terms and referents that we expect of the everyday. This granted the reader greater access to the twinned worlds of Terra and Antiterra and so offered him, for all that novel's fantastic overlay of detail, far more purchase than the claustrophobic society of Zembla. Moreover, *Ada*, in apparently providing its public with two guarantors of its veracity in the delightful forms of Van and Ada Veen, made its illusion far more effective, though no less affected than that produced in *Fale Fire*. *Ada*, significantly Nabokov's most expansive work - if you like, his tallest story - might thus be held up as an endeavour to sustain the most complete of fabrications, an entire world, built upon the dualistic principles by which we perceive (and shown as such in the narrative), with the clear intention of overwhelming the mundane construct of the everyday.

Given that *Ada* sought to push the notion of man as the maker of his world as far as Nabokov could take it, it is perhaps no surprise that *Transparent Things*, the subsequent work, should approach the subject from a completely different tack. Whereas *Ada's* world tries to outdo, indeed almost belittle, the world of the everyday by its extremities of splendour and suffering, *Transparent Things* offers a more subtle and covert challenge to the everyday in its choice of presentation. Instead of the settled terms we expect of 'regular' fiction, that is, the delineation of the intricate patterns and interlacements which traditionally endow meaning, Nabokov lays down a mass of verbal loose stitches, inconsistent "transparent things," as opposed to the ordered and 'solid' coherences of narrative. The material within *Transparent Things* almost appears, in the final instance, to be awaiting its transfiguration into fiction. Consequently, the question of the rightful balance between

an imaginative reality and a mundane world of actuality in this work shifts from the triumphant assertion of the former's supremacy over the latter which marked *Ada* to a heightened awareness of the immense gap between them, of the subtle and subdued inquiry as to whether they even have anything in common, which distinguishes *Transparent Things* and almost wins out over our wish to make the book cohere.

Nevertheless, for all their differences, both the oil painting that is *Ada* and the watercolour of *Transparent Things*, in a sense, do not achieve a definite reconciliation between the common truths of daily existence, namely life as an arbitrary process, and the joy of imposing structure and sequentiality that forms so much of the pleasure of reading fiction, a pleasure in artifice. It is this concern to which *Look at the Harlequins!* addresses itself in a fashion that is far more direct than any of the other novels, and yet is, as a result, far more dependent on certain stylistic twists than almost any of Nabokov's other books, because this novel features games, like that of "Crying Wolf," which, seemingly, can only be played once.

In *Look at the Harlequins!* the division between the worlds of imagination and actuality is one which appears far less distinct than in the works immediately preceding it, because this time the art-world's alluring sense of completion is offset against a fragmentary and continuous world of the everyday which is charged with far more authority than that of either *Ada* (where it is utterly subordinated to the demands of the art-world), or *Transparent Things* (where it dominates to the extent of etiolating the text). The source of this authority, the reason why the everyday in this piece seems of much greater proportionate value, lies in the ostentatious way it draws upon resources from Nabokov's own life to outline the career of Vadim, the novel's author-protagonist.

Like Nabokov, Vadim is a Russian, educated at Cambridge, who becomes an expatriate writer of fiction, initially in his native language, but who, with the coming of war, emigrates to the United States to begin a new career, and commences writing in the language of his newly adopted country. With the publication of *A Kingdom by the Sea*, which is transformed into a bestseller due to an acquired reputation for obscenity, Vadim is released from the financial burden of supporting his family, and devotes the rest of his life to the continuance of his craft, a function performed in Nabokov's own life by *Lolita*, whose working title was *A Kingdom by the Sea*.<sup>9</sup> This sort of echoing resounds through *Look at the Harlequins!*, and although clearly by no means all of Nabokov's readers would note a reference such as the one to the line from Poe's 'Annabel Lee,' the manner in which the general course of Vadim's life mirrors that of his creator is something that even the "minor reader,"<sup>10</sup> in the most dismissive sense of Nabokov's term, could scarcely avoid realising, particularly if we bear in mind the blurb that traditionally fronts the popular paperback, in which form *Look at the Harlequins!* would be predominantly read.

Even if we ignore the biographical parallels between an introductory blurb about Nabokov and this far more extensive fictionalisation of his life, Nabokov's popular identity as 'the author of *Lolita*' and his 'real' existence, the private imaginings of the artist, are sufficiently disparate to provide the "shimmering go-between" in which *Look at the Harlequins!* cheerfully gambols and sports.<sup>11</sup>

In recent years the discrepancies between the private persona and the general public's consideration of the novelist (of course, he has to be a writer who *sells* - at least once) have themselves increasingly and somewhat compulsively, afforded the space - and we cannot help but find the restriction and repetition involved here significant - for fictional speculation. John

Updike's re-enlistment of Henry Bech, and Philip Roth's *My Life as a Man*, together with his wonderfully agile Zuckerman sequence, are perhaps the pick of this crop. In Nabokov's case, however, such fretting is confined to a still narrower area, because the fictional output of his writer-protagonist draws far more extensively on the other published writings of Vadim's creator - for all his books are variant versions of Nabokov's own. Taking things this close to the wire obliges the follower of *Look at the Harlequins!*, just like the attentive reader of Roth, to recognise that the mundane comprises a world we can neither escape from, nor afford to discard, because it is there that the imaginative freedoms of importance, namely the fictions, are first posited. However, this particular charting of an author's "illnesses, marriages and literary life" [27] becomes doubly important because, unlike the Roth, the common life here is continually seen to possess an existence ratified by a world external to that of the central figure, namely our own; and our own, ironically enough, as readers. For, if we accept the importance of the art Nabokov has produced as greater than that we attach to the common round, then surely the most effective way of endowing that arena with significance is to incorporate the art within it? The mundane in *Look at the Harlequins!* is of value because it contains within it aspects of an art-world that, for the first time in Nabokov's work, has an objective existence, in the shape of Nabokov's own corpus.

Like Yeats' poem 'The Circus Animals' Desertion,' a work to which *Look at the Harlequins!* has been fittingly compared,<sup>12</sup> the artist's final trick is to offer the tricks he has played in the past as the ultimate guarantee; for, in the end, the only effective gloss on fiction-making must be another fiction. Thus Vadim's novelistic output bears the same relationship to Nabokov's books as does the gloss that concludes *Ada* to the main body of the work; the



validity of both rests on their status as another imaginative re-working, another act of fiction-making. Hence a book such as Vadim's *The Red Top Hat*, a "tale of decapitation in a country of total injustice" [228-229], which features "graceful little Amy, the condemned man's ambiguous consoler" [78] and the extremely virile "Big Pierre" [144], occupies a slot on the bookshelf next to *Invitation to a Beheading*, the cast of which includes the flirtatious Emmie and the executioner Monsieur Pierre, "a great aficionado of women."<sup>13</sup>

Aside from more overt parallels in the titles of *Tamara* (*Mary*); *Dr. Olga Repnin* (*Pnin*); *Camera Lucida/Slaughter in the Sun* (*Camera Obscura/Laughter in the Dark*); and *Ardis* (*Ada*), Vadim's books often fuse elements of different Nabokov novels. *Pawn takes Queen*, for example, has a title that points to Nabokov's *King, Queen, Knave* as its source, and yet the scheming couple in Vadim's novel "defenestrate the poor chess player" [58], a fate which befalls Luzhin in Nabokov's *The Defence*. Similarly, we are informed that Vadim's last Russian fiction, "*The Dare* (*Podarok Otchizne* was its original title, which can be translated as 'a gift to the fatherland')" [99], recounts the development of its central figure to a full consciousness of his vocation as an artist and incorporates the full text of one of his works, a biography of Dostoevski which elicits "rage and bewilderment" from "émigré reviewers." [100] The presence of this fiction within a fiction marks it as clearly analogous to Nabokov's *Dar*, translated into English as *The Gift*. This, his last Russian novel, includes a biography of Chernyshevshki, a figure who, like Dostoevski, was viewed by many Russian exiles as sacrosanct. Indeed, Nabokov's account of his life was initially suppressed by the fearful émigré magazine who undertook to publish the book in instalments. Intriguingly, Vadim's fiction ends as his "young hero accepts a flirt's challenge and accomplishes a final gratuitous feat by walking through a perilous forest into Soviet territory and as casu-

ally strolling back," [100] a conclusion which parodies the ending of Nabokov's early novel, *Podvig*, translated as *Glory* (and whose working English title was *The Exploit*), where the intention of Martin Edelweiss, to "cross illegally into Russia from Latvia, just for twenty-four hours.....and then walk back again,"<sup>14</sup> the "high deed"<sup>15</sup> that provides the novel's title, is only partially fulfilled, and the book ends with his family and friends awaiting his return.

Clearly then, any direct equation between Vadim and Nabokov as artists is something that the reader is repeatedly compelled to make and retract according to the ebbs and flows of the narrative - unlike the Zuckerman novels which, with the exception of *The Ghost Writer*, are so firmly centred on the *Carnovsky/Portnoy's Complaint* axis (and the pain of that particular tie is the strength of the sequence). The effect of these ripples is to place the artistic process, by which the mundane becomes magisterial, at the forefront. So, the perpetual series of transformations and realignments that lies at the heart of all fiction is mirrored in the flamboyant and spangled embellishments of Nabokov's own literary life that go to make Vadim a harlequin as much as a creator of them.

As a child of seven.....I kept daydreaming in a most outrageous fashion.

'Stop moping!' she (Vadim's grand-aunt) would cry: 'Look at the harlequins!'

'What harlequins? Where?'

'Oh, everywhere. All around you. Trees are harlequins, words are harlequins. So are situations and sums. Put two things together - jokes, images - and you get a triple harlequin. Come on! Play! Invent the world! Invent reality!'

I did. By Jove, I did. I invented my grand-aunt in honour of my first daydreams, and now, down the marble steps of memory's front porch, here she comes, sideways, sideways, the poor lame lady, touching each step edge with the rubber tip of her black cane. [8-9]

Significantly, however, it is because the transmutation of the everyday into fiction remains, in the final instance, a mystery, that the reader is able to accompany the retrospective Vadim in picking out "several fatidic points, cleverly disguised at the time, within the embroidery of (the) seven winters" [57] of his first marriage. Vadim's life and the 'popular' life of Nabokov, the émigré's success 'overnight' in 'the land of opportunity' with a 'blockbuster novel,' are analogous because they both thrive as "a dazzling pyrotechny of sense." [250] Each is an artistic version of a life, Nabokov's own, but both operate within a public sphere, in so far as Vadim exists within the pages of *Look at the Harlequins!* and a Nabokov exists within the pages of newspapers and pieces like this. As such, the two figures can be called authentic but never definitive. Moreover, that this particular game is being played only within the outer public world is underlined by the manner in which Nabokov carefully distinguishes between his and Vadim's personal lives, in notable contrast to his deliberate obfuscations of their respective art-worlds. Nabokov's long marriage to Véra, the dedicatee of all his books, acts as an almost polar opposite to Vadim's "three or four successive wives" [3], and provides the most obvious demonstration of differences between them, but there are also other minor clashes of taste. For example, Nabokov the avid lepidopterist presents us with an author who states "I know nothing about butterflies, and indeed do not care for the fluffier night-flying ones, and would hate any of them to touch me" [34]. More importantly, their lives also diverge in one quite crucial instance: Vadim briefly realises the émigré's dream and returns to Russia in the flesh, while Nabokov contents himself with its spirit.

I will never go back, for the simple reason that all the Russia I need is always with me: literature, language, and my own Russian childhood. I will never return.<sup>16</sup>

The satirical implication of this careful separation of private and public echoes that of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* where the hopelessness of V's endeavours to interpret a private life from public writings is insistently uncovered. In *Look at the Harlequins!* Vadim emerges as the sort of composite figure who may perhaps be arrived at if one sought to find Nabokov in his fictions. That Vadim's private life should differ so radically from his creator's not only refutes those who would attempt such a task, but also invites the reader to add the coda that Vadim could even be the result of a Kinbote or a Goodman applying themselves to Nabokov's fictional output. Even that stance, however, as I hope to demonstrate, is one which is rejected and upended by Nabokov as an over-simplified reading.

Nevertheless, the intricate meshing of the private life of Vadim and the public image of Nabokov does dominate the novel, and succeeds in drawing together the worlds of art and the everyday in a tighter and more systematically rigorous arrangement than is perhaps evident in any of the other novels (with the possible exception of *Fale Fire*, another "old deceiver's testament"<sup>17</sup>). Indeed, the interlocked diamond design of the harlequin costume that features on the book's dustjacket seems to offer itself as an appropriate representation of this dense integration. The other image that seems to shed most light on *Look at the Harlequins!* crops up during one of Humbert Humbert's many appeals to his audience for clemency:

We all admire the spangled acrobat with classical grace meticulously walking his tight rope in the talcum light; but how much rarer art there is in the sagging

rope expert wearing scarecrow clothes and impersonating  
a grotesque drunk!<sup>18</sup>

It is certainly true that on one level *Look at the Harlequins!* represents one of Nabokov's finer achievements, not merely for the aplomb with which he juggles the worlds of his two artists, but for the manner in which he manages, for the most part, to prevent the emergence of any smugness or unnecessary hermeticism. Dealing with one's own life within a fiction as closely as this novel does, there is a clear risk of limiting its readership to a select 'coterie', and reducing the book to the level of mutual back-slapping as recognitions are noted and allusions spotted. This danger is largely circumvented by the effectiveness of Vadim as a piece of literary characterisation and, more importantly, as a practitioner of artistic discernment, an issue I shall deal with later. Nonetheless, the running of this risk so publicly endows the text with a certain vulnerability, which, in its turn, serves to counteract the charge of arrogance that could so easily result from the selection of one's own life as fictional material. To extend the metaphor employed by Nabokov above, of the clown teetering on the high wire; in this novel he does so without a safety-net.

This impression of fragility, the imminent threat that the reader's suspension of disbelief may collapse at any time and so cause Vadim and Nabokov to merge and form the subject of pure autobiography, provides the central tension of *Look at the Harlequins!* Although the maintenance of the precarious balance between the private and public worlds of art and the everyday is the most obvious contributor to the impression of provisionality within the novel, it is a quality which manifests itself with just as much effect in another of the book's stylistic devices. Although perhaps not as obviously

important as the interplay between the private life of Vadim and the public figure of Nabokov, this does have the merit of revealing the ultimate frailty of what one might have expected to be the most confident and self-assured of literary vehicles, without the fascinating, and of course, diversionary, appeal of that particular game. The device in question is not only disarmingly straightforward, but in fact has been foreshadowed in those early instructions Vadim informs us he received from his "grand-aunt" [8], to "Invent the world! Invent reality!" [9]. What we were actually told next is that Vadim had invented the "grand-aunt" in the first place, and her rightful existence should be confined to the boundaries of those inverted commas. Such an action anticipates the one Vadim performs later in the book of displacing the figurative 'reality' he seeks in his fictions in favour of a literal "Reality", a "beloved creature" [245] and his daughter's "coeval" [170] at school, who becomes the novelist's final partner by virtue of a transformation, a moment of "izmena" [74], that is justified by its location within this, one of Vadim's books.

Significantly, and not altogether surprisingly, the reader is gradually made to understand that the novel as a whole is addressed to this creature, as it becomes increasingly strewn with references to "the reality of your radiance" [226], which commence with the deliberately puzzling and initially oblique lament:

Oh, how things and people tortured me, my dear heart, I  
could not tell you! in point of fact you were not even  
born. [86]

The reader is actually introduced to "Reality" as Vadim takes leave of his lectureship at Quirn University in an incident that hardly smacks of the momentous or of any mystic revelation.

I was on my way to the parking lot when the bulky folder under my arm - replacing my arm, as it were - burst its string and spilled its contents all over the gravel and grassy border. You were coming from the library along the same campus path, and we crouched side by side collecting the stuff. You were pained you said later (*zhalostno bylo*) to smell the liquor on my breath. On the breath of that great writer.

I say 'you' retroconsciously, although in the logic of life you were not 'you' yet, for we were not actually acquainted and you were to become really 'you' only when you said, catching a slip of yellow paper that was availing itself of a bluster to glide away with false insouciance:

'No, you don't.'

Crouching, smiling, you helped me to cram everything again into the folder and then asked me how my daughter was - she and you had been schoolmates some fifteen years ago.....Bel and you would both be twenty-eight on January 1, 1970.<sup>19</sup> [225-226]

"Reality" then appears to be a living creature and as solid a figure as any other in the novel. Indeed, her importance is underlined by her place at Vadim's side as *Look at the Harlequins!* closes; as what is surely the most appropriately named of companions for any artist to secure for himself. For, in locating and possessing her, Vadim fulfills the ultimate aim of art: to fix the reality that requires a capital "R". It is therefore equally fitting that his work should end abruptly in mid-sentence; for, if Reality is found, then what else is there to be sought or said through the means of his art? And yet, strangely enough, the onset of marvelous "Reality" does not herald the event the attentive reader should perhaps now expect - particularly a reader of Nabokov's other works (or even one that remembers Eliot's dictum that "Human kind / Cannot bear very much reality"<sup>20</sup>) - namely, that the fiction is

dispelled, and "the procession of my Russian and English harlequins, followed by a tiger or two, scarlet-tongued, and a libellula girl on an elephant" [228] allowed to disappear over the horizon. Instead, the novel continues for another thirty or so pages and is only then dismissed. Why?

Part of the answer to that clearly lies in the fact that, as the author himself rather convolutedly confesses, Vadim does not at first recognise her for what she is ("you were not 'you' yet"). Perhaps more important, however, is Nabokov's realisation that to terminate the novel baldly by stating that its author-protagonist has attained a definitive Reality, an actuality which, as a writer, he has chosen to embody in the shape of a woman, would be to try and bring off too radical, and, above all, too final a transformation, not to incur "an immediate and vociferous protest" from the external followers of the book's twists and turns. Vadim's own reaction to Iris' betrayal should alert us to a novelist's sensitivity to such an issue.

Now, Nabokov's books, for the most part, do endeavour to present some type of final shift or instance of "izmena," but a shift always motivated by a single, and, it must be said, extremely traditional, purpose; to jolt the lazy reader into seeing anew. The effective implosion or self-erasure of the text, which I have documented in previous chapters is always offset by a sense of future possibility: of either new happenings which we cannot follow (*Invitation to a Beheading; Laughter in the Dark; Bend Sinister; Pnin*); or of newer and richer interpretations of the past that, as readers, we have just experienced (*Despair; The Real Life of Sebastian Knight and Transparent Things*) or, as in his very best work, of both (*Lolita; Pale Fire* and *Ada*):

I think that what I would welcome at the close of a book of mine is a sensation of its world receding in



the distance and stopping somewhere there, suspended  
afar like a picture in a picture.....<sup>21</sup>

If *Look at the Harlequins!* ended with the admittedly neat and ironic device of its author, a figure who we have seen doing the expected job of fumbling his way towards 'Reality,' literally bumping into it by accident then we would perhaps be momentarily amused, but no more. It would lack that aura of ambiguity, at once peculiar and profound, which we justifiably demand of Nabokov. In short, it would be too pat. What is more, the feeling of future possibility that Nabokov talks of as "suspended" could not help being outweighed by "Reality" and her continuous world of the present tense.

The most disturbing of all endings to Nabokov's novels, that of *Bend Sinister*, provides an illuminating comparison here. The intervention of what Nabokov calls in his introduction to that novel, "an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me,"<sup>22</sup> is undoubtedly an extremely harsh violation of the text and rapidly brings about its cessation. But, together with the outrage and provocation that such an action generates, we are more than simply obliged, we are literally *compelled* to acknowledge the force of the reasoning that has brought it about. Its objective is patently to stop Krug's suffering, and in doing so, it demonstrates an awareness of a fitting sense of responsibility in a world that has been exposed as one utterly lacking any notion of scale. Such a gesture then, can be seen to open out the way for a more credible glimpse of some sort of potentiality, a sense of *future*, because we have witnessed a sacrifice being made for it. Critically, however, it is a happening which originates from outside the environs of the textual world<sup>23</sup> and one which, by its very success, clearly spotlights the difficulty of the task undertaken by Nabokov in *Look at the Harlequins!* To try and place a

figure within a, by and large homogeneous, verbal network and endow it with what we are accustomed to call 'character', and yet at the same time, by the simple expedient of choosing a name which invites a symbolic interpretation, grant that same entity the freedom to move outside those textual confines, is a very tall order indeed.

This is the impossibility Nabokov toyed with in his treatment of Hugh Person in the shimmering *Transparent Things* to such peculiar effect. Person, however, did affect the reader to some extent, because his very insubstantiality offered a challenge to our attempts to fuse the qualities he possessed and form 'character.' The resultant tension consequently had the virtue of telling us something of the extent and power of our capacity and need to make fictions, precisely because the work as a whole refused to gel. Now, if "Reality's" first appearance was to succeed in breaching that tacit compact between author and reader, then what happens to the balancing act, what type of "suspended" feeling are we left with? Precious little, in so far as the triumph of "Reality" would naturally entail the denial of any future presentiments in favour of the certainty of a belief in an eternal present, of "you, you, my ultimate and immortal one" [122] - a world that favours the sort of interpretation one would like to append to an author's last work, one which talks of the book as "the most affirmative of any that Nabokov wrote," and the ending as "the most unambiguously happy one in the English novels."<sup>24</sup>

In point of fact, *Look at the Harlequins!* does not terminate with "Reality's" first incarnation precisely in order that apprehensions and ambiguities may be engendered and questions generated rather than stifled. Hence, whereas previously Vadim has enjoyed lingering over the subtlest of details in writing about the women in his life, of "Reality's" physical appearance we are told very little. Indeed, it is rather intriguing to note

that the only extended portrayal of "Reality" we are granted is not a direct description, but an explicitly imaginative picture formed by the solitary Vadim during the course of a late afternoon stroll.

I could say what I do not remember having been moved to say in years, namely: My happiness was complete. As I walked, I read those cards with you, at your pace, your diaphanous index at my rough peeling temple, my wrinkled finger at your turquoise temple-vein. I caressed the facets of the Blackwing pencil you kept gently twirling, I felt against my raised knees the fifty-year-old folded chessboard, Nikifor Starov's gift (most of the noblemen were badly chipped in their baize-lined mahogany box!), propped on your skirt with its pattern of irises. My eyes moved with yours, my pencil queried with your own faint little cross in the narrow margin a solecism I could not distinguish through the tears of space..... [232-233]

Similarly, a spirit of inquiry is also roused when we are informed of the "slowness" of Vadim's "divorce dialogue" [230] with his third wife, Louise. "Reality's" response, "a delay you regarded with royal indifference" [230], may well give the impression of her devotion to our author, as it is clearly intended to do, but it also serves to recall the reader's mind to the riddle posed by the novel's striking opening remark:

I met the first of my three or four successive wives in somewhat odd circumstances..... [3]

"Three or four successive wives"? Moreover, this is in the context of a novel which features exchanges that continually pick up on the novelist's manufacture of his world:

I recall regaling the company with one of the howlers I had noticed in the 'translation' of *Tamara*. The sentence *vidnelos' neskol'ko barok* ('several barges could be seen') had become *la vue était assez baroque*.

The eminent critic Basilevski, a stocky, fair-headed old fellow in a rumpled brown suit, shook with abdominal mirth - but then his expression changed to one of suspicion and displeasure. After tea he accosted me and insisted gruffly that I had made up that example of mis-translation, I remember answering that, if so, he, too, might well be an invention of mine. [58]

The advice of the imagined "grand-aunt" [8] (who is later revealed to have an equally fictitious niece on [86]) to "Invent reality!" [9] then perhaps may have been quite literally taken up. The innumerable references to Vadim's "flayed consciousness" [31] and the "incipient lunacy" [288] resulting from "a bizarre mental flaw" and "warped mind" [233], which, despite reassurances ("I consistently try to dwell as lightly as possible on the evolution of my mental illness" [85]), are regularly dotted throughout the text, also invite speculations about the nature of "Reality." If she is the dedicatee of this book, then there is always the reservation, "yet Dementia is one of the characters in my story." [85]

Madness had been lying in wait for me behind this or that alder or boulder since infancy. I got used by degrees to feeling the sepia stare of those watchful eyes as they moved smoothly along the lines of my passage. Yet I have known madness not only in the guise of an evil shadow. I have seen it also as a flash of delight so rich and shattering that the very absence of an immediate object on which it might settle was to me a form of escape. [240]

"Reality," then, is certainly far more ambiguous than one would like to admit of a final novel, and any sense of a life's consummation in *Look at the Harlequins!* is one that is simultaneously as daring and yet as fragile as the semantic switch from 'reality' to "Reality." The only thing that one can state with certainty is that the game being played is definitely a variation of "Crying Wolf."

Writing's ability to shift direction and scope is extravagantly brought to the fore in the book principally by the two devices I have discussed; of interplay between the literary lives of Nabokov and Vadim, and the embodiment of reality as "Reality." The consequence of this for the piece as a whole is not only the revelation that even those literary tricks, which would seem at first glance to be rather crude, possess a considerable degree of sophistication (and are open to augmentation in their turn), but the very particularity of Nabokov's attention ensures further subtle counterminings of the reader's expectations. For the next development in a game of deception like "Crying Wolf" is surely the appearance of the double-bluff, something which features quite prominently in Nabokov's chess problems, games that offer a useful analogy with his fictional compositions.

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), so that a great part of a problem's value is due to the number of 'tries' - delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray.<sup>25</sup>

Intriguingly, there is a coda to this observation that provides a useful gloss on *Look at the Harlequins!*

I remember one particular problem I had been trying to compose for months.....It was meant for the delectation of the very expert solver. The unsophisticated might miss the point entirely, and discover its fairly simple, 'thetic' solution without having passed through the pleasurable torments prepared for the sophisticated one. The latter would start by falling for an illusory pattern of play based on a fashionable avant-garde theme (exposing White's King to checks), which the composer had taken the greatest pains to 'plant' (with only one obscure little move by an inconspicuous pawn to upset it). Having passed through this 'antithetic' inferno the by now ultra-

sophisticated solver would reach the simple key move (bishop to c2) as somebody on a wild goose chase might go from Albany to New York by way of Vancouver, Eurasia and the Azores. The pleasant experience of the round-about route (strange landscapes, gongs, tigers, exotic customs, the thrice-repeated circuit of a newly married couple around the sacred fire of an earthen brazier) would amply reward him for the misery of the deceit, and after that, his arrival at the simple key move would provide him with a synthesis of poignant artistic delight.<sup>26</sup>

Nabokov's novels characteristically operate in a manner akin to that of the chess problem outlined above. Books like *Laughter in the Dark*, *Lolita*, and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* all possess extremely strong story lines in which the impulse to read on, to solve the mystery of what happens next, forms an integral component of the work. If we adopt Nabokov's own terms, such endeavours on the part of the reader would be aligned to uncovering the "'thetic' solution" of the chess problem. Thus, in *Look at the Harlequins!* Vadim's description of his work as "the account of his illnesses, marriages and literary life" [27] in which his "wives and novels (are) interlaced like a watermark to form an oblique autobiography" [85], would have to be regarded as an all-encompassing definition of the work. But, as with the chess problems, so too with the fiction: "for the delectation of the very expert solver," a creature which the artworks themselves have helped to form (hence the reference to "the by now ultrasophisticated solver"), the "thetic" solution is intimately bound with an "'antithetic' inferno." In the novels this principally manifests itself as the manipulation and inversion of the elements of plot and character in order to disclose their essential nature as products of the imagination, rather than as sacrosanct items in themselves.

Moreover, as the sophisticated chessplayer will approach a problem far more warily because he has dealt with others, there are extra entanglements in store for those in any way familiar with Nabokov's prior fictions. Such a

public may well approach *Look at the Harlequins!* ready for almost anything - except perhaps an attempt to write that grand summation we could call 'the last novel.' And yet this is what the book simultaneously provides and, inevitably, parodies. What we seem to witness in *Look at the Harlequins!* is another literary trick that can only be played once, with an additional flourish reserved for the audience his writings have taught to expect anything but the obvious. Are those expectations not flaunted in the most impish and quintessentially Nabokovian manner by instead corkscrewing back upon the familiar territories sought by the ordinary reader, the "unsophisticated" solver? Does "the simple key move" in this piece seek to satisfy those claims for the commonplace (and all others?) by outlining nothing more than what Vadim calls "an attempt at fond reconstruction" [12]?

Nabokov's final act of 'betrayal' is then to provide what may well rank as the most straight-forwardly plotted and consistently even-toned of his works - although the party that follows him may take the course of the novel to realise that they have travelled from "Albany to New York by way of Vancouver, Eurasia and the Azores."

*Look at the Harlequins!* endeavours to make the mundane something to marvel at, not by disrupting it as has been usual in the writing preceding it, but by means of a peculiarly affecting naturalism, a term one would normally view as almost heretical when applied to Nabokov's *oeuvre*, but one that seems to suit this performance, whose title points to the old magic (indeed, one is almost tempted to call it "rough") of the harlequinade, and tries to get closer to the transformative power of art, the essential alchemy of fiction, noticed even by the rather literal-minded Annette who becomes Vadim's second wife:

I was so strange, so, so - she couldn't express it - yes, STRANGE in every respect. She had never met anyone like me. Whom then did she meet, I inquired: trepanners? trombonists? astronomers? Well, mostly military men, if I wished to know, officers of Wrangel's army, gentlemen, interesting people, who spoke of danger and duty, of bivouacs in the steppe. Oh, but look here, I too can speak of "deserts idle, rough quarries, rocks" - No, she said, they did not invent. [108]

The public domain of art, of assembling images and formulating pattern, is something that has always fascinated Nabokov, when "with a pleasure which is both sensual and intellectual we shall watch the artist build his castle of cards and watch the castle of cards become a castle of steel and glass,"<sup>27</sup> and yet it is the truly private world of the artist that this novel repeatedly intimates, the imagination from which the choice of materials and image is actually drawn and the miraculous transformation of that material made.

Indeed, the present memoir derives much of its value from its being a *catalogue raisonné* of the roots and origins of many images in my Russian and especially English fiction. [8]

I regarded Paris, with its grey-toned days and charcoal nights, merely as the chance setting for the most authentic and faithful joys of my life: the coloured phrase in my mind under the drizzle, the white page under the desk lamp awaiting me in my humble home. [79]

Now, it is clearly impossible to locate the source of a writer's imagery with any true sense of precision, or portray what Vadim calls later "the secret struggle with the wrong shape of things" [86], that is, the mental experience undergone before pen is put to paper. But what Nabokov can, and indeed does, establish with accuracy is a figure who carries sufficient conviction to suggest both the activities of that private world and the artist's engagement with it. Although John Shade is more likeable, Vadim is the most convincing



artist to appear in Nabokov's English novels, and, when, towards the end of his chronicle, he considers the question "Was I an excellent writer?", he reflects for a moment, and answers, "I was an excellent writer" [234], it is an opinion that the reader has come to share.

The most obvious reason for our concurrence in this judgement is Vadim's possession of that keenness of vision and exactitude of expression which marks the proper artist.

She had torn off her cap and was struggling to shrug off the shoulder straps of her wet swimsuit, so as to expose her entire back to the sun; a secondary struggle was taking place on the near side, in the vicinity of her sable armpit, in her unsuccessful efforts not to show the white of a small breast at its tender juncture with her ribs. As soon as she had wriggled into a satisfactory state of decorum, she half-reared, holding her black bodice to her bosom, while her other hand conducted that delightful rapid monkey-scratching search a girl performs when groping for something in her bag - in this instance a mauve package of cheap Salammbôs and an expensive lighter.... [39]

Vadim's description avoids the prurient by virtue of the degree of attention he lavishes upon every detail of Iris' movements, registering each nuance with a loving care that reflects not just his infatuation with his subject matter (Iris becomes his first wife), but, equally importantly, his dedication to his craft and status as a man for whom "the voice of words....was my sole joy" [86]. Other moments; the hurried embrace with Louise (wife number three) when they have adjourned to a kitchen under the pretext of getting drinks that is wittily summarised as "rummaging for ice, finding fire" [160], or the day "limned with the numb brightness of a colour transparency" [33], provide further examples of the artist's distillation of experience.

Similarly, the manner in which coincidence, "a pimp and a cardsharp in ordinary fiction but a marvelous artist in the patterns of a recollected

memoirist" [225], is utilised to bind the writing together reveals a figure who appreciates its value in performing this task, and yet is also conscious that such an agency is ultimately arbitrary, dependable, if at all, only in fictional arrangements. Along with Vadim we thus come to inhabit a terrain where a creature like Dolly von Borg can reappear "by a banal miracle of synchronisation" [137], or, if we make the necessary allowances for differing time-zones, Iris' parents will turn out to be born at exactly the same time [29], as events "intergrade in patterns of transposed time and twisted space that defies chronography and charting." [168] Each moment then, if looked at with the eyes of the artist, is seen as "carrying all kinds of synchronous trivia attached to it like burrs or incrustated like marine parasites" [34-35] - trivia which can contribute to the pleasure of structuring a world or, just as keenly, add to the pain of remembrance.

It is this less pleasant, necessarily reverse, side to artistic recollection that stings Vadim inveterately each time he comes across the 'seemingly harmless' phrase, *sans tarder*, during the course of his narrative (a *life story*) - with the extra twist to the pain coming from the fact that, to the non-artist, the phrase is, of course, harmless - he can *forget*. After seeing the expression - in equal parts, affected and ordinary - in a letter to his first wife Iris from her lover [63], it becomes, for Vadim, something that he "cannot hear without a spasm of mental anguish" [75], nor, despite his own supposed command of words, ever succeed in completely warding off - as the ironic recurrence of those same two words in the last communication Vadim receives from his next wife, Annette, makes all too clear [150].

It is, therefore, not inappropriate to regard much of *Look at the Harlequins!* as both a celebration and an enactment of the artist's facility - perhaps, compulsion - to make connections:

Put two things together - jokes, images - and you get a  
triple harlequin. [9]

Indeed, according to the definition advanced by Iris, it is the root of Vadim's "genius," "seeing things others don't see. Or rather the invisible links between things" [40], and it is certainly true that the narrator's occasional statements on aesthetics recall those of another author. Compare.

I looked forward to the refreshing presence of inimical but courteous critics who would chide me in the St. Petersburg literary reviews for my pathological indifference to politics, major ideas in minor minds, and such vital problems as overpopulation in urban centres. [24]

There exists few things more tedious than a discussion of general ideas inflicted by author or reader upon a work of fiction. The purpose of this foreword is not to show *Bend Sinister* belongs or does not belong to 'serious literature' (which is a euphemism for the hollow profundity and the ever-welcome commonplace). I have never been interested in what is called the literature of social comment (in journalistic and commercial parlance: 'great books'). I am not 'sincere,' I am not 'provocative,' I am not 'satirical.' I am neither a didacticist nor an allegoriser. Politics and economics, atomic bombs, primitive and abstract art forms, the entire Orient, symptoms of 'thaw' in Soviet Russia, the Future of Mankind, and so on, leave me supremely indifferent.<sup>28</sup>

We think in images, not in words; all right; when, however, we compose, recall, or refashion at midnight in our brain something we wish to say in tomorrow's sermon . . . . the images we think in are of course verbal - and even audible if we happen to be lonely and old. [122-123]

I don't think in any language. I think in images. I don't believe that people think in languages. They don't move their lips when they think. . . . No, I think in images, and now and then a Russian phrase or an English phrase will form with the foam of the brain-wave, but that's about all.<sup>29</sup>

Composing, as I do, whole books in my mind before releasing the inner word and taking it down in pencil or pen, I find that the final text remains for a while committed to memory, as distinct and perfect as the floating imprint that a light bulb leaves on the retina. [234]

I do think that in my case it is true that the entire book, before it is written, seems to be ready ideally in some other, now transparent, now dimming, dimension, and my job is to take down as much of it as I can make out and as precisely as I am humanly able to.<sup>30</sup>

My good old British passport, which had been handled cursorily by so many courteous officers who had never opened my books (the only real identity papers of its accidental owner) remained..... [204]

The writer's art is his real passport.<sup>31</sup>

Now, parallels of so close an order, and particularly so for the reader of past Nabokovian fictions, markedly encourage the belief that the book's central figure is a true artist, but, critically, its audience is, at the same time, also compelled to face up to the very real price that Vadim has paid for such pursuits. For, arguably, an even more telling contribution to the regard we are encouraged to feel for Vadim is made during those moments when the hallowed status a novel's public is accustomed to bestow upon an art-world is brought rapidly down to earth by an implicit questioning of the motives and scope of the writer's involvements. Here, for example, are Vadim's reflections upon his separation from his daughter, who, at the insistence of his new bride, Louise, has been consigned to a Swiss finishing school.

1957, 1958, 1959. Sometimes, seldom, hiding from Louise, who objected to Bel's twenty well-spaced mono-syllables' costing us fifty dollars, I would call her from Quirn, but after a few such calls I received a curt note from Mme. de Tuem, asking me not to upset my daughter by telephoning, and so retreated into my dark shell. Dark shell, dark years of my heart! They coincided oddly with the composition of my most vigorous, most festive, and commercially most successful novel, *A Kingdom by the Sea*. Its demands, the fun and the fancy of it, its intricate imagery, made up in a way for the absence of my beloved Bel. [193]

The use of art as an anodyne, as a means of escaping pain, is something which has occurred before in the piece - when Vadim imagines Iris' past lovers as identical dancers, always in her shadow as prima ballerina ("Only by projecting thus on the screen of my mind those stylised images, could I allay the anguish of carnal jealousy centered on spectres" [54]) - and, as here, the result is to tarnish the art-world but strengthen our impression of Vadim, albeit through the uncovering of a weakness. Thus, another fleeting contact between the worlds of the everyday and of the fictional is momentarily established, a further indication of the complexity of their inter-relationship is outlined, and, as with Humbert, Shade, and Van Veen, writing is seen to *cost*. Indeed, if we now cast a retrospective glance back to where our inquiries began, at the moment of Vadim's outburst against his own direct experience of betrayal: is even that incident as straightforward as it may at first seemed?<sup>32</sup> Could one not argue that Vadim is as much betrayer as betrayed: for, in dedicating himself to his art, is he not guilty of denying Iris the attention she deserves and of ignoring his obligation to respond and reciprocate fully to others in the world of the everyday? And for what reason is such a sacrifice being made? For magic tricks which he is then obliged to view as paramount?

But only the writing of fiction, the endless re-creation of my fluid self could keep me more or less sane. [97]

Art offers the power to manipulate and control experience, and its world gives the possibility of completion (and an attendant sense of security) which is denied the fragmentary contingencies of the mundane - so is it perhaps not the

most human of actions to turn towards it? Vadim's observation that writing constitutes "the most authentic and *faithful* joys of my life" [My italics. 79] consequently cuts far deeper than a conventional artistic truism. Is that fidelity perhaps a more sophisticated, and as yet unfathomed, form of betrayal?

The fact that Vadim's prose is capable of giving rise to such questions and of pointing towards the existence of a multiplicity of truths helps to impress upon us his merits as a writer in an oblique but nonetheless effective manner. However, the time and opportunity to evaluate and reflect upon our own willingness to believe in Vadim's artistic worth, the attributions the text has drawn us, as readers, into making, is something that the prose is dedicated to closing off. Here Nabokov's ministrations upon the topic are far more overt. Quite simply, Vadim is "an artist of lasting worth" [234] because the fictional variants of Nabokov's own novels which comprise his literary output are presented as 'genuine' works of art, untainted by the slur of a possible Kinbotian distortion. They are protected and thrive as such, by the seemingly personal guarantee we have noted earlier. Furthermore, not only do these fictions relate to that verifiable objective world in which Nabokov novels occupy library space (this time we can "touch things to be *quite* sure of 'reality'"<sup>33</sup>), but in addition (and this proclaims their vitality), their production enables Vadim himself to reach new realms and to note "a certain insidious and relentless connection with other states of being which were not exactly 'previous' or 'future', but definitely out of bounds, mortally speaking." [7] Those "other states of being" are the ones in which Vadim suspects the existence of his creator, Vladimir Nabokov, as "the raw fell under my thin identity." [156]

I now confess that I was bothered that night, and the next and some time before, by a dream feeling that my life was the non-identical twin, a parody, an inferior variant of another man's life, somewhere on this or another earth. A demon I felt, was forcing me to impersonate that other man, that other writer who was and always would be incomparably greater, healthier, and crueller than your obedient servant. [89]

And again, the use of the word "crueller" alerts us that such developments are not without penalties of their own. What Vadim later calls the "especial dread that I might be permanently impersonating somebody living as a real being beyond the constellation of my tears and asterisks" [96-97] also plays a significant rôle in the collapse and bout of paresis which he experiences towards the end of his chronicle, during which his "thin identity" does indeed give way.

Without a name I remained unreal in regained consciousness. Poor Vivian, poor Vadim Vadimovich, was but a figment of somebody's - not even my own - imagination. One dire detail: in rapid Russian speech longish name-and-patronymic combinations undergo familiar slurrings: thus 'Pavel Pavlovich,' Paul, son of Paul, when casually interpellated is made to sound like 'Pahlpahlych' and the hardly utterable, tapeworm-long 'Vladimir Vladimirovich' becomes colloquially similar to 'Vadim Vadimych.' [249]

Perhaps the most useful gloss on Vadim's breakdown is provided by the reflections of one of those other "figments" created by Vladimir Vladimirovich. Here are some of Ada's thoughts on acting, another means of seeking a move away from the mundane.

In 'real' life we are creatures of chance in an absolute void - unless we be artists ourselves, naturally; but in a good play I feel authored, I feel passed by the board of censors, I feel secure.....<sup>34</sup>

This feeling of security is one which Ada shares with Krug in *Bend Sinister* at the instant when he begins to apprehend his creator and which prompts him to ask his friend Ember, "...you are not as stupid as the others, are you? You know as well as I do that there is nothing to fear?"<sup>35</sup>, a query answered by Nabokov in his Preface ("he is in good hands"<sup>36</sup>). However, it is precisely the reciprocity of such a confidence - the sensation of being 'held' - that Vadim is denied. Unable to practice his art, he is acutely vulnerable to what he himself terms "the dream sensation of having come empty-handed - without what? A gun? A wand?"<sup>37</sup> [156] and the essential duality - the credulity that makes the duplicity possible - of the artist himself is opened up before us like a pocket-watch. The author, a being who has the gift of being able to *invent*, to create "patterns of transposed time and twisted space that defy chronography and charting" [168] now faces the cost of his boon: for, in order that he may indulge his "combinational slant," [84] nothing can ever become stable, nothing can ever become fixed, as each event modifies and redefines those of the past. And so, like the juggling tricks of the circus harlequin, the novelist too, must continually keep everything in the air, in motion; he is only 'himself' in performance, ceaselessly working<sup>38</sup> and honing the "endless re-creation of my fluid self." [97] During the period of Vadim's illness, the trickery and linguistic gymnastics of the fiction-maker, resources which he has drawn upon so extensively in the past, are no longer available to him. Instead, the utter loneliness of a position that Ada has defined, "a creature of chance in an absolute void,"<sup>39</sup> seems to loom near - and, moreover, who has the deeper insight into the extent of that void than the artist? Who, but the figure dedicated to constructing meanings, can dread their absence more?

This sense of isolation, or perhaps more accurately these intimations of an ineffable *privacy*, a private commitment to a world of art which can only be



individually enacted and re-enacted, is something that seems to glint intermittently through a surface whose very title invites the reader to view as a masquerade, as a possible source of betrayal.

Reality would be only adulterated if I now started to narrate what you know, what I know, what nobody else knows, what shall never, never be ferreted out by a matter-of-fact, father-of-muck, mucking biograffitist.  
[226]

It is this suggestion of privacy which endows the fun and games that Nabokov plays with his own bibliography with an additional significance, one that extends beyond either the esoteric or the flippant, to add a cauterising note of sadness to the novel's essential tone of celebration. The ambiguity of the author's susceptibilities starts to come home: where does a necessary sensitivity stop and too little a resistance begin?

In *Look at the Harlequins!* these questions of fine divisions are brought to an end by Vadim's recovery and his apprehension of the entity known as "Reality" and, before deriding it as a literary 'trick' (which, as Nabokov would be the first to admit, it is) of no consequence (which it is not), we might stop to consider the point Nabokov is endeavouring to put across, the only 'message' in any of his books. Only through the agency of art itself can a number of truths be momentarily held together and make a work of art, the almost-tautology that lies at the heart of all his revels and also defines us as human beings.

*What distinguishes us from animals?*

Being aware of being aware of being. In other words, if I not only know that I *am* but also know that I know it, then I belong to the human species. All the rest follows - the glory of thought, poetry, a vision of the universe.<sup>40</sup>

I know more than I can express in words, and the little  
I can express would not have been expressed, had I not  
known more.<sup>41</sup>

And if "betrayal" is usually used to mean 'a breach of trust' it is  
important to realise that Nabokov's "betrayal" can also lead to the fulfilment  
of another of its possible definitions, 'a surrender of the truth.'

## Footnotes

1. *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters: 1940-1971*, Ed. Simon Karlinsky [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1979] 177.

2. Vladimir Nabokov, 'On A Book Entitled *Lolita*', *The Annotated Lolita*, Ed. Alfred Appel Jr. [McGraw-Hill, New York and Toronto, 1970] 313.

3. Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1974] 11.

4. Vladimir Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!* [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1975] 74. Future references to the text will follow in parentheses.

5. *Strong Opinions* 194.

6. *The Annotated Lolita* 266.

7. *Ibid.* 151.

8. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1962] 29.

9. I am writing.....a short novel about a man who liked little girls - and it's going to be called *The Kingdom by the Sea*.

[Nabokov to Edmund Wilson, April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1947, in *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters: 1940-1971* 188.]

10. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, Ed. Fredson Bowers [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1980] 2.

11. Witness the evolution of Nabokov's performing self as documented in the interviews collected in *Strong Opinions* ("What I really like about the better kind of public colloquy is the opportunity it affords me to construct in the presence of my audience the semblance of what I hope is a plausible and not altogether displeasing personality." [*Strong Opinions* 158]). That "semblance" serves largely as a defence against the more vulgar journalistic inquiries:

I recall with pleasure my correspondence with the puzzled editor of the *Saturday Evening Post* for which he had written what I had thought was to be an interview with me - or, at least, with the person I usually impersonate in Montreux.

[*Strong Opinions* 298.]

These literary tactics are further discussed in this and the next chapter.

12. See Richard Pattenon's 'Nabokov's *Look at the Harlequins!*: Endless Re-Creation of the Self', in *Russian Literature Triquarterly* 14, 1976, 84-98; and Lucy Maddox, *Nabokov's Novels in English*, [Croom Helm, London, 1983] 142.

13. Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1960] 131.

14. Vladimir Nabokov, *Glory*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1972] 199.

15. Ibid. 204.

16. *Strong Opinions* 9-10.

17. *Pale Fire* 296.

18. *The Annotated Lolita* 251.

19. If we recall Nabokov's pronouncement that "In common with Pushkin, I am fascinated by fatidic dates" [*Strong Opinions* 75] we should perhaps not be too surprised that Bel and "Reality" share their birthday with another girl. Dolores Haze, the pages of *Lolita* inform us, was also born on January 1<sup>st</sup> [*The Annotated Lolita* 83].

20. T. S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', ll. 42-43.

21. *Strong Opinions* 72-73.

22. Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, rep. 1972] xiv.

23. There are in fact intimations that there is some form of connection between the work that Krug is depicted as working on within the text, and the work *Bend Sinister* itself. It may be *Bend Sinister*, and has been argued as such - (see especially Susan Fromberg Scheaffer, 'Bend Sinister and the Novelist as Anthropomorphic Diety', *The Centennial Review*, Spring 1973, 115-151) - but I find that the sheer force and outrage generated by the novel's ending tends to overwhelm such a reading.

24. Maddox 157.

25. Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1965] 290.

26. Ibid. 291-92.

27. *Lectures on Literature* 6.

28. *Bend Sinister* viii.

29. *Strong Opinions* 14.

30. Ibid. 69.

31. Ibid. 63.

32. For one thing - which, given the novel's phenomenal degree of self-reference, should by now perhaps not strike us as that much of a surprise - the altercation with the prostitute replays the central scene of Nabokov's early short story, 'The Return of Chorb' [1925], which resurfaced in his final volume of 'Englished' tales, *Details of a Sunset and Other Stories*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1976]. See 68-69.

33. *Strong Opinions* 79.

34. Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1969] 426.

35. *Bend Sinister* 215.

36. Ibid. xiv.

37. Re the reference to the wand, the traditional prop of any magician: another word for wand is lath, which links it not only to the book "rather similar to that in the reader's hands" [156], namely, *Look at the Harlequins!*, or, as it is abbreviated to on the same page, "LATH, LATH, Look at the Harlequins!"

38. In a sense, the endeavour is the transposed and complementary mirror image to the strivings of the "novice" practitioners of the previous work who "must learn to skim over matter" (*Transparent Things* [1]). The *human* difficulties for the writer who would maintain a balance are significantly and quite clearly underlined in Nabokov's observation that "a novelist is, *like all mortals*, more fully at home on the surface of the present than in the ooze of the past." (*Strong Opinions* [195]. My italics.)

39. *Ada* 426.

40. *Strong Opinions* 142.

41. Ibid. 45.

Coda: 'Creating Readers.'

Early in 1987, Picador Books published Dmitri Nabokov's translation of his father's short story, *Volshebnik*, a tale of obsession which formed the dry run for the transcontinental journey of *Lolita*. Its critical reception proved fascinating and, as we shall eventually see, might be said to form a highly suitable postscript to this perusal of a number of distinctive themes within the writer's *oeuvre*. In prior discussions we have observed how, if we are in any way able to formulate or codify what distinguishes these texts - what makes them 'Nabokovian' (*sic.*) - it has much to do with modulations and manipulations of older, accepted novelistic forms and practices. And just as integral a part of Nabokov's output is the incorporation within those fictional borders of that which we seem likeliest to read as inherent or involuntary. The supposedly 'inherent' then becomes all too manifestly explicit to the eager reader, and somehow appears as too facile a signature to append to such clearly perceptive writing. This is the interior duplication or 'doubling up' which ensures the presence in one of Nabokov's earliest English pieces of an author who operates in precisely the fashion just outlined, one which we cannot avoid construing as quite literally cloaking the figure of his creator.

In the first book Sebastian brought this experiment to a logical and satisfactory conclusion. By putting to the *ad absurdum* test this or that literary manner and then dismissing them one after the other, he deduced his own manner.....'

Equally unsurprising is that a few pages later the same book should also incorporate another maxim that in time would invite its reapplication to the development of its writer's future career.

Fame in our day is too common to be confused with the enduring glow around a deserving book.<sup>2</sup>

Nabokov's ability to anticipate future happenings in his fictions, to imply the existence of another imprint, is something in part abetted by the delayed appearance of translations of the earlier Russian texts, which regularly punctuated the breaks between the English fictions in the nineteen-sixties and seventies. (During a discussion of this unique Nabokovian facility - of the canon "growing backwards into the past" - John Updike memorably queried the location of its "end, [an end, as in earthworms, not immediately distinguishable]"<sup>3</sup>) Nonetheless, it is undeniable that writing which lasts possesses sufficient resource not only to withstand repeated readings, but also to generate further gradations of interpretation. It is the heady apprehension of this vast potential - an *accessible* limitlessness which may perhaps even repudiate time itself - which prompts the writer in the short story, 'Recruiting', to rejoice when he alights on a physical representative of a much sought for character for his new book:

I was so pleased with him! He was so *capacious!*<sup>4</sup>  
[my italics]

Indeed, the best fiction can scarcely avoid countering and confounding the demands of its audience with the disclosure of new shadings and colours, or, to put it another way, such pieces have effectively come to *contain* their readers. Thus, as they pursue resolution, the reading public might be said to go through *ad absurdum* tests of their own - not necessarily maliciously directed from the novelist 'on high', but, nonetheless, possessing sufficient

verve to alert the audience to the consideration that these works have not necessarily finished with them. This literary resilience, so discreetly self-evident, forms the unseen staple behind Borges' magnificent fable, *Pierre Menard, Author of the 'Quixote'*, and underpins Nabokov's reflections on his most famous creation.

I shall never regret *Lolita*. She was like the composition of a beautiful puzzle - its composition and its solution at the same time, since one is a mirror view of the other, depending on the way you look. Of course, she completely eclipsed my other works - at least those I wrote in English: *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Bend Sinister*, my short stories, my book of recollections; but I cannot grudge her this. There is a queer, tender charm about that mythical nymphet.<sup>5</sup>

Nabokov can talk of a "mythical nymphet," because his creature has already come to serve as a repository for speculation in a manner analogous to the way we have come to treat the mythic, as a field - perhaps, more accurately, common ground - over which an interpreter ranges and arranges supposition. In point of fact, Nabokov was by no means overfond of the license encouraged by such generalities, singling out for special attention the "daily application of old Greek myths"<sup>6</sup> that constitutes Freudian analysis, and the mishandling of his own, particular, conception.

I think that the harmful drudges who define today, in popular dictionaries, the word "nymphet" as "a very young but sexually attractive girl," without any additional comment or reference, should have their knuckles rapped.<sup>7</sup>

Nymphets are girl-children, not starlets and "sex-kittens." *Lolita* was twelve, not eighteen, when Humbert met her.<sup>8</sup>



Indeed, the distortion of the notion of the 'nymphet' pained Nabokov to such an extent that, at one point,<sup>9</sup> he even thought of suing one of its more inaccurate usages as a test case. However, as Nabokov must have realised, there would be little satisfaction to be gained from an action which could only seek to repair further distortion of a view that the novel itself patently demonstrates as misguided. As Nabokov states explicitly: "What ideas can be traced in my novels belong to my creatures therein and may be deliberately flawed."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, as we have already observed, misapprehension remains one of the key themes of the novel. Moreover, and this is surely the moot point, it can scarcely escape notice that the enaction of these broader, though still fanciful, procedures of definition exactly mirrors the discredited activities of Humbert Humbert, who, at one point in the narrative, even goes so far as to talk of Dolores Haze as "the most mythopoeic nymphet."<sup>11</sup>

Or can it?

The appearance of *Volshebnyk*, under the English title of *The Enchanter*, was received by that most public of societies, the media, with what we may - for once accurately, rather than euphemistically, - term a "mixed reception." Among the more perceptive responses to the tale were those of Angela Carter, whose observation that she "would not put it past Nabokov to be parodying a dirty book"<sup>12</sup> at least implied that she had half-remembered the Afterword to Nabokov's later and more extensive treatment of the 'nymphet' theme ("Certain techniques in the beginning of *Lolita* [Humbert's journal, for example] misled some of my first readers into assuming that this was going to be a lewd book...."<sup>13</sup>). However, the more apposite views came from other quarters, whose response is, eerily enough, again prefigured in Nabokov's narrative.

Vladimir Nabokov is considered one of the great writers of the 20th century. His most famous novel, *Lolita* (1959), which has sold 40 million copies worldwide, was described by Bernard Levin on publication as "Massive, unflagging, moral, exquisitely shaped, enormously funny."

Moral? Funny? For those not familiar with the story, it concerns a dirty old man's obsession for, and eventual seduction of, a 12-year-old girl.

Women who read it invariably react with outrage. So, too, it must be said, do most men. Particularly family men.

*The Enchanter*....mislaid until 1977 when he (Nabokov) died, and encapsulating the identical "dirty old man" theme..... I am glad to say that the dirty old man gets his come-uppance - but not, one must suppose, before his little victim has been psychologically scarred for life. Although Nabokov does not mention that.

.....I fear that it will be hailed by highbrow critics as a literary masterpiece.

Some of them may even find it moral and funny. I hope these eggheads pause to consider that this book is being published at a time when we are faced with increasing incidence of child abuse.

All decent, responsible parents are sickened to learn from recently-released statistics that girls are frequently molested by the very men responsible for their welfare. Can there perhaps be some correlation between child abuse and the massive sales of *Lolita*?<sup>14</sup>

Now, although the temptation to shoot fish in a barrel is unquestionably one that should be resisted - even though the itch becomes especially acute when those metaphorical creatures are obliging enough to jump in there themselves - this particular 'critic's' harangue is to some degree anticipated by the comments of *Lolita's* very first 'critic.' The tone of this imaginary figure's polemic is, however, far more discreet.

.....still more important to us than scientific significance and literary worth, is the ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader .....they warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils. *Lolita* should make all of us - parents, social workers, educators - apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world.<sup>15</sup>

Although John Ray does resist the tub-thumping rhythm that resounds in Ms. Hennessy's thoughtful qualification of those, as equally incapable of separating life and art, ranged alongside her ("most men. *Particularly family men.*" [My italics]), he too succumbs to the demagogue's yearning, not merely to speak for us all, but also to incorporate us within their supposedly elevated ranks. Compare the psychiatrist's plea, "...all of us - parents, social workers, educators - apply *ourselves*..." with the journalist's rallying call to "All decent, responsible parents." (Hands up all indecent and irresponsible parents, and what are you doing reading Ms. Hennessy's newspaper?)

However, although more credible as a critic (the quality of *Lolita* is something that has little to do with the number of copies sold - or is Ms. Hennessy claiming that all "40 million" purchasers are suspect?), John Ray has the disadvantage of being fictional, and, as such, we might do better to turn to a genuine assessor of literary merit for more 'proper' reflections on the tendency of the more ingenuous reader to conflate the figures of author and character. Among the more succinct commentaries on the topic - and certainly among the most astringent - is Boris Tomashevsky's classic Formalist investigation, 'Thematics,' which first appeared in 1925. It dryly puts such misreadings in their place, and can clearly be applied directly to Nabokov's deployment of the 'nymphet' theme in both *The Enchanter* and *Lolita*. Indeed, to judge from its contents, it would appear that the practices of "journalist-critics" have remained remarkably consistent over the years!

We must not forget that the emotional attitude toward the protagonist is set by his function in the work. An author may arouse sympathy for a protagonist whose character in real life would provoke revulsion and disgust. The emotional attitude toward the protagonist is a fact of the artistic construction of the tale, and only in primitive forms must it coincide with the orthodox moral and communal codes.

This consideration was frequently overlooked by the journalist-critics of the 1860's.....<sup>16</sup>

Now, to advance the notion of a lasting literature as one which is capable of stimulating a plethora of more or less competent readings, is hardly radical, but what the less alert reactions to *The Enchanter* also seem to indicate is the existence of an imaginative discourse that, in a sense, completely enwraps those formulations, seeming both to determine them and yet also feed off them. The net result is that Nabokov's writing - particularly on the 'nymphet' theme (an irony in itself) - has come not only to pre-empt its misreading, but fully, monstrosly, and literally, to *partake* of it. Nabokov's dealings with Edmund Wilson provide perhaps the most drawn out demonstration of that writer's facility to second guess the critic, but the recent review, ostensibly of *The Enchanter*, penned by Bernard Levin, provides perhaps the most succinct encapsulation of this process. It begins, conventionally enough, with the obvious comparison.

What worlds away now seems - is - the uproar over *Lolita*. The publishers who were too shocked to touch it; the other publishers who longed to touch it but feared the law; the positions taken up, *pro* and *contra* (I blush to recall the nonsense I wrote in its defence, which is still reproaching me from half a dozen editions); the tide has long since submerged what then seemed like a landmark on the border of forbidden territory, and to run any risk today a publisher has to combine goats, girls, red-hot poker and full-colour reproduction.<sup>17</sup>

So far, so good, although there is more than a hint of *poshlost* in the parenthetical denial that still seeks credit (those comments retained and valued by a mere "half a dozen" publishers). However, from hereon the 'objective' assessment descends rapidly to insinuation, with a somewhat queasy

alliance of tainted understatement and false delicacy seeping out from an increasingly sour piece.

Nabokov had a slightly too intense curiosity about infant sexuality (*Lolita* and this book are by no means the only works of his to dwell on the subject); in his own prefatory note to *The Enchanter* he refers to "The first little throb of *Lolita*" and to "the throbbing which had never quite ceased"; a revealing use of words for so precise a writer.<sup>18</sup>

Leaving aside the rather tawdry innuendo of that "slightly too intense curiosity....," Mr Levin cannot really hope to pass off modest irony as an immodest Freudian slip. Nabokov's "prefatory note to *The Enchanter*" is in fact derived from the Afterword to *Lolita*, which, as we have already mentioned, explicitly informs the less than perceptive (should he get to the end of the book) that he has been unsuccessfully negotiating a marked, or rather, mined route. The strained compliment with which this "journalist-critic" endeavours to tie up his point here is as perfect an example of how such writing conforms exactly to the model of *poshlost* advanced by its intended victim: it somehow undoes itself before you. In his discussion of this self-incriminating development in the book on Gogol, Nabokov uses an imaginary puff as his example, but the net result is the same, as

the 'beautiful' novel is 'beautifully' reviewed and the circle of *poshlost* [so anglicized throughout as an extra sting] is complete - or would be complete had not words taken a subtle revenge of their own and smuggled the truth in by secretly forming most nonsensical and most damning combinations while the reviewer and the publisher are quite sure that they are praising the book.....<sup>19</sup>

Levin's piece effectively ends with the completion of the by now expected elision between the author and his creature, although it loses out in affrontry to Ms. Hennessy's performance of the same task, which she blazons in the banner headline affixed to her article ("**Web of corruption from a dirty old man**").

the enchanter's image of his victim-partner...is fixed in permanent adolescence; we are in Never-Never land, where indeed I believe Nabokov himself was domiciled.<sup>20</sup>

We will finish with the two reviews by observing that, sure enough, they aspire to merge in that peculiarly circular bond which, according to Nabokov, unites the most distinctive examples of *poshlost*. You might now recall that Ms. Hennessy's tirade actually begins with an attack on precisely those comments on *Lolita* that Mr. Levin now so vehemently half-regrets. (It is perhaps inevitable that one should also misquote the other, as the lady omits to mention that, amongst his other aberrant remarks, may be found Levin's expressed opinion that he then also found the book "enormously vital" - at least, that's what it says on the paperback in front of me.<sup>21</sup>)

The result of writing which both anticipates and produces this kind of splendidly misinformed response is to disclose not merely the *insouciance* with which we take such courses, but an almost fatal compulsion to emulate standardised patterns even when they are already ingrained in the narrative as warning signs. The designs Humbert has on Dolores Haze are, in the end, perhaps only the most vivid - and the impression that we are finally left with is somewhat reminiscent of Hugh Person's "ultimate vision" in *Transparent Things*, of "the incandescence of a book or a box grown completely transparent and

hollow."<sup>22</sup> It is this peculiar sense of a book's active expansion and extension - and *Lolita*, of course, provides the most marked demonstration in Nabokov's canon - which is echoed in the opening pages of the shortest instalment in Philip Roth's Zuckerman sequence, *The Prague Orgy*. The discussion which leads off the piece is between one Zdenek Sisovsky, a Czech writer-critic, and Nathan Zuckerman, the American author of the notorious bestseller, *Carnovsky*, and centres on the latter's book.

'When I studied Kafka, the fate of his books in the hands of the Kafkologists seemed to me to be more grotesque than the fate of Josef K. I feel this is true also with you. This scandalous response gives another grotesque dimension, and belongs now to your book as Kafkologine stupidities belong to Kafka.'<sup>23</sup>

Roth, of course, has had a *succès de scandale* of his own with *Portnoy's Complaint* and the creation of '*Carnovsky*' has allowed him plenty of room for swipes at latterday literary 'fame.' (Hence Zuckerman's response to Sisovsky's flattering judgement, "Whatever the scandal, I have been profusely - bizarrely - rewarded. Everything from an Upper East Side address to helping worthy murderers get out on parole. That's the power a scandal bestows over here."<sup>24</sup>) However, for all their ingenuity, the Zuckerman books have facilitated Roth's meditations at the cost of those of his readers. Rather than let the reader find his own way, the authorial grip is too tight and insistent, the repetition and reworking too harrowing - and ultimately forbidding - for the reader to feel truly able to make a significant contribution - whether misplaced or not - of his own. At times, Roth appears to be seeking revenge for the manner of his success with *Portnoy's Complaint* by doing nothing so much as implacably beating the reader to the punch, or, to mix

metaphors, by closing down every avenue - and that includes the wrong turnings - supposedly opened by his text. Each successive volume has not only narrowed the scope for the reader, but, in a sense, has even begun to encroach upon that "other grotesque dimension" which, more than anything else, endows the book with an independent 'life' of its own, and truly takes it from its author's hands - despite their occasional protests. This shadow-land of 'misapprehension' - for absolute congruence between authorial intent and audience comprehension is clearly impossible - forms the uncharted but discernible boundary which not only distinguishes a Zuckerman from a *Zuckerman Unbound*,<sup>25</sup> but has, in the past, provided the frontier which separates Emma Bovary from *Madame Bovary*

The girl Emma Bovary never existed: the book *Madame Bovary* shall exist forever and ever. A book lives longer than a girl.<sup>26</sup>

and still remains as the constant which differentiates between one Lolita and another - the irony and beauty of which Humbert Humbert finally appreciates when he talks at the last of "the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita."<sup>27</sup>

We have already touched on this particular topic in the earlier discussion of a Nabokov novel which makes much of biographical modes - and which, you will recall, incorporates perhaps the most tangible emblem of the possible workings of that "grotesque dimension" actually contained within the author's own canon. This takes the form of Jack Cockerell's studied mimicry of Timofey Pnin, a performance which eventually prompts the narrator to "wondering if by some poetical vengeance this Pnin business had not become with Cockerell the



kind of fatal obsession which substitutes its own victim for that of the initial ridicule."<sup>28</sup> However, because the immediate form in which the fictional material is couched is so familiar, and variations on its themes so difficult to produce, the reader may not at first grasp the demands made of him: namely, the imaginative input and stamina necessary to negotiate this mysterious new ground. (In the *Lectures on Literature* Nabokov refers to this as "a shimmering go-between."<sup>29</sup>) Thus those who favour, lemming-like, more popular routes - "The public path, whatever it looks like, is, artistically, always a paltry one, precisely because of its being public"<sup>30</sup> - find them so well-worn as to incur upon themselves lemming-like results! Again, the fate of those not lasting the duration or unwilling to make this type of transition - from *Invitation to a Beheading* as stock figure to *Invitation to a Beheading* as artistic and aesthetic entity - is neatly and inadvertently summarised in Bernard Levin's tired schoolmasterly admonition in his piece on *The Enchanter*: "Why do so many of his books end unsatisfactorily, giving the impression that a sequel is on the way?"<sup>31</sup>

These questions, of readerly satisfactions and resolutions, of what we expect from fiction, are not so much answered in Nabokov's English novels - at least not according to unquestioned standards of the day - as they are redrawn, reframed, and relit in such a manner as to disclose the strength and urgency of our impulse to seek reassurances. The earlier books, as we have seen, take up (and on) various facets of the commonest fictional responses to this manifest desire for coherence, order and shape: genre productions; ranging from melodrama (*Invitation to a Beheading*), through to the totalitarian novel (*Invitation to a Beheading*) and 'straight' biography (*Invitation to a Beheading* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*). Although these thematic lines were by no means treated in isolation or could be considered as part of any systematic 'winding down' programme, with the appearance of *Lolita* the literary weave became much more closely knit

and the patterns correspondingly more intricate. *Pale Fire* (a "form.... specifically, if not generically, new"<sup>32</sup>) and *Ada* ("my most cosmopolitan and poetic novel"<sup>33</sup>), in particular, aspire to markedly exotic status - flamboyant one-offs which attempt to annex that richer, less staid (and less stable), strand which is traditionally held as the preserve of the 'poetic.' If the fictions which follow it appear to return and re-adopt more standardised lines - those of a thriller *cum* ghost story (*Transparent Things*) and a mock-auto-biography (*Look at the Harlequins*) - they nonetheless manage to do so whilst retaining (and displaying) the fullest knowledge - a truly *working* knowledge, if you like - of the possibilities and capabilities of literary design. Thus, these final configurations, far more than any other of Nabokov's works, seek to draw upon the artist's own back catalogue, (as personal as it is lavish), to offset the seeming slightness of their initial appearance. Matisse provides perhaps the most helpful painterly analogue for such a course of development, and, like the Frenchman in his late pieces, Nabokov keeps faith with that freshness of perception he upholds as the only creative law.

Nothing is more boring or more unfair to the author than starting to read, say, *Madame Bovary*, with the preconceived notion that it is a denunciation of the bourgeoisie. We should always remember that the work of art is invariably the creation of a new world, so that the first thing we should do is to study that new world as closely as possible, approaching it as something brand new, having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know.<sup>34</sup>

Now, the approximation of the course I have just outlined through Nabokov's fiction, which has, with varying degrees of fidelity, been followed through in the previous chapters of this narrative, represents one possible alignment of the writer's work - a stringing together. Nabokov's art, as we

have repeatedly seen, seeks to confute that easy slip made by the reader (for "easy" read also "automatic" and "unthinking") whereby "one possible" order becomes the "one and only." As such, to settle for a single and solid reorganisation of this fictional material is generally inimical to that pre-eminent spirit of permanent inquiry which informs it. With this in mind, and as a register of the fluidity of even this, my own, predeterminedly confined and consistent, text (a *set work on* a number of books by Vladimir Nabokov), I would like to offer another ordering of the same body of work. Moreover, and this surely underlines the resourcefulness of the written word, the points of this order are ones that have already managed to entrench themselves - deeply - within my account (and without my knowledge?). Nevertheless, it thus provides another 'line' on to (and through) Nabokov's writing, one which may, perhaps, get closer to "approaching it as something brand new."

"These are the secret points, the subliminal co-ordinates by means of which the book is plotted".<sup>35</sup> Each of the texts discussed may be classified by following identical procedures: of taking up a 'key' word or descriptive term which begs its (immediate) application to the piece in question. However, the closer we look, the more the 'key' word discloses, as it not only uncovers the text, but, more unexpectedly, also lays bare its own reserves, other applications of its meaning which take the reading yet further on. So, *Laughter in the Dark* plays with its 'staginess' (*butaforstvo*<sup>36</sup>), but, in the end, it is not the stock situations of melodrama that prove to be stage managed, but the audience who have to content themselves with "Stage directions for last silent scene."<sup>37</sup> *Bend Sinister* emerges as all too 'commonplace' and *Invitation to a Beheading* all too 'charming.' *Lolita*, of course, by now has to be considered *svi generis*, such is its ascendancy over the Nabokov canon and its hold over the general conception of his writing. Therefore it thoughtfully provides its own

label: "Over and above everything there is *Lolita*"<sup>38</sup> (My italics). *Pale Fire* so engages itself with the notion of the (dispassionate) 'commentary' that all the book's voices end up informing on each other. *Ada*, in its turn, so thoroughly exploits the idea of the 'big book' that it does indeed become a 'world in itself' which threatens to swallow up everything before it. *Transparent Things* makes much - finally too much - of reader's (and author's) desires to 'see through' the narrative. Last, and by no means least, *Look at the Harlequins!* strives to effect a new slant to its (overly) advertised form, as the audience is treated to what is truly a 'mock-autobiography.'

Emerging in tandem with a structure based on Nabokov's exploitation of familiar literary patterns and genres then, is this alternative classification determined by the, more or less hidden, development whereby descriptive labels somehow become monstrously literal. So too with the overall title of the piece as a whole, which is taken from the mouth of Dolly Haze's headmistress at Beardsley College as she attempts to describe the unsocial behaviour of her pupil to Humbert Humbert:

'I'm a frank person,' she said, 'but conventions are conventions and I find it difficult...Let me put it this way...'<sup>39</sup>

It is in the mirroring of what we may occasionally sense as the constant alertness of language to respond to modifications in meaning and development, its infinite readiness to mould and form, that Nabokov's art reaches its apogee. To put it aphoristically; in these texts *we get more than we bargained for*, but if we are misled, it is almost invariably because we have *undervalued* the wealth of linguistic resource. The scope of that gift is what Nabokov's

writing celebrates, keeps faith with, and, most critically, insistently strives to convey.

.....for just as the universal family of gifted writers transcends national barriers, so is the gifted reader a universal figure, not subject to spatial or temporal laws. It is he - the good, the excellent reader - who has saved the artist again and again from being destroyed by emperors, dictators, priests, puritans, philistines, political moralists, policemen, post-masters and prigs. Let me define this admirable reader. He does not belong to any specific nation or class. No director of conscience and no book club can manage his soul. His approach to a work of fiction is not governed by those juvenile emotions that make the mediocre reader identify himself with this or that character and "skip descriptions." The good, the admirable reader identifies himself not with the boy or girl in the book, but with the mind that conceived and composed that book. The admirable reader does not seek information about Russia in a Russian novel, for he knows that the Russia of Tolstoy or Chekhov is not the average Russia of history but a specific world imagined and created by individual genius. The admirable reader is not concerned with general ideas; he is interested in the particular vision. He likes the novel not because it helps him to get along with the group (to use a diabolical progressive-school cliché); he likes the novel because he imbibes and understands every detail of the text, enjoys what the author meant to be enjoyed, beams inwardly and all over, is thrilled by the magic imageries of the master-forger, the fancy-forger, the conjuror, the artist. Indeed, of all the characters that a great artist creates, his readers are the best.<sup>40</sup>

### Footnotes

1. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, [New Directions, Norfolk, Conn. 1959] 95.

2. Ibid. 102.

3. John Updike, 'Grandmaster Nabokov', *New Republic*, September 26<sup>th</sup>, 1964, reprinted in his *Assorted Prose*, [Andre Deutsch, London, 1965] 219. That "end," of course, is yet to be located - not so much because of the appearance of the volumes of *Lectures*, *Plays* and *The Enchanter* since Nabokov's death - but rather because of the *non-appearance* of *The Original of Laura*, the literally last novel. One feels it would be altogether appropriate if the book was never published, so thwarting for ever those who would aspire to produce a truly complete summary of the writer and his work.

4. Vladimir Nabokov, *Tyrants Destroyed and Other Stories*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1975] 109.

5. Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1974] 20-21.

6. Ibid. 66.

7. Ibid. 133.

8. Ibid. 93.

9. During the course of such a lucubration, it is inevitable that at least one half-remembered fact should prove irritatingly unavailable - I have decided that this shall remain mine, but as an indication of the likelihood of its being possible, here is an extract from a letter to Edmund Wilson dated November 24<sup>th</sup> 1955, in which Nabokov confesses his worries over *Lolita's* reception.

It depresses me to think that this pure and austere work may be treated by some flippant critic as a pornographic stunt. This danger is the more real to me since I realise that even you neither understand nor wish to understand the texture of this intricate and unusual production.

[*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters: 1940-1971*, Ed. Simon Karlinsky (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1979) 296.]

10. *Strong Opinions* 147.

11. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, Ed. Alfred Appel Jr. [McGraw-Hill, New York and Toronto, 1970] 188.

12. Angela Carter, 'Nabokov's nymphet novella,' *Manchester Guardian*, January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1987, 13.
13. *The Annotated Lolita* 315.
14. Val Hennessy, "Web of corruption from a dirty old man," *Daily Mail*, January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1987, 24.
15. *The Annotated Lolita* 8.
16. Boris Tomashevsky, 'Thematics,' collected in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, Trans. and Intro. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis [University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln/London, rep. 1975] 89-90.
17. Bernard Levin, "An Incurable Obsession," *The Sunday Times*, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1987, 33.
18. Ibid.
19. Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*, [New Directions, New York, rep. 1961] 69.
20. Levin.
21. The actual source for the quotes plastered on all those paperbacks is Bernard Levin's "Why All the Fuss?" in *The Spectator*, January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1959, 32-33.
22. Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1973] 104.
23. Philip Roth, *The Prague Orgy*, [Jonathan Cape, London, 1985] 9.
24. Ibid. 9-10.
25. It is, of course, no accident that the first three instalments in Roth's sequence were collected and printed in the United States under the all-encompassing heading of *Zuckerman Bound* - nor perhaps that defeat would be admitted with the appearance of the further volumes, *The Prague Orgy* [1985] and *The Counterlife* [1987].
26. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1980] 125.
27. *The Annotated Lolita* 311.
28. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin*, [Heinemann, London, 1957] 189.
29. *Lectures on Literature* 5.
30. *Strong Opinions* 224.
31. Levin.
32. *Strong Opinions* 75.

33. Ibid. 179.
34. *Lectures on Literature* 1.
35. *The Annotated Lolita* 318.
36. The Russian term used by Dmitri Nabokov in his Introduction to *The Man From the U. S. S. R. and Other Plays*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1985] 3.
37. Vladimir Nabokov, *Laughter in the Dark*, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1961] 207.
38. *The Annotated Lolita* 47.
39. Ibid. 199.
40. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Ed. Fredson Bowers (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1981) 10-11.



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All Artists. Charlatans.

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